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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 6 January 2016

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Fiscal Framework

1. **Mike Weir** (Angus) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on Scotland's fiscal framework. [902843]

2. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on Scotland's fiscal framework. [902844]

5. **Dr Eilidh Whiteford** (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on Scotland's fiscal framework. [902847]

10. **Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on Scotland's fiscal framework. [902852]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): May I begin by wishing you a very happy new year, Mr Speaker?

In the light of the recent flooding in Scotland, may I pay tribute to all those in the emergency services and in local authorities, and the volunteers, who have dealt with the challenging circumstances? The thoughts of the whole House will be with those whose homes and businesses have been flooded.

The UK and Scottish Governments are discussing the fiscal framework through the Joint Exchequer Committee, and there have been five meetings between the Deputy First Minister and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to discuss it. The next meeting is due to take place on Friday.

Mike Weir: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer and associate myself with what he said about the flooding, which has affected my constituency and those of many of my colleagues. We appreciate the work the emergency services are doing.

The block grant will need to be adjusted to take account of the revenue-raising powers that are being devolved, but, as agreed by the Smith commission, the Scottish

Government should not be financially disadvantaged by the transfer of the new powers. What is the Secretary of State's view of what a fair indexation for the block grant adjustment would be?

David Mundell: My understanding is that the Deputy First Minister of Scotland, John Swinney, with whom I had a productive meeting just before Christmas, is conducting the negotiations on behalf of the Scottish Government. At our meeting, Mr Swinney assured me that his objective was exactly the same as that of the United Kingdom Government—a settlement that is fair to Scotland and fair to the whole United Kingdom.

Marion Fellows: A fair model of block grant adjustment would ensure that Scotland is no worse off financially as a result of the transfer of new powers. Does the Secretary of State agree with the cross-party view, and that of Anton Muscatelli, Jim Cuthbert and the Scottish Trades Union Congress, that only the model of indexed deduction per capita would adequately deliver the principle of no detriment?

David Mundell: As I said, we are involved in an ongoing negotiation, which Mr Swinney is conducting. I have tremendous respect for his ability to reach a fair settlement for Scotland, and for the Chief Secretary's ability to reach a fair settlement for the rest of the United Kingdom. On the basis of the discussions that took place between the First Minister and the Prime Minister, my own discussions with the Deputy First Minister and the meeting that is due to take place on Friday, I am confident that we will be able to achieve a fair settlement.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford: A good new year to you, Mr Speaker.

Many people will find it bizarre, and frankly unacceptable, that the Secretary of State for Scotland is not even attending the negotiations on Scotland's fiscal framework. Can he explain why his office of Secretary of State seems to have been deemed irrelevant to those critical negotiations? Given that he is not directly involved in the negotiations, will he share his personal view on whether he agrees with the learned professors and the STUC on the preferred model?

David Mundell: I think what many people in Scotland will find bizarre is that at a session in Parliament that is called Scottish questions, the Scottish National party could come up with only one question, which all its Members were clearly told to ask.

I know that it may impinge on the importance that some SNP MPs attribute to themselves, but it is the Deputy First Minister of Scotland, John Swinney, who is negotiating the agreement, not them.

Ronnie Cowan: The model of indexed adjustment for the adjustment of the block grant may result in the Scottish block grant falling substantially without consideration of the different rates of population growth north and south of the border. Does the Secretary of State agree that that or any other model of block grant adjustment that results in a diminished Scottish budget year on year will not fulfil the Smith commission's principle of no detriment?

David Mundell: I am disappointed with the hon. Gentleman's analysis because the new powers that are being delivered by the Scotland Bill create the opportunity for Scotland's economic growth to increase and for Scotland's population to increase. I am very surprised that he has such a negative view of the use of those powers that it would be impossible to increase population or economic growth in Scotland and therefore increase tax take.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the transfer of the new extensive powers that he has agreed will be given to the Scottish Parliament will for once make the SNP Government truly accountable to the Scottish people, and that the talk of a second referendum is just a smokescreen to take away their accountability to the Scottish people?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree that the impression created again today by SNP Members is that they are entirely driven by process arguments, and not by getting on and getting an agreement on the fiscal framework, getting the new powers in place and then doing something positive for the people of Scotland with those powers.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, once the fiscal framework has been agreed, the devolution of tax powers to the Scottish Parliament can begin quickly?

David Mundell: I am absolutely committed to delivering the powers set out in the Scotland Bill when it becomes an Act as quickly as possible. We want that Act on the statute book ahead of the Scottish Parliament elections so that it can shape those elections, and so that the parties can set out what they intend to do with the powers. I would like the tax powers in place by April 2017.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): The success of the fiscal framework is vital to the future success of the tax powers that have been devolved. Confidence in the framework is vital for individuals and businesses, particularly in the border region. Does the Secretary of State believe that the Scottish Government are approaching the discussions in good faith, which will be fair to people on both sides of the border?

David Mundell: I absolutely do, because, from the discussions that Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland, has had with the Prime Minister, and from the discussions I have had with the Deputy First Minister—we have to remember that they are determining what will be agreed in relation to the fiscal framework—their view is clear. I take it as sincere that they want to achieve a fiscal framework agreement in the near future. We can then move forward with enacting the Bill and transferring those powers, which could make such a difference to the people of Scotland.

12 [902854]. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Smith commission recommended that the cost of establishing the infrastructure for the collection of the newly devolved taxes would be borne by the UK Government. Will the Secretary of State

for Scotland, and not the Deputy First Minister of Scotland, confirm that the UK Government accept that recommendation?

David Mundell: I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman that that is one of the items that is part of the discussion between the UK Government and the Scottish Government. It is so surprising that SNP MPs have such little confidence in Mr Swinney and the Scottish Government in the negotiation to hold out for positions that would be beneficial to Scotland—I find it staggering.

13. [902855] **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State agree with the First Minister, Professor Muscatelli and the STUC that more powers for Scotland cannot come at any price, but that the fiscal framework settlement must deliver fairness for Scotland? Will the Secretary of State commit to a date before the Scottish elections by which an agreement must be reached?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree that the arrangements must be fair—fair to Scotland and fair to the rest of the United Kingdom. That is perfectly achievable. I do not want to provide a running commentary, but the negotiations and discussions that have taken place have been productive. For example, I absolutely agree with the comments of Mr Swinney to the Scottish Parliament Finance Committee—he clearly said that the Scottish Government should benefit from the positive decisions they take but accept the consequences of bad policy decisions. That should also apply to the UK Government in relation to our responsibilities.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): May I take this opportunity, Mr Speaker, to wish you and all the staff of the House, as well as the Secretary of State and his office, a happy new year? Mr Speaker, you would have thought that the pantomime season was over, but judging by today's questions, it clearly is not—[*Interruption.*] Oh, yes, it certainly is. I was expecting that, from someone who has no jokes whatsoever. We could be questioning the Government on no shortage of things, but the Secretary of State has created this sham by keeping the fiscal framework secret. What is ludicrous is that the SNP Finance Secretary, who is negotiating the very fiscal framework that we are discussing, could be asked what is in it. It is clear that it is the people of Scotland who are being kept in the dark. I have asked the Secretary of State this before, but will he put an end to this pantomime of manufactured grievance and be completely transparent about the fiscal framework?

David Mundell: The Government are completely transparent about our position on the fiscal framework. We want it agreed as soon as possible and we want it to be scrutinised by both Parliaments. When I was in the Scottish Parliament recently I had the opportunity to meet Bruce Crawford, convener of the Devolution (Further Powers) Committee. He assured me that he is satisfied that in conjunction with the Finance Committee in the Scottish Parliament there will be adequate opportunity to scrutinise the fiscal framework. I am clear that there will be an opportunity in the other place to scrutinise it, and the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs is currently conducting an inquiry. I do not think that the people of

Scotland will be in the dark in any way about the fiscal framework. It will achieve what we want it to achieve but it will also be subject to proper scrutiny.

Ian Murray: I do not think that the Secretary of State understands the process and how important this is. The Scotland Bill constitutes the biggest transfer of powers to Scotland ever, but the underpinning financial provisions are being hidden from the Scottish people. I have written to both Governments and questions have been asked in both Parliaments to try to get transparency, but the response from both Governments has been “no”. Meanwhile, the Scottish Government are threatening to veto the Bill. The danger is that while these negotiations are being conducted in secret, both Governments can blame each other with manufactured grievance, and it is the people of Scotland who will lose out. Will the Secretary of State at least assure us that in future negotiations as important as this on Scotland’s finances will be conducted with greater transparency and democratic scrutiny?

David Mundell: I have no grievance, manufactured or otherwise. I am confident that the Scottish Government want to achieve an agreement. The UK Government want to achieve an agreement based on fairness to Scotland and fairness to the rest of the United Kingdom. I give the hon. Gentleman an absolute commitment that the fiscal framework, as agreed, will be subject to full parliamentary scrutiny here in Westminster and in the Scottish Parliament.

Mr Speaker: Question 3—I call Sir Henry Bellingham.

Defence Installations

3. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What plans he has to meet Ministers of the Scottish Government to discuss defence installations in Scotland. [902845]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): May I start by adding to your comment in introducing question 3, Mr Speaker? I congratulate my hon. Friend on the recognition he received last week for some 30 years’ service to this House and the people of Norfolk. It is a great pleasure that he received that recognition.

In response to his question, the Ministry of Defence engages with the Scottish Government about defence establishments and other defence matters at many levels, both official and ministerial. The Under-Secretary of State for Scotland and I met the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities on 17 November to discuss the strategic defence and security review. The Defence Minister responsible for reserves has met the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary twice previously, and the Defence Secretary has agreed to meet the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary soon.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I thank the Minister for his generosity. Given that the decision on Faslane will sustain the largest employment site in Scotland for decades to come, is it not clear that Scotland is the biggest beneficiary of the recent SDSR? Surely that makes the stance on Trident of both the Leader of the Opposition and the SNP even more perverse and damaging.

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend is right that this Government are investing significantly in defence in Scotland. Following the SDSR, not only will we spend some £500 million at Faslane—one of the Royal Navy’s three operating bases and one of the largest employment sites in Scotland with 6,800 military and civilian jobs, which will increase to more than 8,000 as we move all our submarines to be based there by 2022—but Scotland will be home to our new maritime patrol aircraft, with some 400 extra personnel stationed to man the squadron at RAF Lossiemouth.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Scotland is in a vital geostrategic location, with the Iceland gap to our north, the Atlantic to our west and the North sea to our east. As the Scottish National party has been pointing out for a long time, it has been negligent and dangerous for a maritime state such as the UK not to have maritime patrol aircraft. We therefore welcome the Government’s recent U-turn on the procurement of P-8 maritime patrol aircraft. Can the Minister tell us when the entire fleet will be operational?

Mr Dunne: We made it clear in the SDSR that we would be procuring nine P-8 maritime patrol aircraft, and that the fleet would be procured through a foreign military sales procurement contract, the letter for which has already been submitted to the United States. The first aircraft will be operational in 2019.

Angus Robertson: The House will note that the Minister was unable to answer my question on when the entire fleet would be operational. Perhaps when he responds to my second question, he will be able to answer the first one. The RAF is currently maintaining its skill base by training on maritime patrol aircraft with the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Does the Minister acknowledge the importance of the maritime patrol aircraft training that was scheduled to be based at RAF Kinloss before the scrapping of the Nimrod fleet? Will the Government ensure that training on the P-8 maritime patrol aircraft is based at RAF Lossiemouth, as the training for Tornados and Typhoon aircraft is now?

Mr Dunne: As we are currently in contractual negotiations for the procurement, it would be quite wrong for me to pre-empt the precise nature of those negotiations, so I cannot answer the right hon. Gentleman’s initial question on how many aircraft will be available, and when, until such time as the contract has been concluded. On the question of training, he is right to say that we have crews in service on this platform with other users in the United States. The training basing will be established as part of the procurement process in the coming months.

Strategic Defence and Security Review

4. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with (a) the Secretary of State for Defence and (b) Ministers of the Scottish Government on the effect on Scotland of the strategic defence and security review. [902846]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): While defence and national security remain reserved to the UK Parliament, we recognise the importance of

engaging with the devolved Administrations. As I said in my answer to the previous question, Lord Dunlop, the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, and I have had meetings with the Scottish Government to discuss these matters.

Nick Smith: UK defence contracts are a major source of jobs in Scotland, with 2,500 people employed on Clydeside. Can the Minister explain why his Government reduced defence spending by 14% in the last Parliament?

Mr Dunne: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman seeks to hark back, rather than to look forward. At the end of November we published the SDSR, in which the Government committed to increase defence spending in real terms for each year of this Parliament, and that is what we are looking forward to. Much of that investment will be spent in Scotland, and indeed in south Wales, as we procure the Ajax vehicle.

Economic Growth

6. **Karen Lumley** (Redditch) (Con): What assessment he has made of the level of growth in the economy in Scotland. [902848]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The Government's long-term economic plan has laid the foundations for a stronger economy. The Scottish economy has been growing for 11 quarters in a row. Scotland continues to benefit from being part of the UK, which was the fastest growing G7 economy in 2014 and is forecast to be the joint fastest in 2015.

Karen Lumley: My constituency has a number of manufacturing companies that do a great deal of business in Scotland, contributing to the growth of the local economy of Redditch as well as to the economy of Scotland. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is just one element that makes the Union so successful?

David Mundell: I do agree with my hon. Friend. It is a fundamental part of the growth in Scotland's economy that we are part of a single market within our United Kingdom. I recently had the pleasure of visiting Alexander Dennis, the bus manufacturer in Falkirk, and I am sure that they would agree that the rest of the United Kingdom was one of their most important markets.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Given that employment in Scotland is now 53,000 higher than it was before the crisis, and that output in Scotland is now 3% higher than at the pre-crisis point, does the Secretary of State concur with Scottish business leaders who oppose the Treasury's savage cuts to the UK's trade export agency in the autumn statement?

David Mundell: I very much welcome the figures the hon. Gentleman set out on the positive economic position in Scotland. What I do not subscribe to is the frequently voiced Scottish National party and Scottish Government position that anything good that happens in Scotland is in relation to the Scottish Government and anything bad is in relation to the UK Government. We have two Governments working together for the benefit of Scotland's economy.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The North sea oil and gas industry is obviously vital to Scotland's economy. Yesterday, a Scottish nationalist MSP claimed that there is no crisis in the industry, even though it has been estimated that 65,000 jobs have been lost since 2014. The SNP clearly inhabits a different world from everybody else. Will the Secretary of State tell us what his Government are doing to support the oil industry and to protect the thousands of jobs that depend on it?

David Mundell: I find it extraordinary that anyone who represents the north-east of Scotland could claim that there was no crisis in the oil and gas industry. This Government have demonstrated, yet again, in the Chancellor's autumn statement that we are committed to that industry and the thousands of jobs that it supports right across the United Kingdom. There will be further evidence of our commitment to Aberdeen and the north-east in the weeks ahead.

Household Incomes

7. **Robert Flello** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on household incomes in Scotland of the changes to welfare announced in the summer budget 2015 and the spending review and autumn statement 2015. [902849]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): The analysis published at spending review 2015 shows that more than half of all spending on welfare and public services goes to the poorest 40% of households in the UK. That has not changed as a result of the Government's policies since 2010.

Robert Flello: The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that by 2020 more than 2.5 million working families on universal credit will, on average, be £1,600 a year worse off owing to the cuts to the work allowance in universal credit. My constituents know how that is going to damage them, but do the Secretary of State and the Minister have the first clue as to how many of those families will be in Scotland and what the scale of the impact will be on them?

Mr Gauke: The best way to help working households in this country is to ensure that we have a job-creating economy; that wages go up; that we introduce a national living wage that will help millions of people; and that we have a secure and stable economy. That is what this Government are delivering. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Household incomes in Scotland will be of intense interest, not least to people living in Scotland. We must hear the questions and the answers.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): In a recent written parliamentary question to the Secretary of State, I asked:

"what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the introduction of the Work and Health Programme in Scotland."

His response was a masterful example of how not to answer, which is what we have seen again today. Will he now take the opportunity to tell the House whether

he has bothered to discuss with the Department for Work and Pensions how this new programme will affect my constituents?

Mr Gauke: This Government are making reforms to the welfare system—we are making sure that work always pays. We do have to ensure that the system is affordable, but may I remind the hon. Lady that the Scotland Bill gives the Scottish Government the powers to top up benefits and introduce new benefits?

Undergraduates

8. **Mr Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on increasing the number of undergraduates attending Scottish universities. [902850]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I regularly discuss a range of matters with the Scottish Government. Although higher education is a devolved matter, the available figures show that application rates for those aged 18 in 2014 and 19 in 2015 were 37% in Scotland compared with 44% in England. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I also wish to hear the voice of Christchurch on the matter of Scottish universities.

Mr Chope: How can it be in the United Kingdom national interest that school leavers from Scotland are being denied access to their own universities because of the arbitrary cap on numbers imposed by the Scottish Government, when school leavers with lower qualifications from the rest of the UK are able to gain such access?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Students from my constituency have been refused entry to Scottish universities because of the cap imposed by the Scottish Government; we hear a lot about free tuition in Scotland but that is one of the consequences, and I am sure it will be part of the debate in the forthcoming Scottish Parliament elections.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): As the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) knows, the Scottish Affairs Committee has been looking into higher education, specifically into a post-study work scheme for Scotland. What the Secretary of State will find is that everybody—the universities, the trade unions, and the employers' association—wants that scheme for Scotland. Will he now be a Secretary of State for Scotland and put that case to the Home Office?

David Mundell: We always listen with interest and take forward in a positive way anything that is forthcoming from the Scottish Affairs Committee, and I look forward to reading the hon. Gentleman's report.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least Mr Philip Hollobone.

Departmental Running Costs

9. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What the administrative cost of running his Department was in 2010; and what he expects that cost to be in 2020. [902851]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The administrative cost of running the Scotland Office and Office of the Advocate General for Scotland in the financial year 2010-11 was £7.688 million. The administrative provision for both offices in 2019-20, agreed at the recent spending review, is £9.240 million.

Mr Hollobone: Will the Secretary of State confirm to the House what percentage of his Department's administrative costs is met by Scottish taxpayers?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend knows that the funding arrangements within the United Kingdom do not work on that basis. He also knows that this Government are committed to retaining the Barnett formula, which delivers a fair allocation of funding to Scotland.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [902803] **Karen Lumley** (Redditch) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 6 January.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, and, in addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Karen Lumley: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, while he is Prime Minister of this country, condemning terrorist attacks will not be a bar to holding high office?

The Prime Minister: Condemning terrorist attacks is an essential component of aspiring to high office in this country, and that should be the case whether one is a shadow Minister or a Minister of the Crown. It is worth recalling what the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) said, which was that

“terrorists are entirely responsible for their actions, that no one forces anyone to kill innocent people in Paris, blow up the London Underground, to behead innocent aid workers in Syria”.

He was absolutely right to say that, and it speaks volumes that he cannot sit in the shadow Cabinet with the Leader of the Opposition.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I would like to thank the firefighters, mountain rescue services, police, armed services, engineers, workers at the Environment Agency, local government workers, and all the volunteers for all the work they did in keeping safe thousands of people from the floods that have affected this country. Two years ago, in January 2014, following devastating floods, the Prime Minister said:

“There are always lessons to be learned and I will make sure they are learned.”

Were they?

The Prime Minister: First, let me join the Leader of the Opposition in thanking the emergency services, the police, and the fire service. I also thank the search and rescue teams who went from around the country to

areas that were flooded. May I thank the military for all the work that they did? As he says, we saw communities coming together and volunteers carrying out extraordinary work.

Let me deal directly with the issue of lessons learned. Having seen my own constituency very badly flooded in 2007 and having had floods while being Prime Minister, a number of lessons have been learned. This time, the military came in far faster than ever before. The Bellwin scheme was funded at 100%, not 85%, and more money was got to communities more quickly. A lot of lessons have been learned. Are there more to learn? I am sure there are; there always are, which is why I will review everything that has been done. Let us be clear that, as we do that, we will make money available because we have a strong economy to build flood resilience in our country.

Jeremy Corbyn: In 2011, a £190 million flood defence project on the River Aire in Leeds was cancelled by the Government on cost grounds. One thousand homes and businesses in Leeds were flooded in recent weeks, and the Government are still committed only to a scaled-down version of the project, worth a fraction of its total cost. This from a Prime Minister who claimed that “money was no object” when it came to flood relief. When he or his Secretary of State meets the Leeds MPs and Judith Blake, the leader of Leeds City Council, in the near future, will he guarantee that the full scheme will go ahead to protect Leeds from future flooding?

The Prime Minister: First of all, let me make one point before answering the right hon. Gentleman’s points in detail. It is worth putting on record before we get on to flood defence investment—and I will cover it in full—that this was the wettest December for over 100 years, and actually in Leeds and in Yorkshire it was the wettest December ever on record. That is why rivers in Yorkshire flooded, including the Aire in Leeds, which was a metre higher than it has ever been in its history.

No flood defence schemes have been cancelled since 2010. The investment in flood defences was £1.5 billion in the last Labour Government, £1.7 billion in the Government I led as a coalition Government, and will be over £2 billion in this Parliament. It has gone up and up and up. It has gone up because we run an economy where we are able to invest in the things that our country needs. And one more point—let us not forget this. We inherited the Darling plan for our economy. That was a plan for a 50% cut in capital spending, and DEFRA was not a protected Department. We protected that flood spending and we increased it—something Labour would not have done.

Jeremy Corbyn: Of course the rainfall was excessive, of course the river levels were high, but the Prime Minister has still not answered the question on the Leeds flood protection scheme—I will give him an opportunity to do so in a moment. In 2014, Cumbria County Council applied for funding for new schemes in Keswick and Kendal—both were turned down and both areas flooded again in the last few weeks. Does the Prime Minister believe that turning down those schemes was also a mistake?

The Prime Minister: We are spending more on flood defence schemes and stacking up a whole series of schemes that we will spend more on. Let me make this

point to the right hon. Gentleman: if he is going to spend £10 billion on renationalising our railways, where is he going to find the money for flood defences? The idea that this individual would be faster in responding to floods when it takes him three days to carry out a reshuffle is frankly laughable. Since I walked into the Chamber this morning, his shadow Foreign Minister resigned and his shadow Defence Minister resigned—he could not run anything.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is very strange that when I have asked a question about Leeds flood defence, then on Cumbria flood defence, the Prime Minister still seems unable to answer. Can he now tell us if there is going to be funding for those schemes?

In October, Professor Colin Mellors, the head of the Yorkshire regional flood and coastal committee, warned the Government about funding cuts leading to flood defences in Yorkshire being “formally discontinued” in the future. Would that also be a mistake? Can the Prime Minister now tell us: is he going to reverse the cuts in the defences that have taken place to make sure that those cities and areas are protected in the next round of floods which will no doubt come?

The Prime Minister: As I have told the right hon. Gentleman, we have increased and continued to increase the spending on flood defences. We are spending more in this Parliament, and for the first time it is a six-year spending perspective, which is £2.3 billion extra on flood defences—money that would not be available if we trashed the economy in the way that he proposes. Of course, after every incident of flooding, you go back and look at what you have spent and what you have built, you look at what you are planning to spend and what you are planning to build, and you see what more can be done. The head of the Environment Agency was absolutely clear that he had the money necessary to take the action that was necessary, but we can only do that with a strong economy—an economy that is growing, where more people are in work and more people are paying taxes. We have got the strength to solve this problem of floods, and we will do it in a proper way.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister has not answered on Leeds, he has not answered on Cumbria, and he has not answered on the warning from Professor Mellors.

Like the Prime Minister, last week I met people in York who had been affected by flooding. I met a young couple, Chris and Victoria, whose home had been flooded over Christmas—[*Interruption.*] It was not very funny for them. This young couple lost many of their possessions, including photos and children’s toys and school work, and they have the foul stench of floodwater in their home, as have many families all over this country. They are asking all of us wholly legitimate questions. Why was the insufficient pump capacity at the Foss barrier—which, again, we were alerted to in 2013 by a Government report—not dealt with or the pumps upgraded? That meant that people in York were flooded and their possessions and homes severely damaged. Those people want answers from all of us, and in particular from the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: I have the greatest sympathy with anyone who has been flooded. We have to do what it takes to get people and communities back on their feet. That is why we have put record sums in more

quickly to help communities in Cumbria, in Lancashire and now in Yorkshire. We will continue to do that. Specifically on the question of the Foss pumps, that was about to be tendered for extra investment, and that investment will now go ahead, because the money is there.

I say to the right hon. Gentleman that we are putting in the money and doing so more quickly, and the military got involved more quickly. For that couple who got flooded, we are also doing something that previous Governments have talked about but never achieved, which is to have an insurance scheme—Flood Re—so that every single household can get insured. That has not been done before.

Have lessons been learned? Yes, they have. Are there more lessons to learn? There always are, but frankly we do not need a lecture from Malta from the right hon. Gentleman.

Jeremy Corbyn: The reality is that flood defence scheme after flood defence scheme has been cancelled, postponed or cut, many more homes have been flooded and too many lessons have been ignored. Why cannot the Prime Minister support our calls for a co-ordinated, cross-party approach to flooding that looks at everything, including upland management, making people's homes more flood resilient, and more properly funded protection schemes?

Does the Prime Minister at least agree that the fire and rescue service, which has done such a great job over the past few weeks in all parts of this country, should now be given a statutory duty to deal with floods, to help us through any crisis that might occur in the future?

The Prime Minister: I think the best I can say is that when the right hon. Gentleman has worked out how to co-ordinate his own party, perhaps he could come and have a word with me.

On the issue of a statutory duty, everybody knows what they have to do when floods take place. That is why there was such a magnificent response from the emergency services, the fire services and the emergency rescue services. They have our backing to do the vital work. We will go on investing in flood defences. We will increase the money we are spending on flood defences, because we have got a strong economy and a strong country that can back the action that is needed.

Q6. [902808] **Nadhim Zahawi** (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): In 2016 we will mark the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's passing away. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our country should unite to commemorate his works?

The Prime Minister *rose*—

Nadhim Zahawi: There are special events at the Royal Shakespeare Company; the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust is renovating the site of his home, New Place; and King Edward's School is opening his original classroom. May I invite my right hon. Friend, the whole House and the world to come and celebrate our greatest bard?

The Prime Minister: My apologies for almost interrupting my hon. Friend's soliloquy—I am very sorry about that. The 400th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare is a

very good moment for us to celebrate everything he has given to our language and our culture and, indeed, to the world. It is going to be a fantastic moment for people to visit Britain and come to see Stratford and all the other places that have such a great association with Shakespeare.

I find that Shakespeare provides language for every moment. Let us consider what we are thinking about at the moment. There was a moment when it looked like this reshuffle could go into its twelfth night. It was a revenge reshuffle, so it was going to be as you like it. I think, though, we can conclude that it has turned into something of a comedy of errors—perhaps much ado about nothing. There will be those who worry that love's Labour's lost.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP) *rose*—

Hon. Members: More!

Angus Robertson: Thank you very much for the warm welcome. The health service is devolved, but junior doctors in Scotland are not planning to strike next week. Why does the Prime Minister think the Scottish Government have good relations with junior doctors and his Government do not?

The Prime Minister: And now for the Scottish play! The right hon. Gentleman raises an important question. We have taken a different approach from the Government in Scotland. We have increased spending on the NHS by more than the Government in Scotland, which I think is the right approach. We are determined to have a genuine seven-day NHS. Everybody knows—doctors know it, patients know it, the management of the NHS know it, the BMA knows it—that there is a problem with the NHS at the weekend.

One way to correct that is to make sure that we have new contracts, including with junior doctors. That is not to make them work longer hours. In fact, under our plans, many will work many fewer hours. It is not to reduce doctors' pay. No one who works legal hours will see a cut in their pay. Indeed, 75% of doctors will see a pay rise. We think that this is a good deal for a good advance in the NHS. I am sure that Scotland will be looking at it too.

Angus Robertson: The Scottish Government have been investing record levels of funding in the NHS in Scotland and they work very hard to have the best possible relations with doctors, nurses and all NHS staff. Will the English Health Secretary speak to his Scottish colleague, Shona Robison, to learn how to resolve the situation in England and stave off strike action that no one wants, least of all junior doctors?

The Prime Minister: There should always be good relations and discussions between the Health Secretary in the United Kingdom Government and Health Ministers in the devolved Administrations. Importantly, when we make a decision to increase funding in the NHS, as we have done with the £19 billion more in this Parliament, it has consequences for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland under the Barnett formula. Of course, I find it very depressing that the Welsh have decided, under Labour, to spend less than we are planning to spend, and that Scotland has done the same thing.

Q9. [902811] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): The local economy in my constituency of Bolton West continues to strengthen, with great businesses such as Eventura and LLaborate both relocating to and growing in Westhoughton; Heritage Trade Frames investing £1 million in equipping a new factory in Lostock; and Trojan Utilities winning new contracts and recruiting more staff in Horwich.—[*Interruption.*] Does the Prime Minister agree that the northern powerhouse is about not just our great northern cities, but our great northern towns?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is instructive that Opposition Members do not want to hear good news about the businesses, jobs and investment in our economy. Sometimes, it can sound as if the plan for a northern powerhouse is all about the cities of the north of England. Our view is that by linking up the cities, we will help the towns in the north-west and across our country. It will also help rural areas because we are rebalancing the economy and increasing opportunity in the north of our country.

Q2. [902804] **Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): In 2014, in response to the flooding of the Thames valley, the Prime Minister said that money would be “no object”. In the light of his cuts to the flood defences, his cuts to the fire and rescue service and his cuts to the Environment Agency, can he say the same to the people of Leeds, Rochdale, York, Whitby and Teesside, or is it one rule for his constituents and another for ours in the north?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is completely wrong about the funding figures. As I have explained in great detail, they have gone from £1.5 billion to £1.7 billion to £2 billion. What this Government have put in place is funding under Bellwin of not 85% of what a council spends, but 100%, so what I said absolutely stands good.

Q10. [902812] **Simon Hart** (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): The Prime Minister has always been a staunch supporter of the Welsh TV channel S4C, which was set up under the Thatcher Government. Will he use this opportunity to reinforce his support for the channel and the commitment that we made to safeguard its funding?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to do that. S4C is a very important part of our broadcasting structure. It is very popular and well-liked in Wales. I want to ensure that we meet both the wording and the spirit of our manifesto promise to make sure that it continues to be a very strong channel.

Q3. [902805] **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): With home ownership down to its lowest level in a generation, and down every year since the right hon. Gentleman became Prime Minister, why did Tory MPs vote against Labour’s amendment to the Housing and Planning Bill last night, which would have protected the publicly funded discount for new starter homes for future buyers? Is that not better value for money for first-time buyers and for the taxpayer, yes or no?

The Prime Minister: The proposal for starter homes is a Conservative party proposal put into our manifesto and opposed throughout by the Labour party. This is

only happening because we won a majority and put a housing Bill through the House of Commons. We are taking every step we can to help more people to get on the housing ladder. In London, part of which the hon. Gentleman represents, we are seeing Help to Buy now funding 40% of the homes people want to buy, rather than 20%. We are going to see 200,000 starter homes built during this Parliament. We are managing our economy properly so interest rates are low and it is now easier for people to get a mortgage. With our help to save scheme, there is now every opportunity for people to put aside money to help them with their deposit. We are absolutely on the side of the homeowner, but above all those people who want to get on the housing ladder. We are helping with jobs, helping with tax cuts, helping with Help to Buy, helping with help to save and, crucially, helping by building more homes.

Q13. [902815] **Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): On Boxing Day, the village of Croston in my constituency suffered the worst floods in living memory, with damage to schools, homes and businesses. Will my right hon. Friend join me in praising the efforts of everybody in Croston who pulled together to protect their community? Will he ask the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) to review the decision by the Environment Agency to switch off the pumps at Alt Crossens?

The Prime Minister: First, let me pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s constituents, who worked around the clock to help each other in appalling floods and an incredibly high level of rainfall. Let me join her in thanking the emergency services again for all the work they did.

After floods like this, there are always questions about which pumps were used, which floodgates were opened and what decisions were made by the experts on the ground. It is very important, having seen many communities flooded in my own constituency, to hold meetings with community after community; to go through those decisions, to work out what lessons can be learned and to work out whether the right decisions were made. I absolutely pledge that that should be done. We have announced £40 million for the work across Lancashire and Cumbria to help people out, and we will ensure that the flood alleviation money for households and businesses, the schemes we set up after 2013, is paid out as quickly as it can be.

Q4. [902806] **Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): In the light of last month’s Paris climate agreement, at which all countries agreed to progressively increase their ambition and to keep global warming well below 2°, does the Prime Minister agree that we must now urgently begin the process of strengthening the EU’s 2030 greenhouse gas reduction target to 50% below 1990 levels at the very least, a position he argued for, I am glad to say, at the European Council?

The Prime Minister: First, let me join the hon. Lady in once again recognising that Paris was a very big step forward. Previous agreements, such as at Kyoto, did not include action by China or America. Now we have all the big countries and big emitters as part of the deal. We argued that the EU should go further. We achieved,

I think, a very aggressive package for the EU, but that was the best we could do in the circumstances. I think the EU agreement helped to bring about the general agreement. No one should be in any doubt that Britain is playing a very major role in bringing that about. Let me give the House one statistic. I know there is a great deal of interest in the House about solar panels. The other day I asked what percentage of solar panels had been installed in Britain since this Government took office in 2010. I expected the answer to be 50% or 60%; the answer is 98%.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Yesterday, it was announced that the Foxhill housing zone in Bath would receive £313,000 of Government funding to help to kick-start work to build thousands of new homes in the city. Does the Prime Minister agree that that funding will help to reverse the lack of housebuilding under the Labour party and enable struggling families to get on to the property ladder?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted to hear about the development in my hon. Friend's constituency. The fact is that we have built 700,000 houses since the Government came to office in 2010, but a lot more needs to be done. Sometimes it is specific bits of transport infrastructure, specific planning permissions or disagreements between district councils and county councils that need to be sorted out. We should not forget the fact, however, that the developers and housebuilders will go ahead with housebuilding only if they believe that there is a benign economic environment with a strong and growing economy and stable interest rates, and all the things we need. That is the key to the success in housing.

Q5. [902807] **Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab):** The Prime Minister promised to cut the number of Government special advisers, and the Chancellor wants to limit pay increases for public sector employees to 1%. How does he square that with his now having 26 more special advisers than in 2010 and the 42% pay increase for the Chancellor's own personal image consultant?

The Prime Minister: There are fewer special advisers under this Government than there were under the last Government.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is more than a matter of regret that the new shadow Defence Secretary has seen fit to take a donation from the immoral, thieving and ambulance-chasing lawyers Leigh Day, who, together with public interest lawyers, specialise in hounding our brave service personnel in Iraq with spurious claims? Is it not time we removed the latter from the pernicious clutches of the Human Rights Act and honoured our manifesto commitment to a British Bill of Rights?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we should honour our commitment to a British Bill of Rights, on which I look forward to making progress. I do think that this organisation, Leigh Day, has questions to answer, not least because it was deeply involved in the al-Sweady inquiry, where a lot of claims completely fell apart and there was, it seems, evidence that could have shown that those claims were false. It is instructive that we have lost a shadow Defence Secretary who believed in strong

defence and our nuclear deterrent, and instead we have someone who apparently takes funds from Leigh Day. I think that that raises serious questions. Frankly, it goes to a bigger truth: one day, I suppose this reshuffle will be over, and we will be left with a collection of politicians—be in no doubt about this—who have signed up to unilateral nuclear disarmament, racking up taxes, debt and spending and one of the most left-wing programmes in living memory. This is a collective act in which they have taken part. We should not be asking, "Is the Leader of the Opposition happy to have the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) in his shadow Cabinet?"; we know he is not. The question is: "What on earth are the right hon. Member for Leeds Central and others doing in this Labour party shadow Cabinet?"

Q7. [902809] **Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab):** The Prime Minister might know that Knowsley also has a Shakespeare connection? For example, "A Midsummer Night's Dream", among other plays, was written there. Will he lend his support to the proposal for a Shakespearean theatre of the north to complete the triangle—the Globe theatre, Stratford-on-Avon and Knowsley—in a celebration of Shakespeare's work?

The Prime Minister: That sounds like an excellent proposal. We should not try to constrain Shakespeare to Stratford, but make sure that this is a national—indeed, international—celebration, so I shall look carefully at the right hon. Gentleman's proposal.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): In Derbyshire, the county council has announced plans to cut four care homes, including Hillcrest in my constituency, as well as to axe sheltered housing wards from March. This is clearly an attack on the elderly and vulnerable of Derbyshire by an authority with a proven track record of wasting taxpayers' money. Will my right hon. Friend look into this dismal situation to ensure that all Derbyshire residents have access to good levels of care?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to look at the problem my hon. Friend raises. Obviously, it is a Labour-controlled council taking these decisions. I urge it to consider our proposals in the spending review and the fact that councils can now use a surcharge on council tax to fund additional social care, and then recognise that its job, instead of playing politics, should be to serve local people?

Q8. [902810] **Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab):** Last year, the International Monetary Fund warned that income inequality was "the most defining challenge of our time",

was getting worse and slowed economic growth. By last night, FTSE 100 chief executives had been paid more for five days' work than the average UK worker will be paid for the whole of 2016. They got a pay rise of nearly 50% last year, while the average worker got one of less than 2%. Will the Prime Minister support the High Pay Centre's recommendations for organisations to publish data on the ratio of top pay to average pay?

The Prime Minister: I am a great supporter of transparency in these things, as we have proved in government. Let us be clear that since I have become

Prime Minister income inequality has fallen whereas it went up under Labour. Those are the facts. One of the biggest things we are doing to help with income inequality is, for the first time ever, to bring in a national living wage. This is the year in which we will see people paying no tax until they have earned £11,000. This is the year in which we will see a national living wage at £7.20. Those are big advances in helping the low paid in our country.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I, too, would like to pay tribute to the countless number of people and organisations that helped out during the recent floods. Yesterday, I spoke with the chairman of the new Flood Re insurance scheme. I know that people who have been hammered by the floods will welcome the fact that their premiums will be quashed and that they will not meet eye-watering excesses. The chairman told me, however, that the scheme will not cover any houses built since 2009 or any businesses. Will the Prime Minister look again at the scheme to ensure that it is properly comprehensive?

The Prime Minister: We are looking very carefully at the scheme, particularly on the issue of businesses. What we have heard so far is a number of anecdotal stories, with small businesses saying that it will be difficult to get insurance. Meanwhile, the insurance companies are telling us that they will not turn down any small businesses, so we need to get to the bottom of this. That is absolutely key before we get to the final introduction of Flood Re in April this year.

Q11. [902813] **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It was good to welcome the Prime Minister and his excellency the President of China to Manchester airport in my constituency recently to talk about investment. What is in the north's interest and the nation's interest is extra runway capacity in the south-east. Why does the Prime Minister continue to procrastinate?

The Prime Minister: Let me first thank the hon. Gentleman and everyone in Greater Manchester who helped to welcome President Xi at the excellent lunch held in Manchester and then at the very good visit to Manchester airport. Let me respond to the hon. Gentleman's question. The Environmental Audit Committee and the author of the original report, Sir Howard Davies, have both said that the problems of air quality raise new questions that the Government have to answer, and I am in favour of answering those questions and then making a decision.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Two years ago tomorrow, I believe, the House lost a superb parliamentarian and a colleague much loved in all parts of the House. I refer to the predecessor of the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), Paul Goggins. We remember him with affection and respect, and we also remember and think fondly of his widow, Wyn, and their children Matthew, Theresa and Dominic. They are all wonderful human beings, and we wish them well for the future.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): As the Prime Minister knows, my constituency was decimated by the recent floods. It was reported in the Bradford *Telegraph and Argus* earlier this week that the Bradford district would not receive any of the extra funding that the Prime Minister announced for flood defences in Yorkshire. Will he take this opportunity to confirm that that is not the case, that whatever money is necessary to protect my constituency from future flooding will be spent—and if he is struggling to find the money, perhaps he could use funds from the overseas aid budget, because I am sure he believes that victims of flooding in Shipley should not be discriminated against when it comes to victims of flooding in other parts of the world?

The Prime Minister: We will do what it takes to make sure that families, communities and businesses can get back on their feet. That is why we have invested record sums more quickly into the affected areas. We have learned the lessons of previous floods, where sometimes the schemes were too bureaucratic and too much time was taken. Whether it comes to building new bridges, repairing roads, building the flood defences, examining where the water went this time or what more can be done, we will make sure that that work is carried out—in Bradford, as everywhere else.

Q12. [902814] **Jim Dowd** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Is the Prime Minister aware of the valuable work done by the National Wildlife Crime Unit in enforcing the law, promoting animal welfare and contributing to the international effort against the trade in endangered species? Is he further aware that the funding for the unit expires in just a couple of months' time and that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Home Office are yet to make a decision to continue it? Will the Prime Minister prevail on his right hon. Friends to ensure that this extremely important and valuable work is continued?

The Prime Minister: My understanding is that we have kept the funding for this organisation, which does important work both domestically and overseas, but I will look very carefully at what the hon. Gentleman suggests. I think that there is a decision still to be made about the future, although up to now we have backed the organisation very fully.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows that the legacy of thalidomide still hangs over more than 500 people in our country today. In the last Parliament, he signalled strong support for the securing of a fair and just solution to their problems. May I invite him to renew that pledge in this Parliament, and to work with the all-party parliamentary group on thalidomide to bring about a just outcome?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to make that clear. In the last Parliament, I met some of my own constituents who had been affected by thalidomide. There were a number of things that they wanted parliamentarians to do, and I think that a lot of people got behind their campaign. I shall be happy to continue to work with them in this Parliament.

National Health Service and Social Care (Commission)

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

12.36 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish an independent commission to examine the future of the National Health Service and the social care system; to take evidence; to report its conclusions to Parliament; and for connected purposes.

Two former Secretaries of State for Health—one Labour, one Conservative—and other Members on both sides of the House have joined me in calling for the Government to establish a commission of this kind. We have also been joined by an organisation called NHS Survival, a group of progressive junior doctors, patients and others which now has 8,000 members, and by Care England, which represents social care providers. The purpose of the commission would be to engage with the public, staff in the NHS, care services and civic society to tackle the massive challenge faced by the NHS and care services, with the objective of establishing a long-term new settlement for the NHS and care.

Why is this needed? The NHS and social care face an existential crisis. In the post-war period, demand has risen by about 4% every year. We all understand the reasons for that. We are all living longer. The number of people surviving cancer has increased dramatically. According to Cancer Research UK, half those diagnosed with cancer now survive their disease for 10 years or more, compared with only a quarter 40 years ago. The number of people living with three or more chronic conditions is expected to have risen by more than 50% during the 10-year period up to 2019. New medicines are invented that enable the underlying cause of some genetic diseases to be tackled for the first time, and we are seeing remarkable advances in surgical procedures. All that is a triumph of modern medicine and of our NHS, and it is something that we should celebrate.

For the last five years, the coalition Government ensured that spending on the NHS was protected, but real-terms increases have been marginal. With demand continuing to rise, this has been the toughest financial settlement in the history of the NHS. Meanwhile, social care has been cut in real terms, despite significant increases in demand. A widely accepted assessment is that there will be a gap of £30 billion in the NHS by 2020. The Government have committed to finding £10 billion, including the increase in this financial year, but few experts in the NHS believe that that will be enough. The Health Foundation has estimated a gap of £2 billion in 2020 on top of the £10 billion commitment and many others believe that the gap will be much larger.

A reflection of the rapidly deteriorating financial position is shown in the accounts of NHS and foundation trusts. They are facing a projected £2.2 billion deficit by the end of this financial year. Pension changes announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer are likely to add another £1 billion to costs. Pressures across the system are very evident. Today's news that at least 100 GP surgeries applied to stop accepting patients because of shortages of doctors is the latest example.

The position in social care is perhaps more serious. The respected Health Foundation has estimated that there will be a £6 billion funding gap by 2020, without taking into account the increase in the minimum wage; the Local Government Association has estimated that that alone will add £1 billion to costs by 2020. It also does not take into account the planned introduction of the cap on care costs, which the Government have said they are committed to introducing in 2020.

The spending review provision for councils to increase council tax by 2% will narrow that gap by an estimated £1.7 billion by 2020 according to the LGA, but only if every council takes advantage of the new power. The plan for an increase in the better care fund will add £1.5 billion, but only in 2019-20. So a substantial shortfall remains. That means that further cuts to social care are inevitable.

Simon Stevens, the head of NHS England, has made it clear that, if we cut social care, it will have an impact on the NHS and, in effect, create a larger funding gap in the NHS by 2020 than the projected £30 billion. So the situation based on planned spending over this Parliament looks unsustainable and, beyond 2020, it just keeps on getting more challenging.

It is worth looking at how we compare with other European countries. In 2000, the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, set the objective of the UK hitting average EU spending on health by 2006. We now risk drifting further away from the EU average. An analysis shows that of the 21 OECD countries in the EU in 2013 only Slovakia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Estonia spent a lower proportion of GDP on health than the UK.

Looking ahead, the picture is just as disturbing. Projected health spending in England as a proportion of UK GDP up to 2020-21 shows a declining share of GDP spent on the NHS. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, based on the Government's spending review, funding for the Department of Health declines as a percentage of GDP from 6.1% in 2015-16 to just 5.4% by 2020-21. The position for social care is more dramatic. Given what we know about the inexorable rise in demand, can it make any sense at all to commit a reducing share of GDP to health and care? I fear that the consequences of failing to address that funding situation could be very serious.

The Government argue that substantial further efficiency savings can be achieved. Yet, however much we hope that the necessary "efficiency savings" will be achieved through smart re-engineering of the system to deliver better value and better care, the reality is that around the country anecdotal evidence suggests that too often preventive services are cut as clinical commissioning groups indulge in crisis management.

The financial incentives in the system do not help. We have payment for activity for acute hospital care but block contracts for community care and mental health. That ensures that rational allocation of resources is distorted. Acute hospitals continue to see increases in income, but demand for their services also increases, in part because of a failure to invest in preventive care, so their financial position becomes more perilous despite that increase in income. It is a vicious circle that has to be broken.

In social care, the anticipated shortfall, with rising demand, up to 2020, will result in more people losing support, or support packages becoming more inadequate.

[Norman Lamb]

We are currently witnessing reductions in care packages in my own county of Norfolk, and I suspect that that is widespread. There are also serious concerns of significant numbers of providers of social care leaving the market. There is a sense of the system living on borrowed time. The unattractive effect of all this will be that those with money will be able to get good care. Those relying on the state will increasingly get nothing at all or substandard care. None of us can tolerate that, and none of this addresses the fact that mental health desperately needs more investment, despite the help given in the spending review.

The Government face a choice—either the system will drift into a state of crisis or we confront the existential challenge now. This transcends narrow party politics. We have to decide as a country how much we want to spend on our NHS and care system. What can we do differently to make better use of the resources available? Should we consider, as I have proposed, a dedicated NHS and care tax, and give local areas the ability to vary it? Should we end the artificial divide between the NHS and social care? We fund health and social care through three different routes—through the NHS, local authorities and the benefits system. Does that make sense?

The NHS commands an extraordinary level of support in our country. It is an amazing demonstration of social solidarity and decency. It is also the best system in the world, according to the Commonwealth Fund in 2014. Yet we cannot take the survival of the NHS and social care services for granted. William Beveridge proposed the national health service. It is now time for a new Beveridge commission for the 21st century.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Norman Lamb, Tim Farron, Tom Brake, Mr Nick Clegg, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Mr Graham Allen, Mark Durkan, Dr Andrew Murrison, Jim Shannon, Dr Phillip Lee, Mr Ivan Lewis and Caroline Lucas present the Bill.

Norman Lamb accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March and to be printed (Bill 115).

Opposition Day

[14TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Universal Credit Work Allowance

12.47 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to reverse its decision to cut the universal credit work allowance, which is due to come into effect in April 2016.

I start by wishing you a happy new year, Mr Speaker. I wish the same to Ministers, Members on both sides and all in this House, and especially to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who has just joined us. I am disappointed that it will not be the Secretary of State who responds to the Opposition day debate in the name of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. This is the second time that the Secretary of State has failed to address the House when questions have been asked of his Department. I am not sure what his excuse is today, but it is a shame that he is shirking his duty to speak to the House today.

Perhaps we ought to take a lesson out of the playbook of the right hon. Gentleman's Department and think about sanctioning the Secretary of State if he continues to shirk work in this way. Some 600,000 people in the UK were sanctioned by him last year, some for failing to turn up to a job interview, some because they were selling poppies, some because they were attending their father's funeral, and one because they had had a heart attack. Someone suggested to me that an appropriate punishment for the Secretary of State—a sanction—might be to ban him from the House of Commons canteens for a month or so, thereby forcing him to go and visit a food bank at last.

It is extraordinary that the Secretary of State cannot be bothered to defend his pet project, universal credit, today. Perhaps it is because he thinks he is above answering questions from Members in the House of Commons, or perhaps he now agrees that universal credit is indefensible. The changes that we are debating today are among the most radical ever undertaken to social security; they are changes that should have done what the Secretary of State originally intended and made work pay for working people on benefit—on in-work support—and should have made millions of people in this country better off, but after the recent cuts I fear they are set to make millions of people worse off.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): My constituency was one of the first places in Britain to pilot universal credit. Analysis by the House of Commons Library shows a single mother of two working full-time in my constituency on the minimum wage and on UC will have a net income loss of £2,981 next year. My constituents will be the first of millions of people in the country to be hit by these cuts, because they were the first in the country to be put on UC. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is just not fair and another example of Tory broken promises?

Owen Smith: I agree wholeheartedly. In fact I believe that in my hon. Friend's constituency 12,000 people will by 2020 be subject to far lower incomes as a result of

the cuts to UC. That is 12,000 people—less the northern powerhouse than a northern workhouse.

Let me be clear about what we are talking about, because this is complicated; UC is a bit of a black box and I think many people out in the country—and many on the Tory Benches—do not quite yet appreciate what is going on and have believed the smoke and mirrors from this Government. The changes that were snuck out—mentioned in passing in last summer's Budget and then leaked out piecemeal in a statutory instrument subject to negative resolution that we had to pray against in order to get it even debated in this House—will halve the value of the work allowance under UC, which is the piece of UC that is essential to making work pay.

Let me illustrate exactly the nature of those changes to the work allowance by giving a few examples. For a single mother with one or more children, the work allowance will be halved from April of this year from £8,808 to £4,764, a reduction of £4,044. In cash terms, that working mother will lose £2,628 next year. That is the nature of the loss to a single mother. For a joint couple living and working together, one or both with limited capacity to work as they are disabled, their budget—the work allowance—will be cut from £7,700 to £4,700, a loss of £3,000 in their income. A single individual in receipt of UC will lose everything—a £1,332 reduction; a net loss to their income of £865.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I am so glad my hon. Friend has mentioned single parents and how they are going to be hit. The last Labour Government did us all proud with the new deal for lone parents. Does my hon. Friend agree that the fate that now befalls single parents in this country is an absolute reversal of what past Governments did to help them work?

Owen Smith: Let me be very clear: under the Tory Governments in the 1980s I remember the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) being dragged through the newspapers in this country for damaging the reputation of working mothers almost irreparably after comments he made about the St Mellons estate in Cardiff, and the Tories are back on the same track. In their sights are single mothers. They are the biggest single group of losers from all these changes to tax credits and UC, and it is an absolute disgrace that the Tories are undoing all the good work the last Labour Government did.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about examples; can he confirm that without these reforms a family with a net household income of £57,513 would be in receipt of benefits? Does he think that is in any way sustainable?

Owen Smith: We are not talking about families in receipt of £57,000; we are talking about families on low and middle wages. We are not talking about people who are in the highest tax bracket, and it is a complete misrepresentation of the facts and of this debate to try to turn this discussion to high-earning taxpayers. That is not what we are talking about.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I want to come back to the process the shadow Minister outlined at the beginning of his remarks. He said this measure

was sneaked through by a statutory instrument. Has he read the many questions Opposition Members, including myself, asked at the statutory instrument Committee about the impact of this change, such as on carers, particularly young carers?

Owen Smith: We have repeatedly asked for any sort of impact assessment in respect of these measures, and as usual the Government signally fail to offer one. I believe that in the hon. Gentleman's constituency 13,000 households will lose out by the end of this Parliament as a result of these cuts, and in the constituency of the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) I believe 5,000 people will lose out by an average of £950 by the end of this Parliament; perhaps he ought to reflect on that when he votes on this motion later today.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend on bringing this motion to the House today, because the impact of these changes will be devastating to a very great number of my constituents in Tameside who, because they go through the Ashton-under-Lyne jobcentre, were part of the pilot for UC. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is another con here in that the Secretary of State has indicated that the £69 million support fund will help to bring in transitional arrangements, but that fund is used for myriad other purposes, and we already know the impact of the cuts to working families of UC changes this year alone will be £100 million?

Owen Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right as usual, and I think 10,000 of his constituents will eventually be affected with lower incomes as a result of these changes. He is also right about the transitional protections and the way in which the Secretary of State has, I think, sought to misrepresent those as covering the losses; I will come to that later in my speech.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab) *rose*—

Owen Smith: Before I do, however, I will give way to my expert friend.

Ms Buck: That is kind—and inaccurate. Like many Opposition colleagues I was besieged by constituents concerned about their tax credit cuts in the run-up to the spending review. They were horrified that a Government who said making work pay was going to be their mantra should do this to working people. Does my hon. Friend think the 600,000 Londoners on tax credits—7,000 in my constituency—will be equally horrified to know the sting is still in the tail and working people are going to lose out dramatically as UC is rolled out?

Owen Smith: I think that, more than that, they will be absolutely cheesed off to the back teeth that this Government have tried to pull the wool over their eyes, because the truth is these are precisely the same cuts that were proposed through tax credits—almost exactly the same amount of money will be saved through these cuts to the work allowances as was previously proposed.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Excellent.

Owen Smith: A Member says “Excellent” from a sedentary position. I think—

James Cartlidge: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Owen Smith: I will be delighted to give way.

James Cartlidge: I have just a minor detail: every penny paid out in benefits has to be raised in tax out of working people's taxes. The money paid out in tax credits is not wages; it is means-tested benefits. Does the hon. Gentleman not recognise that the great advantage of UC is that it reduces the harsh impact of means-tested withdrawal of income?

Owen Smith: Where do I start? I start by telling the hon. Gentleman that 7,000 of his constituents will be hit by this by the time he next stands before them at the election, and he ought to reflect on that. More importantly, I tell him that it is precisely people in work paying tax—working hard, long hours, many on the minimum wage, working every hour they get—who are getting hit by his Government. That is what these cuts are doing. This is not a different set of people—they are not the scroungers that the Government like to talk about; they are the strivers, and they are being hit by the Government. The truth, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said, is that there is no difference between these cuts and the ones to tax credits that the Government proposed, on which they U-turned. According to the IFS, the U-turn makes “no difference”. The Government will end up saving the same £5 billion, at the end of the Parliament as opposed to the beginning, and they will strip £10 billion out of the pockets of working families. They should be ashamed of themselves.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but he has previously said in the House that he is committed to making £12 billion of savings to tackle the country's deficit. How would he make those savings if not through these changes?

Owen Smith: What I absolutely would not do is cut the incomes of 5.5 million working families, many of them in the hon. Lady's constituency, by an average of £950. I would not take £1,600 from 2.6 million working families—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's mellifluous eloquence has to be interrupted for a moment for me to make this obvious point. Whatever their dissimilarities, the hon. Members for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) and for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) have one thing in common: they are extremely excitable. They need to calm down a little bit, not least so that we can hear the flow of the shadow Secretary of State's eloquence and the eloquence of his flow.

Owen Smith: I am extremely grateful, Mr Speaker.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Owen Smith: No.

Disabled workers will lose £2,000 a year, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) reminded the House, the worst affected group will be single mothers. A single mother working full time on the new, shiny national living wage will be £3,000 worse off. How have the Government justified

that? They have made a series of attempts to defend it. The first was to refer to their manifesto and say, “We said we were going to deliver £12 billion of cuts from welfare, and here we go.” What they did not say at the election, as I recall, was that they would be stripping the money from working families. I do not recall them talking about nursery nurses, security guards or shop workers on the minimum wage as the sort of wage scroungers they now seek to vilify, yet those are the very people who will be scragged by the change.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): My hon. Friend was asked whether he would find alternative ways of raising money instead of taking it from the disabled, single parents, carers and working families. Would it not be more appropriate to collect tax from the many top companies in the UK that are avoiding paying their tax, rather than to steal from low-paid families as the Government propose?

Owen Smith: I found it interesting to learn, as part of the massive data dump before Christmas, that some of our largest banks such as J. P. Morgan and Merrill Lynch paid absolutely no corporation tax in the UK last year, in the same week when we learned that there would not be an investigation of the practices of our banks. Others can draw conclusions from that; I will stick to the subject at hand, which is universal credit.

I turn to transitional protection for those affected. As my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) said, the Government keep telling us that there will be transitional protection, and I will go so far as to concede that that is true—sort of—for some of the 350,000 people who will be on universal credit by April.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): Two hundred and fifty thousand.

Owen Smith: The Minister says it is 250,000, but 350,000 is the latest estimate that I have seen from the Office for Budget Responsibility. Perhaps it is wrong—it could be wrong about other things in future, as well. However, there will not be transitional protection for the 5.8 million people who will eventually be on universal credit. Even for the 350,000 who are currently on it or will be on it by March, there will not really be transitional protection if they undergo anything that constitutes what the Government call a “serious change of circumstances”. In that case, the maintenance of their in-work support at tax credit levels will stop. It will interest the House, especially given the Secretary of State's interest in marriage as an institution, that getting married will constitute a serious change of circumstances. If someone who is on tax credits and enjoying transitional protection gets married, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will take that money away from them.

There will be no protection whatever for any of the millions of new claimants by 2020. The Secretary of State has implied on several occasions that there will be transitional protections. Indeed, when he intervened on me in the debate before Christmas—he was not leading for the Government in that debate—he said explicitly:

“We are transitionally protecting those who are moving on to universal credit.”—[*Official Report*, 7 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 696.]

Unfortunately, the Minister for Welfare Reform, Lord Freud, had to correct him in the House of Lords, saying:

“It is not the same as transitional protection...it might be some more work or it might be upskilling”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 14 December 2015; Vol. 767, c. 1910.]

In truth, the £69 million fund that the Secretary of State has prayed in aid as transitional funding will in no way make up for the £3.2 billion loss over this Parliament.

The truth came out in the infamous data dump of documents snuck out in Christmas week. Responding to criticism by the Government’s own Social Security Advisory Committee, Ministers had to admit that the only way to recoup the losses would be to work an additional three to four hours a week. That is right—the House heard me correctly. The Government are now saying to a single mother who is working full time on the national minimum wage and looking after her children in the evening and who will lose £3,000 that she has to get another job working an extra three or four hours a week—approximately 200 hours a year—to make sure that she is no worse off. Tell me, Mr Speaker—I cannot see it—how that single mother who has a child at home and who is working full time will, even on the new national minimum wage, be able to work an extra three to four hours a week or 200 hours a year. Is she meant to get a job after work in a bar, in a garage or serving coffee? Is she meant to get a job in addition to the full-time job she is doing during the day and in addition to looking after her children—for example, cleaning in the mornings—to earn an extra few quid?

What on earth is the incentive for that mother to undertake that extra work? I ask that because the other massively damaging effect of the cuts is that they fundamentally undermine and destroy the very premise of universal credit—to make work pay.

Alison McGovern: I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous and giving way again. I remind him that when the Chancellor announced his so-called living wage, he assumed a rising personal allowance in his calculations in the Budget book that suggested that work would pay. Given the Government’s broken promises left, right and centre, why should any single parent believe what they say?

Owen Smith: My advice to single parents is absolutely clear: do not believe a single word that the Government say in response to today’s debate, or what they are telling the country about making work pay and about universal credit. Each and every promise is being broken.

Oliver Dowden: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Owen Smith: No, I have given way to the hon. Gentleman once.

The Secretary of State used to say that universal credit was a watershed benefit. Indeed, he used to say that it would

“ensure that work pays, and more work pays, for everyone”.

The cuts to the universal credit work allowance have holed that argument below the waterline. The House of Commons Library briefing, which was produced yesterday evening and circulated to every Member, makes it clear that a single mother will have to work an extra 12 hours each week to earn an extra forty quid, at £3.30 an hour,

after these changes. Before the changes, she would have got £92 for those extra 12 hours at £7.66 an hour. How on earth is this meant to increase her incentives to go out and work harder and work longer? It is absolute nonsense.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I wonder whether there is something in the integrity of the people the hon. Gentleman speaks about, and whether they will raise their heads high enough to say, “Okay. It’s not great and it’s not the end result, but I am lifting myself and my children off a life of welfare dependency.” In that is a pride. I would like us to talk a little more in those terms and that language.

Owen Smith: I have a great deal of respect for the way in which the hon. Lady stood up for her constituents and spoke out against her party and Government Front Benchers on the tax credits changes because many thousands of people would be affected in her constituency. I point her to the document commissioned and chaired by the Secretary of State when he first conceived of universal credit: in his introduction, he demolished the argument she has just made. He effectively said that we could not expect people to work harder simply out of responsibility and moral obligation, and that we needed to introduce incentives. That was the underpinning rationale of universal credit. Unfortunately, these changes—the cuts to the taper rate, the cuts to the work allowance and the cuts to the childcare provision—are fundamentally undermining the initial premise. They are destroying universal credit. In 2020, 5,000 of the hon. Lady’s constituents will suffer lower incomes as a result of the changes to universal credit.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I lived on in-work benefits. The delightful feeling of being lifted out of welfare benefits never fed my children. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Owen Smith: I completely agree, and my hon. Friend’s personal experience ought to be listened to by the Secretary of State and Members on both sides of the House. She will know that 17,000 of her constituents will be hit by the changes in 2020—an extraordinary number of families will have lower incomes as a result of the changes.

The truth is that the changes cannot increase work incentives and will not increase outcomes. They cannot. That is why successive independent experts have come out and told the Government to think again, as they did on tax credits. The Social Security Advisory Committee—the Government’s own advisory committee—tells them to reverse their plans. The Resolution Foundation, chaired by a former Tory Minister, tells them the same. Most recently, and most importantly of all, on 17 December the Government’s social mobility commission, deputy-chaired by a Tory peer, Baroness Shephard, said with great clarity to the Secretary of State in its “State of the Nation 2015: Social Mobility and Child Poverty” report:

“The immediate priority must be taking action to ensure that the introduction of Universal Credit does not make families with children who ‘do the right thing’ (in terms of working as much as society expects them to) worse off than they would be under the current system. That means reversing the cuts to Universal Credit work allowances enacted through the Universal Credit (Work Allowance) Amendment Regulations”.

[Owen Smith]

The commission is right and the Opposition agree, just as we agreed when the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and her colleagues urged the Government to go into reverse last time.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): In a deft but somewhat selective speech, is the hon. Gentleman not missing the point that universal credit, with a single rate of taper, will make it invariably clear to people that if they work more, they will earn more? Under the current system, taper rates go up to 90%. It is incredibly confusing and many people do not risk taking on extra work because they will have to re-apply for benefits and may be worse off. Universal credit has a beautiful simplicity and will encourage people to work.

Owen Smith: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his equally deft selectivity. Dare I say that my point is that universal credit might have done all those things? If we had, as was originally envisaged, a 55% taper rate, or even if we had the current 65% taper rate, and if we had work allowances that were double what are now proposed, as was originally intended, universal credit would have made work pay and it would have been an incentive for people to work those extra hours. I have made that plain in my speech. However, with the cuts—the seven successive cuts that have been made since 2012—it will not deliver what was promised. The hon. Gentleman and the country are being sold a pup by the Secretary of State. It was not what was written on the tin when he first brandished it. Conservative Members need to understand that, because thousands of families in their respective constituencies will be affected by those cuts. Many of them will lose as much or more than they would have lost under the tax credit cuts. I say to all Tory Members: join us or tell me how these cuts are different from those they stood against last time around, other than that Tory Members might not quite have the time to realise that these cuts are being made before they next stand in an election. So far as I can see, that is the only plausible reason for their failure to follow their consciences this time and rail against the cuts.

Justin Tomlinson: I want to be clear on one point. The taper at the conception of the policy was 65%. There has been no cut and no change to that. It is important that the shadow Secretary of State does not make a mistake on that.

Owen Smith: I did not make a mistake in any way, shape or form.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Iain Duncan Smith): You said it was cut.

Owen Smith: No I did not. I referred to the original document commissioned and chaired by the Secretary of State, in which it was recommended that there be a 55% taper rate. I might also refer to the social mobility commission, which is telling him to go into reverse. It argues that he needs to get back to a 55% taper rate.

Mr Duncan Smith: You said it was a cut.

Owen Smith: The Secretary of State can chunter all he wants, but if he really wants to make an argument in favour of his pet project, he ought to get off his rear end and speak from the Dispatch Box. I would be more than grateful any time he wants to intervene and talk to me about it. As I have said before to our effectively absent Secretary of State—he was very bold to brief the press before the Budget that he would resign if his pet project was touched by the Chancellor—now is the time to go. The Secretary of State's plans have been shredded by No. 11 since 2012. He said universal credit would be more generous than the benefits it replaced, but it will be £5.7 billion less generous than he promised. It will be £4 billion less supportive of working families than the current system, thanks to the Chancellor's raids on the Secretary of State's budget. He said it would make work pay, but as I have shown today, after the cuts the policy is tantamount to asking single mothers to pay to work.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the disabled. It is worth underlining how the policy hits disabled people in work particularly hard. Liverpool Economics assesses that they could lose up to £2,000 as a result of the changes.

Owen Smith: As ever, my hon. Friend is completely right. Nine thousand of her constituents will be worse off. Those among them who are disabled or who are part of a couple in which one or more of them are disabled will lose £2,000 under the cuts. That is a disgrace.

Under this Government, people are working in a period of wage restraint and austerity that we have not seen since the 1920s. This Tory decade promises the lowest 10-year period of wage growth in a century, with gains to workers half those they had under the Labour Government—6% wage growth versus 12%. That includes all the fancy promises about a national living wage.

The living wage will make up just 22% of the losses that working people will incur under the changes. It is misleading to the country and the House to suggest otherwise. Under this Secretary of State, we have a bedroom tax that leaves people without money to pay for food or heating. We have a sanctions regime that has driven some to suicide. Now we have universal credit, which will reduce security and rewards for people doing the right thing and working hard for their families and our society. The Secretary of State should have addressed those questions today and spoken to the House. He should consider his position.

1.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): I join the shadow Secretary of State in wishing everybody a happy new year. I am sorry that I am not the person with whom he wished to have this exchange, but this is a real area of passion for me. My background, my school, my work and starting my own business mean that I understand opportunity, which all too often is not a given in society. The changes that have helped shape my journey into politics are integral to why we need to reform the welfare state. That is absolutely key.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Given the background that the Minister has set out, he will well understand why it would have been a mistake to go ahead with the

tax credit cuts that were U-turned before Christmas. Why then are the Government going ahead with precisely those cuts for people whose only mistake is to have the misfortune of receiving universal credit instead of tax credits?

Justin Tomlinson: That was a very early intervention and, to be fair, I need a little time to expand my argument, which will address those points. An element of patience is needed; I know that we all needed it last night with the late sitting and the reshuffle news. A key point about tax credits was that people argued that all the changes needed to be phased in, and I will set that out.

The welfare system we inherited was simply not working. It was not supporting people to get into work, to stay in work and to progress in work. People were left with unfulfilled potential, languishing on benefits, with little or no incentive to work or to progress in work, and opportunity was stifled. Opportunity should be a given; it should not be stifled.

The truth is that our welfare system had become distorted and complex, as we all know from our casework with residents. Too often, residents were missing out on the benefits they were entitled to because they could not navigate something so complex. All too often, the system firmly shut the door on opportunity, because it paid more to be on benefits than to be in work. We all know that, and the electorate—hard-working families—were quick to remind us of it.

Let me be clear that I say that with no disapproval for those who claim benefits. The system itself was to blame, which is why we undertook to reform it. Our aim was and continues to be to create a system that extends opportunity and ensures that work always pays, moving Britain from a low wage, high welfare, high tax society to a higher wage, lower welfare, lower tax society. It is a common-sense approach, creating a system that is fairer to the taxpayers who face an ever-increasing bill and delivering a welfare system that is sustainable for our country but that, crucially, protects the most vulnerable.

Let me remind the House that welfare spending on people in work rose from £6 billion in 1998 to almost £28 billion in 2010.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It might help the debate if the Minister and his colleagues on the Front Bench had an accurate definition of transitional protection. My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) made an excellent speech from the Front Bench outlining Labour's calls for transitional protection, but it seems that that is something that Conservative Members just do not understand. We are having a similar debate tomorrow concerning the state pension equalisation for women. People should not lose out in achieving the principles the Minister is outlining. Why should certain families on universal credit lose out compared with families on tax credit and why will the Government not protect those people so that they do not lose out?

Justin Tomlinson: That will be set out in my speech and I will cover the transitional arrangements. I gently ask the hon. Lady where the transitional arrangements were when the 10p income tax rate was changed. We will be mindful of the advice that we take.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): Does the Minister have access to any figures that point to successes since 2010 in the number of people in employment and the number of people receiving benefits?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend, who I know has worked incredibly hard in his constituency to help more people get into work. Across the country, more than 2 million more people are in work—record numbers—with record low numbers of people out of work.

Welfare spending overall went up by almost 60% in real terms, costing every household an extra £3,000 a year in 2010. What was the result of all that spending? The number of working people in poverty actually went up by around 20% and nearly one in five households had no one working. That was too often the norm.

Owen Smith: Will the Minister confirm that under his Government welfare spending has gone up more than it has under any Government, breaching £1 trillion under the previous Government, and £130 billion more than under the previous Labour Government?

Justin Tomlinson: In percentage terms, it is now back to 2008-09 levels. These reforms are key to that. Having an open blank chequebook is simply not an approach that we or hard-working taxpayers would take.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Everybody understands the rationale for having a welfare system that incentivises people to work, but I would like the Minister to explain how these proposals, which mean that people have to work longer hours for the same money, will achieve that purpose.

Justin Tomlinson: I will now try to make some progress so that I can set that out.

The old approach of taking money from people's wages and recycling it back to them in handouts was not transforming lives, it was trapping them. Why? It did not provide the right incentives or support for people to get on and realise their ambitions. Our central approach is therefore about ensuring people are better off in work and better off working more.

Simon Hoare: The Minister is being a little too charitable to the Opposition. I might be being a bit cynical, but did not their policy seek to create a hinterland constituency of people wedded to welfare and therefore reliant on the Labour party? The voters saw through that in May and they are not going back to that again.

Justin Tomlinson: There is no need for my hon. Friend to feel that he is being cynical, as the statistics make that very clear.

Through universal credit people can support their families and have the dignity and independence that comes with having a job. We have already made huge progress through our reforms. Employment is at a record high, up by more than 2 million since 2010. Unemployment is down by more than 750,000 since 2010. The claimant count rate is at its lowest level since 1975. The number of people claiming the main out-of-work benefits has

[Justin Tomlinson]

fallen by 1 million since 2010. Wages are rising—for 13 months consecutively—higher than inflation. I know that the shadow Secretary of State started talking about the 1920s—an easy mistake to make, perhaps, forgetting about inflation. That is why living standards are up. Business confidence is underpinning all this progress, which the Opposition are—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Justin Tomlinson: I will take some more interventions, but let me make a little more progress because they might be on subjects that are coming up.

Against that backdrop, universal credit is removing the barriers to work that existed in the old system. The major reforms that are needed to our welfare system after 13 years of Labour's culture of dependency are not without difficult choices, but universal credit is designed to provide certainty for claimants and provide the right incentives and support to find work and, crucially, progress in work. That has always been at the heart of universal credit, and it continues to be so. Universal credit policy remains unchanged since the summer Budget, despite attempts by the Opposition to suggest the contrary. The improved public finances allow us to reach the same goal of achieving a surplus while cutting less in the earlier years. We are smoothing the path to the same destination. That is a welcome move and the point I made in response to an earlier intervention.

I want to remind the House of the incentives that universal credit creates and the support it provides.

Andrew Gwynne: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: Shortly, shortly.

A single taper of 65% means that financial support is withdrawn at a consistent and predictable rate, helping claimants clearly to understand the advantages of work. Universal credit also extends financial incentives to people working fewer than 16 hours per week and removes the limit to the number of hours someone can work each week. Nobody can understand why we had a welfare system that created those artificial barriers.

Andrew Gwynne: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Although we all understand how universal credit is intended to work, does he not understand that there is an inbuilt disadvantage for those areas that were universal credit pilots, such as the Tameside part of my constituency? As universal credit is phased in across the country, these cuts will hit the areas that were the early entrants to the programme much harder than other parts of the country.

Justin Tomlinson: We are seeing that people on universal credit are more likely to progress into work and to secure more hours, and I will come on to that in more detail later.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Justin Tomlinson: I will take one last intervention for now.

Stephen Timms: The Minister said in response to my earlier intervention that there were to be transitional arrangements, but the trouble is that people receiving universal credit will get the full cut in April this year. They are going to be clobbered.

Justin Tomlinson: I gently remind the right hon. Gentleman that I shall be going into those details later, so he needs to have just a little more patience.

Crucially and uniquely, universal credit stays with claimants when they enter work until their earnings reach a certain level or until they can support themselves. That gives them the confidence to start a job without having to go through the bureaucracy of changing their benefit claim. Universal credit is not just about IT or streamlining bureaucracy, as it is often portrayed. It is about people having a single point of contact with a work coach who provides personalised support, advice and guidance. This is where universal credit comes into its own, and this is the bit that I am really passionate about.

In life, we are all confident individuals and when we are faced with challenges it is a given that we can normally take them on, but that is not the case for everybody. We are now giving people a named personal contact to help them to deal with their individual case when they are navigating complicated benefit systems. That work coach will be by their side helping them to develop their role when they first get their foot in the door. They will not simply say, "We wish you all the best now you've got a job". They will help them to make progress and develop their role. They will help them to seek and secure more hours, and to develop the skills and confidence to progress through the grades. In other words, universal credit will not only support people to move into a job; it will also help them to build a career. It will break the cycle of dependency and create opportunities.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does the Minister not accept that we are really talking about people who are doing the hours but whose rate of pay is very low? Is not this really about productivity? The fact is that the Government are not creating higher level jobs. We are far too dependent on the service sector, which essentially involves low-paid jobs rather than jobs that offer a higher rate of pay for the hours worked.

Justin Tomlinson: Three quarters of new jobs being created are at managerial level, and the majority are full-time jobs. I shall go into more detail about what we are doing in terms of money.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): My hon. Friend has been talking about the benefits of universal credit. I have spoken to two jobcentres that serve my constituents and that are piloting universal credit, and I have heard very good feedback, both from the job coaches and from the jobseekers themselves, who say that it is giving them more flexibility to work. Please will my hon. Friend confirm that the roll-out will continue, because those jobcentres want to be able to give more jobseekers the opportunity to be on universal credit?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend highlights the importance of that personalised support, which people find absolutely vital. We have seen this in our casework, in our experience of life and through friends who have navigated through the system. My hon. Friend has taken the time to visit her jobcentres, and I would gently encourage the shadow Secretary of State to go and visit one of the universal credit sites and to see it at first hand.

Owen Smith: I spoke to one of the people piloting universal credit just two weeks ago. Is the Minister seriously telling the single mother I mentioned earlier, who is working full time on the new national minimum wage, that she should not worry about the £3,000 drop in her income that will result from these cuts? Is he saying that she should not worry because she will have a personal work coach who will encourage her and give her greater confidence to get another job, maybe in management? Is he seriously saying that to the country?

Justin Tomlinson: I will extend my invitation further: I will join the hon. Gentleman if he wishes to come and see this work in action. If he is worried about going on his own, I will in effect be his work coach. We have talked about examples. Let us talk about a working lone parent with two children who is doing 35 hours on the national living wage. They will be £330 better off. We could continue to trade examples, but that would be to assume that this is a static analysis. I will address that point later.

The evidence is clear: universal credit is working. Independently reviewed statistics published at the end of last year show that under universal credit people spend 50% more time looking for work, are 8 percentage points more likely to have been in work, and when in work, they earn more and seek more hours. So, universal credit is supporting people whether they move into or out of work, and focusing on getting people not just into work but into sustainable employment where earnings increase and the number of hours they work rises.

Chris Stephens: The Public and Commercial Services Union has real concerns about the cuts to the work allowance, which will affect the Government's own staff. What assessment has been made of the effect of those cuts on the employees in the Department for Work and Pensions?

Justin Tomlinson: As I shall explain, this is not a static analysis.

I want to focus on how we are going to support people. People will benefit from the improved support. For those directly affected by the changes to work allowances, we have been careful to put further measures in place. The affected claimants will benefit not only from additional work coach support but from access to funding through the flexible support fund. This will help people to retain work and to increase their earnings through training, travel and care, and we will support people to access those things. In the longer term, we are ensuring protection for claimants who are moved from legacy benefits to universal credit. We have always been clear that there will be no cash losers as a result of the managed migration of claimants from one system to another, as long as their circumstances remain the same.

Owen Smith: This will be the last time I intervene on the Minister, I promise. Is he seriously telling the House that the £69 million flexible support fund that he has just prayed in aid once again will in any way make up for the £3.2 billion loss to working families?

Justin Tomlinson: The shadow Secretary of State is mis-matching the two parts. The people who are going across will continue to have their cash protected. The £69 million fund will provide ongoing support to help people to navigate through the process.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I want to return to the Minister's point about work coaches. The mapping exercise that was undertaken in my constituency and across the borough of North East Lincolnshire was out by 150%, and the local authorities there cannot meet the needs of the work coaches who are needed to support people on universal credit. That task has now been passed on to the citizens advice bureau, which also cannot manage the load because the figures that it was initially given were incorrect.

Justin Tomlinson: This is actually delivered through the jobcentres and the universal service, so I think we will have to discuss that a bit further.

Figures have been bandied about, and I want to make it clear that they were wildly inaccurate. They were based on a fundamental misunderstanding of universal credit, which is why I am so keen to arrange a visit for the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith). The vast majority of those on the universal credit caseload will not lose out as a result of the changes. That is because the measure affects only those people who are in work, most of whom would have received nothing under tax credits. I have not seen the Opposition campaigning on this issue before. Unlike tax credits, universal credit is a dynamic benefit.

Owen Smith *rose*—

Stephen Timms *rose*—

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Member for Pontypridd has had his turn. I give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Stephen Timms: I think we have now got to the appropriate point in the Minister's speech. Does he acknowledge that the 50,000-plus working people who are today receiving universal credit will see their benefits sharply cut in April?

Justin Tomlinson: I will come on to those specific people—*[Interruption.]* In the overall numbers, it is the vast majority—*[Interruption.]* I am going to make some progress.

We have to see the bigger picture. A lot of the analysis that has gone on is static. Even the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which I know a lot of hon. Members will refer to, acknowledges that it is a static analysis. Universal credit is not a stand-alone measure. It is part of our wider, dynamic package of reforms to support families in work and to make sure work pays. We are raising the personal allowance to £11,000 for the next tax year, saving the typical taxpayer over £900 a year, and we have pledged to raise it to £12,500 by the end of this

[Justin Tomlinson]

Parliament. The national living wage will come into effect from April. That will directly benefit 2.75 million people and it is forecast to reach over £9 an hour by 2020. That might upset Opposition Members who campaigned for £8 an hour, but we felt that that did not go far enough.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): The House of Commons Library has given me some figures; I wonder whether the Minister will say that they are wrong. They show that a single parent working full time on the minimum wage will be nearly £3,000 a year worse off than they would have been on tax credits. I would appreciate some clarification on this from the Minister.

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I worked closely with her on our commitment to halving the disability employment gap, and I have a lot of respect for the work she does. In this case, the person—again, presuming it is a static analysis and that they are already in—will be cash protected as they are transferred to universal credit, so they will not be cash worse-off.

We have rising wages and near zero inflation. We have had 13 months—[*Interruption.*] We have strong economic growth, delivering record jobs and creating opportunities for people to get into work and to increase their hours. We have simplified the benefits system, reducing the potential for claimants to miss out on money to which they are entitled and, crucially, allowing them the time to focus on actually finding work, rather than on navigating the complex, chaotic system. We have already seen from the independent investigation that we are talking about 50% more time. We also have work coaches to support people in work, which is vital.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Justin Tomlinson: I will make a bit more progress and then take a few more interventions.

Finally, and importantly, we are increasing the childcare offering. Universal credit currently covers up to 70% of eligible childcare costs, but from April we will increase that to 85%. That will make a huge difference to people's lives, with the increase worth up to £1,368 per year for every child. We are also doubling free childcare to 30 hours a week for working parents of three and four-year-olds, which is worth up to £5,000 per child per year to working parents. Tax-free childcare from early 2017 will give working parents who are not in receipt of universal credit or tax credits up to another £2,000 per child per year, or up to £4,000 for a disabled child. All those measures are designed to help families keep more of the money they earn and support them in work. Therefore, our combined package of measures will make a real difference to real people's lives.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I wish briefly to divert the Minister's attention to homelessness and, in particular, its rise in London. A network of charities have said that the rise is a result of not only the chronic housing shortage, but cuts to welfare reform and social security, particularly universal credit. I do not know now whether the Minister is aware that last

year the level of homelessness rose to a point where 7,500 people were sleeping rough on the streets of London. Does he recognise that universal credit will exacerbate that problem? Can he say how the rolling out—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. An intervention has to be very short, and I think the Minister has got the gist of this one.

Justin Tomlinson: That is why it is key that this Government are committed to building and delivering more affordable housing, particularly in London. I welcome the measures that the Chancellor set out to make that happen. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) may laugh, but we saw record low house building under the last Labour Government, robbing people again of opportunity.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Has the Minister made an assessment of how many people on universal credit will be able to afford even a starter home in London?

Justin Tomlinson: That shows why we have to create opportunities, so that people can get into work, increase their hours—[*Interruption.*] Again, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley does not like creating opportunity. We can all play top trumps on trading backgrounds, but we have to create those opportunities for people, regardless of the challenges they face. My party values the prospect of the potential for people to have home ownership.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that under Labour the welfare system spiralled completely out of control? Crucially, in the words of the former Chancellor Alistair Darling, it ended up "subsidising lower wages in a way that was never intended". Will these reforms not address that?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. Not only did we see that under the last Labour Government we were talking about £3,000 per hard-working family, but the decision to reverse all these dynamic changes will have to be paid for—we cannot magically print money. I know that promising that would help in a potential future reshuffle, but back in the real world it will mean painful, expensive tax rises for hard-working people.

Universal credit is a significant welfare reform that is transforming lives. At its heart, this is about putting work first and ensuring everyone can realise their ambitions and improve their quality of life. It is part of our wider commitment to return welfare spending to a sustainable level and deliver fairness to the taxpayer. That will be delivered through reform, support and, crucially, creating opportunities.

1.44 pm

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me, and may I wish you and other Members of the House a good new year?

I begin by thanking the Opposition and the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) for tabling today's motion, which the Scottish National party will be happy

to support. However, today feels a wee bit like groundhog day, because, once again, we are here debating the adverse impact of the Government's social security changes on people in low-paid work. Once again, SNP Members are asking why low-income families are being asked to pay the heaviest price for austerity. Why are low-paid workers, in particular, once again finding themselves on the front line?

A few weeks ago, when the Government were forced into their tax credits U-turn, I described it as a "stay of execution", because it was quickly apparent that the sword of Damocles was still hanging over many of the low-paid households that were set to be hammered by tax credit cuts. It has been a short reprieve, because in April this year the reductions to the work allowance in universal credit are set to come into effect. They will hit many of the same low-income families who would have lost out under tax credits.

When universal credit was first introduced, early in the last Parliament, some lofty and rather extravagant claims were made for it, some of which we have heard reiterated today: universal credit was going to simplify and streamline our benefits system; it was going to be much more flexible, making it easier for people to move in and out of work, reflecting the reality of the modern labour market; and, above all, it was going to remove the benefit trap, by tackling the financial disincentives to entering the workforce. Instead, it was going not only to create better work incentives and make work pay, but to improve the incentives to move into better-paid work over time. Oh, it was a grand plan! The reality has been very different. I need not dwell too long today on the technical and management problems that have beset the universal credit project from its beginning, except to say that it has been subject to repeated and prolonged delays. It has had to be rebooted several times, and, even now, it is unlikely to be fully implemented until 2021 at the earliest.

Far more telling is how far the whole project of universal credit has strayed from its original objectives. The cornerstone of this ailing policy initiative was that it would improve work incentives and help tackle poverty, but that cornerstone has crumbled under the weight of a misconceived, ideologically driven and quite unnecessary austerity agenda, through which this Government have consistently chosen to penalise low-income families and make them pay a disproportionate price for the economic failures of past and present Governments. The thing is that by cutting the work allowance, the Government are cutting the very aspect of universal credit that creates a work incentive, so all the good progress that has been made is going to be undone very quickly after April.

Angela Rayner: Does the hon. Lady appreciate that one reason why I get so passionate about this issue, as do Members such as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), is that we have previously been recipients of benefits, we have aspired to be able to do better things, and we now pay our taxes and are not on benefits? That is fantastic, but it happened because of a Labour Government. This Government are pulling that ladder up from under people who need and deserve that help.

Dr Whiteford: I am conscious of the fact that the hon. Lady represents one of the areas that has been at the forefront of the pilot scheme and I hope that I will

have the opportunity later to address some of the issues raised there. She makes a valid point that the economic recession hit people very hard indeed, and the people who were hit the hardest were those already in vulnerable employment—those in the most insecure jobs. Unfortunately, recovery just has not given them the job security that they might have hoped for.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): The hon. Lady is making interesting points, but the facts do not quite support some of what she is saying. Is it not a fact that the universal credit system is incentivising people to get into work? The figures speak for themselves: 71% of universal credit claimants in the first nine months moved from welfare into work. It is working.

Dr Whiteford: The whole point that I am trying to make is that any progress that has been made will be undone if the Government remove the work incentive, which is the work allowance. It is the aspect of universal credit that makes it possible to earn more when they work. By cutting the work allowance, the Government are going to impose an eye-watering level of marginal taxation on people in low-paid jobs and make it harder than ever for those in low-income households to break out of the poverty trap. If the Government were serious about making work pay, if they were serious about boosting the UK's productivity and if they actually wanted to help people get on, they would be increasing the work allowance, not reducing it. That would be a genuinely progressive measure, and it would actively help those in low-paid work.

Chris Stephens: Are not my hon. Friend's arguments also supported by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which said in a report after the Budget that the cut to the work allowance

"weakens incentives for families to have someone in work"?

Dr Whiteford: Lots of think-tanks and non-governmental organisations have been queuing up to point out that this measure removes work incentives. It strikes me that increasing the work allowance would be a far more progressive measure than, for example, raising the personal tax allowance, which benefits higher-rate taxpayers such as ourselves far more than anyone in low-paid work.

The cuts to the universal credit work allowances are being introduced via the Universal Credit (Work Allowance) Amendment Regulations, which a Delegated Legislation Committee considered last November under the negative resolution procedure. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) opposed the cuts at the time, because it was clear to him, as it was to me, that reducing the amount that a household can earn before universal credit starts to be reduced would hurt low-income families in certain circumstances very badly indeed, and would remove work incentives for those households.

It causes me great concern that, instead of being fully debated here in the Chamber, the changes were enacted through delegated legislation without the scrutiny that their consequences merited. As far as I am aware, the Department for Work and Pensions has yet to produce a proper impact assessment of the changes to the work allowance, so we are very much dependent on external bodies for worked impact analyses. I would be grateful

[*Dr Eilidh Whiteford*]

if Ministers said today that they will publish an impact assessment, particularly given that the Social Security Advisory Committee has expressed concerns about the adequacy of the evidence base for evaluating the changes. We can get up in this Chamber and spout as much hot air as we like, but if we lack the proper evidence or use the evidence so selectively to back up only our arguments, we really will fail the people who depend on the support of our social security system.

In late December, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission said that

“the net impact of changes to universal credit...on work incentives is largely negative due to significant reductions in the generosity of work allowances.”

It pointed out that claimants who pay income tax will keep only 24 p in every extra pound they earn. They would need to earn an extra £210 a week to make up the losses from a reduced work allowance—a staggering rate of marginal taxation that makes a mockery of the notion that any work incentives will be left in universal credit. Incidentally, it is important to get away from the false idea, which has been creeping into today’s debate, that there are taxpayers and then there are people on benefit. Work allowances are for people who are working—the clue is in the name—in low-paid jobs.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I have been listening carefully to the hon. Lady. She says that it is very important that the full data and the alternatives are exposed. Will she set out the cost implications of going down the route she would prefer, and explain how it would be affordable?

Dr Whiteford: I will happily do that. Before the general election, the Scottish National party set out in some detail its fully costed alternative to austerity. We were keen to point out that austerity is a choice. We can balance the books without austerity and release £140 billion for investment in public services. That would be a much fairer and more economically sensible way of doing business. I refer the hon. Gentleman to our manifesto.

John Glen *rose*—

Dr Whiteford: I will not give way again. The hon. Gentleman might be interested to know that in our manifesto we proposed increasing work allowances by 20% to create the exact incentive that the Government say that they want to create while, at the same time, pulling out the rug from underneath it.

John Glen *rose*—

Dr Whiteford: No, I will not give way again, because I want to make some progress. I may give way again a little later in my speech, but I am conscious of time.

The Commission on Social Mobility and Child Poverty also pointed out that a single parent working full-time on the minimum wage and receiving no help with housing costs would lose £50 a week. In what fantasy world does that amount to making work pay? Many parents who are working hard, and struggling to support themselves and their families, will find themselves substantially worse off.

There is enormous complexity around the impact of the cuts to the work allowance. There is a range of factors, including the number of adults in the household and

whether or not housing costs are included. As has already been said, single parents and the self-employed are likely to be among those worst hit, but it really will depend on individual circumstances. However, the IFS points out that there will be more losers than winners under these changes, and the Resolution Foundation estimates that working families with children on universal credit will be, on average, £1,300 a year worse off by 2020. The IFS estimates that, overall, 2.6 million families across the UK will be worse off by an average of £1,600 a year. Let us not pretend any more—either to ourselves or to the public—that universal credit will create work incentives and tackle in-work poverty. It will not. For most of the people affected, it will make things worse.

Heidi Allen *rose*—

Dr Whiteford: I will give way to the hon. Lady.

Heidi Allen: The hon. Lady is very kind. I am interested to know why more people find employment under the universal credit system than they did under the traditional method of jobseeker’s allowance.

Dr Whiteford: I have made that point already. We are talking about a change that is due to come in in April that will undercut work incentives. It will take the work incentive out of universal credit. The work allowance helps universal credit make work pay. It is the cornerstone of the system. If we take out that allowance, all we will have is another benefit trap like the one that it is trying to replace.

I wish to pick up on an issue raised by the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) earlier in the debate. In the Government’s response to the Social Security Advisory Committee’s “Occasional Paper 15” on universal credit, they said that they expect claimants to respond to cuts in the work allowance by “actively seeking more work.” From what we have already heard about the disincentives caused by high marginal rates of taxation, that is simply wishful thinking. The Secretary of State and Members on the Government Benches seem to be labouring under the misapprehension that people in low-paid jobs do not work as hard as people in highly paid jobs, and that somehow it is easy to pick up extra work—whether that is in the form of another wee job, or of more hours—but the reality is that low-paid jobs are often the most physically demanding, the most insecure, and the most exhausting.

Early yesterday morning, at the crack of dawn, when I was leaving Aberdeenshire, I passed roadworks where men were already trauchlin in the cold and the dark and the pouring rain—it has been raining incessantly—setting up their temporary traffic lights. Although they will not be on the minimum wage, they are certainly not high earners, and, doubtlessly, some of them will be part of families receiving tax credits or universal credit. I could not help but think how lucky I was to be able to work indoors at this time of year. Those manual workers are exactly the sort of folk who will be asked to find an additional job, or work extra hours after a long day outside.

Owen Smith: The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that it is fundamentally offensive to those workers, and to all workers on a low wage, for the Secretary of State and his Ministers constantly to

refer to the “dynamic” effects that will be introduced by this new system? Are these people who are working full time in the pouring rain undynamic?

Dr Whiteford: They were certainly showing a fair bit of dynamism yesterday morning. I was really glad that I did not have to work with them. I partly agree with the hon. Gentleman. The insecurity of the modern labour market means that people move in and out of part-time work more often than they did in the past. It is important that we create a system that responds to that. My problem is that the Government are undermining their own process with their transitional arrangements, but I will say more about that in a second or two.

There are people all over my constituency—and in everybody’s constituency—who work extremely hard already in low-paid, tiring and not exactly pleasant jobs that are neither interesting nor glamorous. They are often doing that while they are juggling family responsibilities, looking after children or, increasingly, elderly and infirm relatives. For many of them, taking on extra hours depends on that work not just being available, but being available at a time when they have access to childcare. Let us face it, young children cannot get themselves out to school in the morning. They may not be able to walk there safely on their own. They cannot just be left unattended at home for several hours after school or get their own tea. Many working parents have to juggle work and family commitments. Indeed, one reason why so many women are trapped in low-paid, low-skilled jobs, even when they have high-level skills and qualifications, is that they are the primary carer in their household and they are trying to fit work around their family responsibilities. The Catch-22, of course, is that it is a lot easier to do that juggling if they are in a well-paid job.

I have a very serious question for the Government that echoes the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West. Many of those who work in low-paid jobs in Government Departments, including in the DWP, receive tax credits or universal credit. Will their employer offer them a few wee extra hours to compensate them for the loss of their work allowance? Will the DWP specifically—I hope that Ministers can answer this one—offer extra hours to its own staff who are set to lose out, or will it impose in-work conditionality on them instead? If the Government cannot or will not commit today to supporting their own staff, they have no business putting the onus on other employers to miraculously conjure up extra work for people.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Whiteford: No—I have moved on, so I am going to keep making progress.

It is important that we understand that new claimants for universal credit will be significantly disadvantaged compared with those still claiming under the old tax credits regime. We have been told that there will be transitional protections for those being migrated from the old system to the new, but my understanding is that the transitional protections for existing claimants will evaporate if there is a significant change to their circumstances such as a new job, having a baby, or the

breakdown of a relationship. The difference will be enormous. In the coming financial year, a one-earner couple with two children will take home nearly £800 a year more on the old tax credit system than they will if they have been moved on to universal credit. That is a huge disincentive to change one’s circumstances. People who are already on very tight budgets will be very reluctant to increase their hours or take a promotion if it might leave them worse off. Once again, this undermines work incentives, and it will make people reluctant to take promotion, change their hours, or move to a different employer. To come back to the point raised earlier, it will erode the dynamism of the system by which the Government have set such store today.

I think these disparities are going to cause real ill feeling in our communities. Co-workers who are doing the same job alongside each other, earning the same salary and living in similar family circumstances, could be receiving wildly differing levels of support. I do not know how the Government plan to sell that to people in low-paid work. I certainly would not want to have to try to justify it to my constituents; it is manifestly unfair. What is also deeply problematic is that some parts of the UK have been transitioning to universal credit before others, so there will inevitably be regional disparities in the areas where a higher proportion of claimants have been migrated. Why should people living in Hammersmith, Rugby, Inverness, Harrogate, Bath and Shotton—the areas where universal credit has been rolled out first—receive less support, on average, than those in the towns and cities that are last in the queue? The Government admit that at least 700,000 people will still be on the old system by the end of next year. That is a recipe for discontent among those who have served as the guinea pigs.

Cutting work allowances will not achieve the outcomes the Government claim. The way to reduce social security spending is to fix the economy—to create jobs and boost productivity. That reduces the need for spending on social security and raises tax receipts. We need to name the cuts to the work allowance as what they are—an assault on people in low-paid work as part of a failed, needless, ideologically driven austerity programme that has held back economic recovery and stifled productivity. The Government have made the wrong choice. They have a chance today to rethink these cuts, which will reduce work incentives and trap low-paid families in poverty. There is an alternative to austerity. Their short-sighted, counter-productive cutting of work allowances will hurt working people. I hope that the Conservative Members who expressed reservations about the tax credit proposals will understand that this cut will hit many of the same people in much the same way as they move on to universal credit, and that they will join us in the Lobby this afternoon.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many Members wish to speak in the debate and that we have limited time because there is another pressing debate following this one. I hope that in the spirit of the happiness of the new year, I will not have to impose a formal time limit, but that Members will, out of respect for other Members and other points of view, take six minutes or less to complete their contributions. We will

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

see how the experiment works. If it does not work, we will go back to the bad, old year way of me telling you that you have got to stop.

2.3 pm

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I join other hon. Members in wishing everyone a happy new year. I will do my best to keep my speech under six minutes.

I rise to support the Government and welcome universal credit. Universal credit is one of this Government's key reforms, and one that I am very proud to associate myself with. At the very heart of this policy is our desire to ensure that it always pays to go out and work. Families around the country will be better off at the end of this Parliament, with more of their income coming from their own earnings rather than the taxpayer. The Government are determined to set our welfare system on an even footing. The previous system did not work in terms of providing those who were willing to work with incentives to help them find it. It often paid more to be on benefits than on work, and that is simply not sustainable. As my hon. Friend the Minister set out, we are trying to move Britain on from that low wage, high welfare, high tax society to a higher wage, low welfare and lower tax society. That is the prism through which all this should be seen. We need to ensure that our system is sustainable and helps to protect the most vulnerable.

It is important to provide a bit of context given what we have heard from Opposition Members. Under the previous Labour Government, 1.4 million people spent most of the previous decade trapped on out-of-work benefits, the number of households where no member had ever worked nearly doubled, and the number of working-age people in poverty rose by about 20%. Not only did it not pay to be in work, but those who wanted to work found themselves either trapped on benefits or worse off. The Government's reforms have already seen an improvement in employment statistics, with employment now at over 31 million—an increase of over 2 million on 2010. Wages are rising and living standards are up. For this reason, we feel that it is the right time to ensure that the barriers to work that previously existed are no longer a factor in employment.

Universal credit is designed to provide certainty in that regard. As a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I am very impressed with the phasing in of universal credit and the Department's attitude towards it. Some people have criticised the slowness of the process, but the willingness to pilot, to phase in, to pause, to reflect, to change and to start again is a massive testament to the Department. I encourage it to continue and not to be rushed by people, because it is a huge transformational change. I am very proud of what this Government are doing, which will really help people and create opportunities.

It is worth reiterating that the single taper rate of 65% means that financial support is withdrawn at a consistent and predictable rate, helping claimants to clearly understand the advantages of work. The taper is the big difference between tax credits and these changes. I think that the smoke and mirrors from Opposition Members on this will be seen through.

Owen Smith: Does the hon. Gentleman not understand that what we have argued here today is that after the cuts, which we are urging the Government to reverse, 6,000 people in his constituency will be worse off in 2020 than they would have been? It is very simple.

Craig Williams: I do not accept that. The shadow Secretary of State would have a lot more credibility if he came here with an idea of how to change the system and practical approaches rather than just opposing everything that this Government try to do. The previous Labour Government failed this country and failed constituents in Cardiff North. We are creating the opportunities. We need only look at the Labour Welsh Government to see their track record at creating opportunities. I stand by this Government and these changes.

Owen Smith: What about employment in Wales?

Craig Williams: Thanks to the UK Conservative Government—I thank the hon. Gentleman.

Not only does the universal credit system encourage people into work, it supports them through the process, staying with them and working with organisations such as Reed in Partnership, to which I pay tribute. Just before Christmas, it produced a survey of young people about the barriers to getting into work. The main things they said were about the importance of consistent career advice and the effects of receiving poor advice. These work coaches will really change things round for youth opportunities because someone will be dedicated to looking after people throughout the whole journey. I really welcome that. The Opposition should not be quite as jovial about this concept, which is a game changer.

The new system gives claimants the confidence to start a job without having to go through the bureaucracy of changing their benefit claim. We need to appreciate the transformational element of universal credit. Ninety per cent. of people who have already signed on did so online. This is a massive change in the way that we operate our welfare system, and it is extremely welcome. As I said, it is being rolled out in a very careful, safe and controlled manner. The Minister touched on that, but it is worth dwelling on. The findings from the December 2015 "Universal Credit at Work" report show us that, as we have heard, 71% of universal credit claimants moved into work in the first nine months of their claim. That compares with 63% of jobseeker's allowance claimants. Universal credit claimants work on average 12 days more than comparable jobseeker's allowance claimants. We need to recognise that and work on it, and provide proper support to ensure that people can achieve their ambitions and do not remain trapped in an unfair system, which is what the previous system was.

As part of that, we have put in place further measures that are directly related to the changes to the work allowance. The transitional arrangements are in place and they ensure that the benefit entitlements of claimants who are migrated on to universal credit by the Department for Work and Pensions—it is worth emphasising this again—do not fall in cash terms.

As I have hinted at, I want to dwell on the tapered relief for universal credit, which remains at 65%. I want to say that over and over again, because the shadow Secretary of State gave us smoke and mirrors. Unlike the planned tax credit changes, which would have resulted

in an increased taper, the savings are achieved without increasing the effective marginal loss of benefit for every pound earned as a claimant moves into work or takes more hours. That means that work incentives are not adversely affected.

I am aware that you want to get everyone in, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will conclude on that point. This really is a massive transition from the system that the last Labour Government presided over, which is not fit for purpose, sustainable or affordable for this country. I welcome the changes and the universal credit roll-out. As a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I will pay particular interest to the issue and be a critical friend, but I welcome the roll-out so far.

2.11 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I think that universal credit is a sensible idea. It has potential to make the system simpler and in particular to make it clearer to people what their financial position will be if they move from unemployment into work. We have always said that the idea is sensible. It is not a panacea—Ministers frequently tell us it is a solution to the problems, even though it is not—but it is a helpful step.

The delivery of universal credit, however, has been a shambles. It went very badly wrong right at the start. Ministers accepted terrible advice about how long it was going to take. Page 34 of the July 2010 Green Paper, “21st Century Welfare”, stated:

“The IT changes that would be necessary to deliver” universal credit “would not constitute a major IT project”.

How anybody persuaded themselves that replacing the entire benefits system was not going to constitute a major IT project is beyond me, but that was the naivety that underpinned the leadership of the project at the outset.

Warnings from Labour Members and others were cheerily waived aside and it was not until September 2013, when the National Audit Office first reported on the issue, that some shafts of light were trained on what was really going on. The NAO said that “the programme suffered from weak management, ineffective control and poor governance”, and it was absolutely right.

John Glen: Does not the right hon. Gentleman agree that, during his distinguished spell in government, a considerable amount of taxpayers’ money was wasted on IT projects and that, as of now, those lessons have been applied and significant, incremental progress is being made in the delivery of this important reform?

Stephen Timms: Unfortunately, we were told in 2010 that the lessons from all those problems had been learned and that things were going to be different, and that is true, because now we have not one, but two major IT projects for universal credit—the live service and the digital service—both under way in parallel. No one has yet told us when those two different systems will be brought together, and undoubtedly large sums of money are being wasted.

I want to spend a couple of minutes addressing the question of just how far behind schedule universal credit is now. If the Secretary of State had spoken at the beginning of this debate—as he should have done, as

my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) correctly pointed out—he would have told us that it was on track, because that is what he always says. The Office for Budget Responsibility, however, pointed out at the time of the autumn statement that the project has been “substantively delayed on at least three separate occasions”, so just how far behind is it?

When the project started, we were told that transition to universal credit would be complete by 2017—an absurd claim, but that is what was said. Back in 2012, the belief was that transition would take five years from that point. Having failed to deliver on that date, Ministers have refused to announce a revised date; it is a question, I think, of once bitten, twice shy. The autumn statement, however, indicated that the Government now expect—the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) was correct to make this point in her speech—the roll-out to be completed by 2021. Therefore, exactly as in 2012, the Government in 2016 now expect the roll-out of universal credit to take another five years from that date. The completion date has gone back four years in the last four years.

Is it unfair to allege, therefore, that universal credit is running four years late? Let us look at a couple of other milestones, not just the completion date. On 1 November 2011, the Secretary of State published a press release that said:

“Over one million people will be claiming Universal Credit by April 2014 Work and Pensions Secretary...announced today”.

April 2014 was nearly two years ago and 1 million people are not receiving universal credit; the latest figure is 155,000. The OBR now expects that the figure will be 1 million by April 2018, so that milestone is also four years late.

Let us look at another example. On 24 May 2012, the Secretary of State announced in another press release—I always used to read them avidly—that

“all new claims to the current benefits and credits will be entirely phased out”

by April 2014. Again, the Department has not been willing to announce when it now expects all new claims to the existing benefits and credits to be phased out, but in a very helpful note, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd referred in his opening speech, the House of Commons Library has worked out, by reading between the lines of opaque statements by Ministers, that new claims for legacy benefits are expected to be closed down by June 2018. That milestone is a bit more than four years late compared with what we were originally told. We can confidently say, therefore, that universal credit is at least four years late. It will undoubtedly slip further and I am equally certain that the Secretary of State will continue to tell us that it is on track.

The management has been a shambles and we have still not been told about key outstanding policy issues. Which recipients and claimants of universal credit will be entitled to free school meals for their children? We have been waiting for an answer to that question for more than five years, but we still have not been told. It makes an enormous difference, because the answer we expect the Government to give will introduce a huge new cliff edge to the social security system. It will be far worse than anything in the prior system, even though the whole point of universal credit was to get rid of such disincentives.

[Stephen Timms]

I want to pick up on the points so well made by my hon. Friend in his opening speech about the way in which the changes to universal credit since it was first announced are undermining so fatally its objectives. In the early debates, the Secretary of State used to make a lot of the fact that universal credit was going to cost more than £2 billion more than the previous system, but that is not true anymore—it is now going to cost £3.7 billion a year less. That has been done by eroding the work incentives that were supposed to be the whole point of doing it in the first place.

The whole House has accepted that it would have been wrong to go ahead with the tax credit cuts, which would have had a huge impact on and reduced the incomes of working families on modest incomes. There would have been a reduction of £1,000, £2,000 or £3,000 a year for those with a household income of £20,000 a year. The whole House accepts that that would have been wrong, and yet the Government are going ahead with precisely those cuts for the relatively small number of people—there are, I think, 50,000 of them at the moment—who are in work and claiming universal credit. If we have all accepted that it is wrong to impose such draconian cuts on the incomes of working families who are claiming tax credits, why is it right to go ahead with precisely the same cuts, which will have a huge impact, to the incomes of working families in receipt of universal credit? I intervened to ask the Minister that question three times. Each time he told us that he would come to it later in his speech. Unfortunately, he never got there. If he is able to explain to us how that can be right, I hope that he will do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd is right to say that all the way through the process of universal credit, we have been told that there would be transitional protection, yet this group of 50,000 working people, who are already receiving universal credit, will suffer enormous cuts in their incomes in April because of the changes to the universal credit work allowance. That cannot be right and the Government need to change their mind.

2.20 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): We seem to have had endless debates on universal credit over the past five and a half to six years, and I am sure that we will have many more.

This Opposition day debate was opened with a call from the shadow Secretary of State to reverse the work allowance changes in universal credit. I sensed that he really wanted to reverse every welfare cut that has been made by this Government and their predecessor. After all, he and his colleagues opposed every penny of savings put forward by the coalition Government. However, he cannot do that, partly because he stood on a manifesto that would have reversed only the smallest welfare savings, such as the spare bedroom subsidy, and partly because he signed up to £12 billion of welfare savings. He did not tell us today that his party would reverse all the changes if it were elected into government, nor how he would find the £12 billion of savings.

Owen Smith *rose*—

Richard Graham: We will keep his windy eloquence for a moment, if that is all right. He had quite a long go earlier.

The reason the hon. Gentleman said nothing about that is that if there are no changes to tax credits or housing benefit, he will not find £12 billion of welfare savings. I suspect that either he has no policy at all, because none was announced today, or that he has something pretty horrific to say on housing benefit that the House needs to hear.

After the windy eloquence of the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), we heard the relative still small voice of calm of the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), who described universal credit as a sensible idea whose implementation was a shambles. I would describe universal credit as an inspired idea, but it is one that the former Labour Chancellor, the former Member for Edinburgh South West, described as too complicated to be taken up by his party. I agree that the implementation has been over-optimistic so far, but it is happening and I have seen it happening. I will come on to that, because I am not sure how many Opposition Members have gone to their Jobcentre Plus to find out how it is working. It is already delivering positive change to the lives of my constituents and many other people. One can criticise a project that is delayed, but that is happening and successfully so, when one said that it was impossible to do it at all, but it risks looking like carping, which is not really worthy of the right hon. Member for East Ham.

The truth is that Labour Members cannot make up their mind whether to say that universal credit was a bad idea, full stop; that it is a complete or partial shambles; or that it was a good idea, but they are not sure whether it will be a shambles. They half hope that universal credit will collapse, so that they can criticise it more and call again and again for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to resign, but they know in their heart of hearts that they must support universal credit because it is the right thing to do and it will completely transform the working opportunities of so many people in this country.

The reason why universal credit is right is absolutely clear to all of us. When tax credits were introduced, they were a modest cost to the taxpayer, but that cost ballooned from £6 billion in 1998 to £28 billion by 2010. As I have hinted, the former Chancellor and former right hon. Member for Edinburgh South West has described more eloquently than any of us here today could how that project ran miles away from its original intention. Something that was launched with the best of intentions—to help people on low wages—became a massive cost. It was not just a cost in itself, but generated huge interest costs that were simply unsustainable for this country, particularly after the great recession of 2007 to 2009.

In their heart of hearts, everybody in this House must recognise that universal credit is the way forward. I cannot believe that anyone here today who has been a Member for more than a few years has not received letters from constituents describing how their life on welfare makes it impossible for them to want to go to work, because they would be worse off working. I also cannot believe that Members here have not had meetings with employers in their constituencies at which they have described the number of times they have offered

people who work for them promotions or a higher salary, only to be told, “Sorry, I don’t want that promotion. I would be worse off because I would lose more in benefits than I would gain from the promotion.”

Tax credits ended up as a disincentive to aspiration and achievement. Scottish National party Members may shake their heads, but that is the truth. What is also true, unfortunately, is that the welfare programmes that were introduced by the last Labour Government ended up, during the great recession, when 6,000 people in my constituency lost their jobs, many of them low-paid, trapping people on welfare with no incentive to go back to work. That is the background to the debate on universal credit. It is vital to our country that it works properly.

Those of us who have been to our Jobcentre Pluses where universal credit is being rolled out know that it is in place and working very well for single people. In Gloucestershire, it has not yet been introduced for families with children where there are two people who are in and out of work or in low-paid jobs. That is the more complicated element of universal credit. If my hon. Friends on the Front Bench are able to add more about the success of the rollout of universal credit to more complicated families with children, it would be reassuring for everyone. I have seen it in place in London and it seems to be working well.

I am conscious that there are time limits on us, so I will bring my contribution hastily to a conclusion. There are 156,000 people on universal credit who are receiving their benefits effectively. As I say, the people I have met in my constituency are definitely in a better place than they were. It is vital that universal credit continues to move forward as quickly as possible. I suspect that the figure of 156,000 will advance rapidly during this Parliament. We should all wish universal credit well. The changes that we are debating today are all part of a move towards a higher wage, lower tax, lower welfare society and away from what we were left in 2010, which was wages that were too low, taxes that were too high, unsustainable welfare and a system that was no longer working.

Let me finish by saying that I understand the emotional appeal of the speech by the hon. Member for Pontypridd, but it is vital that we reduce the cost of tax credits and the cost of welfare, and that we provide people with a system that incentivises them to work through universal credit.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. My “happy new year” experiment has not worked. I will therefore impose a formal time limit of six minutes on Bach-Bench speeches.

2.29 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I would like to start by reassuring the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) that I think universal credit is a total and utter shambles. I invite him to my constituency to speak to my constituents who are claiming benefits, because all of them are already in work. Tax credits did not stop them from going to work; tax credits incentivised them to go to work. He needs to visit constituencies in

London to find out the truth and to dispel the myth that people claiming benefits are just scroungers. They are working hard; it is just that work does not pay.

Richard Graham: I have never said and would never say, and I do not believe anyone in this House would say, that people who work or do not work are scroungers. That is way beyond what I was implying. Let me put the record straight.

Tulip Siddiq: The hon. Gentleman certainly implied that in my opinion.

In January 2012, a considerable period of time before I entered the House, I listened to the Secretary of State tell the House in departmental questions:

“Universal credit is on track and on budget.”

Several years later and several billions of pounds of expense to the taxpayer later, his claim that

“I am not complacent about delivery”—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2012; Vol. 539, c. 8.]—

has not stood the test of time. Millions of families across the country, and especially in my constituency of Hampstead and Kilburn, have faced periods of relentless anxiety over the future of their welfare support. The year 2015 did not bring any fresh hope.

The Work and Pensions Committee’s report in December revealed that the roll-out of universal credit, from Royal Assent to resolving the final outstanding legacy payments, could stretch beyond a decade. The Government promised that universal credit would reach 4.5 million people by the 2015 general election. This has not happened. The Secretary of State may be content for his Department to cruise through endless periods of trial and error, but the delays to the roll-out have been at a significant cost to the taxpayer, with the Major Projects Authority revealing an increase of £3 billion in the past two years. The bill now stands at a staggering £15.8 billion. If the Secretary of State truly understands the pressures faced by claimants, he will apologise for the years of anxiety his delays have subjected them to.

The autumn statement fundamentally contradicts the Secretary of State’s ridiculous claim on “The Andrew Marr Show” that “nobody loses a penny” through the changes. They also mark the end of the Chancellor’s ludicrous claim at the Conservative party conference that the Tories are the new workers’ party. Nothing could be further from the truth. Cuts to the work allowance are so severe they will mean that single people and couples with no dependent children will lose out the moment they start working. Just listen to the facts: the poorest 20% are on average set to lose between 6% and 8% of their income. Just listen to Paul Johnson, the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, who stated that 2.6 million families will on average be £1,600 a year worse off. Further to that—this point was made eloquently by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms)—we know that transitional protections for claimants moving from the old system to universal credit will provide only £200 million against a background of £3 billion of cuts. Transitional protections are dropped when a claimant’s circumstances change. We know that new claimants will have no protection whatever.

Richard Graham: Is the hon. Lady aware that the IFS has actually said that anyone transferring on to universal credit will be protected and will not be worse off in cash terms?

Tulip Siddiq: I have not seen that. What I have seen from the IFS is what I have just reiterated: it shows very clearly that 2.6 million working families will on average be £1,600 worse off. The hon. Gentleman just needs to look at the statistics for inner London constituencies to see that that will be true.

Given the prevalence of part-time, low-paid jobs created by the Government and the well-established impossibility of the so-called national living wage to mitigate cuts to the work allowance, the Secretary of State must update the House urgently on whether he stands by his claims that “nobody loses a penny” through these changes. We need a Government who work towards an economy where employers, city leaders and central Government work together to make sure that economic growth creates new opportunities and high quality jobs. Instead, the Government are embracing cuts that will simply worsen the bleak picture of deprivation that is rampant across the country, and especially in inner London constituencies. Earlier in the debate, I made a point about the rise of homelessness and I did not get an answer from the Minister. Does he acknowledge that the changes to welfare will increase the number of people sleeping rough on the streets of London?

As a London MP, I have real fears that the significant growth in homelessness and destitution in the capital will only be made worse by the changes to welfare. Independent analysis by the IFS and the Resolution Foundation, and the Select Committee’s report, all acknowledge the consequences of the cuts to work allowance on the lowest paid, when they are eventually signed up to receive universal credit. I have a real fear that the decisions being pushed through will ensure that many people in Hampstead and Kilburn, who are already making the choice between eating and putting on the heating, will reach breaking point. Some 8,000 of my constituents are expected to be on universal credit by the time it is rolled out properly. It is not too late for the Government to rethink the cuts to the work allowance if they have any ambition to increase earnings. Higher and more stable levels of pay are the only way to improve financial security and move people out of poverty for good.

We saw the Secretary of State celebrate in this House when the so-called national living wage was announced, but he must reflect on cheerleading in the face of the stark reality that Britain’s low and middle-income families stand to lose thousands of pounds under the flagship policy. I ask him to carefully reconsider where he thinks his legacy lies, and whether he wants to put low and middle-income families through this trial when universal credit is rolled out.

2.37 pm

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The Opposition motion is a very simple one. Once again, the Opposition are asking us to duck a difficult decision. I would like to speak very briefly—I hopeful we will make up some time—about why such an approach is simply unsustainable.

As a nation, we have two very major problems. First, we continue to live beyond our means. When the Conservatives first came into government in 2010, we were spending £4 for every £3 we were earning. That meant we had the biggest budget deficit in our peacetime history. We have made progress. The Government have

more than halved the budget deficit, but there is still a tremendous distance to go. Secondly, as a nation we have the persistent problem of a high tax, low wage and high welfare economy. At the root of this lies the situation we inherited in 2010, whereby people on the minimum wage were working very hard and still having to pay tax and then having their wages subsidised through the welfare system. As a result, nine out of 10 working families were receiving some sort of benefit payment. Despite all the additional spending, it was not working. As we have heard repeatedly, in-work poverty rose by 20%.

The level of borrowing and welfare spending was simply unsustainable. Under the previous Government, an extra £3,000 was spent for every single household in the country. That is burdening our children and our grandchildren with additional borrowing simply to pay for current welfare spending. This is happening at a time when countries around the world are taking difficult decisions and we are facing rising competition from countries such as South Korea and China. Living with the burden of welfare spending paid for by our children and grandchildren is simply not sustainable.

When we came to power, we produced a plan to deal with the problem. First, we said that part of the reduction in the deficit had to be funded by £12 billion of welfare savings. Labour Members can say we should not achieve those savings, but I have yet to hear a single alternative suggestion.

Jess Phillips *indicated dissent.*

Oliver Dowden: Would the hon. Lady like to make an intervention?

Jess Phillips: As admirable as the hon. Gentleman’s party might feel his efforts are in stating that we have to cut welfare, the problem is that under this Government, welfare spending has persistently gone up. One would suggest, therefore, that your tactics do not work in the real world.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I think the hon. Lady meant the hon. Gentleman’s tactics, not mine.

Oliver Dowden: I would ask the hon. Lady to consider the facts. I believe that the OBR is projecting a decline in the proportion of our national income spent on welfare over this Parliament, so the plan is actually working. If Labour Members do not wish to reduce welfare spending, there are only three alternatives. First, they could choose to cut spending on public services, but I have heard nobody suggest that, instead of making this reform, we should cut spending on the NHS or education. Alternatively, they could advocate an increase in personal or any other form of taxation, but I happen to think that in this country we already have unsustainably high levels of taxation. The third alternative is that Labour Members—

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Oliver Dowden: Yes, of course.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: What would the hon. Gentleman say to the 7,000 people in Hertsmere on universal credit who will be worse off by 2020 about the nearly £1 billion that his party is spending on cutting inheritance tax for houses worth between £600,000 and £1 million? How will he excuse that?

Oliver Dowden: I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's figures, but I do recognise the following figures: in my constituency, 5,000 people have been lifted out of tax altogether, unemployment is down by 11%, and, as a result of tax cuts introduced by this Government, 47,624 people have seen a reduction in the tax they pay. This is the Government's plan in action. We are moving from a low wage, high welfare, high tax economy to a higher wage, lower welfare, lower tax economy, and the net result is that unemployment continues to fall at a record pace. Since we came to power, an additional 2.2 million people have acquired the stability and security of a regular pay packet and a job to provide for themselves and their families. That is a record of which we on the Conservative Benches can all be proud.

If Labour does not have an alternative plan on spending, does it have one on welfare reform? Once again, we have a clear plan. First, we will introduce universal credit to remove the perverse incentives, discussed extensively during this debate, whereby employees are refusing a pay rise because they fear that the reduction in their benefits will be greater than the benefit they receive from the additional pay. Secondly, we are increasing the personal allowance. Under this Government, by the end of the Parliament the tax-free personal allowance will be £12,500, which will lift those working 35 hours a week on the minimum wage out of tax altogether. This will end the absurd situation in which people on the minimum wage pay tax and then have it recycled back to them through the welfare system. Thirdly and most importantly, we are introducing a national living wage, made possible only because we have been so successful in reducing unemployment, meaning that employers can bear the burden of that higher national living wage. As a result, we will cease to subsidise low-paid jobs, such as in supermarkets and the cleaning industry, with welfare payments.

This is a sensible plan that, when combined with help for childcare and other Government measures, offers a route to the higher pay, lower welfare, lower tax economy we desire. The House has a choice. Do we stick with a plan that has given 2.2 million more people the stability and security of a job and that will eliminate the deficit in this Parliament, meaning we finally run a surplus and start spending less than we earn—so that when the next crisis inevitably hits, we are cushioned against it—and do we start reforming the welfare system through the excellent measures introduced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and his Ministers? Or do we take the approach advocated in Labour's motion and bury our heads in the sand, pretend the problem does not exist and carry on borrowing forever, thereby burdening our children and our grandchildren with what the Labour party, when led by the likes of Mr Blair and Mr Brown, described as the bills of social failure? We are finally tackling those bills of social failure, and I am proud of the approach taken by the Conservative party.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I have to reduce the time limit to five minutes. I also remind the House, because perhaps newer Members have forgotten, having been away for Christmas, that if one makes a speech in the Chamber, it is courteous and required by the rules of the House that one stays in the Chamber certainly for the following speech and usually for at least two speeches thereafter. The people who have not done so today know who they are.

2.46 pm

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): Thank you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an absolute delight to follow the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden).

I am grateful that this debate is taking place. My constituency was included in the pilot roll-out of the universal scheme and will be feeling the full force of the dreadful cuts that have come along with its implementation. I remain wholly committed to getting as many people out of the benefits system as possible, and I readily accept the need to reduce the burden on the welfare bill and to do all we can to get people into regular, well-paid work, but to do so at such a high price for those least fortunate is not the way to do it. We must be clear that these cuts will affect hard-working people—these are not people who are work shy—who are the very people we should and must be supporting.

The Chancellor was right to do a U-turn on the proposed cuts to tax credits. They were an abhorrent attack on the financial wellbeing of millions of hard-working people in Britain, including more than 7,000 in my constituency. However, here we are, faced with the same work penalty, albeit with a different name. The cuts are the same, and once again it will be hard-working families who will suffer. The only difference is the name: this time it is universal credit rather than tax credits. The 140,000 people on the pilot scheme will be the first to fall victim to the cuts, and, as we have seen too often under this Government and the last, the north will suffer first too—75,000 people in the north-east are part of the roll-out. In my constituency, just over 1,400 people claiming universal credit will see their household budgets cut, will face increasing pressure when they need to pay their rents, will increasingly struggle to put food on the table and will find it harder to support their children.

This is not just about those currently on the pilot scheme, however; in time, the cuts will affect many more. After the initial cuts in 2016 to the 140,000, it will become a postcode lottery as to whom the roll-out will affect. In the longer term, up to 2.6 million working families could be worse off by 2020 to the tune of about £1,600. A single mother of two, working full time and on universal credit in 2016-17, will be worse off to the tune of £2,981, compared with someone on tax credits. These cuts will also see a sharp decline in the reward for people taking on more work.

The House of Commons Library has shown that a single parent earning a living wage and with one child will increase their wage packet by only £40 by working an extra 12 hours, whereas before the cuts this would have amounted to an increase of £92. The Conservatives continue to perpetuate the rhetoric that they reward those who want to get on. This is simply not true, as is proved simply by their proposed cuts to tax credits and the imposed cuts to the work element of universal credit.

[Simon Danczuk]

Finally, let me say that only this week wage growth under the Conservatives will be the worst for 100 years. From 2010 to 2020, wage growth is expected to be only 6.2%. Faced with cuts to their work element of the universal credit, the lowest paid in society will suffer massively at the hands of this Government. I urge the Conservatives to reverse these cuts to universal credit for current and future claimants to protect these hard-working people.

2.50 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): It is privilege to contribute to this debate, which I think goes to the heart of this Government's approach to reform of our society. Universal credit will, I believe, be the critical measure of success for this Government. In the wake of the debate on tax credits, it would be easy to be distracted by how significant universal credit is. Time and again, it has been shown that well-worn problems with our current welfare system cannot be solved by tinkering at the edges of the previous welfare system. As a member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, I have listened to representations about benefit delivery, welfare to work and tax credits, and I believe it makes absolute sense to have radical reform across the benefits system.

Universal credit achieves three core aims. The first is making benefits more like being in work through monthly payments, getting rid of the distinction between benefits such as working tax credits and jobseeker's allowance and removing the need for reapplication. Secondly, piggy-backing on PAYE via real-time information will deal with a vast number of benefit delivery issues that successive Work and Pensions Committees have addressed. Finally, there is benefit simplification by addressing benefit delivery and helping claimants, who quite reasonably find it difficult, to work out what they are entitled to. This effort has been launched by this Government and particularly by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions who has been in post determinedly for five and a half years, battling those who have been cynical about the necessary adjustments he has had to make.

In my previous employment, before I became a Member, I worked in an IT consultancy firm. I recall it winning a contract under the previous Government to deliver a significant project for the NHS. A few years later, however, I saw several billion pounds being written off because that project was not run properly. However, I do not particularly want to make a party political point about this issue because it is incredibly difficult for any Government to deliver complex IT systems.

This Secretary of State has shown admirable determination in the face of great cynicism and a lack of clarity from the Opposition about what exactly should be delivered. Are the Opposition in favour of universal credit? Are they in favour of it only if it works within a timescale that they think is politically expedient; or do they have a credible, well thought through alternative that will deliver the quantum of savings to which they committed in their manifesto?

I listened carefully to the speech by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford), who quite reasonably said that we must look at the detail and not make grand statements. We must, however, also recognise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden)

pointed out, that there would be major consequences of not making the changes that we have set out and not delivering the savings on which this Government have based their projections for our public finances.

We do not need to be distracted by the speed of universal credit delivery; we can be positive about the progress that has now been made. The DWP announced before Christmas that universal credit is now in three quarters of jobcentres. It is my expectation, based on the evidence I have seen, that everything is moving in the right direction towards full delivery of universal credit within the timescale that has been set out.

This Government's legacy will be enhanced by the fact that universal credit is not a stand-alone measure. The reforms of the personal allowance, the national living wage, rising wages, economic growth delivering record numbers of jobs, the simplified benefit system and the detail of work coaches helping those who need assistance will provide a compelling legacy. I regret the fact that the Opposition have brought this motion before the House today; it is misguided, and I shall vote against it.

2.55 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Obviously I echo the sentiments of all my hon. Friends about how these changes will affect working families throughout the country. I am especially concerned about the effects on single parents. The changes to universal credit are complex and difficult to decipher for people who are not yet receiving the benefit, so there is understandably much less buzz than there was for the tax credit changes, but make no mistake, the same uproar will come.

In the debate on tax credits, I spoke of the 24,000 children in Birmingham, Yardley who would be worse off because of those changes. By contrast, on the same date I could find only four properties in my constituency that would benefit from the inheritance tax changes. Thanks to the fact that universal credit has been record-breakingly slow, by April 2016 the changes will potentially affect only 760 households in my constituency. That is still 756 more families hit hard than the number that will benefit from the inheritance tax changes. I think it safe to say that, perhaps other than for those four families—and let us not forget that they have to be dead first—the residents in my constituency can see the same old Tory Government protecting and rewarding the richest.

In honour of the Tories keeping to their type, I shall do the same and raise issues of domestic and sexual violence victims. I wish to pick up two problems with the whole universal credit experiment. The first is that it all gets paid to one person in a household. I have met countless women who have kept small bits of money, saved up and used the funds to help set them and their children free. I have met too many women for whom financial control was the worst and most limiting part of their abuse. Walking away from violence and threat is never easy. It is nearly impossible if you have nothing.

I recognise that the DWP has bowed to pressure and accepted that split payments are available in cases of domestic violence when they are reported to the benefits adviser or the work person we have been talking about today—but there is a real problem with that scheme. It is the same problem I have with the two-child policy coming down the line for the very same families when considering children born of rape.

The Government expect women who are terrified, who have been told every day that they are nothing and no one, to rock up at the local jobcentre and tell the staff that they have been raped or that their husband beats and controls them—“Please, sir, can we have split payments?” What do we think their violent partners are going to do when they find half of their funds gone? I could be wrong and I am willing to be proven so. I have tabled some parliamentary questions about how many people have asked for split payments in the pilot areas. Perhaps all my years of experience are wrong and people in domestic violence relationships are skipping into neighbourhood offices, happy to disclose their worst fears.

Justin Tomlinson: I understand the power of the important points that the hon. Lady is raising, but one subtle change is that for the first time such women will have a named contact, who will get to know and understand them, and if they can spot signs that have been highlighted, they will be able to signpost support. That might encourage people for the first time to have that conversation. I know it is difficult, but this provides another opportunity for people to get the support that they absolutely need.

Jess Phillips: I shall respond to the Minister’s point by saying what I was about to say anyway. I hope that these issues will be considered as the roll-out continues, as he has said that they will. When domestic violence victims had to prove to legal aid services in cases of family law that they were victims, they initially had to provide proof from either the police or a doctor, and some were charged for the pleasure of producing a letter proving that they were indeed victims. Demanding that victims of domestic violence skip around telling anyone who will listen that they are victims before the Government will recognise them as such is inhumane.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue again, because it is extremely important. Does she share my concern about the fact that no details have been given of how the system will work, what the burden of proof will be, and how women are expected to go about this?

Jess Phillips: I absolutely share the hon. Lady’s concern, and I commend her for all the work that she is trying to do in this regard. As we have seen in the past, at a time of limited services and limited legal aid provision for victims of domestic and sexual violence, just a woman’s word should be enough. It has always been enough for me, I never made people prove that they were victims when they came to me and said that they wanted to come into a refuge. What burden of proof will the Government require? I leave that thought with the Minister.

I understand that the Government have a drive to bring down welfare spending, although, as I think I have already said, they have repeatedly failed in that this task. There is a desire—and I wish that we could draw a line today, and stop this—to pitch people who take against people who give. The truth that the Government fail to realise, again and again, is that we are all taxpayers. There is no distinct group of people who pay nothing. Moreover, I will wager that everyone in the Chamber has been, or will be, on some sort of state benefit. I bet

that all our mums and dads had their family allowance, as we called it when I was a kid. Even the Chancellor himself, a man who I believe has a bob or two, admitted that he claimed child benefit for his own children. What a scrounger!

Everyone contributes, and everyone takes. The single parents on low wages who will be hit by these changes are no better or worse than any of us here, and in my opinion they deserve to be treated better than a dead person with a posh house.

3.2 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I am delighted that we are debating universal credit, because Conservative speakers have already eloquently quashed the myths and rumours that have been put about by Opposition Members.

My constituents probably come to my advice surgeries most frequently when their tax credit payments are in a mess and they owe, in many cases, thousands of pounds. The system that we inherited in 2010 is broken and not fit for purpose. Yet again, the Government are sorting out a mess left behind by the Labour party: a mess created by a tax credit system that did not encourage, financially, people who wanted to work to actually go to work. Universal credit is at the heart of the Government’s welfare reforms, ensuring that everyone who can work is encouraged to do so. By combining six benefits in one, it ensures that work always pays. That is definitely the right approach.

Universal credit is being rolled out in my constituency, and on Friday I plan to attend a meeting at Ilkeston jobcentre to be given an update on the progress of the roll-out. Earlier this year, at a business meeting, I met a member of staff from the jobcentre, who delighted in telling me just how good universal credit was. Indeed, he wanted it to be rolled out even more quickly, although I am sure that the measured roll-out will be of long-term benefit.

According to the latest data available to me, in November 2015 the total number of unemployed claimants in Erewash was 1,058. That figure represents just 2.2% of the economically active population aged 16 to 24. It includes 943 people claiming jobseeker’s allowance, and 115 claiming universal credit. The good news is that that represents a reduction of 245 since November 2014, and a fall of 59% since November 2010.

I am sure that the 115 people who are already receiving universal credit are appreciating its benefits, and that many are now in work. People claiming universal credit are 13% more likely to be in work than those claiming jobseeker’s allowance. They are earning more money, and they are more willing to take jobs. No one wants to be dependent on benefits, and I believe that universal credit goes a long way towards helping people to be independent from them. Let’s face it, self-esteem and dignity are so much higher when income comes from earnings rather than from the taxpayer.

So far the debate has revolved around benefits. I want to expand that into the question of job opportunities, and how we can help people return to work and help those who are in work to aspire to different jobs. It was my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister who, before the 2010 election, encouraged both Members of Parliament and candidates to set up voluntary job clubs. Since 2010,

[Maggie Throup]

many MPs have organised successful job fairs. I am extending the tradition that was established in Erewash by my predecessor by organising a job and communities fair, which will be held in March. It will promote not just job vacancies but the power of volunteering, because it has been proved that people who volunteer are more likely to obtain jobs and to stay in them long term.

Like tax credits, which we have debated recently, universal credit cannot be seen in isolation and should not be debated in this way. The Government are committed to welfare reform as a whole. As the Minister said earlier, welfare changes must be seen as part of an overall package of measures. The introduction of a national living wage will mean a pay rise of more than £4,700 by 2020 for people over 25 who are working full time. Changes in the income tax personal allowance will also make a difference. In the coming year, people will have £80 more in their pockets. Increasing childcare support will help people move from part-time to full-time employment. There are various other measures that should be looked at in total.

I am disappointed that the Labour party does not back the Government's measures, which will enable us to become a nation with low welfare, low tax and high wages, and will create a secure economy and a secure future for my constituents and for our country.

3.7 pm

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I wish you and everyone in the House a very happy new year, Madam Deputy Speaker. Unfortunately, it will not be a very happy new year for many people out there on universal credit.

I am very proud of where I come from in the north-west—the St Helens and Knowsley constituencies. We were at the very centre of the powerhouse during the industrial revolution, but sadly we have lived through deindustrialisation. We have struggled to provide new jobs for our constituents, who received good pay in manufacturing. Unfortunately, most jobs are now in services. Many are insecure, involving zero-hours contracts and agency and part-time work, and those that are secure provide very low pay.

The people in my constituency want to work. They are hard workers. They want to be respected, and they want the dignity of providing a home for their families, clothing them and putting food on the table; but they struggle. Many of them go to food banks, and that is not right; it is unfair.

If the Department for Work and Pensions were part of local government, someone's feet would not touch the ground. For the Department not to carry out an assessment of the impact of taking billions of pounds in benefit away from the poorest people is totally unacceptable. No one would get away with it in local government, but this is central Government, and there has been no impact assessment. Did the Secretary of State not want one? He repeatedly insisted that people would not be worse off under universal credit because of the "into work" benefit changes that were announced in the summer Budget, but now the Government have admitted that that is not the case.

At the beginning, universal credit was sold on the basis that it would encourage people into work. Some went along with that, thinking that perhaps it was right, but they were warned by all the IT experts that it simply was not practical to expect the roll-out to take place in the existing timeframe, and it has repeatedly been delayed. Unfortunately, however, my constituency has had its roll-out. We are on universal credit at the moment—not all of us, but the latest assessment is that there are 1,586 families on universal credit. [Interruption.] That was the estimate in November 2015 and it came from the House of Commons Library. I am sorry but I would rather take the Library's word than the Government's. If you have a problem, go and sort it. Of those 1,586 claimants in November 2015, 510 were in work; 510 will be affected. The facts are from the House of Commons Library. They have not been proven wrong to me as yet. Lone parents—adults who are not disabled—will lose £2,400 in net income in April next year. A single person or a couple, where one or more are disabled, will lose £2,000 in April this year. A single mother of two working full time on the minimum wage will lose £2,400.

Too many of the jobs in my constituency are low-paid and insecure. We have many agency workers and the Government have done nothing about agency working. Agency workers turn up for work, they are sent home from work. They could have a week's work now, a week's work in a fortnight or work for three months. One agency even offered two week's work for free for the employer, after which they would guarantee that person an interview for a permanent job—for 12 months. Not many of them got a permanent job. We had people who were told they if they worked at Tata and Jaguar through the agency for 12 months they would get full-time jobs. But it did not happen; they finished just a few weeks before. Seven weeks later, some of them were called back for three weeks. That is what is going on in the real world out there where I live.

The reason benefits have gone up is that the Government of the day's economic strategy has failed miserably. Do not talk to me about debt in this country, because that has a lot to do with it. We paid off more debt than any Government on record. What is more, we got up to 1% of GDP and we paid £38 billion of the debt. We had to borrow money to save the banks and working-class people's savings. So do not talk to me about that. We are only up to 0.4% of GDP now. Benefits have soared because you have not produced the jobs that you said would be produced—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I allowed the hon. Lady to get away with it once when she said "you". If she wishes to attack the Minister, she has to say the Minister or the Government.

Marie Rimmer: I do apologise—the Minister, or the Secretary of State, who is not present and often takes his leave when we are on such subjects.

It is totally unacceptable—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady has had her five minutes.

3.13 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I apologise for not saying before the hon. Lady rose that I now have to reduce the time limit to four minutes.

Maria Caulfield: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will be brief.

I want to pick up on a couple of points made in the debate. First, I want to address the economic aspect of the issue. I have pressed the shadow Minister on the matter this afternoon. We have had many debates on this issue and on tax credits. Labour Members have said that they are committed to reducing the deficit and debt in this country, and the shadow Minister has said that he is committed to reducing welfare spending by £12 billion, but yet again today we have not had any answers as to how that would happen. To give credit to the SNP, the effective Opposition in this House, while I disagree with its alternatives, at least it has some. Perhaps the shadow Minister in his winding-up speech will acknowledge how he would tackle the welfare saving that needs to be made. If it is not through savings on universal credit, how would he propose to make it?

I agree with my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham). They produced figures that show that those moving to universal credit, with the tapering and transitional arrangements, will not be worse off in cash terms. They have shone a light on the smoke and mirrors from Labour Members.

With all the changes that are happening during this Parliament, and with the introduction of the national living wage, someone working full time on the current minimum wage will be £5,000 a year better off. With the free childcare being introduced for three to five-year-olds, a family will benefit by about £5,000 a year. The rise in tax thresholds—the threshold is currently £11,000 a year and the proposal is to increase it to £12,500 by the end of this Parliament—will benefit low-wage families. That is not to mention the increase in employment, a significant percentage of which is full-time work.

On my second and more important point, I have been disappointed by the patronising and insulting laughter from the shadow Minister when we suggested single parents could get back into work and life coaches would be helpful in that regard. He laughed that off as if that were something that we could only dream about.

I will tell him why I believe so passionately in this. I grew up in a working-class family. I went to school in the socialist state of Lambeth in London, where there was little or no hope or aspiration for working-class kids such as me. We got no careers advice. My careers advice was the housing office number if I got pregnant at 16. It was about how to claim my first benefits. There was no sixth-form advice or advice on how to go to university, so I never got there. There was just benefits advice, but that is the socialist way, because there is no hope or aspiration for people on a low income.

This universal credit debate is more than just about pounds and pence in people's pockets. It is about a fundamental shift to where people can work and those who do work are paid well for doing so. I will support the Government in their move to universal credit. I urge Opposition Members to do the same.

3.16 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I make it clear that I welcome the principles behind universal credit. Any scheme that simplifies the welfare system, provides additional support to those who have to use it and incentivises people into work, which ultimately is the best route out of poverty, has to be encouraged. However, the problem is, because of the Chancellor's failure to reach his deficit reduction target, the original totally laudable objectives of universal credit have been subsumed by the Government's need to cut the cost of it.

I applaud those Conservative Members who lobbied hard for the removal of the Chancellor's proposals to cut working tax credit. They recognised the false logic of what he was doing. Indeed, in the autumn statement he said:

"I have had representations that the changes to tax credits should be phased in...I hear and understand them... the simplest thing to do is not to phase these changes in, but to avoid them altogether. Tax credits are being phased out anyway as we introduce universal credit."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1360.]

The overwhelming impression at that point was that his policy had been abandoned. But it has not been abandoned. He did not mention that it was effectively being rebranded and recycled through the universal credit system. I cannot understand why those people who lobbied him beforehand on working tax credits seem to be accepting those same proposals being recycled through universal credit.

The Chancellor was the one involved in smoke and mirrors. He compounded that with another trick. He suddenly found, for the funding of that, £27 billion that seemed to be in the accounts in the autumn that had not been there in July. That does credit to that well-known comedian and illusionist, the late Tommy Cooper—the Chancellor found it "Just like that." All I can hope is that, for the state of the nation's finances, the £27 billion is not as illusory as the benefits that the Chancellor claimed would accrue to those who move on to universal credit. Not only do I object to the way the proposals were introduced in the House, but the underlying philosophy is a contradiction of everything the Government have said about making work pay, taking people off benefits and incentivising them into work. The theme has been well developed by other contributors to this debate, so I will not take it further.

In the context of the cuts to inheritance tax, the universal credit system in effect penalises those who are working hard to produce the goods and services and pay the taxes that will reduce the deficit and benefit those who inherit capital, who will be better off. The policy is incoherent and contradictory, sends the wrong message and ultimately will be self-defeating.

3.20 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): It must surely be a fact that Members in all parts of the House want to see more people in good jobs. This must be a central focus of any Government. There is a pragmatic economic argument for this, as well as a social and moral argument. Labour's policies in this area were no doubt well intentioned, but proved to be expensive, bureaucratic and in some cases—too many cases—counterproductive.

[James Cleverly]

The growth in job vacancies in the UK economy today is a reflection of the success of this Government's policies and provides opportunities for people currently out of work and people who want a better job. Some 2 million more people are now in work, which means that we are creating 1,000 jobs every day. Estimates vary, but there are between 750,000 and 1.2 million more vacancies in the economy than before the recession. On a parochial note, I welcome the latest figures showing that the number of people in my constituency, Braintree, claiming jobseeker's allowance or universal credit fell by 110 in 2015. There has been a staggering 59% drop since the economic and welfare reforms that the Government introduced in 2010.

However, looking forward, we have to ask why we have so many vacancies, yet so many people under-employed. Surely the past welfare system must be a contributory factor. We can recognise the impact of perverse incentives without vilifying the unemployed or the under-employed. At no point in this debate have I heard the word "scroungers" uttered from the Government Benches, but many times from the Opposition Benches. That is unfortunate.

We have all had people in our surgeries saying something along the lines of "I am working my 16 hours." How on earth have we come to this? If taking more work brings extra paperwork, extra uncertainty but little extra money, is it any wonder that so many people decide not to do it? This is fundamentally wrong and must be rectified if we are serious about dealing with long-term under-employment.

Universal credit extends financial incentives to people working less than 16 hours per week and removes the limit on the number of hours that some people can work. The single 65% taper helps claimants clearly understand the advantages of working and planning for the long term. As a Conservative, I want to give people real choices in life. A life trapped on welfare is a life without choices. It is our duty to change this and give people a well-deserved chance to make the very best of themselves and their families. The financial imperative is important, but just as important is the fact that universal credit is a means of getting more people into work and more people into good work.

I have listened to the contributions from Opposition Members. Their arguments are all based on people not changing their circumstances. This fundamentally misses the point of universal credit. I want people to change their circumstances. If they are trapped in low-paid part-time jobs, I want them to change their circumstances. If their employers will not invest in their training because they are only on 16 hours a week, I want them to change their circumstances. If they are stuck on the minimum wage, I want to see them able and confident to get better jobs and therefore change their circumstances. Universal credit will be a game changer. I welcome it and I commend it to the House.

3.24 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and happy new year.

The apparent tax credit cut U-turn performed by the Chancellor at the autumn statement appeared at the time to be a victory for common sense and the vigorous

campaign fought by my colleagues in this place and in Holyrood, and by Labour, Plaid and the Greens. But as the dust settled on the much-hyped U-turn, it appears now that all the Chancellor did was delay the pain of those tax credit cuts and transfer much of them into universal credit, specifically the work allowance. The House of Commons Library briefing on the subject states:

"The work allowance reductions announced in the Summer Budget will ultimately have a similar impact to the changes to tax credits which are not now going ahead".

So low income working households in Airdrie and Shotts and across these isles are still going to suffer painful cuts from this austerity-obsessed Government, and those low income families are again going to be asked to pay the price for economic failures not of their making. The cuts have just been deferred, deflected and dished out by other means.

Yet again we must ask how these cuts can possibly chime with the Government's claim that they want to make work pay or with the aim of universal credit—that "work pays and more work pays for everyone". Well, work will not pay for those on universal credit who are due to see their incomes cut by up to £3,000 a year, according to the House of Commons Library—£3,000 less for a single parent or a family before housing costs are considered, where one or both adults are disabled. These people are working hard, paying their taxes and are now to be hammered yet again.

The Minister said that he wanted a change to the cycle of taking money from low income workers and giving it back through social security. He is achieving that change, but now the Treasury will just take and not give back. Government Members may well suggest that the shortfall can be made up by working extra hours. The Work and Pensions Secretary has already suggested that, but for those with a disability which makes it possible to work but impossible to work full-time, or for someone with caring responsibilities who can work only part-time, or for those whose employer cannot afford to give them extra hours, this cut will be an unfair punishment for this Government's flawed and reckless obsession with austerity at any cost.

The despicable suggestion that all those who are about to have their incomes cut can just pick up some overtime here and there goes to show how desperately out of touch Tory Ministers are, and, on the evidence of this debate, a great many Government Back-Benchers are. They do not have a clue about how people on low incomes get by or how devastating an impact these cuts will have.

If the Government were serious about reducing welfare spending, they would be creating more job opportunities and truly dealing with barriers to employment, particularly for the disabled and mentally unwell. Instead, we see savage cuts to social security support directed at those finding it most difficult to get into work—the universal credit work allowance and the employment support allowance work-related activity group are perfect examples. These benefits, which help those in need of extra support to get back into work or to stay in work are being slashed to ribbons by this Government. I hope the Government will heed the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) in her excellent speech and publish an impact assessment.

We must remember that these cuts are being made out of choice, not necessity. The Tory Government should be refocusing their priorities for spending cuts elsewhere, not on poor and low-income families.

I hope we will see a similar rear-guard action from the Tory Back Benchers who spoke out against the tax credit cuts and that they will oppose these cuts to the universal credit work allowance. The House of Commons Library says the cuts to work allowance will have the same impact as the cuts to tax credits.

3.29 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): “A guid new year tae yin and a’ and mony may ye see.” I thank the Labour Front Bench—[*Interruption.*] It is okay; I will send that up to *Hansard*. I thank the Labour Front Bench and particularly—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman is using perfectly good language and most of us understand it perfectly.

Chris Stephens: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

May I thank the Labour party and the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) for bringing this motion to the House? I want to start, as he did, by discussing the parliamentary procedures and the concerns I had about how this change was made. My view is that the Statutory Instruments Committee should be used to address technical changes to legislation and amendments. This was not a technical amendment; this was a policy change, and this was a procedural vehicle to sneak in the most damaging legislation and avoid public scrutiny. At the SIC we were subjected to the usual sunshine and cheerful rhetoric from the Government members, so much so that if we were playing Tory buzzphrase bingo we would have won the snowball after a couple of minutes, because the reality of this change is that a lone parent who currently earns the national minimum wage can work up to 22 hours, but with this cut to working allowance they would lose that support after 12 hours.

I am still waiting for the answers to many of the questions I asked at the SIC, and I hope that those on the Government Front Bench will answer some of them. First, what assessment has been made of the effect of the changes to working families and their ability to take on part-time work? Does this disincentivise work and lead to workers reducing their hours? It seems to me that it is human nature that if there is a chance of someone losing benefit payments and they can save that benefit only by cutting their working hours, that is exactly what they will do. Will there be any mitigation of the effects on their benefits? How will carers be affected, in particular young carers? Talking about young workers, what about those aged under 25, who will not get access to the national living wage?

I also ask this question again: what impact assessment has been done in respect of Department for Work and Pensions staff, who are the lowest paid civil servants in the country—so much so that when staff from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs are merged into the DWP, they earn £2,000 more than those in the DWP? These are staff who are subjected to a 1% pay cap, and who are paying, and have had to pay, increased pension and national insurance contributions; and 40% of DWP staff are currently on tax credits.

We have heard so much again today about aspiration. What message does the cut to working allowance send to those who aspire? The reality is that people are increasingly aware that the ladder of social mobility is being systematically pulled up ahead of them, and that no matter how hard they work or how much they aspire to a better life for their children and themselves, they will be punished for not being born into the right sort of family. That is the reality of this cut to UC work allowance.

3.33 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) in actually debating the motion, which is about the Government’s cut to UC work allowance. This debate has been like a silent disco experience; it seems like the other side are tuned into a debate about their vision of UC and some of the issues and arguments around its roll-out, whereas this side of the House seems to be tuned into the right debate, which is about the cut to UC work allowance.

We have heard spurious arguments across the Chamber. The hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) told us he wants his constituents to be able to improve their choices, but he has not told us how the cut to the UC work allowance is going to improve anybody’s choices; it certainly is not going to improve choices for people in my constituency when the effects of this change reach them in time to come.

We have also heard some other nonsense arguments. The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) said the Institute for Fiscal Studies was telling us that nobody will lose out from the changes. That is not what the IFS has said in relation to these specific changes to UC, and not just the change to the work allowance. The IFS estimates that, taking into account all the announced changes to universal credit, there will be a reduction of £3.7 billion in entitlement, and that there will be an aggregate loss of £1.5 billion a year for working families.

As the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) pointed out, some people are billed as losers and some as winners, and we can look at what the various analyses and appraisals show. According to the IFS, 2.6 million families are due to lose an average of £1,600 a year, whereas 1.9 million are scheduled to gain an average of £1,400 a year. Of course, we do not know whether those who are currently projected as winners will stay as winners, because the Government have already melted and bent all their promises and assurances on universal credit. They said that work would pay, and that more work would pay, for everyone, but that promise has been eroded and corroded by the Government’s measures over the past year.

In the spring, the Government produced a Budget in which they announced one figure for the welfare cap, but then in the summer Budget they reduced the cap by £46.5 billion over the following four financial years. That shows us that we cannot depend on any of the Government’s projections or assurances. Of course, when the Chancellor announced his U-turn on tax credits, it was clear that he still intended to make both the near-term and longer-term changes to universal credit. He said that he would achieve by other means the savings that he was giving up through his U-turn on tax credits. Will those savings come through other changes to universal

[Mark Durkan]

credit, including the work allowance? Will those who are currently billed as potential winners from the work allowance have their terms and conditions changed in years to come? Government Members have made no argument about the change to the universal credit work allowance that they could not equally give in response to any future cut affecting other universal credit claimants.

Quite apart from the question of whether the roll-out of the project will work in IT terms, individuals know they cannot rely on any of the assurances and promises that have been given about what universal credit will mean for them. It is all very well for Tory MPs to say what it means to them when they turn up in their constituencies, but it will be a different story around kitchen tables when the budgets of hard-working families are affected.

3.37 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in today's debate. I promise that I will try to be brief.

In his autumn statement on 25 November, the Chancellor trumpeted that he was reversing the proposed cuts to tax credits in full, stating that he had abandoned plans to impose £4.4 billion of cuts from this April. It now appears that he is doing a U-turn on his U-turn, because in the short time since the autumn statement it has transpired that he has lined up similar cuts affecting many of the same working families, this time to universal credit. It seems that he is ushering in a new postcode lottery by pushing ahead with cuts to universal credit, which will leave some families up to £3,000 a year worse off than others in exactly the same circumstances.

We have heard the example of a single mother of two, working full time on the minimum wage and claiming universal credit, whose net income next year will be £2,981 lower than that of someone in the same circumstances who is claiming tax credits. Meanwhile, a single parent of two on a salary of £18,000 a year will see their overall income fall by £2,601 next year if they are on universal credit. As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State indicated, analysis shows that from April, cuts to the work allowance will also mean an annual reduction of £2,000 a year in support for disabled people in work, which is clearly a particular concern.

My constituency will be hit hard by the proposals, with 2,000 families being affected in 2017, 5,000 in 2018, 8,000 in 2019 and 10,000 by 2020. Across our country, the need for food banks is increasing. I mention that because in many cases, food bank support is provided more to people in work than to those out of work. Perhaps if the Minister and the Secretary of State took the time to visit food banks and talk to the many thousands of volunteers, they would get a better appreciation of the hardship that is being endured. The proposals to cut tax credits will make matters much worse for people and hit working families—people the Government say they want to help and are committed to helping.

I say to Conservative Members that these measures will cause great hardship to many vulnerable families across our country, in all constituencies. The Tory

Government have choices. We have seen announcements of billions being allocated to the most well-off by cutting inheritance tax and further support being handed to big businesses by cutting corporation tax.

Oliver Dowden: There is a repeated assertion on the inheritance tax cut. Even by 2021, the inheritance tax cut will cost less than £1 billion, which is in no way comparable to the savings that are achieved through the welfare reforms. We cannot magic up the savings by not proceeding with the inheritance tax cut alone.

Gerald Jones: That is one example of the wrong choices being made by the Government but there are others. They have given further support to big businesses by cutting corporation tax. They have chosen to continue the cut in the top rate of income tax from 50% to 45%, allowing someone earning £2 million a year to continue to pay £250,000 a year less in income tax. Those are clearly wrong choices, and they are made on the backs of ordinary working families. Against that background, the decision to penalise working families who are already struggling to make ends meet is wrong in so many ways.

The changes will cause worry and undue stress to millions of families. I therefore urge Conservative Members to support the Labour motion today, and not to turn their backs on working families.

3.41 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I welcomed the Chancellor's U-turn on tax credits and praised him for it. It was the right and courageous thing to do. I pay tribute to colleagues on both sides of the House who worked together to achieve it, and colleagues in the other place. I particularly pay tribute to colleagues on the Government Benches who had the courage to tell the Government that they were wrong and that the measure would hit hard-working families.

Imagine the dismay of those people—many of the very same people who thought they had escaped a £1,400 cut in their low income from next April—who now find that, through a different mechanism, they will suffer in exactly the same way. That decision was merely a delay and a temporary reprieve. Those people will feel duped and betrayed. I serve notice on the Government today that the Liberal Democrats will table an amendment in the House of Lords and seek co-operation from other parties and Cross Benchers to seek to bring the Government's measure down, to show them that they cannot introduce the tax credit change by the back door, which is exactly—disgracefully—what the measure is about.

The reality of the figures is worrying, but the reality of the people affected is disgraceful. According to Liverpool Economics, the net effect on the income of lone parents will be a reduction of £2,600. Disabled people will see a net reduction in income of £2,000. The net effect on couples with children will be a reduction of £1,000. Some 2.6 million working families will lose out if the cut to universal credit goes through. A couple on £20,000 a year with two children were looking forward to being £160 better off due to changes in the personal allowance in April after the tax credit cuts were scrapped. They would have welcomed that very strongly, but that same couple now face a cut from April—in just a few weeks' time—of £1,030.

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission—the Government’s own advisory body—has said that

“there is a risk that incentives to progress in work for many families could end up being worse than they were... The immediate priority must be...reversing the”

planned

“cuts to work allowances...before they are implemented”.

Despite the reversal on income tax credits, the proposals merely delay the impact on those relying on state-funded wage top-ups. Why, therefore, have we heard not one word from those who had the courage to oppose tax credit cuts when exactly the same cuts in a different guise are here today? Asking people to work 200 more hours a year simply shows a Conservative Front Bench and a Government who are out of touch.

My question for the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in the short term is why there has not been a proper impact assessment of the change. Will they now do one? What do they have to hide? Will they also respond to the view of the statutory body, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, which they have not done so far? Let me be clear that the Liberal Democrats will seek to overturn this measure in the House of Lords. They are right to do so. Let us hope that once again we will see a U-turn from this Government, because this is not acceptable and hits the people who they purport to be seeking to help.

3.45 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate everybody and thank them for their contributions to today’s debate. The list includes too many Members to mention them all, but I want just to mention my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) who, in his typical way, forensically analysed the implications of the cuts to work allowances for universal credit and the implications of undermining the objective of universal credit, which is to incentivise work. The Government might have been forced to row back on their proposed cuts to tax credits, but, as has been emphasised in the debate, that is not the end to their attack on hard-working people on low pay.

In his autumn statement last November, the Chancellor failed to exclude people who are currently on universal credit from any cuts in work allowances. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said, as everyone in receipt of tax credits now will eventually move on to UC, the long-term effects will be nil. Again according to the IFS, by 2020 2.6 million families will be £1,600 a year worse off.

Starting in April, there will be a £9.6 billion reduction in support for working families over the next five years, with £100 million of that coming in 2016-17. Those people already on UC, including my constituents, will be hit first. There are currently 155,000 people on UC, and that number is increasing every week and is expected to reach half a million by April. House of Commons Library analysis shows that the cuts will mean that a single parent of two who is working full time on the minimum wage will lose £2,400 next year. Liverpool Economics has estimated that disabled people will have their support reduced by £2,000 a year. A couple earning £20,000 a year and with two children will be £1,600 a year worse off.

The north—particularly the north-west, where UC started—will be hit first, so we go from powerhouse to workhouse.

The Government first of all denied that anyone on UC would be worse off, with the Secretary of State saying on the BBC:

“Nobody will lose any money on arrival on Universal Credit from tax credits because they’re cash protected, which means there’s transitional protection.”

Well, that could not be further from the truth. As the Government finally conceded during the Christmas recess, the flexible support fund that the Secretary of State claimed would provide transitional protection for claimants is used for other purposes and last year was only £69 million, well short of the £100 million cuts for this year, let alone the £3.2 billion cuts by 2020. Will the Secretary of State now apologise, as I believe this is the first time he has had an opportunity in the Chamber to apologise for his inaccuracies and for misleading the public in this way? I will take that as a no.

The blunders and callousness do not stop there. The Government suggested that the way to avoid the cuts was just to work an extra 200 hours a year, three or four hours a week. As the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) said, is that what the DWP is going to do? If it is not, the Department needs to get its own house in order first.

The Minister was desperately trying to say that this was about dynamism and strengthening work incentives, but cutting universal credit work allowances will weaken, not strengthen, work incentives—a far cry from the supposed intention of universal credit. As a result of these cuts to universal credit work allowances, a single parent earning the new minimum wage and with one child will increase their income by only £40 by working an additional 12 hours. That compares with an increase of £92 for the additional 12 hours before the cuts to the work allowances were introduced.

The Government are once more making the poorest, including the working poor, bear the brunt of further cuts, as the IFS analysis of the autumn statement shows. After six years, they have done next to nothing to curb boardroom pay. The average worker’s pay of £27,645 increased by less than 2% last year, compared with pay for top executives on an average of £5 million increasing by nearly 50%. That trend is getting worse, not better. In the first five days of January, many of those top executives had already earned the equivalent of the average worker’s annual salary.

Worryingly—though sadly unsurprisingly—this Government have yet again failed to publish an impact assessment of the effects of these cuts. The Social Security Advisory Committee said of these regulations that

“the impact needs to be analysed carefully and the policy about work incentives should be derived from strong evidence.”

The Committee was concerned that

“there may be an uneven impact on individuals”

and expressed disappointment with the

“lack of statistical analysis to support the view that the abolition of the work allowance for several UC categories will not deter people from seeking work”.

In the House of Lords, the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee issued a report stating that its members were

“disappointed that no impact assessment or similar statement has been provided showing how many people are likely to be affected by these changes and to what degree.”

[Debbie Abrahams]

In addition, there has to date been no cumulative impact assessment of the Department's policies on poverty affecting disabled people and children—something I have repeatedly urged Ministers to undertake. The Social Security Advisory Committee stated in 2014 in its report on cumulative impact assessments of welfare changes that it believed

“that more can and should be done to identify and evaluate the interaction between elements in the welfare reform agenda, particularly as they affect vulnerable groups.”

Others have made such evaluations. Demos made an assessment of the cumulative effects of the 2012 welfare reforms, estimating that £23.8 billion will have been taken from 3.7 million disabled people by 2018—and that does not even take into account the potential effects of this year's Welfare Reform and Work Bill. The Child Poverty Action Group states that the cumulative impact of welfare reforms on low-income households, the majority of which are families with children, will amount to £9.7 billion by 2020-21. A recent *BMJ* article highlighted the disproportionate effect that the Government's social security cuts are having on children and on people with disabilities; another highlighted the impact on child health of the Government's welfare cuts. This is happening at a time when this affluent country, the sixth wealthiest in the world, has the highest under-five mortality rate in northern Europe. These policies are going to make that worse.

We are calling for a full reversal of the proposed cuts to the Government's universal credit work allowance. As we have heard throughout the debate, all the evidence shows that there is no valid reason for protecting people on low and middle incomes from the cuts to tax credits without extending the same protection to working families on universal credit, especially as the Secretary of State has said he expects no new claimants to be eligible for tax credits from 2018 as tax credits will have been replaced by universal credit for all new claimants. The cuts to the universal credit work allowance are just as unjust as the cuts to tax credits. That is why we on this side of the House are calling for a full reversal and asking Conservative Members who were brave enough to make a stand against the tax credit cuts to have the courage of their convictions and vote with us today.

3.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara): I should like to thank all those who have spoken in today's debate. On a Labour Opposition day, however, it is rather regrettable to find more Scottish National party Members than Labour Members present for most of the debate. Labour Members have demonstrated a poor showing on their Opposition day.

Let me make one thing absolutely clear at the outset: universal credit is transforming people's lives. After years of Labour's dependency culture, this Government are continuing to reform the welfare system and the labour market.

It is worth reminding the House of the broken welfare system and labour market that were left to us, a legacy that hon. Members have recognised during today's debate: nearly one in five households had nobody in them working; the number of households where nobody had

ever worked had nearly doubled; 1.4 million people had been on benefits for most of the previous decade; and close to half of all households in the social rented sector had nobody in work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Vara: I will not give way, as I have limited time available and I am keen to address as many of the points raised as possible. We have turned that situation around. Our reforms, the centrepiece of which is universal credit, are working and are getting people back into work.

Stephen Timms: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I will make an exception for the right hon. Gentleman.

Stephen Timms: The Government are not going ahead with the tax credit cuts, so why is it right to go ahead with precisely the same cuts for the minority of people who have the misfortune to be claiming not tax credits but universal credit?

Mr Vara: It is important that the right hon. Gentleman and others take into account the need to consider the broader perspective: the raising of personal allowances; the introduction of the new living wage; the doubling of free childcare to 30 hours; tax-free childcare from early 2017; and, let us not forget, the fact that every time we fill up our tank with petrol there is a saving of £10 because of the freezing of the fuel duty. It is important to consider everything in a broader perspective, not the narrow perspective that we have heard from so many Opposition Members.

A number of speeches have been made today and, unfortunately, time simply does not allow me to address them all. I shall simply say that the right hon. Gentleman made a passionate contribution. I have huge respect for him and I am sorry that he is no longer on his party's Front Bench. May I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden), who made a learned contribution, clearly setting out the reasons why Labour's proposals are simply not sustainable? My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) made a powerful contribution, telling us of her experiences growing up, which had the whole House in agreement with her.

This is an important subject and we need to recognise that the IFS has pointed out that no one on existing benefits or tax credits whose circumstances remain the same will lose out in cash terms as a direct result of being moved on to universal credit. These claimants will get transitional protection to avoid cash loss at the point of change. It is important to note that the only people who will be directly affected by the change to work allowances in April will be those already in work, the majority of whom will be single claimants without dependants. [Interruption.] The shadow Work and Pensions Secretary chunters away, but we have checked the *Hansard* record and found that he was wrong and we were right. Conservative Members await a withdrawal of his earlier comments, which we debated. We have checked *Hansard* and he should do likewise. For those people who are affected, we have been careful to put measures in place

to ensure that they are fully supported. As well as the additional work coach support that these claimants will receive, we have increased the amount available through the flexible support fund to help people progress in work and increase their earnings.

Universal credit is a major reform of welfare that is designed to make sure that work always pays. Through the removal of the requirement to work 16 hours per week that exists in the tax credits system, people will see a financial benefit from every extra hour they work. The universal credit taper means that financial support is withdrawn at a consistent and predictable rate, helping claimants to understand clearly the advantages of work. The IFS has said that anyone being moved on to universal credit from tax credits will be protected—they will not be cash losers. Opposition Members need to take that on board—that comes from the IFS.

Owen Smith *rose*—

Mr Vara: I will not give way.

It is also worth noting that universal credit is working: for every 100 jobseeker's allowance claimants who find work, there are 113 universal credit claimants who do so. It is important to look at the bigger picture. This Government are moving Britain to a higher wage, lower tax and lower welfare society. Universal credit is fundamentally different to the legacy systems it replaces, and it must be recognised that there is no meaningful way of comparing an unreformed tax credit system with universal credit.

As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People highlighted at the start of the debate, Labour's spending on in-work benefits went up by £22 billion, but the number of working people in poverty actually rose. The system we inherited from Labour was one where, for millions of people, being on welfare was a more attractive option than working or taking on more work.

Under Labour, there was a complete abdication of responsibility for managing working taxpayers' money. Labour's shambolic welfare policies led to a colossal welfare budget that was simply out of control, and the party has not changed. Page 47 of the 2015 Labour party manifesto said:

"To guarantee a decent social security system for the next generation, we need to keep costs under control."

Yet when the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary was on the "Daily Politics" programme in December he said:

"We are campaigning for a...full reversal of universal credit...we will put that money back in if we were in power...I'm crystal clear about that."

The presenter Jo Coburn challenged him—she had to challenge him three times. She said:

"Where will you get the money? The bill would go up under your proposal."

The shadow Secretary's reply was:

"Had I been Chancellor...I would have taken the extra £27 billion tax receipts."

There we have it: the party that wants to continue taxing. That is why it is the party of welfare—it is the welfare party, not the labour party.

Welfare is much more than simply giving money to people and writing blank cheques; it is about removing the barriers that prevent people from finding work and progressing in work. It is about giving people the support

they need to stand on their own two feet and live independently of the state. It is about creating the right incentives for people so that they can make the right choices for themselves and their families. That is what universal credit does, and it is working. It is incentivising work, renewing personal responsibility, and rewarding positive choices. Under this Government—this one nation Government—we will continue to deliver for all our citizens.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 273, Noes 308.

Division No. 157]

[4.2 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Cryer, John
Abrahams, Debbie	Cummins, Judith
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	Cunningham, Alex
Alexander, Heidi	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Ali, Rushanara	Dakin, Nic
Allen, Mr Graham	Danczuk, Simon
Anderson, Mr David	David, Wayne
Arkless, Richard	Davies, Geraint
Ashworth, Jonathan	Day, Martyn
Austin, Ian	De Piero, Gloria
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Bardell, Hannah	Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Barron, rh Kevin	Doughty, Stephen
Benn, rh Hilary	Dowd, Jim
Berger, Luciana	Dowd, Peter
Betts, Mr Clive	Dromey, Jack
Black, Mhairi	Durkan, Mark
Blackford, Ian	Eagle, Ms Angela
Blackman, Kirsty	Edwards, Jonathan
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Efford, Clive
Blenkinsop, Tom	Elliott, Julie
Blomfield, Paul	Elliott, Tom
Boswell, Philip	Ellman, Mrs Louise
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Esterson, Bill
Brake, rh Tom	Evans, Chris
Brennan, Kevin	Farrelly, Paul
Brock, Deidre	Farron, Tim
Brown, Alan	Fellows, Marion
Brown, Lyn	Ferrier, Margaret
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Field, rh Frank
Bryant, Chris	Fitzpatrick, Jim
Buck, Ms Karen	Fiello, Robert
Burden, Richard	Fletcher, Colleen
Burgon, Richard	Flint, rh Caroline
Burnham, rh Andy	Flynn, Paul
Butler, Dawn	Fovargue, Yvonne
Byrne, rh Liam	Gardiner, Barry
Cadbury, Ruth	Gethins, Stephen
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Gibson, Patricia
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Glass, Pat
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Glindon, Mary
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Godsiff, Mr Roger
Champion, Sarah	Goodman, Helen
Chapman, Douglas	Grady, Patrick
Chapman, Jenny	Grant, Peter
Coaker, Vernon	Gray, Neil
Coffey, Ann	Green, Kate
Cooper, rh Yvette	Greenwood, Lilian
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Greenwood, Margaret
Cowan, Ronnie	Griffith, Nia
Cox, Jo	Gwynne, Andrew
Coyle, Neil	Haigh, Louise
Crausby, Mr David	Hamilton, Fabian
Crawley, Angela	Hanson, rh Mr David
Creagh, Mary	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Creasy, Stella	Harpham, Harry

Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Mr Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hermon, Lady
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Hunt, Tristram
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Irranca-Davies, Huw
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Alan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kerevan, George
 Kerr, Calum
 Kinahan, Danny
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lavery, Ian
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Mr Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCaig, Callum
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
 McDonnell, John
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMahan, Jim
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Monaghan, Dr Paul

Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame M.
 Mulholland, Greg
 Mullin, Roger
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Osamor, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Albert
 Paisley, Ian
 Paterson, Steven
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Pugh, John
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Marie
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Robertson, rh Angus
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simpson, David
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmar, Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thomson, Michelle
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Stephen

Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Watson, Mr Tom
 Weir, Mike
 West, Catherine
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Corri

Wilson, Phil
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Angela Rayner

NOES

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
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Berry, James
 Bingham, Andrew
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Blunt, Crispin
 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, rh Sir Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, Alun
 Carmichael, Neil
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colville, Oliver
 Costa, Alberto
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey

Davies, Byron
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Nadine
 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
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh Mr David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, Mr James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam

Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matthew
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 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
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Boris
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kirby, Simon
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Pauline

Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lumley, Karen
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Offord, Dr Matthew

Parish, Neil
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 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
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber
 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
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain

Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
 Swire, rh Mr Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

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

Question accordingly negated.

Flooding

4.16 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House extends its sympathy to all those affected by recent floods and its gratitude to the emergency services, armed forces and volunteers who rallied round to help afflicted communities over the holiday period; notes the damage the Chancellor of the Exchequer's cuts, which the National Audit Office estimates amounted to 10 per cent over the course of the last Parliament, excluding emergency funding, have caused to these communities; notes that by delaying or cutting new flood defence projects or neglecting maintenance of existing flood defences, the Government has failed to protect these communities; notes with concern the recent decision by the Scottish Government to impose a six per cent cut on funding to the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency; believes that there has been a dismal lack of action by the Cabinet Committee set up after the floods of 2013-14 and questions the effectiveness of the newly-created Cabinet Committee under the same leadership; further believes that the UK needs a long-term plan which includes a complete rethink of flood defences, as proposed by the Environment Agency, measures to make homes, communities and infrastructure more flood resilient and a greater focus on flood prevention, particularly through uplands and water catchment management; and calls on the Government to commit to the figure that the Environment Agency said in 2014 was required to protect communities of £800 million per year on maintenance and strengthening of flood defences and to carry out an urgent, independent, public review of flood policy.

I know that very many Back-Bench speakers want to take part in this debate. I will therefore try to limit the number of interventions because it is important that, above all, we hear from people whose constituents have been affected by flooding over the Christmas period.

Unfortunately, this is the second Opposition day in less than a month when we have had to call a debate on flooding. We were grateful for the statement from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs yesterday, but there were too many unanswered questions for the communities that have been devastated by the floods. I hope that today we will hear more answers.

At the outset, I put on the record again our thanks for the outstanding work of the emergency services, the armed forces and the very many volunteers who responded to the floods over the holiday period. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. There are a lot of private conversations going on and it is quite difficult to hear the shadow Secretary of State. Perhaps we could listen because this is a serious subject that has affected many of our constituents.

Kerry McCarthy: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I appreciate that the Secretary of State chaired Cobra and sought to ensure that there was a swift response to the crisis over Christmas, but we cannot keep relying on emergency responses and on communities going above and beyond to help each other. There is a worrying air of complacency about the Government. Ministers have failed to prioritise flood prevention, despite the national security risk assessment citing flood risk as a tier 1 priority. We would not ignore experts' warnings on terrorism or cyber-attacks, so why have the Government repeatedly disregarded expert advice on flooding?

The Committee on Climate Change gave flood adaptation a double-red warning and urged the Government to develop a strategy to protect the increasing number

of homes that are at risk of flooding—sound advice that the Government inexplicably rejected. People who have been forced out of their homes need to know why.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): My area floods repeatedly. Frankly, people are weary of it—we are sick of it. It has been happening for a very long time. Is it not the case that all Governments have disregarded advice? After the 2000 floods, which also devastated my constituency, the Labour Government were warned that to keep up they needed to spend £700 million a year—I think that was the figure—but they never did. The record is of increased flood spend after an event, followed by reductions. All Governments have been guilty of that and we need to break the cycle.

Kerry McCarthy: As I will go on to mention, the Pitt review, which was initiated in 2007 by the last Labour Government, recommended year-on-year above inflation increases in spending. That is exactly what the Labour Government did. It was only when the coalition Government got in in 2010 that that spending was reversed.

I was talking about the warnings that the Government have ignored, such as the warning from the Committee on Climate Change.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kerry McCarthy: If I may, I will make a little progress.

People in Yorkshire deserve to know why the Secretary of State did not feel compelled to act when Professor Colin Mellors, who was appointed by the Government to chair the Yorkshire regional flood and coastal committee, warned that “ever tighter budgets” would mean that they would have

“to consider sites where maintenance might be formally discontinued”.

What about the Association of Drainage Authorities? It told Ministers that their neglect of our flood defences could double the number of households at significant risk of flooding within 20 years, with too many assets maintained to only minimal level. The Government were warned repeatedly about the damage caused by spending cuts and Environment Agency redundancies. They were warned that too many households and businesses could not afford flood insurance. They were warned that their neglect of our natural environment was exacerbating the flood risk, and that heavy rains and flooding would only become more frequent.

The Environment Secretary will no doubt tell us again that the Government are spending more than the coalition Government and more than the previous Labour Government. If only this Government put as much effort into defending people's homes and businesses as they do their own record. The fact is that the Secretary of State is talking about capital expenditure only. They did not intend to spend more, but thanks to the emergency funding after the Somerset floods spending did increase by 0.8% in real terms. In today's prices, that is £15 million over five years. The Government's own advisers told them that flood spending would have to increase by £20 million plus inflation each year. Does the Environment Secretary really think that £15 million over five years was something to be proud of?

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kerry McCarthy: If I could just finish on the figures, because otherwise we will lose track of the point I am trying to make.

The National Audit Office confirmed that were it not for the panicked reaction to the Somerset floods, total funding would have fallen by 10% in real terms during the previous Parliament. In 2011-12 alone, capital funding fell in real terms by £118 million. The following year, the Environment Agency published a list of 387 flood projects that would be delayed or cancelled due to a lack of funding—schemes in Leeds, Croston in Lancashire and Kendal in Cumbria, all of which have since been hit by floods.

Graham Stuart: Does the hon. Lady not agree that my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) is right? It does not matter who is in government, the pressure for flood defence goes away when there has not been flooding for a while and there is competition with schools and hospitals for funding. Water was privatised not because it created a market—that could not be done—but because it got the funding in place to deliver an agreed standard at the most affordable price. Is it not time for a radical change so that instead of fighting the Treasury for funding we put it on to water bills or some other form of levy, as Dieter Helm suggested in the paper he produced this week?

Kerry McCarthy: I will come on to Dieter Helm's recommendations, which I agree make a really important contribution, and to the general issue of upstream management. The hon. Gentleman's constituents would perhaps be concerned by the thought that they would be paying more in their water bills in order to address this situation.

The motion asks the Government whether they would be prepared to meet the £800 million a year of spending that the Environment Agency recommended. I look forward to hearing the Secretary of State's response. On the point about water bills, people already struggle to pay very high insurance premiums. In many cases, they have to make up for losses not covered by insurance. They have to meet excesses of up to £10,000 themselves. They would really struggle if they were hit by rising water bills on top of that.

Many people are angered by the Prime Minister's claims today. A six-year programme of investment is welcome, but we need to know it will address the lasting legacy of the coalition's cuts and that the money will be available given the reliance on external contributions. With the slow progress that has been made on infrastructure projects, we need to know when the schemes will be built. Communities cannot wait another six years for work even to start. We know how slow the progress has been on some of the schemes supposedly already in the pipeline.

We need the Environment Secretary to realise that any benefit from new schemes will be diminished if the Government allow existing schemes to deteriorate. In 2013-14, it was estimated that almost three quarters of flood defence asset systems would not be sufficiently maintained. Maintenance spending fell by 6% in real terms under the coalition.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): As well as the point my hon. Friend is making, we need an Environment Secretary who understands, particularly in urban areas, the value of floodplains, such as those around Denton and Reddish Vale. They were completely submerged over the Christmas period, doing precisely what they are supposed to do: take the excess water away from further up the Tame valley, where flooding could have been much worse. Those areas are set to be reviewed as part of the Greater Manchester green-belt review. They are at risk of being taken out of the green belt for development.

Kerry McCarthy: As ever, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is partly an issue about house building on floodplains, but there is also an issue, which stems from this piecemeal approach to the problem, of people looking after their own patch, preventing their own land from flooding, only to exacerbate the problem further downstream. We need a coherent overall approach that protects everybody.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Does she advocate pressing the Government for a complete review of the guidance to local authorities, because at the moment they can say, "Oh well, the Environment Agency hasn't designated it a floodplain"? Clearly, their thinking is out of date, given the changes in climate conditions in recent years.

Kerry McCarthy: The Secretary of State will say that it is ultimately a decision for local people, but we need to look at the broader picture. For one local authority to say, "It's okay to build on a floodplain", perhaps ignores the impact on communities in the surrounding areas. We need an overarching approach.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): As the hon. Lady is well aware, being from Bristol, the Somerset Rivers Authority, which we have set up, is working well. We have the money we need for flood defences. We have had everything we require. This is a county-wide development receiving money directly from the Government to do the necessary work. I am pretty sure she understands that, but I just wanted to make sure.

Kerry McCarthy: I am well aware of the work being done on the Somerset levels, but it is a slightly different picture there because of its basin geography, which perhaps makes it more isolated from surrounding areas. Elsewhere, as we have seen in the north of England, one community after another can be hit.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The SNP really wanted to support Labour's motion today, but it included unnecessary criticism of the SNP, which is not even accurate: flood spending in Scotland is actually going up. Does the hon. Lady not think it would have been better to have united the Opposition on this issue by getting the SNP to agree with Labour? Is the motion not therefore a little bit unfortunate?

Kerry McCarthy: It is a fact that the funding of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency has been cut, as I understand it. We have seen devastating pictures of flooding in Scotland.

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

Kerry McCarthy: I need to make some progress. As this is a devolved matter, we cannot debate it in the detail we would like today, but it is important that the motion recognises the problems with how flooding is being dealt with and the seriousness with which it is being taken in Scotland. That needs to be addressed, which is why we put it in the motion.

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

Kerry McCarthy: I want to make some progress. As I have said, there are about 27 Back-Bench contributions to get through, plus the winding-up speeches, and we also need to hear from the Environment Secretary, so we really need to make some progress.

DEFRA and the Treasury still refuse to provide any long-term certainty on maintenance. All the Environment Secretary could tell us yesterday was that the maintenance budget this year was £171 million. She is ignoring the EA's advice that flood protection requires £800 million per year, which, with the amount spent on capital, would mean an average annual maintenance expenditure of £417 million.

We cannot continue with DEFRA's panicked, piecemeal approach. The coalition abandoned the cross-party consensus on sustained investment following the Pitt review, and after the 2014 floods, the Prime Minister chose to put all his trust in the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin) and his Cabinet Committee—a Committee that was quietly disbanded once the floodwaters receded and the media attention subsided. The promised annual review of national resilience never materialised. I ask the Environment Secretary again, as I did yesterday: how are we to have confidence in yet another review led by the right hon. Gentleman? I notice he is not here this afternoon, just as he was not here yesterday. Will the Environment Secretary tell us whether he is currently in Yorkshire or Lancashire, visiting flood victims, or perhaps he has more pressing matters to attend to?

There is no sense that the Government truly understand how people have been affected or the challenge they face in rebuilding their lives and businesses. Members across the House spoke eloquently yesterday about how their constituents had suffered and how their fears had not gone away, so why could the Secretary of State yesterday only give vague assurances about considering the Leeds defence scheme? The Prime Minister today dodged the same questions. Why did the Environment Secretary not review earlier whether her predecessors made the wrong decision?

Simon Hoare *rose*—

Kerry McCarthy: I am going to make progress, without taking interventions. I am sure the hon. Gentleman can intervene on somebody else later—perhaps the Secretary of State can answer his question.

Why did the Secretary of State not review earlier whether her predecessors made the wrong decision to scrap the planned scheme in 2011? Why, with Members of all parties urging the Government to apply to the European solidarity fund could the Secretary of State say only that the Government were considering it? She claimed that they had not yet applied because it could

take months for the funds to come through, so why is she dithering and adding to the delay? Why does she not just get on with it?

Why are the Government refusing to implement the Pitt review recommendation on the fire service? The service has lost thousands of firefighters since the 2007 floods. Does the Secretary of State not think that the pressures on the service and the extraordinary professionalism it displays merit including flood response as a statutory duty? Should not our fire and rescue service be fully supported?

Everyone anxiously watching the flood alerts needs to know that everything is being done to protect communities from the floods and to reduce the risk. As the Environment Agency has said, the UK needs a complete rethink of flood defences. This must include better management of river catchments from land use in our upstream areas to estuaries and lower land areas.

The last Labour Government developed some really innovative thinking, agreed to all the recommendations of the Pitt review and had started the process of implementing them. We also passed the Flood and Water Management Act 2010, but the coalition then wasted the next five years. Labour's Acts gave the Government powers to require land managers to protect assets for flood protection, for example, so why have this Government not made better use of those powers? Will the Secretary of State tell us why the Government delayed and weakened requirements in the Act for sustainable drainage in new and existing developments?

Yesterday, the Environment Secretary welcomed Dieter Helm's excellent paper, "Flood defence: time for a radical rethink", which highlights the critical role played by land use in both causing and helping to alleviate flooding, especially the protection of natural capital in upstream areas. Pickering in North Yorkshire has attracted some attention this week, highlighting how efforts to slow the flow of water from the hills prevented the town from flooding this time. I know that that is not the only example. The Environment Secretary has said that she wants the results from Pickering to be used more widely, so how is she going to make that happen?

Dieter Helm also highlighted the thorny issue of how some agricultural policies and associated subsidies pay little or no attention to flood risk dimensions. The examples he gave included greater exposure to rapid run-off from the planting of maize; the burning of heather to improve grouse moors, as it reduces the land's retention of water; and farming practices in the upper reaches of river catchments. Helm sets out how adaptation measures in these areas, such as the planting of trees, could have some of the greatest potential benefits for reducing flood risk.

In response to a question from the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) yesterday, the Environment Secretary talked about getting better value for money for DEFRA funding on the environment and countryside stewardship schemes. Will she clarify those comments today? Does she think that some of these financial incentives are not fully aligned to achieving flood resilience objectives? As the National Farmers Union says, services provided by farmers that protect urban areas downstream are at present "unrewarded and often unplanned".

In urban and developed areas, sustainable drainage systems could make a positive difference, but progress has been slow and the scope for local authorities to make progress on flood risk management strategies seems limited. As the Climate Change Committee reported, many are yet to finalise their strategies, despite that having been a legal requirement for the past five years.

We need a cross-departmental approach to flood prevention and adaptation. Some 1,500 new homes a year are built in areas of high flood risk. We have seen how road networks, hospitals, schools and telecommunications cannot withstand the flooding. Will the Secretary of State ensure that infrastructure planning takes into account the increasing flood risk?

Just as the Government cannot neglect English regions, we need to work across the UK on climate change mitigation and adaptation. The Welsh Government have this week provided £2.3 million for flood-hit communities in Wales, and we know that flooding has caused havoc across Scotland, yet there are fears about significant cuts to the Scottish Environment Protection Agency.

People are not interested in more excuses or empty promises. Put simply, they want to know that this Government are doing everything they can to prevent such flooding from happening to them again. We cannot stop the rain, but we can stop at least some of the devastation it causes. People are living in fear of floods and they need reassurance; I hope that they will hear precisely that from the Environment Secretary.

4.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): I am grateful to the Opposition for securing this important debate today. We have seen extreme weather over the last month, including the highest-ever rainfall in the north-west, record river levels across Lancashire, and Yorkshire rivers such as the Aire a metre higher than they have ever been before. I have every sympathy for all those affected throughout the United Kingdom. To be flooded is a devastating experience at any time, but it is truly terrible at Christmas.

I pay tribute to the emergency services, the military, the Environment Agency, and the other responders and volunteers from across the country who worked around the clock to help. Many of them gave up their Christmases. Through daily Cobra meetings, we ensured that all the necessary resources were deployed early and ahead of the flooding. That meant that the military, the emergency services and the Environment Agency were on the ground and able to provide immediate help. We moved temporary flood barriers to the region, and we moved pumps across the country to support the response effort.

Funding to support the communities, businesses and farmers who were flooded has been provided in record time, within three days of the flooding occurring. Money is now with the local authorities so that they can help people as soon as possible. The Government are determined to do what it takes to put people back on their feet.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right in saying that money has been distributed very quickly, but there is still some concern among local authorities about exactly what it can be spent on. Will she clarify, for their benefit, what the Bellwin funds can and cannot be spent on?

Elizabeth Truss: As my hon. Friend says, there is Bellwin funding which councils can claim, but there is also the money that we have given them to fund resilience measures for homes and businesses. The money is there to cover the costs that councils have incurred, but it is also there to cover immediate support for residents and businesses. I urge affected residents to contact their councils so that they can receive that support.

Repairs to the Foss barrier in York have been completed, and it is fully operational again. It will now be upgraded with new pumps to ensure that it can cope with higher volumes of water. The flood recovery envoy for Yorkshire, who is with me today, will be producing a plan to repair Tadcaster bridge early next week and will be meeting local residents. That is a national priority.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State not accept what is happening with climate change? Once-in-200-year events have now become once-in-100-years events, and it was accepted at the Paris conference that another 2 degrees would probably be added to world temperatures. There is surely no excuse for not investing more and more—even more than we planned to invest following the 2007 Pitt review. Will the Secretary of State urge the Government to invest even more than is proposed under the current agreement?

Elizabeth Truss: In response to weather events that we have not seen before, we are reviewing our national resilience and looking at our climate change models. Climate change is currently baked into our six-year plan, but we clearly need to look at that again in the light of recent events, and we are committed to doing so.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about our plans for flood investment, and said that we needed a long-term strategy. The fact is that this Government have introduced the first ever six-year plan for flood defence spending, unlike the Labour party, which ran a year-to-year budget when it was in office. In the run-up to the general election, the hon. Lady's predecessor refused to match our pledge to increase flood defence spending in real terms. We are spending more, in real terms, than the Labour Government spent between 2005 and 2010, and we are increasing our spending again, in real terms, in this Parliament. The hon. Lady asked about flood maintenance spending. We are spending £171 million on flood maintenance, and, as the Chancellor announced in the autumn statement—before the floods took place—we said that we would protect that too, in real terms. Both those bits of money are protected.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Elizabeth Truss: I want to respond to what the hon. Lady has said, but after that I will give way to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart).

The hon. Lady asked about the £800 million figure from the Environment Agency, which is part of its long-term investment scenario. That analysis is based on total investment, not just central Government spending. It is based on both capital and maintenance spending. If she read the entirety of that report, she would see that it concluded that current spending plans are in line

[Elizabeth Truss]

with the optimum levels of investment over the next 10 years. She needs to read the entire report, not just cherry-pick sections of it.

Pete Wishart: The Secretary of State is right: we have to invest for the future. I am grateful she has acknowledged that climate change plays a significant part in the problems we are experiencing. So why are the Government stopping the investment in renewable technologies? Will they review the catastrophic decision to stop the support for onshore wind, a technology that will help us and that we desperately need in Scotland?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change is doing an excellent job in achieving affordability for consumers at the same time as hitting the carbon budget targets. She also helped to negotiate a fantastic deal in Paris.

Graham Stuart: There has been a rather tedious backwards and forwards about the money. The fundamentals are that this Government are spending more on flood defence. Once we get over that attempt at point scoring, which sadly comes relentlessly from the Labour party, we can move on to the more important question, which is how the money is spent. Dieter Helm suggests that the thinking behind the spending has not been sufficiently aligned with economic reality. Regardless of who is in power, how do we ensure that we spend the limited money we have on the most effective defence for the maximum number of people and corporate interests, rather than perhaps as now spending it on areas where it cannot be justified?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes a good point. That is exactly why, in December, I reappointed Dieter Helm as chair of the Natural Capital Committee. I did so precisely so that he could look at that issue and ensure that we are spending money holistically across catchments. That is working hand in hand with our 25-year environment plan. Shortly, we will announce the framework for that. That will require a lot of work. There are a lot of people involved: the water companies, the Environment Agency, local communities, farmers and landowners. We can get better value for money. That is why we are moving in that direction and carrying out that work. However, there is a famous Chinese proverb: the best time to plant a tree is 25 years ago and the next best time is today. We do need to plan for the long term but it takes time to ensure that we get everything in order.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that chapter 5 of the Paris agreement is about the need to protect forests and to have more trees in the world if we are to tackle some of the problems related to carbon. Does that not also have a relevance for flooding? Does she agree that, as part of the work that she has described, it is important to look at whether we need more tree planting in this country? The House has taken initiatives such as the Westminster wood and the National forest to try to encourage tree planting but perhaps we need more.

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for his point. I want to make all Members aware that we have a tree-planting scheme for schools at the moment. We are collaborating with the Woodland Trust on that and schools can apply; we are close to the deadline, so people should look that up as soon as possible. It is part of our pledge to plant 11 million trees over this Parliament. Of course, however, we can do more. Dieter Helm will certainly look at that as part of the work of the Natural Capital Committee.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Elizabeth Truss: I want to finish the point on the Natural Capital Committee. Members have mentioned the Somerset Rivers Authority. That is a good model for how we get better local engagement, how we get more decisions taken on the ground by people who understand the landscape, and how we look at wider catchment issues. The Floods Minister is developing the Cumbrian flood partnership to do that. We are interested to hear from local areas that want to develop such a scheme.

We need to move to a catchment basis. That is the basis on which our environment plan for 25 years is being developed. We are working on that and we are due to announce the framework towards the middle of the year, with a view to finalising the 25-year plan later on this year. That works closely in conjunction with our 25-year plan for food and farming.

Andrew Gwynne: In the same way as the Secretary of State is looking at a strategic approach to flood defences, could she not make the case for a strategic approach to planning within the floodplains? As I said after the statement and earlier in an intervention, the issue in relation to floodplains often goes beyond one local authority, and planning decisions in one local authority area can affect flooding in several local authorities.

Elizabeth Truss: As I made clear yesterday, it is clear in the national planning policy framework that that needs to be taken into account. Houses should not be built where there is such a flood risk. That is clear in the NPPF.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Elizabeth Truss: I will give way to the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner).

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, who has been generous in giving way. She said that in real terms the Government were spending more. Perhaps she could explain to me and to the House her own Department's "Funding trends" paper of December last year, which shows the total real-terms spending from 2005 right the way through to 2015-16. In the last year of the Labour Government spending was £724 million in total in real terms—that is, in 2015-16 prices. In no single year since then have this Government matched that funding, except in 2014-15, when an extra boost of £140 million emergency funding was given to repair the defences that had been destroyed in the floods. The figures are £608.5 million—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. The hon. Gentleman is down on my list to speak. I suggest he does not make his speech now.

Elizabeth Truss: As I have already said, if we compare the two Parliaments, the Labour Government spent £1.5 billion and the coalition Government spent £1.7 billion. It is clear to me which of those two numbers is higher.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Elizabeth Truss: I have given way on a number of occasions. I now need to make progress to give people an opportunity to speak.

Andrew Percy: Before my right hon. Friend does so, will she give way one more time?

Elizabeth Truss: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Andrew Percy: I am pleased that my right hon. Friend has given way, given that 20% of England drains through my constituency on the four tidal rivers that meet the Humber estuary. She confirmed yesterday that the £80 million funding that we already have for the next six years is safe and secure. She was asked yesterday about the £1.2 billion bid which, contrary to what the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) said, was rejected not by the Government but by the Environment Agency because it would increase flood risk in my constituency. Will my right hon. Friend commit today from the Dispatch Box to working with Humber MPs cross-estuary so that we can get a revised Humber flood plan together to ensure that we get the defences that we desperately need in the most flood-prone area of England?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We do not want schemes that protect part of an area and increase flood risk in other areas. That is the importance of the catchment-wide management system that we are developing. I understand that the Floods Minister is due to meet Humber MPs and I will take a close interest in that matter.

We have set out our programme for the next six years. We are investing £2.3 billion in flood defences. This is a real-terms increase on the £1.7 billion we invested in the last Parliament and an increase on the £1.5 billion spent by Labour. We have made the first-ever commitment to protect maintenance spending as well at £171 million per year, adjusted for real terms. Let us remember why we have the money to invest in these flood defences. Let us remember what happened when Labour left office in 2010. The then Chief Secretary left a note saying, “I’m afraid there is no money.” Labour would not have had the money to invest in flood defences, as we have. At the 2015 general election the Labour party refused to match our pledge of a six-year programme protected in real terms. It is only with a strong economy that we can afford these flood defences. It is only with a long-term plan that we will make our country resilient and give communities the protection they deserve.

4.50 pm

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): As the Member of Parliament for Dumfries and Galloway, a constituency badly affected by storms Desmond and

Frank, I am honoured to be able to give my constituents a voice in this place today, but before I speak about the flooding impact in Scotland and the Scottish Government’s response, the incredible work of the emergency services and the unbelievable resilience of local communities, I wish to deal with the wording of the motion put before the House today.

As a new Member of this place—and new to politics, thankfully—I have been astounded at the procession of ideologically based legislation from the Conservative Government. I have searched long and hard for an evidence base to much of what they suggested, and have searched in vain. I have also been completely dismayed at the amount of misinformed mud-slinging that goes on with these motions devised by the Labour party—in particular the needless pops at the Scottish Government in circumstances where they are actually performing marginally better. We thought Labour would have learned a lesson from the disastrous police debate motion a few weeks ago.

The mud slung at my party and the Scottish Government in this motion is to criticise the 6% cut to the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency budget for next year. I will deal with that head-on in a moment, but first I want to make one thing explicitly clear. It relates to the tone of this debate: my constituents deserve better; your constituents, Madam Deputy Speaker, deserve better; all of our constituents deserve better. They do not care, when they are clearing up the sewage and debris from the front room, about the mud-slinging and political points-scoring in this Chamber. They want to know what we can do to help, they want to know that we care about their plight, and they want to know we are on top of the processes and plans, to ensure we can minimise the risk of severe flooding in the future. But there is a recognition, in light of factors such as global warming, that we may never be able to devise defences and plans capable of completely eliminating flood damage when mother nature decides to sneeze as heavily as she did this month.

John Woodcock: What the hon. Gentleman says about his constituents is clearly heartfelt, but they are surely concerned—I speak for my mother, who is one of them—about the 6% cut that the Scottish Government are imposing on flood defences. Is he really going to defend that? [*Interruption.*] Is he going to defend the cut to SEPA, or is he going to—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry, but I do not seem to be able to continue as SNP Members are chuntering so much. I am trying to speak over them, but they are so noisy that I cannot seem to get a word in edgeways. [*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Although I am enjoying the intervention, a lot of Members wish to speak. I would be very grateful if we could keep interventions as brief as possible, otherwise we will not get everybody in to speak.

John Woodcock: Why is the hon. Gentleman defending the 6% cut to SEPA?

Richard Arkless: If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I will, as I just intimated—if he had opened his ears, he may have heard—deal with that point head-on

[Richard Arkless]

in a few moments. In relation to his mother, if she is a constituent of mine, please offer her our services to help her in any way we possibly can.

John Woodcock: What did the hon. Gentleman say about my mother?

Richard Arkless: I was politely offering the hon. Gentleman my office's assistance if his mother has been affected by the floods, and I do so with the utmost sincerity.

The wording of the motion in relation to Scotland is as follows: it states that the House

"notes with concern the recent decision...to impose a six per cent cut on funding to the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency", yet in the last three calendar years culminating in this year there has actually been a cash increase in SEPA funding from £36.4 million in 2012-13 to £39 million in 2015-16. The 6% cut pertains to next year—to the future—and has not affected in any way Scotland's ability to deal with the travesty of the last week or two. May I remind all colleagues that all budgets across the UK have had to stomach a cut at some level?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): I am interested to hear that the cut is for next year. Is that because the hon. Gentleman believes that there is less risk of a flood next year?

Richard Arkless: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, our budget is set by Westminster, not by us. If he bears with me, perhaps I will enlighten him a little bit more.

I am sure that all colleagues will understand that all Departments have had to take a cut of some description since the current UK Government have had a say. The Scottish Government have attempted to protect the SEPA budget in the fairest way possible, while still endeavouring to offer immediate assistance and permanent solutions to all those who have been affected by flooding.

A further point that I should make clear is that SEPA is not responsible for flood prevention in Scotland, which is the responsibility of local authorities with the support of the Scottish Government. We believe in Scotland that local authorities are best placed to devise flood protection, and the Scottish Government will support them in any way they possibly can. Indeed, the Scottish Environment Minister told me recently that our Government have never refused funding for a flood defence on the basis of cost. Other elements of flood spending, such as on the Scottish flood forecasting service, are protected in their entirety until 2020 and will not be subject to any cuts. Good flood defence is not only about how much is spent but about how we choose to spend it.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): As a victim of the floods in 2013 in west Kent, I am extremely aware of the money that has been spent on flood defences by the British Government and around the whole UK. I am astonished to hear the hon. Gentleman claim, somewhat bizarrely, that nothing has been refused to anywhere in Scotland on the grounds of funding. Is

there an enormous sack of cash into which the Scottish people can dip for money when the British people in the rest of these islands are struggling to pay for what they need?

Richard Arkless: Again, had I been given some forbearance and patience, an answer to that question might have come up soon. I beg the hon. Gentleman to stay patient.

The cuts to SEPA's budget planned for next year have to be seen in their full and proper context. The Scottish Government's top priority is the reduction of flooding across risk areas, which was why the Scottish Parliament passed the Flood Risk Management Act 2009. One of its main requirements was the production of a flood risk management strategy for the whole of Scotland, and we now have 14 local strategies. They are all about forward planning, with the end aim of minimising flood damage. As a result of the Act, we now have 42 proposed flood defence protection schemes to cover the period 2016 to 2021. They will cost an estimated £235 million, which the Scottish Government have agreed to finance.

Under the Act, flood prevention schemes can proceed to approval without the rubber stamp of Scottish Ministers, giving local authorities full responsibility and authority to implement them under a streamlined process. We believe that those decisions should be taken locally, not least because a flood defence scheme requires significant construction in and around riverbanks, which are often the focal point of a community. Not only do engineering solutions have to be found, but buy-in from local communities is essential. Communities care about their riverbanks, and plans must take account of that. In Dumfries, there are many objections to the local council's plan for an earth bund, which would remove car parking and views at the river. The council is now under severe pressure to ensure that the voices of local people are heard in the debate.

As part of our flood preparation in Scotland, the Scottish flood forecasting service has done an excellent job of providing reliable information to relevant authorities in good time. In actioning the Bellwin scheme, the Deputy First Minister has committed the Scottish Government to covering any additional local authority costs. As the House will understand, the scheme sets a threshold beyond which the Scottish Government guarantee to cover the costs of emergencies. Following Storm Desmond in December, the Scottish Government provided £3.94 million to the most affected local authority areas, including in my constituency, to help them support flood-hit households and businesses. That funding will go to affected local authorities as a specific grant in this financial year, and they will be able to provide each flood-affected household or business with a grant of up to £1,500, which is under review. That grant is available to reimburse people for the cost of not receiving the full benefit of services that they pay for through council tax or rates while they are absent from their home or their business cannot trade. It can also be used to protect homes and businesses against future floods by installing new flood barriers or by carrying out flood-resilient repairs.

The Scottish Government have recently legislated to give councils the power to reduce and remit bills, which can be used to target support to businesses in areas affected by flooding. The Deputy First Minister,

John Swinney, announced in the Scottish Parliament yesterday that Scottish councils have a new power to relieve households devastated in the flooding from council tax and small business rates. They are considering what further help they can give.

A few days before Christmas, Dumfries and Galloway held its breath as weather experts indicated that the region would be the next one hit by severe flooding as a result of Storm Frank. We had witnessed the devastation caused by Storm Desmond to our neighbours and friends in Cumbria and the borders. In the first wave of flooding, Dumfries was flooded but the rest of Dumfries and Galloway managed to escape largely unscathed. We watched as Hawick, Appleby, Penrith, Carlisle, Keswick and Cockermouth, to name but a few, battled against the flow of water that was sadly insurmountable.

The predictions for Storm Frank made for worse reading and, as it approached, we prepared. SEPA and the Met Office co-ordinated information about expected rainfall in risk areas and issued details of areas and addresses to be evacuated.

Pete Wishart: Once Storm Frank had been to Dumfries and Galloway, it came further north-eastwards to Perthshire. In my constituency, I have the biggest and most extensive river system in the whole UK—the biggest flow of water in any community of the UK flows through the heart of Perth. I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend would like to pay tribute to the local authority staff and the emergency services who ensured that cities such as mine were adequately protected and that the flood defences held up. They did a remarkable job and I am sure my hon. Friend would like to congratulate them too.

Richard Arkless: Seeing the work and dedication of the emergency services was probably one of the most humbling experiences of my entire life. I will touch on that before I close my remarks.

The local authorities and emergency services swung into action. Properties were knocked and evacuated, with the focus on moving the elderly and the vulnerable. Warnings of what was to come were everywhere. In particular, social media played an enormously valuable part. Posts and tweets from SEPA, the local authority, the police, the emergency services and elected Members meant that people were highly informed. In the time I spent visiting those affected, I did not hear one complaint about the warning system or the plans put in place. That co-ordinated approach meant we could all prepare as best we could.

I was incredibly impressed by the actions of all engaged in that co-ordinated response. Particular thanks go to Dumfries and Galloway Council, SEPA and all the emergency services, as well as to volunteers both on the ground and stationed at the respite centres that were set up. Without them, that co-ordinated effort and warning system, things would have been immeasurably worse.

On 30 December, we awoke to the news of the devastation. I was very concerned to hear that the high street in Newton Stewart was under more than a foot of water and that cars were submerged in car parks on the banks of the River Cree. High tide was expected at 2 pm, so I put my wellies on and drove to see it for myself. I can assure Members that there a few more surreal moments than walking up a deserted main street

of a small town they know so well and seeing sandbags piled at shop entrances, wading through over a foot of water. It was bizarre.

I met a chap called Paul Da Prato from Cunningham's in Newton Stewart. He was fighting back tears as he showed me the flooding in his properties. It was very moving. All that we could do was wait for the water to recede so the damage could be assessed. Thankfully, nobody was hurt and nobody was left stranded.

The next day, as the water receded and shop owners began to clear their premises, I was delighted that First Minister Nicola Sturgeon joined me in Newton Stewart. She spent almost three hours going from shop to shop to offer her support. I did likewise, to offer the support of my office in any way we could provide it.

Although Newton Stewart—for once, ironically—grabbed the headlines, many more towns and villages in Dumfries and Galloway were affected by the flooding.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The third party spokesman—I highlight that the Scottish National party is the third party—has now been speaking for as long as the Minister chose to speak. What guidance was given to the third party on the length of speech it should give in a limited-time debate on an Opposition day?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I believe that the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) was coming to the conclusion of his speech anyway but, as the third party, no time limit is imposed, so he is perfectly at liberty to speak for as long as he wants. Many interventions were accepted, which lengthens speeches. I will allow him to finish his speech.

Richard Arkless: In a sense, I agree with the point made by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). This is a very energised debate—[*Interruption.*] And I am coming to the end of my speech, so the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) should not have to wait too much longer.

What we have in Dumfries and Galloway—I imagine that this is replicated UK-wide—is the resilience of our people. I was struck that café owners trawled the streets, trying to give people food—but no one was hungry. I was amazed that residents affected were in competition with each other to say, “Och wur fine, Richard,” when really they were not. We should never take that resilience for granted and it should never diminish our responsibility to deal with what I think is a new problem for a new generation. The weather is not going to get any better, so we must up the ante to ensure that our communities are protected in the future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I want to get everyone in, because I understand that we all have major problems and that flooding is a big issue. I am going to impose a four-minute limit, but I suggest that we try not to intervene so that everybody gets equal time.

5.5 pm

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): The flooding between Christmas and new year could not have come at a worse time for many residents and businesses, as

[Nigel Adams]

people were relaxing away from the pressures of work and several householders and business owners used the break to get away, leaving their properties unattended. They were therefore unable to defend their homes and possessions from the rainfall.

We are no strangers to flooding in Selby district. We had serious floods in 1947, 1981 and 2000 and on plenty of occasions between and since. On this occasion, I am relieved that the flood defences protected the town of Selby where, to my knowledge, not a single property was flooded. The historical village of Cawood was also spared, as its floodwalls kept the River Ouse at bay. Flood defences in Selby were not overtopped and I can only say that the way in which all the agencies responded was superb, ensuring that evacuation measures were in place should the worst happen. Residents who potentially would have to be evacuated were notified and rest centres were prepared. It is clear that plenty has been learned from previous flooding incidents.

Unfortunately, the town of Tadcaster and the villages of Ulleskelf, Kirkby Wharfe, Church Fenton, Newton Kyme, Acaster Selby and Bolton Percy were not so fortunate. In Tadcaster, 16 residential properties, 41 commercial premises and three public buildings, including the church, succumbed to flooding. Ulleskelf, where I used to live, saw 16 properties flooded, largely in the west end of the village. I thank all the volunteers there, led by Councillor Carl Clayton, whose efforts, early action and diligence without doubt prevented further homes from being flooded.

Andrew Percy: I am sorry to intervene, but I think that this is important. I congratulate my hon. Friend for what he did for his constituents. I got sick of seeing him on “Look North”—he did such a good job. Parish councils are important. In my village, when the warning came it was the volunteer emergency plan team in the village that swung into action. Do we not need to learn from that so that in future flooding incidents we encourage every village and parish to have an emergency plan in place? They can do much more than the county councillors can.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I understand that the hon. Gentleman wants to get on the record, but if he wants to make a speech he should put his name in—*[Interruption.]* No, do not argue. I want to treat everybody fairly and equally and that was quite a lengthy intervention.

Nigel Adams: I totally agree with my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy). What some of the flood wardens have done is exemplary. Many are parish councillors and we should take our hat off to them.

Church Fenton had three homes underwater adjacent to the former RAF base, and I thank the Prime Minister for joining me in visiting families affected in the village, without media coverage and the accompanying journalists. I know that that approach meant a lot to families in Church Fenton. Nearby Kirkby Wharfe saw a dozen homes affected, ironically just before a flood defence solution was about to be implemented. Even if it had been in place, however, homes would still have suffered given the sheer levels of flood water.

The town of Tadcaster, famous for its brewing heritage, its viaduct and its 300-year-old bridge has now attracted worldwide media attention. I want to take a moment to comment on the response to the flooding in Tadcaster.

I, along with more than 100 residents, attended a public meeting the day after Boxing day at which volunteers signed up to help the relief effort. Alongside the flood group, residents were fortunate to have the assistance of Team Rubicon and Serve On, a team of volunteers assisting the people of Tadcaster and the surrounding villages following the devastating impact of the flooding. Following the partial collapse of the bridge, Team Rubicon volunteers who had travelled from all over the UK assisted the Army with the evacuation of homes until the risk of gas leaks had been lifted. I should like to single out Dougie Clark, Team Rubicon’s incident commander, and his colleague David Wiseman for the leadership they provided during the response and the recovery stages. Their volunteers, working in conjunction with the town’s flood group under Nicola Eades and the town council staff, did an incredible job and their support will not be forgotten.

It is fair to say that the response to the flooding was almost exemplary. It involved the emergency services, local councils, environment agencies, charities, utilities—and yes, Government Ministers—but above all, the residents and the business community of Tadcaster and those from the wider area who came to the town’s aid. I want to mention a recent review by the North Yorkshire fire authority on the changes to fire services in Tadcaster. Perhaps this crisis will provide an opportunity for the fire authority to revisit its decision to downgrade fire services there.

As the local MP, I have seen with my own eyes acts of kindness and selflessness since the flooding that will stay with me for a long time. In fact, all the affected communities have shown incredible resilience and a community spirit that demonstrates the best of Yorkshire and the best of British. I want to take this opportunity to welcome a longer-term approach to flood defence spending and the national flood resilience review. Parts of my constituency, including Tadcaster, have a long and potentially arduous road ahead as they recover from Storm Eva, and it is crucial that we stand by their people and their businesses, and by the town, district and county councils. The Government have made a good start with their response, but this problem requires not only a short-term response but medium and long-term solutions—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I call Rachel Reeves.

5.11 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): For many people in my constituency, Christmas was ruined by the floods that devastated homes and businesses there. On Boxing day night, the River Aire showed its tremendous force and burst its banks following days of heavy rain. Small businesses were forced to close, as was the Leeds Industrial Museum at Armley, and the Rodley Nature Reserve was badly damaged. Businesses of all sizes lost machinery, premises and stock, and workers have been laid off.

I have been deeply moved by the solidarity of local people, public service workers, civic leaders and community volunteers as they have pulled together to help those in the most urgent need and to begin the work of clearing

up the damage. I want to pay particular tribute to Leeds City Council leader, Judith Blake, and to the council staff who came out during their holidays to collect waste, clean the streets and help those who were most affected. I also want to pay particular tribute to the work of Councillor Lucinda Yeadon in Kirkstall, as well as to John Liversedge and Phil Marken of Open Source Arts. There were nearly 1,000 volunteers in Kirkstall alone over the past 10 days. Their countless acts of everyday heroism can never be individually itemised, but they made a huge difference that will be felt for years and decades to come. It is often in times of adversity that we see communities at their strongest, and I have never been so proud to be the Member of Parliament for Leeds West.

Today, I want to focus on two specific issues for the longer term: flood insurance and flood defences. Flood insurance is essential for businesses. Small businesses struggling as a result of costs and loss of revenue as they deal with the immediate aftermath of floods should not then be hit by huge unaffordable premiums in the months that follow. Flood Re will come into force in April this year and it is hugely welcome, but it will not help small businesses. It will help only people in residential properties. We must look at this again, and I urge the Government to do so. We must help those affected to get affordable insurance, and the Government should take that action.

It is also important that adequate funds are made available for resilience repair, including flood doors, air-brick seals, waterproof coatings and other measures that can help businesses to deal with future floods. Such funding must be on top of the £50 million already allocated, which should be used for immediate support such as reductions in council tax and business rates for those affected.

The second issue I want to raise is that of flood defences. The 2012 climate change risk assessment identified flooding as the top risk to the UK from climate change. The Government must wake up to the fact that extreme weather events are now an increasing feature of British weather and must reassess the cuts to flood defences.

The Prime Minister said at today's Prime Minister's questions that no flood defence scheme had been cancelled since he became Prime Minister. I ask the Secretary of State to correct the record, as in 2011 phases 2 and 3 of the Leeds flood defence scheme were cancelled. Phase 2, which would have covered the stretch of the Aire to the west of the city, including Kirkstall, to provide a one-in-75-year standard of protection was cancelled. Phase 3, which would have extended from Kirkstall to Newlay bridge in Horsforth, providing a one-in-200-year standard of protection, was also cancelled. More than £100-worth of flood defence schemes in Leeds alone have no funding, and only a full flood defence scheme for Leeds would protect the businesses in Kirkstall that were hit so badly on Boxing day. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has now agreed to meet me and other Leeds MPs, but I ask her and the Government to ensure that that money is available so that the tragedy we saw on Boxing day can never be allowed to occur in my city of Leeds again.

5.15 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I do not think any of us will forget Christmas 2015 in a hurry. The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) talked

about the selfless humanity she witnessed in her constituency, and each and every one of us saw the same thing in areas where flooding took place. I have never seen anything like it in the 23 years I have been a Member of Parliament.

A four-minute limit will not allow us to name all the people we would love to mention and thank publicly, so we will have to do it in another way. Let me just mention Gillian Darbyshire of the Whalley Lions and her entire team, who have given up 10 days of their Christmas holidays to man the emergency centre in Whalley. They were absolutely superb. I also wish to mention Marshal Scott, the chief executive of Ribble Valley Borough Council, who also gave up 10 days, coming into the emergency centre every day and working incredibly long hours with an amazing team. The day after Boxing day, the bin men came out to remove the sofas and furniture from the streets, which looked like a warzone at times. I would love to thank them and the emergency services, but, as I say, I shall thank others in a different way.

Four lads who were coming up the M6 from Watford heard about the floods, pulled off at the Clitheroe junction, went into Whalley, helped clear a lady's house of all the debris, and then got back into the car and drove on to Scotland to spend the rest of their Christmas there—it was absolutely amazing. The Whalley Lions have helped to bring in cookers, washing machines, fridges and microwaves; they have handled more than £1 million-worth of goods. More than 1,000 volunteers have been involved. I know that you have spent some of your Christmas dealing with the floods in Chorley, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am sure you will want to thank the people who have given so much support.

I, too, have some big asks to make of the Government in the limited time I have left. Clearly, we do need a review of the flood defences, and Sir James Bevan has said that that will happen. We do need a review of the drainage, gully and culvert cleaning around our constituencies to make sure that it is done properly. In pubs there is signage saying when the toilets were last cleaned, so what about having public provision for information as to when the gullies were last cleaned and when they are next going to be cleaned? That would allow the people to hold local authorities to account if they did not do this work.

Building on floodplains is absolutely bonkers. There was a famous scene on Facebook of one of the fields in my constituency, where permission had been given for 39 houses to be built—it was well underwater. We have to look for the sponges that exist throughout our constituencies so that they can take the flood waters. The extra building that is going on is insane and we need to examine that, as well as the use of woodland, which has been mentioned. The new insurance company, Flood Re, is great, but it will not cover houses built post-2009, and lots of houses have been built since then. We have to examine that, and I think the Prime Minister gave an indication that the Government are going to look at what is happening in respect of businesses, too. We have to look at the unadopted roads issue and that of dredging. For goodness' sake, it cannot be beyond their wit to come to a conclusion as to whether dredging does or does not work, and, if it does work, to do it.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It does not work.

Mr Evans: I hear what my hon. Friend says, but we are spending £20 million over the next two years, and if dredging does clear away some of the grit and debris and means that the water can flow through, let us do it. There is lots more that I will ask the Minister to examine in the period I have got left, but in the meantime I just wish to say to everybody who has shown selfless humanity over the past 10 days, thank you so much.

5.19 pm

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): I will be as brief as I can to allow other Members into the debate. The impact of the floods on Cumbria cannot be overstated: homes and businesses face significant damage; schools have been closed; and roads have disintegrated, as the Minister knows only too well. The estimated cost of the damage to Cumbria has been put at £600 million, but the truth is that it is likely to be higher. The A591 from Grasmere to Keswick has become completely impassable. Parts of the carriageway have crumbled under the force of the flooding. It is a key route for many people, including those travelling to schools. The damage caused to this road has put a 35-mile additional journey on people, which is having a profound impact in terms of time, cost and everyday life.

The support announced so far by the Government is welcome, but until it translates into a new road surface it is simply not enough. The highways authority, Cumbria County Council and my constituents need the Government to be more proactive in repairing key roads and infrastructure. I asked the Secretary of State for Transport to put a timeline on the remedial work required for the A591, and his response was that it was not a matter for Government. When local government is being cut to the bone, such shrugging of the shoulders simply will not wash. It is time to show some real leadership. As I said in the Chamber yesterday, the road needs to be open before Easter, as that is a critical time for the tourist economy, particularly for Keswick and the surrounding areas.

Another result of the floods was the profound impact on healthcare services in the county. A flooding emergency should never become a health emergency, with people unable to access the services on which they rely. Cobra should not be convened every time there is significant rainfall.

The West Cumberland hospital in Whitehaven was not directly affected by flood waters, but the impact of the flooding on the Cumberland infirmary in Carlisle had profound effects on the services available to my constituents. Patients were not able to travel from the West Cumberland to Carlisle; doctors and nurses were not able to get to work; and the hospital in Carlisle was running on back-up generators, without staff, bedsheets and more. That proved, once and for all, the sheer folly of transferring services from the West Cumberland hospital to the Cumberland infirmary in Carlisle. Heavy rain in the Lake District should not mean that patients cannot access health services, and it should not lead international news bulletins.

In the wake of the flooding at the beginning of December, I called on the Government to create a dedicated Cumbrian infrastructure and resilience commission so that we could learn from the floods and put in place practical measures to improve defences,

resilience and local infrastructure and the Government's response to any future flooding, of which there will be more. I appreciate that since I made that call, many more communities across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland have been affected by flooding, but I would be grateful to the Minister if he undertook to write to me on this matter, because only by properly understanding, on a practical level, how and why the flooding occurred can we hope to defend ourselves better in the future.

The key issue at the heart of this debate is resources—the resources we need for flood defences, for improving community resilience and for rebuilding. It is unfathomable, therefore, that the Government are reluctant to apply for funding from the EU solidarity fund to help flood-stricken communities. International partners have contributed to an EU-wide fund to help communities hit by severe weather. The Government should commit to seeking these valuable resources from the EU fund, which was specifically set up to help flooded communities. The Government's objective should be to help communities recover and to provide the resources they need as quickly as possible, and not to sacrifice those communities in order to save the Prime Minister's face or assist with the internal management of the Conservative party.

Any support must reach those who need it quickly. It is all well and good announcing support, but until repairs actually start it is not much use. I hope the Minister will explain how the Government intend to get support to those who badly need it as soon as possible. My constituents have now experienced three “once in a lifetime” flooding events in the past 10 years. It will happen again, so complacency is not an option.

In Keswick and the surrounding areas, we need to look at dredging, fell-water management, bridge relocations, support for businesses, the Thirlmere reservoir and so much more. Nationally, we need comprehensively to change our approach towards flood defences, water management and community resilience.

5.24 pm

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): My constituency is probably one of the highest constituencies in the city of Leeds, and on two sides of the valley we would probably not expect to see too much flooding. That said, on Boxing day I foolishly agreed to do the Chevin chase, which is a 7-mile run up the Chevin and along footpaths that starts near my home. We had had constant rainfall over the preceding weeks, but as we got on to Carlton Lane I was surprised to see the levels of water. Usually there is a little trickle down Carlton Lane, but this time the full width of the road was running like a river, and on top of the Chevin it was even worse. I have never seen anything like it. I knew at that point that it was going to be bad further downstream and particularly towards the city centre.

We have had localised flooding in my area. At Guiseley retail park some shops were affected. In Horsforth, lanes were closed and the River Aire burst its banks, as it did at Rodley. Even though the localised flooding was bad, it was much worse further downriver in the constituency of the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). As we know, the River Aire was at 3.3 metres. The retail parks were affected and flooded, as were the services that my constituents use along the busy A65, and all the trains going into Leeds and Bradford were cancelled.

There has been much talk recently of the Leeds flood defence scheme, and it is clear that we must get this right and look at it properly. I was pleased to join my fellow MPs from the city, cross-party, in asking for a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, and I was grateful yesterday to hear her commitment that we will have defences and that she will meet us. However, we must make sure that we get it right. We cannot afford for a major economic driver in Yorkshire to be at risk and for these poor people to go through such things again.

It is also important to ensure that we get it right further downstream. In communities further down the line, such as Elmet and Rothwell and Brigg and Goole, we need to make sure that there are no unintended consequences. Upstream, what we do in areas like mine will have a knock-on effect. I have raised on many occasions my concern about plans to build on the green belt. The council is planning to build more than 70,000 homes, which means that we need to find the sites for them. In my constituency, we have built on the brownfield sites and now we have only the green belt to look at, and some of those sites are flooding now. The Ings Lane site, where 300 houses are proposed to be built, looked like a lake. In the Wills Gill gate area, where hundreds of houses are proposed, it was exactly the same picture. In Horsford, over 700 houses are being built on the field between the A65 and the River Aire. If we are going to build there, we need to be sure that we know where that water is going to go.

As Jennifer Kirkby, the chair of the neighbourhood forum said, the council needs to think about how the whole city works, not build on floodplains, and we need to listen to the experience of local people. Another constituent said to me that we need to be a lot smarter about the concept of mitigation of run-on from these developments, because it is not just about rates of run-off but volume. Otherwise people further down the river will be severely affected. I hope that we will learn from the experiences that we have suffered in Leeds, across Yorkshire, and across the country.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to all the people at Leeds City Council, to the volunteers, to the businesses, and indeed to Ministers, who took the time to contact us all, and to Leeds Community Foundation for setting up an appeal that I hope people will support to help people in Leeds.

5.28 pm

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew). I am very grateful that this debate is taking place, not least because my constituency suffered heavily from the floods, which inflicted much pain on many people throughout Rochdale, Littleborough and Milnrow.

As alarming as the floods have been, I have never been more proud to represent Rochdale after I witnessed the response to them. The people of Rochdale have done an absolutely incredible job in very difficult circumstances. I pay tribute to the outstanding compassion and commitment of volunteers and council staff. To name but a few examples, St Barnabas church at Shore did an excellent job as a hub where people could come together; the landlord at The Wheatsheaf pub in Littleborough was absolutely amazing; and I even pay tribute to the Conservative club in Littleborough, which acted as a great hub within the village to which many

people came on many occasions. The Asian Muslim community and the mosques, in particular, right across Rochdale, did a sterling job in helping and assisting people. We even had a team of Syrian refugees out there filling sandbags to help the community, particularly in Littleborough.

I want to make a few brief points. The £50 million that the Chancellor made available is very welcome, but there are questions about how quickly it was given to local authorities. Richard Farnell, the leader of Rochdale Borough Council, did a sterling job in directing the local authority to help people, but he raised concerns that the Treasury might have delayed the Department for Communities and Local Government getting the money out there. I want the Minister to consider that. There are also questions about what that money can be used for. Can it be used for any purpose or only for certain purposes? Some clarity would be welcome.

Rochdale Borough Council did an excellent job in making £500 payments available to local residents and in cancelling council tax and business rates for businesses where appropriate, but I am still concerned about support for business. The idea of grants of £5,000 is fine for very small businesses, but the costs incurred by larger employers—such as Better Dreams Ltd in my constituency, which employs 80 people—run not into the thousands, but into the hundreds of thousands, and they are unable to get insurance. The Government and local authorities need to think again about how we help larger employers when they are adversely affected.

I want the Minister to consider one final point that has been raised with me: what support is available for councils to put right the damage to infrastructure, including roads, bridges and parks?

5.31 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): First, may I reiterate my thanks to not only the emergency services, but the families, friends, neighbours and communities who did so much during the floods to help the people of my constituency who were directly and, indeed, indirectly affected? I was also very pleased that the Prime Minister came to Carlisle immediately after the initial floods to see the issues for himself. That certainly set the tone within Government, and I fully recognise that Ministers have been up to Cumbria on a regular basis and have been very supportive, helpful and proactive in their response. I want to give particular mention to the floods Minister, my parliamentary neighbour the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), who has been extremely busy both as a Minister and in his own constituency.

I can only speak from my own experience of what the Government have done. I wrote to the Prime Minister immediately after the event, asking for support for the Cumbria Community Foundation. The Chancellor announced that the Government would give matched funding of £1 million, which has subsequently been increased to £2 million. I am very pleased that the foundation has also managed to raise £2 million itself, so we will have at least £4 million to help many families and individuals who have experienced great difficulties.

The Government have also introduced the Bellwin scheme, which is at 100%, not 85%, and announced £50 million to improve properties for future flood resilience

[John Stevenson]

and prevention; £5 million to support affected businesses; £40 million for transport infrastructure; and, of course, rate relief for both residential and business properties.

My office is already actively dealing with a number of queries from constituents as a result of the floods, which have had three principal effects on Carlisle. First, more than 2,000 residential properties have been affected—many, sadly, for the second time—but people have proved remarkably resilient and determined, and they are committed to getting back into their homes as quickly as possible. Secondly, it is vital that businesses recover as quickly as they can and get back up and trading, and that economic confidence returns to our city as soon as possible. Thirdly, education is often the forgotten sector, but three secondary schools and 3,000 pupils were affected, with one of those schools facing long-term issues. I am therefore very pleased that the Secretary of State for Education will visit, and I am grateful for her Department's proactive support in responding to my calls for assistance.

A more long-term approach needs to be taken to the issue of flooding. The impact of flooding policy will affect many future Parliaments and Governments of different political colours. We should therefore consider long-term solutions, policies and initiatives to help our communities. The Government have already started that work with a six-year budget, and I welcome the announcement of a new Cumbrian floods partnership, which will consider all possible improvements to flood defences and flood prevention in Cumbria. Clearly, we need to look at all aspects—flood defences, prevention and resilience—and accept that there is no one solution for the whole country. Each area needs to be considered on an individual basis.

As for today's motion, I have to say that I am disappointed with the Opposition's approach. It would have been far better had they been more constructive and recognised that no policy or flood scheme is perfect and that there is a limit to the amount of resource that can be spent. Cumbria is a prime example of that. Under the last Labour Government, £50 million was spent on flood defences. Some of the defences worked and some did not. Was that the fault of the Labour Government? Let us have a constructive debate about the future of floods policy and do the right thing for our constituents.

5.34 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): On Boxing day, my constituency of Halifax and the neighbouring Calder Valley constituency were devastated by Storm Eva. I echo the sentiments that we have heard expressed around the Chamber and thank the council officers, emergency services and armies of volunteers who committed their time and effort over the Christmas period and selflessly came to help with the clean-up. Most of the volunteers were local, but some came from much further afield to play their part. Their staggering generosity and compassion allowed us to make a great deal of progress in the hours and days immediately after the floods. We are eternally grateful to them.

Early on in the crisis, Calderdale Council established community hubs in the affected areas from which the efforts could be co-ordinated. Christ church in Sowerby

Bridge, which is run by Angela, the reverend canon, and her wardens, served the community with distinction. My staff gave up part of their Christmas break to help me open a temporary parliamentary office out of Christ church to liaise with the relevant agencies and offer support and advice to victims where we could. I thank them for their time.

The hubs served as a point where donations could be dropped off. Had it not been for the efforts of the volunteers at Christ church in organising and distributing the donations, the church would literally have been overwhelmed with the cleaning products, food, toiletries and clothes donated by individuals and businesses to assist the flood victims. Because there was such a huge response to the call for donations of clothes, the local authority has opened a pop-up charity shop in Halifax town centre, where the excess clothes donations are being sold. The money raised is going to the community foundation fund for the flood victims, which the Government have agreed to match.

I turn to the impact on residential properties. There are a number of old mills and factories along the River Calder, which are a reminder of our days as a textile powerhouse. Many of those buildings have been converted into apartments. I met residents who lived in some of the ground-floor apartments, where every room was flooded. They lost everything from the white goods in their kitchen to the clothes in their wardrobe. I spoke to one resident who had been informed only days before the flood that his insurance would not be renewed because of his proximity to the river. He had been unable to resolve the situation before the floods wiped him out on Boxing day.

I visited businesses, some of which are big employers in my constituency, that had never been flooded before. The cost and devastation that have been caused by being flooded just once mean that they are thinking long and hard about whether they want to rebuild in the same premises. The shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs joined me on a visit to Pulman Steel, which was visited twice by the Chancellor in the run-up to the 2010 and 2015 general elections. It is faced with having to refit its factory completely and is battling hard to be up and trading again at full strength as soon as possible.

Today, I have written to the Chancellor, inviting him to make a return visit to Pulman Steel. From his previous visits, he will know that it is a supplier to a number of key northern powerhouse infrastructure projects, so it is of strategic importance to the north and beyond that it operates at full strength as quickly as possible. I ask for his support in getting it there. It is essential for the local economy that we remain an attractive place for businesses to operate. We need to ensure that they have the specialist support they require to get back on their feet as soon as possible.

With regard to the damage to infrastructure in our area, I thank the Secretary of State for her comments yesterday about Elland bridge and its national significance. I am keen not to reduce this debate to one exclusively about funding because a comprehensive strategy to combat the effects of floods needs to be about changing attitudes towards the environment and climate change, as much as anything else. Having said that, I am mindful that a change in attitudes alone will not rebuild our damaged bridge or repair our highways in the short term.

5.38 pm

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Let us be clear that the floods that hit Yorkshire on Boxing day have brought untold misery and suffering to a record number of people, not to mention the devastation to homes, businesses, communities and, of course, infrastructure. In the Calder valley, almost 2,100 homes have been flooded, 1,500 businesses have been flooded, four schools have been closed, three bridges have been lost and there has been record damage to roads and infrastructure. An initial estimate of the cost to the borough of Calderdale is about £16 million.

For all the misery and suffering, the community spirit has been absolutely amazing: neighbours helping neighbours, communities from all over the country coming to the Calder valley in their hundreds to try to make the pain and suffering a little more palatable. A special mention has to go to the Calder Valley flood support group, the Hebden Bridge community association, the Todmorden town hall group, the Mytholmroyd community group and the Community Foundation for Calderdale. In conjunction with Calderdale Borough Council, which did a sterling job, they organised volunteers, clean-ups, food, drink, household clear-outs, plumbers, gas men, cellar pumping, roofers and just about any task one could imagine. There are too many individual stars to mention, but they know who they are. Let us not forget the flood wardens. One in particular I will mention is Keith Crabtree. He worked solidly for 48 hours, went home and had three hours' sleep, and then came back straight to it. The model we have in the Calder valley—we have been flooded before—is one that can be used as a good beacon model around the country.

I also have to mention the Secretary of State and her whole team. Their response has been rapid and absolutely spot on. There were visits by the Secretary of State and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. They were followed by a visit by the Floods Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), who I must praise. He must have seen an incredible number of communities—I think nearly 60—over the course of the whole Christmas period. Well done that man.

On the back of those visits and the constant phone calls, we got an emergency relief package of £12 million for Calderdale. The Chancellor, as has been said, is matching up to £2 million in donations and providing an immediate £40 million for flood defence repairs in Yorkshire. As the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) mentioned, Elland bridge has been classified as a national priority by the Secretary of State. That is a great package to start, delivered in record time, which will help to make the pain and suffering a little more palatable going forward. However, it must not stop there. In the Calder valley we saw the completion in 2015 of the £30 million three-phase flood defences in Todmorden, but we need a much quicker turnaround from the Environment Agency. Three-and-a-half years after the last floods, we are still waiting for a flood defence model for both Hebden Bridge and Mytholmroyd. It says it will have a £15 million shortfall in funding, even with the partnership model.

I would like to ask four very quick questions. The Secretary of State has said several times that the schemes for Mytholmroyd and Hebden Bridge are in the pipeline, but there is the £15 million shortfall. Will she tell us

where the money will come from? The pledge to rebuild Elland bridge is a national priority. May we have an assurance that this will be fully funded? Of the £40 million pledged for flood defences and repairs, we know that £10 million is going to the River Foss in York. How do other areas tap into that fund? That is not clear at all. Finally, we need money for our schools. In particular, Todmorden High School did not receive the money pledged last time. Can we please have a look at that, too?

5.43 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Three key areas of concern have been raised repeatedly by my constituents with regard to the recent flooding. I would like to consider each one briefly in turn.

First is the controversial issue of dredging our rivers, and the damage to the farmland that lies next to riverbanks and to the riverbanks themselves. In Cumbria, we have huge quantities of gravel that wash down from the fells. In former times, parishes and landowners were expected to keep the watercourses clear of gravel and silt. Since this regular management has stopped, local residents and farmers tell me that not only has this raised the height of the rivers but that bridges have huge deposits of gravel around them. This restricts the flow of the rivers. There are also huge deposits of gravel on the farmland next to the rivers. I recently visited a farmer in Papcastle, near Cockermouth, who after the previous floods had spent £35,000 clearing his fields. He now faces exactly the same situation. He is faced again with the same tasks, but with increased costs.

Secondly, on planning and development, we have to stop building on floodplains and consider the potential impact of all proposed developments on other properties. In Dearham, I visited properties that had never flooded before, and across the beck at the back of them was a new housing development, while in Cockermouth, a development at Strawberry How is strongly opposed by local people, in part because it would straddle a zone 2 flood area, the Tom Rudd beck.

The third and most important issue has been raised already: insurance. I welcome Flood Re, which is designed to improve the availability and affordability of insurance for home owners, but it does not include businesses or leasehold properties. We must consider urgently how to provide adequate cover in these areas, especially the lack of support for businesses, particularly small businesses. Business flood claims tend to be for loss of trade, which can be significant, and the consequences for small businesses, some of which might not be able to get insurance after the latest floods, can be catastrophic. The number of bankruptcies will increase and businesses will close. If we do not do something to support small businesses with flood insurance, we risk losing beautiful, independent high streets, such as Cockermouth main street, forever, because only large national chains will be able to afford to trade there. We cannot allow this to happen. The Association of British Insurers has made some interesting suggestions for supporting small businesses with flood insurance, and I urge the Minister to consider them seriously.

Finally, I want to make one small point. Many businesses in Cockermouth were only allowed to make an insurance claim if they chucked away all their stock, whether it

[Sue Hayman]

was damaged or not, which is completely crazy. Will the Minister look at whether that is necessary, and if it is not, will he contact the insurance companies?

5.47 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I commend the Floods Minister for his magnificent work during the flood crisis over the Christmas period: he was accessible and responsive at all times. The same applies to the Secretary of State, who was magnificent, and to Ministers and the Department for Communities and Local Government. I cannot praise them enough for how responsive they were at a very difficult time. The same applies to the emergency services and Army, which provided magnificent support, and Bradford local authority, which got off to a shaky start, but then got going. In particular, the dedication of Mike Powell, in the emergency planning department, who dealt with queries I put to him at all hours of the day and night, was much appreciated.

The amazing work of the volunteers was beyond belief. The Bingley flood support group, based in the scout headquarters in Bingley, and the Baildon Shipley flood support group, based at the Salvation Army premises in Shipley, were magnificent. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) said, so many people helped, but, in particular, I would like to mention the magnificent work of Michelle Chapman at Bingley. I cannot praise the volunteers enough. The number of people who have contacted me to say they would not have coped without them is amazing. Our thanks go out to all of them.

I am grateful to the Government for the speed with which financial assistance was given to local authorities such as Bradford—£600,000 went into its bank account in record time—but I echo the point from the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk): I hope the Government will keep that figure under review, because I suspect that much more will be needed in the longer term to help people back on to their feet. The immediate flooding is over, but for many people the effects continue, as they clear up the mess and get back on their feet. I hope the Minister will make a longer-term commitment to residents and local businesses to make sure we hold their hands and get them back up and running again as soon as possible and give them all the support they need.

On flood defences, there are short-term and long-term concerns. I hope the Minister will reflect on the fact that river levels are still very high in many of our communities, so extra rainfall in the short term could cause flooding all over again. I wondered what short-term measures were going to be put in place to make sure that some of those defences were put together very quickly to prevent that from happening. I also wonder what longer-term measures are in place.

We have heard the spat between the Government and the Opposition about who spent what, who spent more and so forth. That is all very interesting, but I suspect that most of my constituents could not care less about who spent more or less. What my constituents in Shipley want to know is how much is going to be spent now in the Shipley constituency to stop what happened happening again, what will be done with that money and when it will all take place. If the Minister provided some clarity on those points, I am sure my constituents would be

very grateful for it, rather than for a party political spat about who spent what and when and what was cancelled and when. It is what we do from now on that seems to me to be the most important thing.

I echo the point made by the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) that we cannot carry on building houses on floodplains and then complain when they all get flooded.

Finally, let me reiterate the point I put to the Prime Minister earlier today about the overseas aid budget. There seems to be a limitless amount of money going in overseas aid to help communities abroad when they suffer great tragic events such as flooding. Well, our communities suffered in just the same way as the communities in other countries did, and they expect the same level of financial support. Some £500,000 was spent on a flood alleviation scheme in the Caribbean that helped one person. We want some of that money spent here to help our people—and I make no apology for requesting it.

5.51 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Let me start by sending out our sympathy and empathy with the people affected by these devastating floods in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cumbria and Scotland. I had the experience in my own constituency of seeing about 50 homes flooded in Otley, and farmland along lower Wharfedale between Otley Pool and Arthington was flooded, leading to the very sad sight of sheep being washed down the stream, unable to escape the floods.

I want to pay my own and my party's tribute to the police, fire and rescue services, the ambulance service, mountain rescue, the armed forces and council workers who have helped, and I particularly want to join those paying tribute to the amazing community spirit shown by the many volunteers who came out in my area and other areas around the country to assist by offering shelter when the flooding happened and subsequently with the clear-up.

We saw a magnificent response in Otley from a huge number of people. Mel Metcalfe organised clear-ups and was helped by the Featherstone brothers. Ben Featherstone worked with me and a fantastic team of retained firefighters from Otley fire station to pump out water from under homes. Niki Taylor and the Wharfe Valley appeal fund raised more than £4,300, with £1,000 of that coming from the Otley Lions. The team at B&TS Building Supplies provided free sandbags and offered free home carpets to people who were not insured for flooding, while electricians and gas workers, including Chris Higgins, Brian Wise and Jon Kilmartin, were helping residents for nothing. It was an absolutely amazing response.

The damage has been huge, with an estimate by KPMG of £5.8 billion across the UK, while for the north of England, PricewaterhouseCoopers suggest it could breach £1.5 billion. We need to look back to the decision to cancel the £180 million or £190 million Leeds flood alleviation scheme in 2011—something that I, as a Leeds MP, strongly opposed. The then DEFRA Minister, the hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) who I see in his place, said that it was “a Rolls-Royce” scheme

“where a reasonably priced family car might serve some of the purpose”.

Sadly, he was wrong at the time; we needed a better scheme, and now we are paying the price. The damage done to Leeds by not having a scheme is considerably more than it would have cost.

There were extraordinary front pages and editorials in both the *Yorkshire Post* and the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. The damning editorial in the former on 27 December said:

“Mr Cameron needs to remember that Yorkshire and the North will not become an economic powerhouse if left to the mercy of ‘unprecedented’ weather events because past and present governments failed to invest in adequate flood defences and contingency planning. The Prime Minister should be aware that the cost of inaction is greater expense in the long-term, and even more heartache for those families on the flooding frontline. It’s time for the political tide to turn, starting now.”

I hope that will happen.

Let me echo a point that was made earlier. The plans to build on floodplains, green fields and green-belt sites, in Leeds and in other areas, suggest that we need a rethink of the planning deregulation that the Government are backing, and Leeds City Council’s plan to build in such areas. Ultimately, of course, we also need to do more about flood alleviation, on the River Wear and also on the River Wharfe, in my constituency. I look forward to speaking to Ministers about both those issues. We must also tackle climate change, but some of the Government’s decisions have moved in the opposite direction.

5.55 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Flooding events are miserable experiences for householders, and for businessmen and women. Many other Members have, like me, waded through the stench of a flooded home. In 2007, 3,000 homes in my constituency were flooded, and there have been many flooding events since. When I had the current Minister’s job, I had the miserable experience of witnessing events similar to those that have occurred recently.

When flooding events happen, many good things happen as well. As we heard earlier today, communities come together and there is great heroism. Flood defences work, and properties are protected. Emergency services are brave and stoic, save lives and do great work. However, there is also a tradition of stupid things being said and, occasionally, stupid things being done. We must be careful not to take a short-term view when flooding events occur.

One of the great knee-jerk reactions among many commentators—including, I am afraid, some Members of Parliament—is to say that the panacea for all flooding events is dredging. Admittedly, on some rare occasions it works. For instance, I have visited the constituency of the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), and I know that improving river beds in such areas may well be the right thing to do. However, we could spend all the budgets that any Government would ever have on dredging rivers such as the Thames, and within two years they would be back where they were because of the way the silt moves down them.

If we want to improve the rivers, we must consider wider catchment issues such as land use management. We should bear in mind the extent to which farming has changed in recent years. If we look at a map of the

Bristol channel two years ago, when all the excitement was going on around the Somerset levels, we see a large proportion of Somerset being washed into the channel in a plume of silt. That was caused by farming practices higher up, not in the area where the flooding was taking place.

There is an enormous amount of historical revisionism. I want to say a little about the Leeds scheme, because, as was pointed out by the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland), I was the Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at the time. That was an over-engineered scheme. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and a number of other local politicians from all parties, came to DEFRA when I was there, and we discussed the scheme at great length. If my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) were here, he would say that it would have been a disaster if it had been built at that stage, because it would have jetted water through Leeds into communities in his constituency.

We managed to convince people that a smaller scheme could work, and I gather that it is now being constructed and will protect a large number of properties. The other scheme, however, would have eaten into the budget of whoever was in government, and taken flood defences away from other communities which are represented in the Chamber today. Other Members’ constituencies would have been flooded. It is important for us to prioritise flood spending very carefully.

I believe that there is now a good opportunity for us to consider how we should address flooding in the very long term. Integrated catchment management schemes need to be thought through, involving agriculture, forestry, planning, water framework directive implementation, and the way in which we manage our uplands. We need to look again at the funding and investment models that we have used in the past, and at the economic assumptions that have been made. We need to ensure that the 5 million homes that are at risk in this country are represented here as well.

5.59 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Last month was the wettest December on record in Wales, where we suffered the greatest amount of rain anywhere in the UK. In Pen Llyn it has rained, and this is not anecdotal, every day since the end of October, and homes and businesses across my constituency have suffered flooding.

I note the announcement by the Labour First Minister that funding of £3.3 million has been identified to help communities in Wales to recover from the effects of flooding. That comes, however, against the backdrop of the Welsh Government’s decision to cut the funding to Natural Resources Wales by almost 7%—something that the motion neglects to mention, interestingly enough. Although capital spending on flood defences is welcome, that cannot make good in itself for the long-term attrition in revenue funding. Have the Government considered whether the £2.3 billion announced for flood defences at the spending review can in any way justify 15% day-to-day departmental budget cuts?

When the culverts are blocked by detritus swept down by unprecedented rainfall, what is needed is someone on call at short notice to clear them out. What will it

[Liz Saville Roberts]

take for the Government to appreciate that such public sector jobs are necessary in a functioning society that safeguards its citizens?

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has called for farmers in Wales and the north to be paid to plant trees and maintain areas to soak up water.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Upland farmers and farmers in general have a great knowledge of the land, the weather and what happens. Is it not time that the DEFRA Minister took on board the experience and knowledge of farmers to ensure that some of the ideas they have to solve the flooding problems actually happen? They are ignored because they are not engineers, but they should be taken on board because they have the knowledge.

Liz Saville Roberts: Indeed. As we have heard, there is an expectation on upland farmers and communities to play their part. They are ideally placed so to do and they are willing to help to address the flooding threat. None the less, planting trees needs to be a tailored response as befits a catchment-specific solution. It should not be just another capital project, a quick-fix panacea, which negates the need for environmentally sensitive dredging and other measures where they are seen to be appropriate. It is impossible in Wales to forget the environmental and social damage caused to our uplands by past initiatives to plant trees, initiatives that often resulted in vast monocultures of conifer plantations.

According to Gwennallt in his poem “Rhydcymerau”,

“Coed lle y bu cymdogaeth,

Fforest lle bu ffermydd”

which means

“Trees where was once a neighbourhood

A forest where there were farms.”

Although slowing the upstream flow of water is a critical part of flood management into the future, environmental planning needs to be sensitive to the natural and working habitats of upland Wales and other upland areas. I also propose that safeguarding green areas and additional tree planting in towns and cities would help to soak up heavy rainfall.

Furthermore, I urge the Government to reconsider their continued reluctance to access EU solidarity funds in relation to flooding. If they are content to carry on doing so in England, so be it, although I note that many people here would like them to change their opinion. In relation to Wales, if they do not reconsider, they should at least allow the Welsh Government to access the funds, or consult and apply on behalf of the Welsh Government, as this Government is the member state. That would alleviate problems in Wales.

Lastly, I point out that the UK Government are able to mobilise the Army, yet devolved Governments cannot mobilise the Army and its help, except in extreme circumstances, as it is a reserved matter. The UK Government should revisit that matter and implement a function whereby devolved Governments can mobilise the Army to assist in such circumstances. I also note that basing Welsh regiments in Wales might be a good starting point to be able to do that.

6.3 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am obliged to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me in the debate. Two years ago, my constituency saw some of the worst flooding witnessed in that area since 1947. I regret to say that there was a fatality. A seven-year-old boy, Zane Gbangbola, was killed as a consequence of the flooding. The inquest into his death is going to be held next week. For two years, his parents have barely managed to get over that appalling loss.

My experience and that of my constituents was that Ministers were responsive. There was a commitment to spend money on flood defences, and generally there was a feeling that Government and governmental bodies—the ambulance service, the fire service, the police—responded reasonably well. Luckily, in the past few weeks, we have not been affected by the flooding that has ravaged so many parts of the country, particularly in the north, but we are always alert. We are always watching in case the rivers rise to a level at which homes are endangered.

Reflecting what others have said about flooding, I have seen many homes that have been flooded. I went to one in my constituency with the Prime Minister. There is nothing more inconveniencing or more depressing than being flooded out of one’s own home. In many cases, even now, two years after the appalling floods of 2014, people still have not returned to their homes.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I appreciate my hon. Friend giving way. Does he agree that in his constituency, like mine, we know that the response to flooding may be good, but constituents in our areas are concerned about prevention and action on prevention?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend is right. The steps that the Government have taken towards preventing flooding in our areas in the Thames valley have been impressive. There has been a commitment to a flood defence scheme. Obviously, more could be done. Discussions are being held about funding and about the balance—how much should be contributed by central Government and how much by local government. That is a legitimate debate.

I am glad about the spirit in which much of this debate has taken place. It is not a good arena for a party political slanging match, which was set up by the motion. I am pleased to see that the course of the debate has not reflected the partisan and highly opportunistic nature of the motion.

One of the other things we have to bear in mind as legislators and as representatives of constituents right through this county is the long-term plan to try and deal with the phenomenon. For whatever reason, we have seen much more flooding in the past 10 or 15 years than was the case in the preceding 50 years. The Government owe it to everyone in this House and to our constituents to have a robust plan to deal with flooding and with a range of natural occurrences on a much more strategic basis, with much more long-term planning. We do not want to be in a situation where, whenever flooding occurs, we rush to have a debate, to recriminate and to urge the Government to spend more money.

It is easy for politicians to say that we should spend more money. I totally understand that that is a human thing to want to do, to make sure that our defences are

adequately resourced and that we are spending money effectively to meet a problem, but we have to recognise that we are still borrowing £1.4 billion a week. It is good that the Secretary of state is mindful of her obligation to balance the books as well as to provide relief.

6.9 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): May I begin by paying tribute to the council workers, police, fire officers, Environment Agency staff and the Army who sacrificed Christmas with their families to protect other people's families in the grip of flooding? May I pay particular tribute to the Penny Appeal, a charity based in my constituency which, with boxer Amir Khan, brought much needed biryani to Cumbria and the lake district before Christmas?

We know flooding is the greatest risk that climate change poses to our country. Those are not my words; they are the words of the Committee on Climate Change. The 2015 national security risk assessment says that flood risk is a tier 1 priority risk alongside terrorism and cyber-attacks, so I want to look at the Government's record on flood defence spending, outline the impact of flooding in my constituency and look to future resilience.

The 2007 floods were the largest civil emergency since world war two. Tragically, 13 people lost their lives and 40,000 homes were flooded, 1,000 in Wakefield. The Labour Government commissioned Sir Michael Pitt to ensure the lessons of those floods were learned, and his key recommendation was that flood defence spending should rise by more than inflation each year. We acted on that recommendation, and in three years flood defence spending rose from £500 million in 2007 to £670 million in 2010. As Labour's shadow Environment Secretary from 2010 to 2013, I watched in horror as the coalition Government cut flood defence spending by nearly £100 million in 2010—a 27% cut in capital funding.

I asked the House of Commons Library to research what the impact of that decision was over the last five years. It calculated that, had spending continued as Pitt recommended from that 2010 baseline, flood defence spending should have been £3.468 billion over the last 5 years, but under the coalition Government it has been just £3.228 billion. That is a flood defence funding gap over those five years of £240 million.

Despite what colleagues on the Conservative Benches are saying, the consequences of that funding gap are stark. In Leeds, the UK's third largest city, a planned flood defence scheme was cancelled in 2011. That scheme covered the Kirkstall area of the city, which was under water two weeks ago. We have a smaller scheme that will be ready in 2017 and will only protect against a one-in-75-year flood, not the one-in-200-year event under the original plan. So when the Prime Minister said at Prime Minister's questions today that no flood defence schemes were cancelled, he was wrong.

There is a north-south divide when it comes to funding to deal with flooding. The annual budgets of northern metropolitan councils have been disproportionately cut. Cuts to Wakefield council alone between 2011 and 2016 are predicted to reach £149 million. Maintenance of highways and bridges and drain and gully clearance have all had to be cut—invisible cuts but very visible when the waters rise.

I am very pleased that after the 2007 floods I got £15 million for flood defences in Wakefield. Thanks to that investment we were not impacted by these recent floods, but flooding did hit a number of houses and businesses in Calder Vale and Horbury Bridge. When I visited them on Saturday, people told me they were concerned about the availability and affordability of flood insurance, and they were not claiming on their insurance because they were worried they would not be able to get insurance in the future—and some were simply uninsured.

The deal, or statement of principles, we had with the insurance industry was based on flood defence spending rising by more than inflation each year, as recommended by Sir Michael Pitt. The new scheme does not cover businesses or homes built after 2009. This needs to be looked at urgently.

If flooding is a part of a national security risk, we need to see the resilience review the Minister is going to undertake, reporting to the Intelligence and Security Committee.

6.13 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): When I stood up to my knees in flooding back in 2007, it never dawned on me to try to make politics out of the flood victims in my area; it never dawned on me to make reference to the cuts in flood defence budgets by the then Labour Government; it never dawned on me to make reference to the advice they were given in 2000, after the floods that also devastated my area, on what they should spend, which they roundly ignored. I always thought of the flooding primarily as a human issue rather than a political one, so the wording of today's motion is disappointing.

As somebody who was born and bred in my area and who is very proud of my area, it is also disappointing constantly to be told by Opposition Members, most of whom only appeared in Yorkshire when they won the nomination for a Labour constituency, that there is a north-south divide and we are in some way being badly done by. That is not helpful; it is all about creating bitterness and division, when really we should be trying to have a sensible debate.

I was disappointed, too, by the comments of the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) with regard to the flood scheme in Leeds. I do not know the details, but I live further down the River Aire, just 15 feet from the river at the point where it meets the River Ouse. In the lower catchment, we are aware that many of the flood defence schemes that have been put forward in the past would have pushed the water further down on to other communities. There has been a strategy of getting water from the upper catchment to the lower catchment as quickly as possible.

A number of tidal rivers—the Aire, the Ouse and the Trent, and the Dutch river, as we call it, which is known as the River Don elsewhere—meet in my area at the point where they hit the Humber. The strategy of moving water from the upper catchment to the lower catchment as quickly as possible is a real danger to people in our area, and also to some of those further along in the middle and upper catchments. I welcome what the Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary have said about the need for wholesale catchment reviews. We must not look at schemes in isolation but must consider the impact that they will have further down.

[Andrew Percy]

My area was very badly affected by the tidal surge in 2013. More people were flooded out in my constituency than in the whole of Somerset, and I believe more than in the whole of southern England. We were hit by floods in Goole in 2010 and 2011, and we were hit in 2007 and 2008 and were on flood warnings again this time. Thanks to investment, the river defences fortunately held, but we are repeatedly hit in my area. As I said in interventions, we must change the whole way in which we address flood defence funding in this country.

Under the last Government, as under the current one, flood defence funding peaked after an event and then fell. The Labour Government cut flood defence funding before the massive 2007 floods, which devastated more homes in Yorkshire than the flooding we have just had. It then went up again, then was reduced, then spiked to a record high post-2013. All Governments have been guilty of that, and we have to change it.

I again make the pitch I have made on numerous occasions. In our area, we drain 20% of all England and we are at extreme risk of flooding. We flood repeatedly, and it has got to end. We need the special strategy for the Humber that the Secretary of State has committed to, which I welcome, but what people in my area really need—I say this as somebody who was born and bred there and is proud of it—is not politics but cross-party consensus to be made out of flood victims so that we do not have the devastation we have seen too many times in my area.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am going to reduce the time limit to three minutes to give everybody equal time.

6.17 pm

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): Many communities, families and businesses in my constituency have been affected by the recent flooding caused by Storm Frank and the persistent rain in the days following it. The worst of the flooding has been in Deeside. In Ballater, many residents had to be evacuated from their homes, and cars and other possessions were washed away. The 16th-century Abergeldie castle, not far from Balmoral, now teeters on the edge of the River Dee after land between it and the river was swept away, and work to save that historic building is going on as I speak.

Braemar was also badly affected, and for a while was completely cut off from the east, with no accessible roads, no phone lines and no internet. In Aboyne this has already been the wettest January on record, and it is only 6 January. Further down the Dee, Corbie hall, which is used by a number of groups including the Maryculter Rainbows, Brownies and Guides, was completely overcome by water, and the shed in which equipment was kept was swept downriver. Farmers have also been badly affected, and the suddenness of some of the flooding meant that some lost large numbers of livestock.

Unfortunately it is still raining, so residents across Deeside are bracing themselves for further flooding. I am sure Members will join me in sending our thoughts and sympathies to my constituents at this time.

At this difficult time, I must also pay tribute to the emergency services, Braemar mountain rescue, the community off-road transport action group and the coastguard, which all worked tirelessly over Hogmanay and into the new year to assist those in immediate danger. Tribute must also be paid to Aberdeenshire Council and SSE engineers, who have been working hard to co-ordinate clean-up efforts and restore power to homes that have been flooded.

The greatest tribute, however, must be paid to the volunteers. Among all the loss and devastation, we have seen the very best in people, with communities across Deeside and in Aberdeenshire more widely coming together to assist those affected by flooding. Whether that has been through donations of food, essentials, dehumidifiers and heaters, through offers of free services or through driving many miles to get sandbags, it has been fantastic to see. The Hope Floats Facebook page has more than 5,000 members, many of whom have been actively involved in volunteering or giving donations. Furthermore, the Ballater Charitable Chiels JustGiving page has raised more than £20,000.

The Scottish Government are providing money for flood-hit communities to allow local authorities to help businesses with their business rates and to relieve council tax payers of their council tax bills, but those affected by floods will want to know all the assistance available. That is why I again urge the Government to make an application to the EU solidarity fund. When I asked the Secretary of State about that yesterday, she said that it could take more than seven months to get the money. For communities facing the impact of the flooding, that money will still be useful seven months down the road. It is worth noting that the EU solidarity fund website states:

“Emergency measures may be financed retroactively from day one of the disaster.”

6.20 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I am fortunate that my Newark constituency has not been seriously flooded in this winter's flooding, but it has been among the worst-flooded of any constituency in the country over the past few years. Forty towns and villages in my constituency have been flooded in the past three years alone, including the beautiful cathedral town of Southwell, which was devastated in 2013. More homes were flooded in that small town than were flooded in all the Somerset levels in 2014. Some residents are still not home.

As other hon. Members have said, being flooded is not only a terrible inconvenience, but can be an individual tragedy. Some of those tragedies do not become apparent until sometime later. I have met constituents whose elderly parents were rescued from their homes by the emergency services and taken elsewhere, very confused and scared, and died in temporary accommodation or nursing homes, having never returned to their own homes. Essentially, their lives were washed away by the floods.

Some good things have undoubtedly come out of the floods, particularly in Southwell, which I hope gives a glimmer of hope to other communities. That community was brought together wonderfully by those events. A very important and award-winning flood forum was founded.

In the short time I have, may I make three observations drawn from our experiences in Nottinghamshire? As this is an Opposition day debate, inevitably a blame game crops up, but the Secretary of State and more recently the Minister could not have been more helpful to my communities. They have had the greatest and most helpful can-do attitude. Together, we have begun to achieve quite a lot for those communities.

My first point is that we need a more local approach to prevention and maintenance, as well as to the implementation of new flood protection schemes. In communities such as Southwell where there are superb flood forums, I ask the Secretary of State please to make use of them in her flood review and gain the benefit of their experiences. I ask her to make small amounts of money available to them. They need that money immediately to create websites and fliers and so on. Those are invaluable. Where we have those groups and they do such a good job, I ask her to use them and not simply to rely on the Environment Agency and such large, often excruciatingly slow, organisations. We should use those forums and the internal drainage boards. I heard from someone or other in the Labour party over the winter that IDBs are hopeless and out of touch, and that they are dominated by biased landowners. The opposite is true in my area: the Trent valley IDB is superb.

Secondly, I ask the Secretary of State please to use local people so that we can use public money better. This debate should be about getting value for money for the taxpayer, rather than simply about the quantities.

My last point in the dying seconds that I have available is this: we need to explain to the public that many people will be flooded—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

6.23 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) said that we should not play a blame game. The floods were unprecedented, but they were not unpredicted. It is the job of the official Opposition to hold the Government to account. We have listened to hon. Members backslapping in the Chamber this afternoon, saying, “We have learnt the lessons. We were quick in the response,” but that is not the point. The point is that this is a national tragedy that, according to KPMG, is likely to cost the country £5 billion, £2 billion of which will simply repair the existing defences and restore them to their pre-flood inadequate level. Twelve years of the entire 2014 maintenance budget of £171 million will be squandered. So, follow the money. In the last full year of the Labour Government we spent £633.1 million in cash, £703.4 million at 2015-16 prices.

Rory Stewart: Will the hon. Gentleman please expand on where this £2 billion figure for repairing flood defences comes from? I have no recognition of the figure whatsoever.

Barry Gardiner: It comes from KPMG.

In 2010-11, we spent £670.1 million in cash, £724.4 million in today's prices. In no year since then did this Government exceed that in either cash or real terms until last year, when they put in emergency funding of £140 million to

repair the damage done by the 2013-14 floods. Without that emergency money, the budgeted figure was only £662.6 million. Again, that figure is lower. If the Minister wants to check where it comes from, I can tell him that it comes from his own DEFRA figures on his own website. That emergency money cannot be equated with normal maintenance. We are talking of wholesale repairs, rebuilding bridges and floodwalls after they have been destroyed. Most people would say that when someone repaints the windows of their house or repoints the chimney stack that that is maintenance, but when a bulldozer slams into their living room that is a disaster. Only this Government appear to count the rebuilding of the living room as normal maintenance. It is not. That is the con trick—the smoke and mirrors that the Government are using. Instead of congratulating themselves on spending that money in the first and only year in which they spent more than we did in 2010-11, the Government should be apologising for cutting the programme so badly.

In 2014, the Government's long-term investment scenarios report recommended an optimum overall investment—the Secretary of State was right to point out that it was an overall investment—of £750 million to £800 million a year. If that were to be achieved, the Government would need to spend £417 million a year on maintenance, which is also in her report. That adds up to a £2.5 billion gap in flood defence spending between 2015 and 2021, exactly as my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State said.

Grouse moors and sheep farming lead water to run straight off hills into populated valleys. Burning back heather reduces areas of peat and the ground's ability to retain water. Climate change affects how much rain falls and how much water ends up in our towns and cities. That is our problem. We need catchment management and we absolutely need to see what the Natural Capital Committee will do and what it will advise the Government, but we must take on board the fact that land can no longer ignore the public good that it must provide. The grouse moor economy brings £100 million a year into this country, but its cost is incalculable. The Minister must take note and sort this out.

6.27 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I praise people across York for the generosity that they have shown over this Christmas period, as well as the businesses that have given so much to help with the clear-up operation and the recovery. However, it would be a dereliction of my duty if I did not ask the difficult questions that result from the crisis. I have pages upon pages of concerns from constituents to which I am trying to seek answers.

We have been able to establish that the risk that the Foss barrier would fail was known. It was understood through successive reports over many years that the capacity of the pumps at the barrier could not match the challenges of climate change and the volume of water coming down the River Foss. That has now been established as fact through the Environment Agency and reports from the local authority, but questions remain. Why was the barrier not upgraded sooner when that was known for more than 12 years? Why were there only two mechanisms to operate the pump and why have no steps been taken to raise the level of the

[*Rachael Maskell*]

electricians in the nearly 30 years since the barrier was established? York needs answers to those questions and I trust that we will hear them later.

Today, I also want to focus on the additional help needed now by families and businesses who have experienced devastation this Christmas. As I have gone door to door, I have seen the damage and smelt the rancid waters, but £500 barely touches the initial costs that families face now. Many will not be able to claim the £5,000, but the £500 for people without insurance barely buys them anything. Many people in my constituency have only the clothes that they stand up in, and £500 will not go far enough. They are too poor to buy insurance. What additional resources will the Minister make available to the poorest people in my community? To do nothing is not acceptable, and they cannot rely on charity.

The Traveller community in my constituency lost everything, including their homes. The rescue operation did not happen among that community, and I want to know what additional support will be provided for Travellers. Victims of poverty and flooding should have a Government who will not abandon them in their time of need or leave them to rely on charity. They need a Government who will take action. I also want to know how the Government will support businesses more. I want a guarantee that the Government will seek to prevent businesses from going into administration, as many in my constituency are likely to do. Finally, the local authority plans in York did not work well on the ground, and I would like an external audit of those plans to ensure that they will be efficient and effective when the need arises.

6.30 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Just a few weeks ago, on 15 December 2015, we spoke in this Chamber about the devastating effects of Storm Desmond in Cumbria. Sadly, we are now here again debating the aftermath of Storms Eva and Frank and the devastation that has been wrought in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and Scotland, along with many other areas in the north. During that debate on Storm Desmond, I welcomed the announcement of a national flood resilience review to assess our infrastructure, with particular reference to electricity substations. I mentioned that because many areas of Lancaster, including the hospitals, many homes and businesses and the university, suffered from long power cuts caused by unforeseen flood damage at a substation in Lancaster. I made the case for electricity substations to be better protected from flooding, to avoid disruption to our healthcare, education and business institutions.

Unfortunately, on Boxing day, my constituency was battered by Storm Eva. Roads were flooded, people's homes were damaged and a 20-foot sinkhole opened up on the M62, causing massive disruption to travellers on Boxing day. Rochdale town centre was also hit extremely badly by the unprecedented rainfall. One major issue affecting my constituency was a prolonged loss of power, again caused by flood damage to an electricity substation. Around 20,000 homes in the borough of Rochdale lost power, and Electricity North West worked day and night to try to restore services. Again, this has emphasised

the importance of adequate defences for our power stations and of a properly funded flood defence policy, with the north getting its fair share.

I would like to use my final minute to pay tribute to our emergency services, whose response over the holiday period was incredible. Two days before Christmas, I visited Heywood firefighters to wish them well for the festive season, not quite anticipating what was in store for them. Heywood fire station is one of only two Greater Manchester fire service stations that has a water rescue unit and firefighters who are fully trained in its use. The water rescue unit was deployed to help with the widespread flooding in areas of Greater Manchester, and its response was magnificent. However, those same firefighters are extremely concerned about further cuts to their services. They are worried that there may come a point when they simply do not have the workforce to be able to deploy their specialist vehicles. It is all very well having the latest kit, but without sufficient numbers of firefighters to operate it, that kit becomes redundant. Finally, it will come as no surprise to the Secretary of State that I again call for the creation of a statutory duty on the fire and rescue service to respond to flooding.

6.33 pm

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) spoke earlier of a fatality in his constituency two years ago. I had a fatality in my constituency last month, when Mr Ivan Vaughan's car was trapped in a flood. It appears that he got out of the car and was washed away. Sadly, he died.

Questions have been asked today about whether dredging works or not. Yesterday, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) said that the flood prevention programme following the devastating flooding in Somerset in 2013-14 was working and that dredging was proving effective. I know that the hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) indicated earlier that he was less enthusiastic about dredging, but certainly in my constituency in Northern Ireland we need further dredging, and I have been campaigning for that in Lough Erne. I know the Secretary of State and the Minister will say that that is a devolved issue, and I accept that, but the Electricity Supply Board and the Republic of Ireland Government have a role, and therefore so, too, do the UK Government; this is a four-party agreement. There are aspects that this Government need to look at.

We have had a dispute here today about finances, and about who is right and who is wrong, some of it between the Opposition and the Government, and some of it between the Labour party and the Scottish National party. I do not want to get into that argument, but I do know that there is a serious difference between the compensation or the money available to homeowners who have been affected in Northern Ireland compared with the money available here in England. Here, it is up to £5,000 for businesses and homeowners, whereas in Northern Ireland it is only up to £1,000, and that is limited to homeowners.

I asked yesterday about the Barnett consequential. I know that the Secretary of State said that it was a devolved issue for Northern Ireland, but if additional money is going into flood defences and repairs in England, surely the devolved institutions of Northern Ireland,

Scotland and Wales are entitled to the Barnett consequential of that. I would like a specific answer on that aspect, just to see whether that can boost the support and help that we and the devolved institutions receive.

6.36 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): More than 2,000 homes and up to 400 businesses in Leeds were hit by the floods, but what a fantastic, heroic job the emergency services, public sector workers and local volunteers did in Leeds, as they did around the country. Locally, we still await estimates of the financial cost of the flooding, but we know that in human terms it has hit people and businesses hard. We need to ensure that Leeds residents and businesses are properly protected, and we need an urgent review to put in place changes that prevent it from happening again.

Five years ago, the Environment Agency estimated that 3,000 properties in Leeds were at risk and that a major flood of the River Aire could cause £500 million of damage in Leeds city centre alone. Five years ago, given the estimates of the scale of the potential cost of flooding in Leeds, it proposed a £180 million flood defence plan, designed to deliver protection against a one-in-200-year flood event—the Government rejected it. Why? It was because of spending cuts. My Leeds East predecessor, George Mudie, raised concerns about the risk of flooding at that time—half a decade ago—as did Councillor Richard Lewis, Leeds City Council's executive member for development, who condemned the Government as “short-sighted”.

We are now halfway through the construction of the smaller Leeds flood alleviation scheme, which is designed to deliver flood protection against a one-in-75-year event. That itself will now undoubtedly need repair work, and the Government review, working with Leeds City Council, must consider the following: whether the scheme, if it had been completed, would have been sufficient to prevent flooding in the city centre; whether it would have helped in any way in Kirkstall; whether it will be sufficient to protect against future floods; and whether that one-in-75-year figure is still appropriate and, if not, what further funding is needed for improved defences.

I welcome the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) is seeking a meeting for Leeds MPs and council representatives with the Minister, and I hope we can have that soon. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister three times today whether he would commit to funding fully plans to give the whole of Leeds the protection that we need, and three times the Prime Minister failed to give a clear answer. People in Leeds and people across the country deserve better.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Very briefly, Mr Neil Parish.

6.39 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): May I thank the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister and the floods Minister for all the work they have done on the flooding in the north of England? We now need a fundamental review on floods, as they are occurring more often. In the past, there may have been a flood

every 25 years or 50 years, but now there is one every five years or 10 years. The frequency may be down to climate change or it could be part of a pattern, but something is fundamentally wrong.

We must ensure that internal drainage boards have more powers, so that more can be done locally and that more dredging can be done. We must also learn the lessons from Somerset, where large pumps were brought in from the Netherlands. If we need pumps, let us move them around the country and ensure that we can pump out all the water. Rivers close to the sea and inland rivers are very flat and silty and tend to need dredging. My hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) was quite right to say that chalk streams and rivers do not need the same amount of dredging.

We must also look at land management. At the moment, farmers are given compensation only when there is a loss of earnings. We need to look at that land and say, “Why don't you farm that land in a way that allows you to have an income from it?” I am talking about planting trees or retaining water in the peat. Farmers might then view managing flood protection in a much more positive way. If we can put all these things in place, we could slow down the amount of flooding that is happening, but if we have 13 inches of rain in 36 hours, it is very difficult for any flood protection scheme to protect everybody.

What the people of Cumbria were absolutely certain about today when they attended an Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee was that they have all worked so well together and that their communities and their emergency services have performed well. They were delighted that Ministers had turned out to support their local communities. It is essential that we work together to change what is happening and to put enough money in place.

I plead with the Chancellor to view flood protection as very much part of our infrastructure. If we are to build infrastructure, we need to protect it from inland floods and the sea. We need look only at the Netherlands to see that if we want to protect the country, we need sea and coastal protection. These floods have been a wake-up call.

My very final point is that if we look at the amount of spending on flood protection, we will see that it began very slowly during the last Labour Government, but then it started to rain and the flood money went up, and the same happened under the previous Government. Now we are seeing a bit of tit for tat between the Government and the Opposition, but what this Government need to do is put together a package that will ensure that we have the right funds in place to protect us.

6.42 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): We have heard already that David Rooke, deputy chief executive of the Environment Agency, recently called for a “complete rethink” in our approach to flooding. I could not agree more. More than an entire month's rainfall fell in a single day on one Saturday in early December, resulting in many of the main rivers across Cumbria exceeding their highest levels ever recorded. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, the Government appear to have been caught short by the changing weather.

[Alex Cunningham]

The extensive flooding that followed at the end of December and into the new year across Cumbria as well as in Lancashire, Yorkshire, north-east England and throughout much of Scotland confirmed that building higher walls will not, on its own, provide the protection that our towns and cities need. There are thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people in the north of the country and in Scotland who have seen with their own eyes the evidence that the Government have not done enough. We should not overlook how sick they are of the Government's excuses. Let us not forget that areas of Cumbria assessed as having a one-in-100 years' chance of such flooding have experienced these events three times in the past decade.

Similarly, people are tired of the frantic efforts to persuade the public that spending is greater now than it was under the previous coalition and Labour Governments that went before them. As my hon friend highlighted, the Government are constantly chirping about their £2.3 billion of capital spending over six years, but their attempts to defend their record over the previous Parliament will not wash. Analysis from the National Audit Office has confirmed that, between 2010 and 2011 and 2013 and 2014, capital funding fell by 18% in cash terms. Were it not for the emergency funding after the floods hit, total funding would have fallen by 10% in real terms during the previous Parliament.

In 2007, the Labour Government announced an ambitious target of £800 million per year in flood defence spending by 2011, and spending actually increased by 27% between 2007 and 2008 and 2009 and 2010, reaching £633 million, with £766 million budgeted for in 2010-11. What was the Prime Minister's first action on flood defences when he came to power in 2010? Yes, he handed out a £96 million cut in the budget, leaving the Government lagging behind thereafter and struggling to keep pace. According to the House of Commons Library, subsequent years' spending was hundreds of millions below what the Environment Agency said it needed, even when the extra millions in response to the tragic floods in Somerset are considered. The Secretary of State said earlier that others have contributed to make up the difference. I ask the Minister who has made these contributions and how much have they contributed to the overall budget.

While money was no object for the Prime Minister a couple of years ago, it does seem to be an object now. As we have heard from hon. Friends, on three separate occasions today he refused to confirm that he will fund the full Leeds flood defence scheme. The hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) told us that that project had been over-engineered, but we still need action, and we need it now. The Prime Minister has no excuse for the failure to act on the upgrading of the Foss barrier several years ago, yet he seemed pleased with himself today when he said that the work is now being tendered—little consolation for those who saw the waters invade their homes.

The Government are even less enthusiastic about revealing precisely how much of the capital spending is simply maintaining existing flood defences at their current level without providing increased protection. As the Committee on Climate Change has identified and the events of recent weeks have confirmed, the impacts of a

changing climate will see defences that might otherwise provide protection against a one-in-100-year flood provide a much lower level of protection, risking their being overtopped more frequently.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House have spoken on a number of different issues. There has been much praise for volunteers, local authority workers, the military, and the Environment Agency. A great example came from my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who talked about the pop-up charity shop providing goods but also raising cash for victims. All this is Britain at its best.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) talked about the small communities affected, because many of them feel abandoned. I am looking forward to my meeting with the Minister, I believe next week, to talk about the proposals to help smaller communities. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) talked about the River Aire and spoke of businesses ruined. Sometimes we forget that jobs are lost as a direct result of these things, with machinery ruined and insurance protection not really in existence.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) spoke of a field under flood where planning permission has already been granted for more housing development. I wonder what mitigation is in place for the houses that are going to be built there and on the other floodplains where housing has permission to be built. My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) also spoke about floodplain development, as well as insurance, which was covered by other Members.

I was interested to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr Reed) talk about the threat to health services in Cumbria—we know how remote places there can be. He also mentioned the potential damage to the oncoming tourist season. It is not just people's holidays that are going to be lost, but people's livelihoods as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) referred to Members saying how great the response had been, and it was, but the spending on that response has been counted as maintenance whereas in fact it was repairing damage.

As I argued in the House during the debate on the Housing and Planning Bill only yesterday, we need measures aimed at prevention as well as at defence. The havoc and devastation that have engulfed vast swathes of the northern regions is testament to that, underlining the need for in-built resilience when new developments are planned and constructed. The Minister for Housing and Planning said that sufficient legislation is in place, yet we continue to see planning permissions for floodplain development and no real requirement on developers to build into their schemes the measures needed in the immediate and longer term.

The commitment from the Secretary of State to revisit the modelling used by the Environment Agency and to review its fitness for purpose off the back of these repeated unprecedented weather events, as well as to a national flood resilience review that will update worst-case-scenario planning, is welcome, if not overdue. What are the timescales for this review? When can we expect some outcomes and some news?

Elizabeth Truss: This summer.

Alex Cunningham: Well, this summer is better than next year.

I offer this challenge: what happened to the innovative thinking of the previous Labour Government who left office in 2010 and who had accepted the recommendations of the Pitt review that would have seen much greater resilience of this kind? Let us take, for instance, the catchment management plans within the Flood and Water Management Act 2010. Despite giving the Environment Agency responsibility for building an understanding of current and future flooding risk, and informing policies for managing this risk within the catchment area, those plans were axed post-2010 as the agency's funding was cut. The Secretary of State spoke about this, and I hope the Minister will tell us a little more. What thought has been given to changing the incentives for farmers and landowners in river catchment areas, particularly in the upper reaches of river catchments, which play a key role in determining flood risk?

I need to wind up now. It is time to recognise that our rivers, streams and watercourses are natural infrastructure assets, and the Treasury and others have to treat them in the same way as motorways, trunk roads and other infrastructure if we are going to build resilience into the future.

6.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): May I begin by paying tribute to the debate, which has been very detailed and serious and has properly reflected the fact that this has been a very unusual and very complex situation? The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) talked about the unprecedented nature of the rainfall. As has been said repeatedly, every kind of record has been broken, including those for rainfall in 24 and 48 hours and that for rainfall in a month.

As right hon. and hon. Members across the House have emphasised, it has been the most extraordinary and horrendous experience for people. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for highlighting the impact on the Traveller community in York Central, who are among thousands of people affected—we now know that more than 12,000 separate homes were affected by this extraordinary experience.

The emergency services have been astonishing. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) has paid tribute to the fire and rescue service. We should also pay tribute to the police gold commanders and the sergeants and policemen standing on the streets, in the rain, day in, day out, securing the safety of communities, and to the Army, from the company sergeant-major standing in the streets of Appleby and the 100 men clearing out houses, to the commanding officer of the Light Dragoons working his way up and down the Calder valley. We also note the work of the Environment Agency and people such as Adrian and Phil, who struggled with the problems with electricity to the Foss barrier, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) has said, the actions of councils up and down the country. The council response has been fantastic

The hon. Members for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) and for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) paid tribute to the Muslim communities, which in their different way have contributed, as have the Sikh and Hindu communities. In the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for

Carlisle (John Stevenson), I saw church representatives out with hot cross buns at 4.30 in the morning. We also note the sea cadets standing up to their waists in rain water, as well as mountain rescue, the boats and Team Rubicon, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams). Moreover, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribbles Valley (Mr Evans) has pointed out, we also note the thousands of anonymous members of the public who got out of their cars and then continued on their journeys.

I also want to take a small moment to pay tribute to Members of Parliament themselves. On that first evening, I saw the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) out on the streets of Cockermouth. I saw the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) working with the Methodist Church, and my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle working from dawn to dusk. I also saw the hon. Member for York Central and my hon. Friends the Members for Selby and Ainsty and for Shipley, as well as colleagues in St Michael's and at Hebden Bridge—and they are just the Members of Parliament I happened to see as I worked my way around the country.

I also pay tribute to the Flood Forecasting Centre and the work done by the Met Office, which gave us the important warning. That was also central for our colleagues in the devolved Administrations. The floods in 1953-54 killed 450 people, and one of the reasons we have been more fortunate this time is that we have the warning systems in place.

In the short time available to me, I want to touch on some of the issues raised by right hon. and hon. Members in relation to recovery. Elland bridge was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) and the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). I reassure them that we are working very hard, particularly on the telecoms challenges in relation to that bridge. My hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty raised the issue of Tadcaster bridge. I reassure him that we have been able to get Balfour Beatty to work for the next three days. We have located a temporary footbridge, which will be put in place.

The hon. Member for Copeland (Mr Reed) raised the issue of the A591. For the first time ever, Highways England has agreed to take over, from beginning to end, the project management of a county council road, and it will deliver that in the quickest time possible.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) mentioned the challenges with regard to electricity. My hon. Friends the Members for Carlisle and for Calder Valley raised the challenges for schools. I am pleased that the Secretary of State for Education will be there to deal with those issues herself. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley mentioned household grants and the hon. Member for Rochdale raised some of the challenges for businesses. I am pleased that the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise, who is in her place, is addressing that problem directly. The hon. Member for Workington raised the issues in respect of insurance, which we are dealing with along with the Association of British Insurers.

I want to set all the other issues in context in the very limited time available. Whether, like the many right hon. and hon. Members from Leeds, we are talking about specific defences; fairness in other parts of the country, as was raised by the hon. Members for Dumfries and

[Rory Stewart]

Galloway (Richard Arkless), for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson) and for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) and my hon. Friends the Members for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and for Newbury (Richard Benyon); the unintended consequences raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy); building on floodplains, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) and the hon. Member for Workington; the challenges of culverts, which were raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley; the disagreements about dredging, which were evident in the conflict between my hon. Friends the Members for Ribble Valley and for Newbury; farmland, which was raised by the hon. Member for Workington; upstream alleviation, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury; forestry, which was raised by the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts); or the overall strategy, which has been pushed hard by the hon. Member for Copeland, we come again and again to the importance of having an independent objective judgment by the Flood Forecasting Centre and the Environment Agency that is respected by this House.

These decisions cannot be made through party politics. The resources must be allocated on the basis of flood risk, the number of households that will be protected, the position of those households on the deprivation index, the businesses that will be affected, the agriculture that will be affected, and the impacts on productivity, infrastructure and electricity. Those issues of cost and complexity will be central to the debate.

Barry Gardiner: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Rory Stewart: I am afraid that I have only a minute and a half to go, but I am happy to continue the discussion with well-informed Members such as the hon. Gentleman.

Perhaps a hundred different arguments have been raised in the House today, but to come to a close, there seem to be four main conclusions to be drawn from this debate. The first is that in an emergency situation, we must, above all, act decisively. We must think big and we must think early. It was very important that the Environment Agency moved 85% of its assets up immediately. The Cobra meeting was held on 23 December, even when there was uncertainty about the floods, to deal with an issue that would come up on Boxing day. The military deployed immediately.

The second thing to be taken from the debate is the importance of understanding and compassion. This can become a technocratic debate about numbers, but it is really about the horror that is experienced in individual households. Our ability to listen to those households will be central to our ability to go forward.

The third lesson from this debate is one of humility. We are dealing with extraordinary issues of climate and uncertainty. We are breaking records in a way that has never been seen before in this country. There needs to be a joint cross-party response that is not limited to this House, but that reaches out to the very best scientists, commentators, experts and members of the Environment Agency who are available to deal with the challenge.

Finally, this debate is about localism. It is about local knowledge. Every scheme and every response needs to respond to local knowledge. In one community it might be about dredging, in another it might be about a pump, in another community it will be about the clearing of trees and in another it will be about upland storage. We need to look at what we are doing with forestry and what we are doing with peatland restoration. We need to understand that some schemes take 25 or 50 years to succeed, but that they should be undertaken nevertheless. As the Secretary of State said, we need to start the 25-year planning now.

Whatever our other disagreements, this country has responded very well to the emergency nature of the floods. There has been a good emergency response in Scotland, a good emergency response in Wales, a good emergency response in Northern Ireland and, I believe, a good emergency response in England. The only way in which we can go forward is with the utmost seriousness—seriousness about science, seriousness about evidence and seriousness about the formulas we use to allocate the funding in a way that is fair to the entire United Kingdom. If we get that determination correct, I believe that we can move forward with the humility and attention to local detail that will allow us to deal with perhaps one of the most serious crises of our generation.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 216, Noes 281.

Division No. 158]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Coyle, Neil
Abrahams, Debbie	Crausby, Mr David
Alexander, Heidi	Creagh, Mary
Ali, Rushanara	Creasy, Stella
Allen, Mr Graham	Cryer, John
Anderson, Mr David	Cummins, Judith
Ashworth, Jonathan	Cunningham, Alex
Austin, Ian	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Dakin, Nic
Barron, rh Kevin	Danczuk, Simon
Benn, rh Hilary	David, Wayne
Berger, Luciana	Davies, Geraint
Betts, Mr Clive	De Piero, Gloria
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Doughty, Stephen
Blenkinsop, Tom	Dowd, Jim
Blomfield, Paul	Dowd, Peter
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Dromey, Jack
Brennan, Kevin	Durkan, Mark
Brown, Lyn	Eagle, Ms Angela
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Efford, Clive
Bryant, Chris	Elliott, Julie
Buck, Ms Karen	Elliott, Tom
Burden, Richard	Ellman, Mrs Louise
Burgon, Richard	Esterson, Bill
Burnham, rh Andy	Evans, Chris
Butler, Dawn	Farrelly, Paul
Byrne, rh Liam	Farron, Tim
Cadbury, Ruth	Field, rh Frank
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Fitzpatrick, Jim
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Flelo, Robert
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Fletcher, Colleen
Champion, Sarah	Flint, rh Caroline
Chapman, Jenny	Flynn, Paul
Coaker, Vernon	Fovargue, Yvonne
Coffey, Ann	Gardiner, Barry
Cooper, rh Yvette	Glass, Pat
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Glindon, Mary
Cox, Jo	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
 Harpham, Harry
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Mr Mark
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Hunt, Tristram
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Irranca-Davies, Huw
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Alan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinahan, Danny
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lavery, Ian
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Mr Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, John
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame M.
 Mulholland, Greg
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Onn, Melanie
 Osamor, Kate
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Pugh, John
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Marie
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmer, Keir
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Watson, Mr Tom
 West, Catherine
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Phil
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Angela Rayner

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Berry, James
 Bingham, Andrew
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Blunt, Crispin
 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, rh Sir Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Carmichael, Neil
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colvile, Oliver
 Costa, Alberto
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Byron
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Dinage, Caroline
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Nadine
 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
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh Mr David
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, Mr James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matthew
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 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
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid

Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Boris
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kirby, Simon
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Pauline
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lumley, Karen
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 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
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Parish, Neil
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Perry, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen

Philp, Chris
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
 Swire, rh Mr Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Wharton, James
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob

Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William

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

Question accordingly negated.

Business without Debate

WELSH GRAND COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That:

(1) the matter of the Draft Wales Bill be referred to the Welsh Grand Committee for its consideration;

(2) the Committee shall meet at Westminster on Wednesday 3 February at 9.30am and 2.00pm to consider the matter referred to it under paragraph (1) above; and

(3) the Chair shall interrupt proceedings at the afternoon sitting not later than two hours after their commencement at that sitting—(*Julian Smith.*)

PETITIONS

Compensation for Negligent Medical Treatment

7.13 pm

Mrs Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): This petition declares that healthcare professionals under investigation for negligence should not be able to work in either the NHS or the private sector until disciplinary procedures have concluded satisfactorily. More than 1,000 women underwent inappropriate breast cancer surgery, and while many NHS patients have already been compensated, those treated in the private sector have been caught up in protracted litigation during which time some have sadly passed away.

The petition would require every insurance company to provide affordable cover for every aspect of healthcare professionals' work, including where it is found to be negligent, and those under investigation would be suspended until the complaint had been fully resolved.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the UK,

declares that private healthcare patients have less access to adequate redress and compensation following negligent treatment in comparison to NHS patients; further that insurance companies can withdraw cover from healthcare professionals who are alleged to have breached the terms of the insurance policy; and further that healthcare professionals under investigation for negligence should not be able to work in either the NHS or the private sector until the disciplinary proceedings have concluded to the satisfaction of the General Medical Council and patient or patients concerned and, in case of fatalities, the patients' families.

The petitioners therefore ask the House of Commons to legislate to require insurance companies to provide affordable cover for every aspect of healthcare professionals' work including in cases where the work was found to be negligent, and for all healthcare professionals under investigation for negligence to be suspended until the complaint has been fully resolved.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

Park and Ride Scheme on Bathampton Meadows

7.14 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The petition reads as follows:

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that Bathampton Meadows are an area of cultural and historical importance; further that the proposed park and ride scheme on Bathampton Meadows will negatively affect the local landscape; further that the plans will negatively impact local tourism; and further than an online petition on this matter was signed by over 6,000 petitioners.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Bath and North East Somerset Council to withdraw plans to build a park and ride scheme on Bathampton Meadows.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001667]

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. A couple of hours ago I was informed by email that HSBC was proposing to close branches in Ruabon and in Chirk, which is in my constituency. We have, of course, seen many such bank closures, especially since the Government changed their policy of working with banks to keep the last branch in every community open. Can you tell me, Mr Speaker, whether any Minister has proposed to come to the House to discuss that change in policy?

Mr Speaker: I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Lady, but I must advise her that no Minister has given notice to me of an intention to make a statement to the House about the matter. However, the hon. Lady is herself a notably dexterous and versatile Member who is very familiar with the arsenal of weapons that is available to her so that she can raise matters of concern, one of which weapons she has just deployed by means of an ingenious but entirely bogus point of order. She will therefore know that she can continue to pursue the matter through questions, and possibly through debates. I have a keen hunch that she will pursue the course of action that I have recommended.

Vauxhall Bus Station

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Julian Smith.*)

7.17 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am pleased to have this opportunity to bring to the attention of the House and the Minister the anger that is felt by my constituents, and by many other people in a much wider area, about the plans of Transport for London and Lambeth Council to demolish Vauxhall bus station. It is also an opportunity for me to express publicly our concern about the series of misleading statements about the matter that are currently on the TfL website, and, indeed, to raise widely the view of, I believe, thousands of people that TfL consultations are clever exercises which do not give the public an opportunity to answer the real question, but are designed to give the answer that is wanted by TfL.

In London, 2014 was celebrated as a year of the bus, but now, in 2016, there seems to have been a cultural change in both City Hall and TfL from championing bus passengers to scrapping bus lanes. We are seeing more and more buses being forced into general traffic lanes, slower journey times, frequencies being cut, and, now, the incredible decision to demolish Vauxhall bus station.

Just 15 years ago, Arup Associates won a public competition to build a new bus station within the gyratory. The commissioning statement from TfL said that the purpose was

“to create a coherent and efficient interchange for bus, rail and Underground users...to promote the use of public transport”

and to be

“a landmark structure to enhance the local environment and amenity.”

Less than 12 years ago, the bus station was completed at a cost of £4.5 million, and was opened by Ken Livingstone. It was immediately hailed by architects and public transport users as inspired. Jonathan Glancey, *The Guardian's* architectural correspondent, said that it was “a trumpet blast”, but that what made it

“so special is the fact that it is localised... the Vauxhall bus station does show what can be done as public transport in London is taken increasingly seriously... it points to a new ambition, however crudely expressed by politicians, to make London's public transport system among the finest in the world.”

That was 12 years ago.

By the way, the ski-slope roof is not just a gesture. It is studded with photovoltaic cells which, angled towards the sun, help to generate electricity for the station's lighting.

At the time, those who had used the previous dreadful facilities expressed their delight. Peter Hendy, then in charge of TfL, said then that

“The Vauxhall Cross interchange has been an ambitious project for TfL. For passengers at Vauxhall Cross, changing between bus, rail and Tube had been difficult for a long time.”

The view was that following the changes the interchange would

“provide easier access to, and transfer between, bus, Tube and rail services”.

I want to mention some key facts. Vauxhall is the second busiest interchange in London, after Victoria.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I have a home just the other side of Vauxhall bus station from Westminster. Twelve years ago, when it was being built, there was a big hole in the road, and people who lived at the other end of Wandsworth road were unable to escape south London. If TfL is to knock the bus station down, I fear that again people across south-west and southern London will be cut off from the centre of London for months.

Kate Hoey: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. That is another important reason why the whole scheme is so ridiculous.

Vauxhall is the second busiest interchange in London, after Victoria. It is used by 2,000 buses per day. Nearly one in four of London's buses use the station. It serves 14 bus routes, 11 of which are daytime routes. Three routes offer a 24-hour service. The three night routes are used frequently by many of the LGBT community who visit the clubs in that area. Every day, 712 Victoria line tube trains and 739 mainline trains go through Vauxhall. It really is a hub. Forty-five thousand commuters go through it each day. The largest group by far are bus users, who include the most vulnerable—the old, disabled people, parents with young children—all of whom make disproportionate use of buses because of the ease of access and frequent stops. Many change from bus to bus at Vauxhall. Others change from the tube or the train. Getting the bus interchange right is crucial to keeping traffic moving across a wide area of central and south London.

So where does the proposal to demolish the bus station come from? It did not originate from TfL. It was first made public in Lambeth Council's draft supplementary planning document way back in 2012. That talked about looking at replacing the bus station with

“a series of relocated bus stops.”

In November 2013, in the local plan, the council stated that it wanted to work

“towards the removal of the gyratory. At the outset this will involve remodelling the bus station so that the canopy is removed and bus stops and stands are relocated to allow for the introduction of the high street”.

That intention was repeated in presentations time after time. In 2014, there were initial consultations. Now, finally, TfL is consulting on a scheme that looks at getting rid of the gyratory. However, it claims that to do that the bus station must be removed. Artists' impressions, but no detailed designs, of the plans for the bus station show a series of bus stops around two or more high-density, multi-storey commercial developments.

Interestingly, the Secretary of State's inspector, reporting on the Lambeth local plan submission in 2015, concluded that it should be reworded so that it stated that removal of the gyratory “may” be necessary, not “will” be necessary. Although we understand that Lambeth has accepted the inspector's changes, that has not been published on the website. Lambeth is obviously trying to disregard that change of emphasis.

A majority of people, including local residents, agree that replacing the one-way roads—the gyratory—at Vauxhall is desirable. But that does not mean they want the bus station to go. They have never been asked whether they want it to go. A local community group, Our Vauxhall, which includes local architects and traffic engineers as well as residents, has produced an ambitious plan for the area which goes much further than the one

put forward by Lambeth and TfL. Its plan has been enthusiastically backed by local residents, including at well-attended public meetings that heard repeated demands to keep the bus station.

TfL obviously wants to rubbish Our Vauxhall's plan. TfL put all sorts of wrong things on the website about it. It has tried to pretend that it has modelled the scheme. We know it has not. It has stated that it would not work, without giving any reasons. It has just done what it assumes it can get away with—that is, say what it wants to say and people will have to go along with it.

On 19 December, TfL published a statement about the scheme claiming to have done a comprehensive review. That contained some blatantly false and misleading statements that are now subject to a formal complaint. We have raised the matter with the Transport Commissioner and Leon Daniels. I am confident that in a straight competition Our Vauxhall's plans would outperform TfL's on a range of measures, including overall road safety and total distance travelled. They would also be much cheaper and quicker to implement and would avoid some of the issues that my right hon. Friend raised.

So what does TfL or Lambeth get out of abolishing the bus station? The proposal seems to be linked to the huge developments at Nine Elms and plans for the Northern line extension to Battersea and Nine Elms. Lambeth used the opportunity of the Northern line extension to negotiate a deal with TfL which culminated in an agreement about Vauxhall's redevelopment in November 2013. Lots of discussions have been going on about that.

TfL is a landowner in the area. The consultation does not include any new commercial development over and above what is needed to support the transport interchange. If any further development is proposed in the future, it would be subject to planning permission. That is what TfL says. Londoners, including local residents, are being asked to accept a pig in a poke—“Agree to the plans to demolish the bus station and then we'll show you what our plans involve.” TfL wants to get rid of this fine facility just to free up the land for some unspecified private development.

What do bus passengers get out of Transport for London's plan? What is being proposed is not a new bus station. That is perhaps the most shocking part of the whole exercise. There will be bus stops on pavements in four separate locations. Half the buses will stop at the side of heavily used main roads—Wandsworth Road and Kennington Lane. There is to be a huge high-rise development between some of those stops and the others near Bondway. Changing buses will be less straightforward, especially for those with mobility problems. There will be less space to wait in. Passengers will be waiting on crowded roadside pavements which will be less safe, more polluted and with less shelter, even in the planned new central area. The present canopy is very good because it extends over the roadside as well as the waiting area, so passengers do not get wet as they get on to the bus.

There is a feeling of safety in that station. Yes, we could make it greener and make other improvements, but it certainly does not need to be knocked down. The most important aspect is that Lambeth and TfL have not played fair in their consultation. At no stage has the option of retaining the bus station in its current form

been put to residents or anyone else. Indeed, in January 2014 a motion to include an option to retain the status quo was explicitly rejected in an amendment moved by the leader of the council.

The community's solution for Vauxhall shows that it is possible to retain the existing bus station structure by modifying certain entrances and exits and to get rid of the gyratory system. If the current plans for Vauxhall go ahead, the Minister must know that the second busiest bus station in London will be turned into a building site for several years, with a reduction in bus services and unacceptable disruption for all passengers. The consultation period on the plans began in December and is due to end on 17 January. We have repeatedly asked for that to be extended because it covered the Christmas holiday period and was deliberately set up to confuse people. Arranging meetings was very difficult. There is some sharp practice here, I believe.

On the maps that have been produced, interestingly, all the symbols denoting the bus stops have been placed as far apart as possible on the maps of the existing area, and as close together as possible on the proposed plan. The maps do not show accurately what will be there and how bad it will be. TfL has sent out emails to those on its Oyster card database, but that database does not include freedom pass holders, pensioners and the elderly, who we know are heavy users of the station.

At the recent public meeting people were very angry with TfL because they felt they were being—I know that I cannot use the expression “lied to”, but whatever the equivalent parliamentary term is, they felt that.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady is perfectly entitled to accuse people outside the House of lying. She cannot accuse someone in the House of lying. So she was in order, even if she did not know she was.

Kate Hoey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am very pleased to say that and I will do so because people felt that very strongly.

TfL said that it was trying to get the consultation on the plans “out of the way” by March—that means before the mayoral elections, as public bodies will enter a period of purdah in March. It has refused to extend the deadline and there has been no wider consultation in the area of Waterloo, Westminster or Southwark. Today the first meeting was held in Wandsworth in the Clapham library near Clapham Junction, and I understand that one person turned up in the first half hour.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that the current bus station is a splendid example of what is rarely achieved in urban planning—an integrated transport system where the buses are above the trains? It is also a fine iconic building.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right. How can everybody's attitude to it have changed so much in a short space of time, especially now it has been used?

I could quote all sorts of users who say how good it is, how much better than in the past, and how angry they are. For example, there are the users who go to St Thomas' hospital. People from right across south London attending appointments there tend to use it, because

south London does not have the network of tubes that other parts of London have. At present they can do that straightforwardly, all on one level and under cover. We should try to imagine what it must be like having to cross roads and pass through a multi-storey block to change buses, with a sick child in a buggy or while on crutches. All these things have genuinely not been looked at. I believe that TfL is letting down bus users, including by reducing the area available.

The bus station is on the border of Wandsworth, Westminster and Lambeth. A lot of children change buses there in the morning to go to school, and their situation has not been looked at. No one has been properly consulted. From our experience so far with the plans and the way the gyratory has been looked at, we genuinely do not think that TfL can be trusted to do the best, because it is not doing this for the right reasons.

I ask the Minister to intervene right away with his colleagues in City Hall, the current Mayor of London and TfL to halt what I call a sham consultation. It is something that will affect transport users across London, and indeed outside London, which is why it is not just a local London issue. This should not be railroaded through.

It is going to fall to the next Mayor to implement whatever is decided, and I think the next Mayor and the mayoral candidates should have a part to play in reviewing what TfL is planning. We want them to be involved in this even leading up to the mayoral elections.

The consultation should be started properly, and it should start with one simple question: “Do you want to retain the bus station?” That has never been asked. No one has had a chance to answer that. This has all been smoke and mirrors.

The bus station should not be demolished, even if this is gone ahead with, before there are the new owners of the island site, which has been put up for sale again, and before TfL has published its plans of what it wants to do with it. This is irresponsible; this uncertainty should not be allowed.

There is absolutely no certainty, and no reason has been given as to why the bus station has to be demolished, other than we know somewhere there is money involved and there is obviously interest in land and development and future plans. Well, the people of Vauxhall and the general area, including Wandsworth, are sick, sore and tired of developers coming in and making huge developments which end up doing very little for people who cannot afford those properties and are on a long waiting list. It would be an irresponsible waste of public money to knock down something that works.

Will the Minister get the Minister for London—who obviously is not in his place so he cannot respond tonight—to come and visit in the next two weeks, before 17 January? I want him to get the period extended, and then to visit and meet the people who have done so much work on a voluntary basis to get this campaign out there in the country.

This is being pushed through by smoke and mirrors. All the people who use the station—from outside London and all over London—will be horrified when they discover what is being suggested. I am suggesting the Minister should get involved now—should come along and talk to people and learn what an irresponsible waste of public money this would be. The bus station is entirely

[Kate Hoey]

functional, and appreciated by its users from all over London, and especially by the residents of Vauxhall who remember the time before it was built.

I want to end by saying that I wrote to Leon Daniels, managing director of Surface Transport, in November—I have been involved with him many times over different things—and said:

“When is someone like you going to stand up for bus users?”

He wrote back:

“I am! I have called a halt to new schemes which materially disadvantage bus passengers. Poorer reliability and slower journey times are affecting bus passengers negatively as is worsened interchange when stops are moved to less convenient places. I am now sending back such proposals with a clear message that permanent material worsening is not acceptable.”

That was what Leon Daniels said on 6 November 2015, yet TfL has not stopped the consultation and sent it back. Mike Brown, the new head of TfL, should take a lesson from the now much missed Peter Hendy, who was involved when the bus station was built and said things that were proved right about how important it was.

Thank you for the opportunity to raise this issue, Mr Speaker. I hope that the Minister will take it seriously, because it is not just a little local issue. It concerns Londoners, and it will concern more than just Londoners when it gets out into the public domain. We need proper, genuine consultation. We can have changes and get rid of the gyratory, but we have to keep the bus station. The Minister must not allow us to go back to the situation before it was built.

7.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) on securing this debate about the effect on London and its transport network of the proposed demolition of Vauxhall bus station. It follows a slightly more convivial debate that we had on the same subject last night in a different location in the building.

This debate is particularly timely, because Transport for London’s consultation on its proposals is open for another 10 days or so. If anyone has been misled during the process, I am sure the hon. Lady has clarified matters. I will ensure that a transcript of her comments and of the whole debate is sent to those she mentioned.

Transport is London’s lifeblood, and London’s transport is critical to the rest of the UK. We know that London contributes about 20% of the UK’s GDP, and that its population is set to grow to 9 million by 2020 and 10 million by 2030. We all understand the need for continued investment in transport infrastructure to allow London and the rest of the UK to continue to prosper. I do not need to tell hon. Members that transport in London is much improved from just a few years ago. We have better bus services, Boris bikes and transformational tube modernisation.

I turn now to London buses in particular. There are at least 6.5 million journeys a day on the London bus network, compared with 4 million on the tube. That amounts to 2.4 billion journeys a year on the London bus network, which is more than half of all bus journeys

made in England. I am proud that some of the buses are manufactured in Scarborough in my constituency, and some Members in the Chamber will know that a number are manufactured in Ulster. I will not comment on which might be the better buses.

Vauxhall bus station is owned and maintained by Transport for London and is, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall said, the second busiest in London after Victoria. As she will be aware, in 2013 her comrades on Lambeth Council and TfL announced plans to demolish the bus station to build a new high street as part of Vauxhall’s regeneration plans. Those plans include redesigning the transport interchange, including a new central bus station. TfL’s plans also include providing more cycle and pedestrian crossings, providing segregated lanes and parking for cyclists, and improving existing public spaces and providing new ones. As a cyclist myself, when I was down there last week I had a look at how difficult the area currently is for cyclists, despite the fact that we have a new cycle superhighway into the area.

TfL ran an initial consultation on its proposals in 2014 and is currently running a further public consultation on detailed design proposals. It received more than 2,000 responses to the initial consultation, with the majority supporting the proposals.

Kate Hoey: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mr Goodwill: By all means. I thought the hon. Lady might want to intervene.

Kate Hoey: The Minister must understand that in that consultation no one was asked whether they wanted to see the bus station removed.

Mr Goodwill: I am aware that that is the hon. Lady’s view. I have not looked at the consultation in detail, but I hope that her making these points will help her constituents respond in the time available. I encourage them to take part in TfL’s consultation and express their views before it closes on 17 January. I understand that TfL has hosted several drop-in sessions to discuss the consultation with local parties in detail—there is one tomorrow night. I encourage her constituents to attend those sessions.

The proposed changes to the bus station are an integral part of TfL’s wider plans to transform the wider Vauxhall Cross area. In turn, that is part of TfL’s £4 billion road modernisation programme, which is the biggest investment in London’s roads for a generation and which, among other things, aims to make London more cycle-friendly. The road modernisation programme consists of hundreds of projects to transform junctions, bridges, tunnels and pedestrian areas. The Government’s financial support to TfL has helped to enable it to deliver that programme, the tube modernisation programme and all other investment in London’s transport infrastructure.

For many years, Vauxhall Cross has been heavily dominated by motor vehicles. The gyratory system can be difficult to navigate and the area is very unwelcoming to pedestrians. The existing pedestrian crossings do not always follow the most direct or popular routes, which can lead, as I have observed, to pedestrians crossing

roads away from crossings. That leads to a large number of collisions involving injury to pedestrians and cyclists in London.

The overall aim of the proposals is to create a thriving, more pleasant and safer public space, with better facilities for pedestrians, cyclists and bus users alike. I should like to assure the hon. Lady that improving the area for bus users is a top priority for the Mayor and for Vauxhall's town regeneration scheme. Redesigning the transport interchange will bring benefits for not only bus users but cyclists, pedestrians and vehicles.

A new bus station will benefit bus users in a number of ways. It would be fully integrated with the new pedestrianised square and two-way road system, and would have facilities including public toilets, seating, information displays and maps, and an information kiosk. All that would mean a safer and easier interchange at the centre of Vauxhall.

TfL will ensure that bus passengers are inconvenienced as little as possible. Temporary bus stop locations will be incorporated in the construction phasing plan and consideration will be given to the ease of interchange for users, minimising alterations. The stop locations and any changes to routes will be fully communicated to all bus passengers with clear signage on site.

The hon. Lady mentioned her concern that TfL's proposals, particularly the removal of the distinctive ski-jump canopy, will mean that bus passengers have less shelter from the weather than they do today. I understand from TfL that its proposals include a new canopy in the main bus station, with a contemporary look and feel to it, that will provide shelter from the rain.

Kate Hoey: I know the Minister has the TfL briefing, but if he knew as much about TfL as we do, he would not believe it. The briefing is wrong. The proposed canopy will not go over everywhere—it will be like little bus stop covers that he can find at any bus stop. The proposal is not for a bus station or interchange, but for a hotch-potch of bus stops put together.

Mr Goodwill: I hear what the hon. Lady says. There will also be canopies providing shelter between the different parts of the new bus station. I should like to assure her that the canopies have been designed to provide a better level of weather protection than the current canopy. As the current canopy is so high, when it is a windy day, the rain can blow under it. I have observed that when I have been in the area.

The design of the bus station may be iconic, but it is certainly not universally popular. I understand that it won a certificate of merit in the structural steel design awards in 2006 in recognition of its high standards of structural and architectural design, with the judges noting that

“the bus station elegantly gathers together all the elements of public transport within an overall umbrella surface which weaves its way overhead”.

In my view, however—a view that I think will be shared by the Prince of Wales—winning an architectural design

award is not always a guarantee of long-term popularity for a structure. Although I would not go so far as to describe the current bus station as a “monstrous carbuncle”, I am prepared to say that I am not the biggest fan of the current design, but that is personal taste. Having seen artists' impressions of the proposed bus station, I would argue that it is much more pleasing to the eye than the current one.

Paul Flynn: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the Minister to call in aid members of the royal family? I understood that it was forbidden under our house rules.

Mr Speaker: Ministers should certainly tread with great care in such territory. I think that the Minister was referring to a known public statement of the Prince of Wales, but I am sure that he was not seeking to invoke his support with reference to the future of the Vauxhall bus station. I am sure that he will disavow any such intention immediately.

Mr Goodwill: Absolutely, Mr Speaker. Indeed, if one hears the word “carbuncle”, there can be only one name that comes to mind.

It might be helpful to the hon. Member for Vauxhall if I explain what TfL plans to do following the consultation. TfL has told me that it will publish a report on the results and analysis of responses in spring 2016. It plans to start construction in 2018, and it is also its firm intention that a bus station will remain in some form throughout the entire construction period.

The spending review settlement shows that we recognise that London is a city on the move. The capital's economy is moving emphatically in the right direction, and our support is helping to transform London's transport network. I am proud to be part of that transformation, together with all our partners, including TfL, although I understand that the hon. Lady is not its biggest fan. The investment we are making for the next five years will not just keep London mobile but equip the city for the challenges of the future, to compete and win in the 21st century global economy.

Kate Hoey: Will the Minister come and visit, with the Minister responsible for London, to meet the people who understand the issue much more than some of the experts at TfL?

Mr Goodwill: I will certainly extend the hon. Lady's invitation to my noble friend Lord Ahmad, who covers this area in the Department. I am sure that he will consider it carefully.

TfL's plans for Vauxhall bus station are an important part of its wider road modernisation programme and I strongly encourage all interested parties to let TfL have their views on the proposals before the consultation closes on 17 January.

Question put and agreed to.

7.46 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 6 January 2016

[MR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

Child Prisoners and Detainees: Occupied Palestinian Territories

9.30 am

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered child prisoners and detainees in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I wish you and everyone here a happy new year.

In June 2012, a delegation of leading British lawyers published a report on children held in Israeli military custody. That independent report was facilitated and funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and, based on a number of undisputed facts, found that Israel was in breach of six of its legal obligations under the UN convention on the rights of the child and two obligations under the fourth Geneva convention. The report also concluded that if allegations of abuse referred to the delegation were true, Israel would also be in breach of the absolute prohibition against cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Eight months after the UK report was published, UNICEF released its own assessment of the military detention system for children. After reviewing the available evidence, including over 400 sworn affidavits from children detained in a system with a jurisdiction to prosecute 12-year-olds in military courts, UNICEF concluded that,

“the ill-treatment of children who come in contact with the military detention system appears to be widespread, systematic and institutionalized throughout the process, from the moment of arrest until the child’s prosecution and eventual conviction and sentencing”.

Following release of these damning reports into a system of martial law that is now in its 49th year, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that,

“it would study the conclusions and work to implement them through on-going cooperation with UNICEF”.

Similar statements were made following the release of the UK report and the issue has been subject to much discussion between our two Governments during the intervening three years.

As part of those ongoing discussions, British officials have raised a number of specific issues with their Israeli counterparts, including the use of painful plastic ties to restrain children, arresting children in the middle of the night in terrifying military raids, and the mandatory use of audiovisual recording of all interrogations. In response to these interventions, the Israeli military issued standard operating procedures for the use of restraints and introduced a pilot study to use summonses instead of night-time arrests. However, in February 2015, UNICEF issued an update to its original report and noted that allegations of

“alleged ill-treatment of children during arrest, transfer, interrogation and detention have not significantly decreased in 2013 and 2014”.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I visited the west bank with my hon. Friend in September 2015 with the Council for Arab-British Understanding and Medical Aid for Palestinians, and we were briefed by Military Court Watch. Does my hon. Friend share my concern at the significant disparity between treatment of Palestinian and Israeli young people, including lack of legal representation and parental support, allegations of widespread abuse and having to sign confessions in Hebrew, among many others?

Sarah Champion: I share those concerns and will come to them. The disparity between the two legal systems includes, for example, a maximum period of detention without charge of 40 days for an Israeli child and 188 days for a Palestinian child.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this incredibly important debate. She is speaking eloquently in listing the human rights abuses in Israel and indicating that warm words to encourage Israel to act differently are not working. Does she agree that it is now time for action? For example, the UK could call for the suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement, which has a clause saying that if there are human rights abuses, there is a right to suspend the agreement. How can the agreement still be in place with that human rights clause when Israel completely ignores human rights concerns year after year?

Sarah Champion: I agree with the hon. Lady. That recommendation is superb and there are others.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes an important point, but does she accept that the context in which these situations occur is an organised campaign conducted by the Palestinian authorities of incitement, to try to provoke young Palestinians to carry out acts of violence towards other civilians, some of which result in death, including the death of young children?

Sarah Champion: I take on board my hon. Friend’s point. However, this debate is about the different treatment of Palestinian and Israeli children, and the breach of human rights and international law. I completely agree that if someone has committed a crime, they should be dealt with appropriately and with due process, but that is not what is happening at the moment.

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): On the specific point made by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) about human rights abuses and whether that should result in a breach of our relationship with Israel, did not UNICEF, which the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) quoted, highlight alleged human rights abuses of minors in the UK who were arrested during the 2011 London riots?

Sarah Champion: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, but I am talking specifically about detention of Palestinian children. If he wants to bring his point forward in another debate, I am sure that this Chamber will be equally packed.

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. She will be aware that evidence from Military Court Watch suggests that 65% of children continue to report being arrested at night in what are described as terrifying raids by the military. Will she comment on that worrying fact?

Sarah Champion: It is disturbing. A pilot study looked at not doing night raids and issuing summonses instead, but the summonses were issued after midnight, which defeated the whole object.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this undoubtedly important debate. The context in which Israel operates on the west bank is obviously incredibly difficult and none of us would want to find ourselves in it. With that in mind, will she comment on the failure of the Palestinian Authority to work with the Israeli authorities on the west bank on alternatives to detention? She knows full well that they will not engage in such alternatives. I hope that she also knows full well that the difficulty of arresting people during the day instead of the night is that it has led to deaths and riots. The authorities are operating in a very difficult context.

Sarah Champion: There are two points and I will come to some conclusions. There is a role for the British Government to work with both sides, and I accept that there are failings on both sides. However, the reason for riots when children have been arrested during the day is largely the inhumane treatment of those children. I understand why a parent would be extremely upset if their child was detained. The very fact that the Israel Defence Forces go in at night shows how hostile their behaviour is.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the context is the illegal occupation since 1967? Does she also agree that one of the most egregious elements is the difference between the treatment of Israeli children in illegal settlements and Palestinian children? Israeli children are subject to the rule of law; Palestinian children are not.

Sarah Champion: That is the nub of this debate and I appreciate the fact that my hon. Friend brought it forward. If there are no more interventions, I will make some headway.

UNICEF's findings are corroborated by evidence collected by Military Court Watch, an organisation made up predominantly of lawyers working in the region, indicating that ill-treatment within the system still seems to be "widespread, systematic and institutionalized" as of last month. In spite of UK and UN intervention, the most recent evidence indicates that the majority of children continue to be arrested in terrifying night-time military raids. In the few cases when summonses are used, most are delivered by the military after midnight and much of the information is written in Hebrew.

Some 93% of children continue to be restrained with plastic ties, many painfully so, and the standard operating procedures are frequently ignored. Around 80% of children continue to be blindfolded or hooded, a practice that the UK and UNICEF reports said should be absolutely prohibited. Audiovisual recording of interrogations has

been mandated only in non-security-related offences, which means that nearly 90% of cases involving children, including those accused of attending a demonstration, continue to take place without this practical safeguard.

Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that the reports of physical abuse—consisting mainly of punching, kicking, position abuse and slapping, but in some cases also including more serious allegations, such as of being mauled by dogs and receiving electric shocks—are now higher in number than they were in 2013.

As for the scale of the problem, Military Court Watch estimates that since June 1967 about 95,000 Palestinian children have been detained by the Israeli military. Of those, 59,000 are likely to have been physically abused in one way or another. That abuse is truly disturbing and is on an industrial scale. Why is it that after so much effort, so little progress has been made? Is there something inherent in the situation in Palestine that prevents genuine change? When I visited Israel and Palestine in September 2015 as part of a cross-party Council for Arab-British Understanding and Medical Aid for Palestinians delegation, it became apparent why little has changed during the three intervening years.

To understand the situation, one must think like an Israeli defence force soldier. Essentially, the Israeli military have but one mission in Palestine—to guarantee the protection of nearly 600,000 Israeli civilians living in illegal settlements in East Jerusalem and the west bank—an unenviable task for any military to be given. To achieve their mission, the military must engage in a strategy of mass intimidation and collective punishment of the Palestinian population, or risk the eviction of the settlers. That inevitably leads to fear, resentment and friction. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. Somebody at the back of the room is taking photographs. That is not allowed.

Sarah Champion: Thank you, Mr Chope.

As I was saying, that inevitably leads to fear, resentment and friction, often resulting in the military detention of Palestinian civilians, including children, or, to put it another way, how else could 600,000 Israeli civilians safely go about their daily lives while residing in illegal settlements in occupied territory for nearly 50 years? It is no coincidence that the one thing that all detained children have in common is that they live at a friction point located within a few kilometres of an Israeli settlement or a road used by Israeli settlers. At those friction points, the military make their presence felt through night raids, violent incursions, suppression of demonstrations, arrests and roadblocks—a fact repeatedly confirmed by former Israeli soldiers in their testimonies to the group Breaking the Silence.

Mrs Ellman: Does my hon. Friend really believe that the solution to this horrendous conflict between two peoples—the Israeli and the Palestinian people—can be found by encouraging individual child Palestinians to commit acts of violence against other human beings?

Sarah Champion: My personal view is that there have been atrocities on both sides, but my feeling is that the way to reach a solution is to treat all individuals, both children and adults, as humans and respectfully, and I do not believe that that is happening at the moment.

Another explanation as to why so little progress has been made during the past three years is that the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs delegated the task of implementing UNICEF's recommendations to Israel's military prosecutor in the west bank, who is himself a resident of an illegal settlement. That fact alone raises serious questions as to whether the Israeli authorities have any genuine intention to bring about meaningful change in accordance with their international legal obligations.

As troubling as the lack of progress may be, another issue strikes closer to home, because it highlights a blatant disregard for the international legal order established after the second world war and accordingly has the potential to endanger us all. One recommendation in the UK and UNICEF reports was as follows:

"All Palestinian children detained under Israeli military law should be held in facilities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and not in Israel, which constitutes a breach of article 76 of the Fourth Geneva Convention."

Our own Government have confirmed that legal conclusion in writing. Sadly, the latest figures released by the Israel prison service, a Government body, indicate that since that recommendation was made, the percentage of Palestinian children being transferred to prison facilities inside Israel has actually gone up and now stands at 56%.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern about British companies, such as G4S, that are operating prison facilities and illegally detaining Palestinian children in Israel, and about movements by the UK Government to stop local authorities divesting from companies that are committing atrocities in the occupied territories?

Sarah Champion: That is a very real concern, which I will shortly come on to.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Israeli authorities, if they are to make any attempt at democracy, should implement democratic laws in particular? These children, if they are guilty of wrongdoing, should be handed to civilian authorities and civilian courts.

Sarah Champion: That is the nub of the problem: the Israeli children are tried in civilian courts, but the Palestinian children are largely tried in military courts.

Andrew Percy: The allegation is that Israel is attempting, through various processes, to annex the west bank, but the imposition of civil Israeli law on the west bank would be an annexation of the west bank. It is a standard rule under UN provisions that an occupying force uses military laws and justice. Any attempt to implement the Israeli legal system would be an annexation of the west bank.

Sarah Champion: I have heard that argument before and I hope that I will deal with it in the forthcoming part of my speech.

In the case of adults, the percentage rises such that a staggering 86% are in Israeli prisons. That affects between 7,000 and 8,000 individuals annually. To make matters worse—if that were possible—the military authorities

have now informed UNICEF that they have no intention of changing that policy. It is striking that of the 38 recommendations made by UNICEF, the one stating that Palestinian children from the west bank should be held in facilities located in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is the only recommendation that UNICEF declares has been "rejected" by the Israeli authorities.

There is an unfortunate UK link when it comes to those prisons, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) highlighted. As I am sure everyone here is aware, our own G4S is providing services to the prisons that hold Palestinian detainees following their unlawful transfer from the west bank, in violation of the convention. Those commercial contracts are set to continue until 2017, even though they have been officially held to be inconsistent with the OECD guidelines for multinational enterprises.

To understand why any of this matters, it is worth briefly considering the legal provisions that prohibit transfer, and why they were thought necessary in the first place. Article 76 of the fourth Geneva convention specifically prohibits the transfer of protected persons accused or convicted of offences from an occupied territory. It is unnecessary to consider whether the convention applies to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or the status of Palestine as an occupied territory, as both those issues have been authoritatively determined by the UN Security Council in legally binding resolutions and that has been accepted by successive British Governments, putting the question beyond any sensible dispute.

The articles of the convention are accompanied by a commentary provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross, whose role includes monitoring the compliance of warring parties with the convention. The commentary makes it clear that the prohibition on transferring protected persons from occupied territory, for whatever reason, stems from the experiences of the second world war, when, as we all know, mass transfers in Europe were commonplace. Determined to avoid a repetition of those experiences, the authors of the fourth Geneva convention voted unanimously in favour of prohibiting unlawful deportation or transfer.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): "My hands were tied in front of me, so I kept reaching up to pull the blindfold off, but the soldiers kept pulling my hands down to stop me. I just wanted to go home to my dad." That was a nine-year-old. Does my hon. Friend agree that if that behaviour happened in any of our constituencies, we would be outraged?

Sarah Champion: I think that the whole room gasped when my hon. Friend read that out. We would be outraged, and I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the fact that that behaviour is happening on an industrial scale.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way for a factual point?

Sarah Champion: I will.

Ian Austin: As I understand it, the age of legal responsibility in Israel and Palestine is 12. A nine-year-old could not be detained—they just could not. It does not happen.

Sarah Champion: I completely understand my hon. Friend's incredulity, but unfortunately it does happen. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office sent out an incredibly highly regarded group of lawyers, who witnessed this and who spoke to people and to the judges. I agree that it should never happen, but unfortunately it does.

I will just go back a bit. Determined to avoid repeating those experiences, the authors of the fourth Geneva convention voted unanimously in favour of prohibiting unlawful deportation or transfer, including the transfer of detainees, and designated the practice a "grave breach" of the convention, requiring severe penal sanctions as a deterrent.

To appreciate how seriously the House views a grave breach of the convention, we need to look at the Geneva Conventions Act 1957, which provides that any person who

"commits, or aids, abets or procures the commission by any other person of a grave breach...is liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 30 years"

if convicted. Similarly, the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court, to which the UK and Palestine are states parties, and the obligations of which have been incorporated into UK domestic law, lists:

"Unlawful deportation or transfer or unlawful confinement" of protected persons as a war crime requiring heavy sanctions.

In this debate, I am putting aside the fact that transfer makes it more difficult for Palestinian families from the west bank to visit loved ones held in detention facilities in Israel. The issue I am talking about is key, because it is a violation of the fourth Geneva convention. A violation of such magnitude and duration undermines the credibility of the international legal order and its institutions, and has adverse implications for the rule of law in the region and beyond. Either alleged war crimes must be investigated, without fear or favour, where they occur; or we must accept the risk that our inaction and our turning a blind eye may eventually destroy the international legal order that was established after the second world war. That would be an enormous tragedy, because it would mean that we had abandoned whatever lessons we had learned from that conflict. I suspect that we all agree that this nation has shed too much blood, sweat and tears to abandon those hard-won principles, which were entrusted to us by those who came before us, and of which we are temporary custodians.

The transfer of detainees en masse from occupied territory is a stand-alone issue, because it is a war crime. It is not contingent on the presence or absence of peace talks. It should not be contingent on one political view or another. After nearly half a century, it requires decisive action in accordance with our international legal obligations. The fourth Geneva convention makes it clear that the UK has a positive legal obligation to search for persons accused of committing grave breaches of the convention, regardless of their nationality, and to ensure that if such persons enter the UK, they are arrested and prosecuted with all speed. That is why I recommend that in order to begin to fulfil our legal obligations, we must establish and maintain a watch list of all known war crime suspects, whoever they may be. We should know, at all times, who is coming into this country, whether we need to be concerned and what action we are legally obliged to take. As a nation, we

must send a strong message that we will no longer tolerate the commission of war crimes on such an industrial scale, and that we are a people who honour our commitments.

I would like the Minister to act on five points. I would like him to establish a watch list that includes the names of all who commit, aid, abet and procure the commission by another person of the unlawful transfer of protected persons—adults and children—from occupied territories to prisons in Israel. I want him to ensure that any individual on the watch list who attempts to enter the UK is detained for questioning and, if sufficient evidence is available, charged and prosecuted, subject to the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

I would like the Minister to continue to lobby the Israeli Government to cease the practice of unlawfully transferring protected persons—adults and children—from the occupied territory, and to relay the concerns of this House that that practice undermines international legal order. I would like him to continue to lobby the Israeli Government to implement all 40 recommendations included in the UK report, and to monitor whether any changes to military detention systems are translating into tangible improvements on the ground and resulting in a substantial reduction in the level of reported abuse.

Finally, what is the UK Government's response to Israel's reported decision to reject UNICEF recommendation 13, which was echoed in the UK lawyers' report, and which states:

"In accordance with international law, all Palestinian children detained in the Israeli military detention system shall be held in facilities located in the occupied Palestinian territory"?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. As hon. Members can see, there are many more people standing than there will be time to accommodate, because we are going to start the wind-ups at 10.30 am. I therefore ask those who are fortunate enough to catch the Chair's eye to exercise self-restraint, and I hope that an example will be set by Mr John Howell.

9.54 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I shall be brief, Mr Chope. I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing the debate, and it is a great pleasure to follow her. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The context for the debate is the level of incitement against the state of Israel from the Palestinian territories. Both Israel and the Palestinians are legally bound to abstain from incitement and hostile propaganda in accordance with the Oslo agreement and the 2003 road map, which called on all Palestinian institutions to end incitement against Israel. The Palestinian Authority's failure to deliver on its commitment to end incitement and hate education explicitly undermines the principles and conditions on which the peace process is built.

In that context, the level of continuing incitement from the Palestinian Authority is hard to believe. Considering the use of young people in the incitement process, it is quite amazing that the state of Israel has made the changes that it has to the process by which it deals with that serious matter. The majority of arrests, for example, occur during the day, and those that are

conducted at night are done at that time to minimise the danger to Israelis and Palestinians, including Israel defence forces.

The interrogation procedure is carried out in Arabic, not in Hebrew, and statements are written in Arabic. Appeals can be made to the courts that have been set up to hear the cases, and all minors brought before the court during the investigation or thereafter are represented by lawyers of their choice, provided by them or by the Palestinian Authority.

Sarah Champion: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about the process being conducted in Arabic, but we do not have evidence of that because it is not being recorded. Will he comment on access to lawyers? The maximum period of detention without access to a lawyer is 48 hours for an Israeli child, but 90 days for a Palestinian child.

John Howell: I believe that the hon. Lady is wrong about the evidence that interrogations are held in Arabic. I have the figure for investigations of which an audio or audio-visual recording was made. The number of cases in 2013 and 2014—the figures that I have—in which the investigating officer recorded the hearings is about the same, at about the 300 to 400 mark.

We are being unfairly selective against Israel, when we should focus our attention on the Saudi execution of minors. The point should also be made that the Palestinian Authority are responsible for human rights violations in the west bank, including the detention of journalists critical of the Palestinian Authority and the detention of peaceful demonstrators. In 2014—according to a Palestinian non-governmental organisation, so the figures are independent—some 2,500 Palestinian children in the west bank had been arrested by the Palestinian Authority. A number of those children were mistreated, and I will give some examples. One 15-year-old Palestinian was arrested on 24 April 2015 after a group of youths threw rocks at Palestinian Authority forces. He was beaten on his head, arm and foot with a rifle butt by a Palestinian Authority policeman.

If hon. Members want another example, in August 2015, a 14-year-old Palestinian suffered a broken arm and bruises when he was seriously beaten by a Palestinian Authority police officer who was breaking up a fight. Of the 81 Palestinian children whom the NGO had identified and provided legal aid to in 2014, almost half had suffered some form of physical violence at the hands of Palestinian police and security forces, so the argument here is not at all about just one side—that it is Israel that is the perpetrator of these attacks on children.

Andrew Percy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the biggest issues, of course, is incitement. Does he share my concern about the container of children's dolls that was headed for the Palestinian territories? I have brought one with me today—although we are not allowed to use aids. Each doll is dressed up, has a rock in its hand and has messages saying, "Jerusalem is ours" and "We are coming for Jerusalem" on it. A child with a rock in its hand—how on earth are we ever going to get peace between these two peoples when children are incited from a young age into committing what are, quite often, very serious acts of violence that have resulted in death?

John Howell: I agree with my hon. Friend. His example is a good example of the level of Palestinian incitement.

Guto Bebb: Does my hon. Friend agree that the extent of Palestinian incitement of young people to take arms and violent action almost becomes an issue of child abuse?

John Howell: I agree with that. It is a question of child abuse, and we need to direct attention to the Palestinian authorities for their handling of children.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Is not the nub of the problem the fact that there are two legal systems operating and they are not equalised? If a child happens to be Israeli, they are treated much more fairly than if they happen to be Palestinian. That is wrong and Israel should sort it.

John Howell: No, the nub of this issue is that Palestinian incitement continues. As long as it does, we will not get peace in the area. We have to end the Palestinian incitement. I urge the Foreign Office to take action on that.

Ian Austin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Howell: I will not give way; I will finish there.

10.2 am

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I will speak briefly, although I must first congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on an excellent speech and on securing the debate. The number of Members in attendance—I think there are almost 50—shows the importance that is given to this issue. I am sure that we will not do justice to the number of briefings we have received. I will only refer to one, which is from Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights. It goes beyond the many compelling individual cases that we have read about in those briefings and talks about the basic legal issues.

To return to the point I made in my intervention, paragraph 4 of that briefing says:

"There is an inextricable link between the systemic human rights violations of Palestinian children held in military detention and the overarching context of prolonged military occupation. The realisation of the right to self-determination for the Palestinian people is the optimum solution for the complete removal of 'widespread, systematic and institutionalised' violations against Palestinian children held in military detention."

Now, some of my hon. Friends may think that that is rather stating the obvious, but given some of the comments today, I think it is worth putting on the record because some Members seem to be living in an Alice in Wonderland world. The speech that we have just heard is very illustrative of that point because, according to that, the blame for all that goes wrong in the occupied territories apparently lies with the Palestinian people. There is a very easy solution to that, which is to let the Palestinians govern themselves. Last year, this House voted to allow them to police themselves in that way and not to lead to this situation.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy Slaughter: I will not give way, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind. I will speak for one or two minutes at most, hopefully setting a better example than the previous speaker in relation to the time limit.

I will simply make two points. The first is that the differential treatment between Israeli children in settlements—settlements that are illegal under international law, as this Government recognise—and Palestinian children is symptomatic of the apartheid regime that exists on the west bank and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Israeli Government Ministers are quite open now that they want annexation—they refer to the area of the west bank as Judaea and Samaria. There is no longer any pretence, and Government Members—and, indeed, Opposition Members—who seek to defend the occupation are increasingly clutching at straws in doing so.

Finally I make a plea to the Minister. His Government have a poor record on human rights. His senior Foreign Office officials have said it is no longer a priority. We have seen what they are now saying about torture and the death penalty in relation to membership of the United Nations Human Rights Council. We have seen what has happened to the ministerial code. I urge the Minister—because he is a civilised man—to look at these issues and not just to come back with platitudes today, but to address them seriously and to address this issue, which clearly concerns a large number of hon. and right hon. Members. I urge him not just to go through the motions of protesting to the Israeli authorities, but to take some action and to be very clear that Britain, internationally, will not stand for this treatment of children.

10.5 am

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Personally, I am someone who has huge respect for what Israel has achieved since its formation on 14 May 1948. Without doubt, modern Israel has been forged and inspired by what happened in the holocaust. Obviously, its foundation goes back far beyond that, but to my mind its inspiration is the fact that Jews from across the world have and can find a safe refuge there where they will never be persecuted.

It is utterly wrong that any human being should be condemned for their race or faith, but it still happens, as we all know. For Jews, the state of Israel is thus their ultimate sanctuary and insurance policy should they feel a need for it. We all understand that. Israel is also a real democracy, in a region where the majority popular writ is not greatly seen in many Governments. As such, Israel is a modern inspired state where what people think and want can be reflected in politics. Elections matter and reflect what the majority of people want to happen. Israel also has, and should have, respect for law and order. In democracies all citizens are equal before the law.

Mr Gregory Campbell: Previously, the hon. Gentleman indicated an issue that he felt was getting to the very nub of the problem. He is now discussing the history of the origin of the state of Israel. Does he agree with me that part of the nub of the problem is that in the middle east there is still a belief among some that peace will only come with the utter annihilation of the state of Israel?

Bob Stewart: Yes, I accept that point. Of course there is that belief among some people. It is wrong. It should not happen.

It is with a certain amount of bewilderment that I watch how Israeli law in practice differs from one individual to another in an area controlled by Israel, specifically the west bank. There is certainly not equality before the law for all who live there. Jewish settlers are treated very differently from Palestinians. It worries me that two kinds of law apply in the west bank, depending on race and nationality identity. If someone transgresses and they are a Jewish settler child, they are tried under civil law, but if they are a Palestinian minor, they automatically go before a military court, which has very different procedures and punishments.

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Stewart: No, I am sorry. I will not take any more interventions.

I understand and accept that legally applying civil law to Palestinians in the west bank would be tantamount to unlawful annexation of the area. I agree with that point but, when dealing with civilians, both civil and military laws should be equalised so that children—whether they are Jewish or Palestinian—are treated equally. At this point I pay tribute to Gerard Horton of Military Court Watch—a great lawyer.

According to the Israeli prison service, 407 Palestinian children aged 12 to 17 have been in military detention since 30 November 2015, which is a 33% increase on the previous month. The number of children in detention is now at its highest level since March 2009, and is 54% above the level that Foreign Office lawyers witnessed when they produced their report. Of course that is wrong. Who would not dispute circumstances in which children can be arrested at night, blindfolded and hooded? Who would dispute that lawyers should be present at every interrogation, that parents should be given the option to be present too, that all interrogations should be audio-visually recorded and, importantly, that no child should be transferred out of the west bank into Israel?

In the past, when I commanded British forces in Bosnia—I am sad to say this—I witnessed what were clearly crimes against humanity. Many people, including children, were arrested because of their race. They were ill-treated, detained and improperly locked away in totally inappropriate circumstances. It saddens me to make an analogy—I do so with huge hesitation because of my love for Israel and what it has achieved, and because of the Jewish historical experience—yet I am sorry to say that the way Palestinian children are dealt with in the west bank has some disturbing similarities with what I witnessed happening to children in the Balkans. To me it is utterly wrong that a democratic, enlightened, pro-western state such as Israel, with two different legal systems, clearly differentiates—

Guto Bebb: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Bob Stewart: I will not give way.

Guto Bebb: You should.

Bob Stewart: No, I should not. It is my right.

Guto Bebb: This is a debate.

Bob Stewart: Okay, I give way. Let us hear it.

Guto Bebb: I find my hon. Friend's comments frankly disgraceful in view of the murder of 10,000 people in Srebrenica simply because they were Muslim. To make that comparison is unworthy.

Bob Stewart: I am so sorry, but I disagree. I am not making a comparison with Srebrenica.

Guto Bebb: You just did.

Bob Stewart: No, I am not making a comparison with Srebrenica. I was there; you weren't.

It is wrong for there to be differentiation between systems, and that is the whole point of this debate. Please, Israel, we want this to stop. What is happening is plainly against international law and practice. It must stop. If it does not, people such as me, who actually are big supporters of Israel, will lose the urge to be supporters. Please, Israel, sort this out.

10.13 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I personally thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for bringing this extremely important debate to the House today.

I will be brief because so many Members wish to speak, and I will address some specific issues relevant to my background understanding. First, psychological research shows that children, particularly young children, are prone to suggestibility when interrogated under pressure, which makes it more likely that confessions or evidence given in such circumstances will be unreliable if the child is not treated as a vulnerable witness and accordingly given full rights. Those rights would normally include the presence of a lawyer and an appropriate adult for support and, as the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) described, the video recording of interviews to ensure that children understand what they are asked, to ensure that the way in which it is asked is not leading or suggestive and to ensure that evidence is not gained through emotional pressure, perceived threat or actual threat. Trained interviewers who are skilled in interviewing minors should be involved. Those are only some of the many safeguards accorded to child witnesses in the UK, in line with our best practice guidance. As a psychologist, I feel that such guidance must be enacted across the world in any situation in which children are interviewed.

The lengthy detention of children in the circumstances described has an impact, particularly upon their psychological health, which is likely to be gravely affected, causing concern due to the increased risk of mental health problems.

Ian Austin: As a psychologist, will the hon. Lady comment on the likely impact on children of the Palestinian Authority's glorification of terrorists who have murdered Israelis, presenting them as role models? What is the likely impact on children of Palestinian schools using textbooks that glorify violence and of countless examples

of hatred and anti-Semitism being promoted on children's television programmes on official Palestinian Authority TV in the west bank?

Dr Cameron: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I have already spoken in other debates, including a debate on child soldiers, about children's vulnerability to influence, which is a concern where children, in any context across the world, may be affected by influences that promote violence.

Lengthy detention is not something that we would advocate; treatment is the optimal response, because we are dealing with children. If we imagine our own children being detained for a lengthy period in another country where there may be limited access to family, and where they are living in fear and uncertainty for their future and with a lack of appropriate support, we would feel distraught, helpless and angered. Our children would likely be terrified. I therefore conclude by urging the Minister to take account of the best practice to protect vulnerable children, which we hold so dear in this country, and I urge him to ensure that representations are made to Governments across the world, including Israel, on the importance of such fundamental rights, children's human rights and legal rights, in the context described.

10.17 am

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I will be extremely brief. First, however, I commend the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing this important debate. She and I went on the same CAABU-organised visit to the west bank in September 2015. I declare that I am a board member of CAABU.

A number of hon. Members have mentioned context, which is all-important when considering the issues arising in this debate. The basic context is that Israel has been the occupying power in Palestine for almost the past half century. The fact that Israel is the occupying power brings certain responsibilities and duties. The question that has to be considered is whether Israel, as the occupying power in Palestine, is discharging those duties properly.

We have already heard about the two UNICEF reports, which concluded that Israel is in significant breach of its duties in Palestine. Those reports were supported by the report of United Kingdom jurists, which was funded and sponsored by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It is therefore missing the point for hon. Members to suggest that there is fault on both sides. The significant point is whether there is a breach of law. If there is a breach of law on the part of Palestinian children, those Palestinian children should be dealt with in accordance with the law. The difficulty, of course, is that the legal system applied by the occupying authority in Palestine is a military legal system. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) mentioned, Palestinian children who find themselves caught up in the military court process are treated differently from Israeli children who may have committed similar crimes. I do not wish to repeat arguments that have been advanced by other hon. Members.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jones: I will not, because I am anxious that as many other hon. Members as possible should have an opportunity to speak.

The most troubling aspect of the matter is the breach of article 4 of the fourth Geneva convention, which clearly describes the transportation of people in occupied areas out of those areas as a war crime. There can be no doubt that war crimes are being committed by representatives of the Israeli authorities, which should be of extreme concern to everybody in this House and particularly Ministers in the Foreign and Commonwealth office. So I look forward to hearing from my hon. Friend the Minister as to what action the FCO proposes to take.

I will conclude by saying that Israel is a country that attracts the admiration of—I would suggest—most hon. Members who are present here in Westminster Hall today. Israel frequently styles itself as the only democracy in the region. Frankly, the way that Israel is conducting itself is in a way that should bring shame to any self-respecting democracy, and even those of us who consider ourselves to be friends of Israel should point out, in a friendly manner, that that is a matter that the Israeli authorities themselves should also address.

10.21 am

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing this very important debate, and it is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope.

I will keep my speech very brief. The hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) referred to a doll. I would argue that people do not need dolls to promote hate and violence. What we have before us in Israel and Palestine is children between the ages of nine and 12 experiencing discrimination. I have children of my own who are aged eight and 11, but I cannot begin to imagine the trauma and the stamp on Palestinian children's brains and hearts of hatred towards the Israeli military as they grow up and face discrimination, as well as the way they are treated in custody. So I would argue that we do not need props.

Only recently, Shin Bet told the Israeli Government that Abbas was not encouraging terror and was actually promoting peace. So, I disagree with my hon. Friends when they say that the Palestinians are promoting this kind of propaganda.

Guto Bebb: Will the hon. Member give way?

Naz Shah: No, I will not, because I will not speak for long.

As a former chair of a mental health charity and having my own children, I really struggle to understand why the Israeli Government and the world are silent on dealing with the trauma that these Palestinian children are growing up with. Surely we know that hate breeds hate; laws aside, that is just common sense. There are children who are blindfolded and tortured. We have got evidence before us. How can my hon. Friends ignore that? How can anyone even present a counter-argument to it? We are talking about the basic humanitarian right of children, which we in this House have signed up to, and we must support these children with conviction. There should be no excuse for taking children aged nine away from their homes, detaining them and sending them to prison. That is absolutely unacceptable.

Mrs Ellman: I note my hon. Friend's comments that a child should not be detained, and I assume that she means in any circumstances. Suppose a child was involved in an act of violence that resulted in the deaths of other human beings. That is what has happened with young Palestinians throwing stones—people have been killed. In those circumstances, surely she thinks that there should be detention.

Naz Shah *rose—*

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I thought that the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) had finished her speech, but—

Naz Shah: Can I just respond to that question, Chair?

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I will allow the hon. Lady to respond, and then we will go on to the next speech.

Naz Shah: I will respond very briefly. The fact is that the disproportionality of someone throwing a stone or a rock and being detained for it is not acceptable. That is the reality of what is happening with children.

Ian Austin: Last February, four-year-old Adele Biton died after being critically injured by youths in a stone-throwing incident. I am just as worried as my hon. Friend is about the detention of children, but she should not minimise the crimes and violence that are taking place on the other side as well.

Naz Shah: I will finish by clearly making the point that the Israeli Government have not provided any evidence of any child causing a death, or contributing to a death, using a stone. There is no evidence of that.

10.24 am

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Chope, for calling me to speak and I will endeavour to be brief. I commend the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this debate. Obviously, it would have been great if we could have had more time for it.

I find it a sad coincidence that this is the week that unfortunately the UN human rights envoy to the Palestinian territories has resigned from his post because of lack of access to information. I urge the Minister to try to follow that up.

Many years ago during the first intifada, I reported on many matters in the region, including children who were detained by Israelis, some of whom had suffered injuries and others who had been killed. This debate is not about gunshot wounds, which unfortunately I had to report on a great deal, and it is not about mortality, which unfortunately I also had to report on many times. However, I am saddened by this debate, because every single recommendation in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office-funded report—all 40 of them—could have been written by me all those years ago during the first intifada. I did that reporting job in the hope that things would improve.

I applaud what my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said, from his viewpoint as a witness, about how children should be treated. In the

occupied territories, I met children who had been subject to many of the things that we have heard about today.

I fully support the UN convention on the rights of the child, and I urge the Minister to urge the Israeli Government to support it. I also fully support the Geneva convention, and again I urge the Minister to urge the Israeli Government to support it as well.

I was a witness for two years in the occupied territories, but I have also been a witness as an MP in my constituency of Twickenham, where I witnessed a child being arrested by my local police. I had a minor flashback to my time in the occupied territories when I realised how different the experience in Twickenham was. I actually applauded my borough commander after that shift, and told him how impressed I was by my local police, because they were both clear and kind to the child in explaining what was happening to them and who they could talk to. That child was not distressed, which was an absolute contrast to all the times that I witnessed children who had been detained and undergone other experiences in the occupied territories.

Therefore, I urge the Minister to please urge the Israeli Government to adhere to all the recommendations in the report, most importantly recommendation 40:

“There needs to be a comprehensive and independent monitoring system.”

I also urge him to urge the Israeli Government to work with senior people in the military in Israel, because I never, ever met a senior military person in Israel who wanted cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of children. There are people in Israel who do not support bad treatment of children.

There should be no discrimination for children whether in Gaza, Bethlehem, west Jerusalem, or east Jerusalem: they should all be treated like the child in Twickenham.

10.28 am

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this very important debate. As a former chairman of Labour Friends of Palestine and the Middle East, this issue is very close to my heart.

The treatment of child prisoners in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is deeply concerning, counterproductive and completely discriminatory. As has already been pointed out, currently in the west bank we see two laws: Israeli civilian law, which only applies to those with Israeli citizenship; and Israeli military law, which applies to the Palestinian population.

Since 2000, at least 8,000 Palestinian children have been arrested and prosecuted in Israeli military detention facilities, which are notoriously bad in their treatment of children. A UN report found that out of 208 affidavits that had been collected, 91% of those spoken to reported being painfully hand-tied and 82% reported physical abuse.

Dr Paul Monaghan: Does the hon. Member agree that the current situation and the current sustained level of child imprisonment evidences a judicial process in Israel that lacks all proportionality and requires international intervention to protect victims on both sides of this conflict?

Simon Danczuk: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

I am conscious of time, so I will turn quickly to the issue of parents and guardians not being able to accompany their children when they have to appear before court. Many such issues come up time and again, including how children cannot or do not have legal representation while they are detained. Military Court Watch reports that 73% of children detained said that they were simply not aware of their right to remain silent. What is also damning is that in 30% of cases, the prosecuted child was made to sign their plea in Hebrew.

To conclude—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid we have already reached 10.30 am. We have to start the wind-up speeches; otherwise everyone will be squeezed out and it may not be possible for the proposer of the motion to respond, which is always desirable in a debate such as this.

10.30 am

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The sheer number of people who have come to the debate and tried to speak shows the importance of this issue. I have to declare an interest, which many people are aware of, as I spent a considerable time in Gaza and Lebanon working as a surgeon. Like the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias), I experienced these things well over 20 years ago. I was working in Gaza when the Oslo agreement started, and look where we are 23 years on: absolutely nowhere. For many people living in Gaza or the west bank, things are worse. When I was out there in 2010, I was shocked by the sheer scale of settlements. Members have talked about how the context is incitement, but there is no requirement to incite the Palestinian children, because they are completely surrounded by the issue all the time. We are talking about huge towns and housing estates flowing over the hills. One only has to look at the map on the front of the briefing from the House of Commons Library to see how little territory within the west bank is under the control of the Palestinian Authority. It is by far the minority. The industrial annexation of the west bank is the underlying problem, and we have allowed the issue to go down the agenda.

Ian Austin: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Whitford: No, I will not, because I am trying to leave time for a wind-up speech at the end.

We have allowed ourselves not to try to solve the problem. We are talking about how children are treated. I totally accept the point that the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) made; the Israelis must try these children in a military court—that is a requirement, otherwise they would be seen as annexing the west bank—but it is about the way that the children are treated. They are arrested by the military, held and interrogated and taken to a military court. There is no requirement for a military court to treat the children badly.

Andrew Percy: One point we have heard repeated today is about people not having access to legal representation or parents, but will the hon. Lady accept,

[*Andrew Percy*]

because it is a fact, that the situation is the same in the domestic law in Israel on minors? Similarly, many of the standard operating procedures that apply in the west bank have been copied over from the domestic law in Israel. Also, in terms of Gaza, when the Israelis left we ended up with a police force that was throwing people off buildings.

Dr Whitford: That is why I will not be taking any more interventions. If the hon. Gentleman compared the domestic civilian law in Israel and the situation in the military courts, he would find that they are nothing like each other. We have the reports from the delegation in 2011, the report in 2012, UNICEF's report in 2013 and the update in 2015, and things have not changed. She is sadly no longer in her place, but the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) talked about this. If we simply imagine a 12-year-old or a 14-year-old that we know going through this situation, whether they are in our family or are around us, what do we think it will produce? They are shaken awake to find two men with military weapons and they are dragged from their bed. They are blindfolded or hooded and their hands are tied behind their back. They are thrown on the floor of a military vehicle and driven for a couple of hours. They are then left with no food or drink and often no access to the toilet, and eventually their interrogation starts.

There is no audiovisual recording or evidence to show how the children were treated, but the affidavits collected by one charity after another, including B'Tselem, which is an Israeli non-governmental organisation, show that these children are being abused, threatened and frightened on an industrial scale, with more than two thirds of them being made to sign a confession in a language they do not understand. None of them reported having a parent with them. Only 97% reported not having a lawyer, so a whole 3% got access to a lawyer. The vast majority will meet their lawyer at the time of their first hearing. That leads to a high rate—it is in the nineties—of plea bargaining. They are told, “You have been held for three months. You will be held longer if you decide to contest this. Actually, that thing you signed is a confession.” They then end up in prison, miles away in Israel, with their parents unable to visit them for more than 45 minutes a month. Those parents have to get permission, which nowadays they are unlikely to get.

We have children who may be held for 18 months, without seeing a parent or family member, for throwing stones. What does Israel think that that produces? The child will have post-traumatic stress disorder. They will have missed schooling and will be suffering from all sorts of psychological problems, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). They will probably fail at school. They will not have work; work is hard enough to find in the west bank at the best of times. What we will have created is an angry young person who is ripe to be recruited to be violent and who hates Israel. That is not the solution to get peace.

Ian Austin: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Whitford: No, I will not. I need to conclude shortly. We need to get Israel back to the table and we need to get a peace process going. We need to realise

what is happening in the west bank. It is simply being built over, and things boil over. If these children have committed crimes, they must be arrested and tried. The evidence must be brought, but it behoves Israel, even though it is through a military system, to ensure that it meets the terms of the UN convention on the rights of the child, which it signed in 1991, with the presentation of high-quality evidence taken from children who have been well-treated. At the moment we have the terrorisation and intimidation of children, confessions that cannot be trusted and children who will turn into the violent terrorists of the future. That is not in the interests of Israel or Israelis. It is not in the interests of Palestinians. We need to use our power not just to tut and to click our tongue, as was discussed last night in relation to what has happened in Saudi Arabia. The UK should stand up aggressively for human rights and not be a pushover.

10.37 am

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Chope. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing the debate and on her excellent opening speech. Since she has been a Member of this House, she has been a constant and tireless campaigner for children, no matter where they live. This debate has been well-attended and well-informed, and has reflected the strong opinions across the House. Many Members have visited the region and speak with experience. We have also benefited from the professional expertise of certain Members, with their backgrounds in psychology, mental health and medicine, and also as a professional soldier.

Before turning to the specific issue of children, I should, as others have, comment on the wider context of today's debate and reiterate the Labour party's commitment to support a negotiated two-state solution for the two peoples of Israel and Palestine. As has already been said, the situation in Israel and the west bank is bleak. There are no peace talks, and there is no immediate prospect of peace talks. We appear to be as far from a resolution to the conflict as at any point in the past 20 years, while the continued settlement building makes the prospect of a two-state solution even less likely.

Tensions are escalating on both sides, and sadly we have seen a number of terrorist attacks against both Palestinians and Israelis in recent weeks and months. As with any conflict, it is children who often suffer most. The international community has a particular obligation to children, as laid out in the UN convention on the rights of the child. Israel, as a signatory to that convention, is expected to uphold those rights. Furthermore, as an occupying power, Israel has obligations under the Geneva convention towards Palestinian child prisoners.

As we have heard today, there are numerous and highly concerning reports that the detention of children, some of whom are very young, breaches those obligations. That should concern us all not only because it amounts to abuse, but because we want a better future for Israel and Palestine, and today's children are central to that hope. What we should be working towards and what the international community should be promoting is co-operation and dialogue between Palestinian and Israeli children, to enable a shared and peaceful future.

Andrew Percy: I could not agree more on trying to bring groups together. On a recent visit to Israel—I declare an interest—we met the MEET group, which brings Palestinian and Jewish children together. It is a fantastic organisation. However, the hon. Lady knows I was a schoolteacher. Would I have delivered the following to any of my lessons? This is from a grade 8 Palestinian textbook:

“Today’s Muslim countries need urgently Jihad and Jihad fighters in order to liberate the robbed land and to get rid of the robbing Jews”.

That is the context of a lot of the violence. Yes, we must hold Israel to account, but we must also hold the Palestinians to account for the abuse of children through the school system.

Diana Johnson: I want to come on to deal with the point that the hon. Gentleman has just made. I think that every Member—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. Up until now we have had mutual respect, and I think that should continue.

Diana Johnson: I think that every Member of this House would agree that the involvement of children in conflict is absolutely wrong. Before I go on to deal with some of the specific issues around the Israeli response to Palestinian child prisoners, I want to refer to the 2005 assertion from Amnesty International:

“Palestinian armed groups have repeatedly shown total disregard for the most fundamental human rights, notably the right to life, by deliberately targeting Israeli civilians and by using Palestinian children in armed attacks. Children are susceptible to recruitment by manipulation or may be driven to join armed groups for a variety of reasons, including a desire to avenge relatives or friends killed by the Israeli army.”

Moving on to the issue before us today—the treatment of child prisoners—in 2012 the Government convened a group of eminent lawyers with expertise in human rights and child welfare to investigate what was going on. I commend the Government for doing that and I commend all the lawyers involved, including my right hon. and learned Friend the Baroness Scotland. The report concluded that Israel’s treatment of Palestinian child prisoners amounted to a series of breaches of the rights of the child, including article 2 on discrimination and article 3 on the child’s best interests. More concerning still, the lawyers encountered significant evidence that Israel may be in breach of the general prohibition on cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

The following year, in March 2013, UNICEF released a report, “Children in Israeli Military Detention”, which prompted the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to express,

“its deepest concern about the reported practice of torture and ill-treatment of Palestinian children arrested, prosecuted and detained by the military and the police, and about the State party’s failure to end these practices in spite of repeated concerns expressed by treaty bodies, special procedures mandate holders and United Nations agencies”.

UNICEF made 38 recommendations to improve the treatment of child detainees. Many of these overlapped with the 40 recommendations from the UK legal delegation, which covered the five clear areas of arrest, interrogation, bail hearings, sentencing and the investigation of complaints. Those were all important recommendations. In response,

there have been a few welcome military orders issued by the IDF, including military order 1711, which reduces the time a Palestinian child can be detained prior to appearing before a military court judge, and military order 1745, which requires interrogations to be conducted in a language the child can understand, and to be recorded. However, this order does not apply if a child is suspected of committing a security offence such as throwing stones, and that is of concern.

A 2014 UNICEF working group on grave violations against children gathered 208 statements from detained children and found that, among other things, 171 reported being subject to physical violence and 144 reported being subject to verbal abuse. Of the 38 recommendations made by UNICEF in March 2013, only five were deemed to have been addressed by March 2015, although 15 were partially addressed and 14 were under discussion. It is important to note that Israel has rejected only one recommendation outright. The British Government need to do much more to hold the Israeli Government to account in terms of what they are doing to meet the recommendations that have been made.

In a recent answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), it looked as though there was little tangible progress in implementing the recommendations that have been set out. Nor can I say there is much evidence that the Government are prioritising the issue. Although I welcome the efforts of our ambassador in Tel Aviv to raise the issue, I think Ministers can do far more. In conclusion—

Ian Austin: Before she concludes, will the hon. Lady give way?

Diana Johnson: No; I need to complete my speech.

In conclusion, I hope the Minister will make it unambiguously clear today that the UK Government stand behind all 40 of the UK recommendations and will explain to the House how he intends to encourage Israel to do far more to implement the recommendations as soon as possible.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to see you chairing this important debate, Mr Chope. I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing what is a well-attended debate. I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady: it is an important debate. I am sorry it is taking place here—no disrespect, Mr Chope—but such matters should be debated in the main Chamber and given more time. I am very sorry that colleagues were not able to get in; I will do my best to write to them. I apologise for not being able to answer everybody’s questions in the short time that I have. I want to allow time for the hon. Member for Rotherham to reply at the end. Forgive me again: I do not intend to take any interventions.

I want to pick up on a couple of points made by hon. Members before I respond to the points made by the hon. Member for Rotherham. First, my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) made the important point that we should not forget that Israel is a democracy in a very difficult neck of the

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

woods. We encourage and support Israel to continue to support the democratic process. We are a friend of Israel and we work with the United States to ensure it maintains high standards and the rule of law. That is very important indeed. It is very easy when a country is under pressure, as we have found ourselves—Guantanamo Bay is an example—to allow standards to slip. So it is important that we are constructively critical but supportive of Israel in the challenges that it faces.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas)—regrettably, she is not in her place—mentioned that the EU-Israel association agreement should be suspended if Israel does not live up to its human rights obligations. The agreement could be suspended, but it provides the framework for human rights and other issues to be debated. It provides an important forum for such things to be discussed, so we would be doing ourselves a disservice if we suspended it.

I have a huge respect for the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and how he keeps pressure on the Government in a variety of areas, including human rights. However, he is being a little disingenuous in saying that human rights is not a priority for the Government. Whatever has been said, I can assure him and all those here today that in all the countries in my portfolio—other Ministers would say the same—human rights, the rule of law, democracy, governance and freedom of speech are important matters. Where appropriate and in whichever country I visit, including Israel, where I will be going shortly, I will raise those issues.

Andy Slaughter *rose*—

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way, but I would be delighted to have a cup of tea with the hon. Gentleman to discuss the issues in more detail.

The hon. Member for Rotherham made an important speech that was accurate in many respects. I welcome the initiatives and the thinking about how we can resolve matters. If she will allow me, I will give consideration to the five points that she raised and I will write to her. Again, I will be more than happy to sit down with her and discuss the issues as we take stock. A lot of the issues have legal parameters, as she will know.

The Government share Members' concerns about the treatment of children, including Palestinian children, who are detained in Israel. Israel has a legal and moral responsibility to ensure that international standards are upheld. It is especially abhorrent to see child detainees suffering inhumane treatment, whether it is in Israel, the occupied territories, or anywhere else in the world. We are pleased that the Israeli Government have made progress on improvements, but we are pushing for further implementation of the required reforms.

Members from across the House have said that we need to put what we see in context. Co-operation is needed between the Palestinian authorities and Israel to deal with child prisoners. There is also the fundamental absence of a two-state solution, which is the cause of this problem. Members have mentioned the appalling use of children to commit acts of violence. The level of incitement is worrying, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) pointed out, but that should

not prevent us from encouraging Israel, working with it and being critical of it on those points, as allies and friends are able to do.

As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said, it has been a long time since Oslo, Madrid, Camp David, the Wye crossing opening and so forth. It is very frustrating indeed. I agree that we seem further from a solution at the moment. We need leadership. It is very sad that individual Palestinians, who are not prompted by an intifada but have no faith in their own leadership, are going out, killing Israelis and causing mayhem on the streets of Israel in the knowledge that they will be killed. They are not scared to die. We are in a very dangerous place, which is why we call on all sides to come together and look forward to resolve these matters.

This debate is not about the middle east peace process, much as we can wander into it, nor about the occupied territories, although I agree that those issues are related to what we are discussing, so I will focus my remarks on the specific points that have been made. As has been said, in 2012 the UK funded an independent report entitled "Children in Military Custody" by leading British lawyers. Since then, Ministers and the British ambassador in Tel Aviv have spoken and written to the Israeli Justice Minister, Attorney General and military advocate general to urge Israel to take action based on the report's findings. In February 2013, UNICEF published a report entitled "Children in Israeli Military Detention" and a progress report later that year. Those reports and lobbying by the international community have had an impact. We will continue to make this issue a focus of our engagement with Israel, and we plan to fund a follow-up visit by the delegation in February 2016 to report on further progress.

The UNICEF progress report of October 2013 noted that Israel has taken important positive steps towards addressing the recommendations in the 2012 report by updating its existing standard operating procedures and policies on the arrest of minors. Those updates include changing the policy on methods of restraint and limiting the use of blindfolds to only when there is a security need. Israel has also increased the age of majority for Palestinian children. The Israeli military committed to conducting a pilot of using written summons, instead of night-time arrests, which has now been concluded.

We welcome the steps that have been taken to date, but we continue to call for further measures, including the mandatory use of audio-visual recording of interrogations, an investigation into continued reports of the use of single-hand ties and an end to solitary confinement for children. We also challenge Israel's classification of diverse incidents—for example, stone throwing and participating in illegal demonstrations—as national, as opposed to criminal, offences. We also said that minors should consistently have access to lawyers before interrogation, and that they should have the right to have their parents present during their detention or interrogation.

We remain concerned about Israel's extensive use of administrative detention, which, according to international law, should be used only when security makes it absolutely necessary, rather than as a routine practice. Administrative detention should also be used only as a preventive measure and not as a punitive one. We continue to call on Israeli authorities to comply with their obligations under international law and either charge or release

detainees. We regularly raise that matter and other broader concerns about the treatment of Palestinian detainees of all ages with the Israeli authorities. We have done so at Foreign Minister, Attorney General and National Security Adviser levels.

Members also mentioned the recent violence in the west bank. We very much condemn what is going on there at the moment, and we remain extremely concerned about the terrorist incidents that have resulted in a number of deaths and multiple innocent civilians wounded. We are also concerned about the use of force by Israeli security personnel in response to protests and security incidents. The Foreign Secretary and I have publicly called on both sides to restore calm and improve the situation on the ground.

I am conscious of time, so let me conclude. This is obviously an emotive issue. That much is clear from Members' valuable contributions. I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham for enabling this debate to take place. I welcome the positive steps Israel has made in implementing some of the recommendations of the "Children in Military Custody" report, but the Government remain concerned about the treatment of Palestinian children detained in Israeli prisons. The UK has made repeated representations to Israel about the treatment of child detainees, and I assure Members that this issue will remain a focus for us. We are committed to this matter, and I will raise it when I visit Israel next month. We will remain engaged on it.

10.56 am

Sarah Champion: I welcome the Minister's comments. The point of this debate is that we want children to be treated in a fair, just and legal manner, regardless of their race or the crime they committed. We want to ensure that international law is observed.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware that, as the US State Department noted, the Israeli military courts have a conviction rate

of more than 99% for Palestinians. Does she share my concern that it is influenced by coercive interrogation and the lack of an Arabic translation of documents in interrogation?

Sarah Champion: I completely agree. Hon. Friends have made that point very well already.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The Minister, in reply to my hon. Friend, said that he wanted to reflect on the five points that she made. He also said that a follow-up delegation will go out in February. May I ask the Minister, through my hon. Friend, to indicate whether he thinks that there should be a full debate in the main Chamber on this issue after that? Clearly, there is a great deal of interest in this issue and a lot of people want to make points.

Sarah Champion: When I have my meeting with the Minister, I will push that very point.

Andy McDonald: Palestinian children have been subjected to such treatment for decades. Generation after generation grow up having experienced violence and trauma, and they harbour feelings of resentment, persistent anger, hatred and mistrust as a result. Does my hon. Friend agree that, unless those gross and offensive violations cease, the prospects for peace will continue to diminish?

Sarah Champion: Sadly, I agree. Everybody in this Chamber and in the country wants lasting peace. We should all be driving for a two-state solution.

I am delighted that the Minister has agreed to meet with me. I want to discuss with him how the UK can meet its legal and humanitarian obligations. I thank the Minister and Members in this Chamber for participating in this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered child prisoners and detainees in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Refugees in Calais

11 am

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered assistance to refugees in Calais.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Chope, and to welcome the Minister to his place as he arrives. In the brief time available, I will first say a little about my involvement with the “jungle” camp in Calais and the circumstances there. I do not know whether the Minister has visited the camp—a nod would suffice.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Refugees (Richard Harrington): I have not visited Calais, but I have visited many refugees and I have received extensive reports about the camp.

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful. I hope that the Minister will find the time to visit, because I will not be able to do justice to the situation in the time available to me. Alongside Calais, there is also the issue of Dunkirk. I have several questions for the Minister, but if he is unable to answer them today, I am sure he will write to me.

Martin McTigue, a senior manager at the London ambulance service and a constituent of mine, contacted me in December and suggested that I visit the jungle camp with him, which I then did. Mr McTigue’s involvement came through Samad Billoo, who is involved in a charity called HANDS International. The charity was set up in Pakistan in 1979 to bring relief to villages there. It is a substantial charity in Pakistan, but its first venture outside Pakistan was to set up an immunisation clinic in the jungle camp in Calais. Sam also works for the London ambulance service, and I found quite a number of paramedics and others who work for the LAS out in the jungle camp providing not only immunisations—40% of the 6,000 or 7,000 people have been immunised against flu—but basic medical procedures. I met a great number of people and will not be able to pay tribute to them all, but I want to mention Abi Evans, another paramedic from the LAS, who has also devoted a lot of time. These individuals are giving up every weekend, and substantial parts of their week through leave, to go out to minister to the refugees in the jungle camp and the camp at Dunkirk.

I mention that background, which is interesting in itself, but it is a curious state of affairs when the relief of several thousand people situated 30 miles from the British coast on the land of our nearest neighbour, a prosperous and civilised country, is reliant on the skilful and diligent attentions of British volunteers. Whether they are medics bringing food aid or helping with shelter, clothing and other matters, these people are predominantly British. They are all volunteers. Some of them have expertise and some do not.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy Slaughter: I will in a moment.

These people simply saw a humanitarian crisis and wanted to assist. However, that is the limit of the support that has been provided to the refugees so far. There is no support from major charities or from the

UN, not because they do not want to be involved—Save the Children and Amnesty International have provided briefings for this debate and are very concerned about conditions at the jungle—but because the French Government have persistently refused to recognise the situation as a refugee issue and see it as a border control issue.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy Slaughter: In a moment.

The French Government will not allow major NGOs and humanitarian organisations into the camp, nor have they been providing any real assistance themselves. That is changing, but only following legal action by Médecins sans Frontières, which is present in the camp alongside Médecins du Monde. They had to take the French Government to court in order to get some response, but the Government there will not provide any permanent accommodation. Heated tents are now being constructed for 1,500 people—presumably women, children and the vulnerable—but that is the limit. I saw that part of the camp being built and it will clearly be better, but it is not complete and the winter may well be over before it is finished. That is an appalling way for a civilised country such as France to treat people in dire and desperate need.

I will now give way twice.

Dr Lisa Cameron: Many thanks to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I share many of the concerns that he has expressed in such detail. Does he agree that it is of the utmost importance that children in Calais have access to education? Even one lost day of schooling for a child refugee is a day too many.

Kirsten Oswald *rose*—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman must accept one intervention at a time.

Andy Slaughter: I was trying to save time, Mr Chope, but it obviously had the opposite effect. I will come to the good point made by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) later, but I will first give way to the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald).

Kirsten Oswald: Like my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s sentiments. I am concerned that those who are supporting the refugees in the Calais are volunteers giving up their time. In my constituency, many volunteers have undertaken collections, raising more than £7,000 for the refugees, and provided a convoy of goods and food to Calais. Funds are now being raised for a trip to Dunkirk to provide more much-needed food and supplies. The situation is unacceptable.

Andy Slaughter: My attempt at a multiple intervention was clearly an innovation too far, but I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. A lorry load of supplies, organised by Reverend Bob Mayo of the Church of St Stephen and St Thomas in Shepherd’s Bush, went out from my constituency before Christmas. Communities all over

the country are assisting, if not directly by their own intervention, then by giving money and goods, which is to everybody's credit.

During the day I spent at the camp on 21 December with HANDS International, I met many people. I am unable to do justice to everything I saw; suffice to say, however, that conditions are appalling and will get worse as the winter deepens and the weather deteriorates. Despite all the assistance on offer, the jungle camp is still in an old landfill site under a motorway bridge. There is asbestos lying around. It is waterlogged with mud everywhere. There are chemical plants on either side of it. There is a chronic spate of illnesses, ranging from respiratory problems and scabies to serious diseases such as tuberculosis. The medical and accommodation facilities, which may just be a combination of tents or some rudimentary wooden shelters, are simply unable to cope. I admire the resilience of both the volunteers and the refugees, but they are fighting a losing battle against establishing any quality of life. Of particular concern are the hundreds of unaccompanied children, some as young as 12 or 14, and the increasing number of families.

The people at the camp come from a variety of countries. Many are from Syria, but some come from Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Eritrea and Sudan. Many of them have stories of fleeing persecution. Many of them have their nearest relatives, outside of the countries from which they have fled, in the UK, which is essentially why they are there. It is also true that not all are seeking asylum in the UK. The French authorities have given the situation poor attention. Their involvement in the camp is limited to patrols by riot police, who occasionally fire tear gas into the camp. They do nothing to curb either the problems of violence within the camp, where a 15-year-old boy was stabbed to death before Christmas, or the protests by fascist elements of the National Front. It is a truly beleaguered and desperate situation.

Against that there is a huge amount of hope. There are churches, a theatre and—to take the point made by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow—classes, including English classes and education for children. Shops and restaurants have also been set up, with extraordinary ingenuity in the circumstances, but all that cannot be a substitute for proper treatment. The Minister says that he has visited a number of refugee camps, as I have, but this is not a refugee camp with facilities able to maintain any basic standards of life; this is simply people camped out in the open in completely unsuitable conditions.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is talking about the conditions in the jungle camp near Calais, which I have also visited, with the Bishop of Dover. I was similarly shocked by the conditions, which were much worse than I have seen in the official camps for Syrian refugees in countries such as Turkey. The conditions in the jungle camp are absolutely shocking and simply unacceptable for animals, let alone for humans, and the migrants certainly felt that they were living like animals, which was leading them to have a great hatred for the UK, the country that they hoped to come to and came towards with great hope—instead, they are very angry. It is good news that the French Government are planning to improve facilities and to construct a new camp. The hon. Gentleman

might well yet do so, but I ask the Minister to update us on the UK Government's conversations with the French about improving conditions and on the part that we are playing. Will the Minister also address the concerns of my Kent constituents about the security implications of the new camp?

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I have indulged the hon. Lady, but normally interventions should be brief—they are interventions, rather than speeches.

Andy Slaughter: I am glad that you indulged the hon. Lady, Mr Chope, because it was a good intervention and one with which I agree. I must speed up a bit, but I will pick up on one point: I am afraid that not much comfort can be given, because the pace of action by the French Government is so slow, whether deliberately or through bureaucracy.

I want to bring another matter to the Minister's attention, although it might be a debate for another day. If conditions in Calais are atrocious, they are far worse in Dunkirk. I have not visited Dunkirk, but I have had a long report from there. We were told—this was reported in lurid terms in the UK press—that a new refugee camp was to be built, à la Sangatte, at Dunkirk by the French Government. Perhaps so, but it too is to have those heated tents, and everything is taking much longer than it should be. It might well be winter before it is ready.

Importantly, while the camp is being constructed at Dunkirk, no resources will be allowed in. Only this week I had a report from Mr McTigue to say that police were not letting in any tents, blankets, building materials or wood for fuel, which adds to the misery. There are no signs so far of a permanent camp. I therefore urge the Minister to visit not only Calais but Dunkirk, because the conditions at Dunkirk are truly appalling given the freezing conditions and the lack of shelter, water and toilets. Each day young children are having to sleep in those conditions, without even enough food being supplied. Of the first 100 people vaccinated by HANDS International at Dunkirk, 96 had scabies. Such conditions should not prevail anywhere, frankly, but certainly not in northern Europe.

In the few moments I have left, let me ask the questions that I want the Minister to answer. How much are the UK Government spending in and around Calais? I think that the answer is nothing to relieve the refugee situation, but some £18 million on razor wire fences to stop refugees getting to Eurostar or other ways of reaching the UK. How are the Government liaising with the French? What pressure are they putting on the French Government? I ask that because of a Home Office statement—I think about Dunkirk, although it might well apply to Calais—that said:

“We do not get involved in what is a French decision on what they do with a camp in their country.”

I am afraid that that rather Pontius Pilate attitude will simply not do.

What steps are the Government taking to allow the reuniting of families? As I said, a large number of the unaccompanied children and the families in the French camps are there because their nearest relatives are in the UK. At the moment, other than risking their lives and trying to get through the tunnel or over on lorries, there

[*Andy Slaughter*]

is no way for them to achieve reunion with their families. What are the Government doing to facilitate asylum claims to the UK? How are they co-operating—this might be a difficult issue for them at the moment—with the European Union?

The Minister will have seen the recent report of the Select Committee on International Development, which was excellent and clearly recommended that this country should take 3,000 refugee children from within Europe. I do not know whether the Minister is in a position to respond to that. I must also pay tribute to the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) on such matters. She has visited the camps and heads the Labour party's taskforce on refugee issues. She has called for a major new, co-ordinated humanitarian relief programme, including for Calais and Dunkirk; a proper series of assessments of who needs refugee support; and an increase in the number of people to whom this country is granting sanctuary.

The problems are severe and terrible, but we are still only talking about something perhaps in excess of 10,000 refugees in total; compared with the refugee crisis as a whole, the situation is not one that should be beyond the wit of Britain and France to resolve. I share the frustration of organisations such as Amnesty and Save the Children, which wish the Government to act or to act themselves, but at the moment they are prevented from doing so.

I ask the Minister to look at the terms of Dublin III and the UN convention on the rights of the child to see whether his Government are properly fulfilling their obligations under them. He might rely on Dublin III to say, "Britain has no responsibility," but I urge him to acknowledge that we do have a responsibility—a humanitarian responsibility—in particular to the children in Calais and Dunkirk who have relatives in the UK, and to say how we may reunite them with their families.

I could say a lot more, but I will give the Minister time to respond. One of the many inspiring people I met in Calais was a man whom I will simply call Muhamad. He was a translator for UK forces in Afghanistan, but he did not qualify for the right to come to the UK, which some translators were given, because he was not still employed at the time—although his services to the UK forces were none the less for that. He is an inspiring figure in the camps and he helps to run the library and the education classes. He let me know through some of the people I met in Calais that a young friend of his called Masood was found dead in the back of a lorry at Dunkirk last week.

Any death of a child is a terrible tragedy, but in those circumstances I find it extraordinary—we are talking about people whom the Minister could get on a train and meet in an hour's time. The reason why Masood wanted to come to the UK is because his nearest relative, his sister, was in the UK. However, the only way that he thought he could reach her and escape the terrible conditions in which he was living was to take the step that led to his untimely and tragic death. Those are the circumstances with which we are dealing. We cannot turn away and say that the situation is someone else's responsibility. We have to play our part.

11.19 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Refugees (Richard Harrington): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I apologise for my lateness, but a lot of people were leaving the previous debate and we had to wait outside.

I thank the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for introducing the debate. No one could suggest that this is not an important subject. I have not visited Calais, but I have spoken at length about the conditions there to many of the people whom the hon. Gentleman has mentioned in his speech. For example, I have spoken to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), who is in her place, and others as diverse as the Chief Rabbi and non-governmental organisations, so I feel familiar with this subject.

In the limited amount of time that we have, I would like to say that the Government are not standing idly by and doing nothing. The gist of one of the questions the hon. Gentleman asked really was, "Is it being left to the French on their own and what are the British Government doing?" My hon. Friend's question also related to that. Therefore, rather than giving hon. Members a lecture about the migration crisis, which they are familiar with, given the limited time I will attempt to stick to the core subject.

A lot of what the UK is doing stems from work done together by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and her French counterpart, Monsieur Cazeneuve. As I am sure Members are aware, that led to a joint declaration. That was not just a political declaration; it set out a programme of achievements for the two Governments. It has led to significant improvements in security for example, which answers my hon. Friend's question.

I understand that, from a security point of view—I will mention this before we skip on to the refugee side—the situation is very different from the middle of last year, with extensive fencing installed and infrared cameras on the way, so there are many different methods to detect people trying to get into this country. It is not perfect, but there has been a dramatic improvement. I want to ring-fence that security point, because while that is not the main purpose of the debate, the question was asked. I accept the worries that my hon. Friend's constituents have, but a lot of work has been done on that and I could spend the whole 10 minutes talking about it.

On the core subject of what the joint agreement between the two countries has achieved, other than on security and the related subjects of challenging organised crime gangs, intelligence sharing and everything like that—I do not want to detract from the importance of that—I shall use the remaining time to talk about the refugee side of the agreement. What has actually happened? On the main effort—this answers the hon. Gentleman's question about what money the UK Government are spending on refugees—I want to put on record that the efforts of the Department for International Development are predominantly in helping refugees in the areas around Syria. As people may be aware, in particular those who have read the International Development Committee's report, which was ably referred to by the hon. Gentleman, we are spending £1.2 billion. Apart from the United

States, we are the major provider of humanitarian resources in the areas adjacent to Syria, as I saw when I visited the region as the Minister for Syrian refugees.

To get back to Calais and the French situation, the UK has supported significantly—I believe to the tune of €750,000—a French NGO that operates for the most vulnerable people around the jungle camp. That work has involved the construction of a day centre away from the camp and facilities to take the most vulnerable people away from that site. That is coming to fruition now. The steering committee behind that is made up of UK and French officials and others, and it hopes to target the most vulnerable people—children, women and those who have suffered particularly—and remove them from that spot. Therefore, while I cannot say that that is a financial priority for DFID—after all, France is a high-income country with adequate resources of its own—it is trying to target financial efforts on vulnerable people. I know that some people are sceptical about whether that will work, but the strategy is serious.

Andy Slaughter: I accept that the French Government have primary responsibility—if it were on UK soil, it would be the British Government—but the French are failing on this. I ask the Minister to ensure that his Government take a proactive stance. They do so, rightly, on security measures in terms of co-operation and they should do so on humanitarian measures. By setting an example on both the conditions in the camp and the resolution for the individuals there, they may encourage the French Government to do what they should be doing.

Richard Harrington: In answer to the point about the French failing, I cannot speak in complete defence of the French Government because the conditions are as they are, but—as the hon. Gentleman may be aware—they have pledged that people will not sleep under canvas this winter: large amounts of heated container-type accommodation, similar to what I saw in Jordan, is currently being installed.

The strategy is based on reducing the number of people at the jungle camp. According to the most recent report, which I received yesterday, there are about 4,000 people currently in the camp and it is expected that significant numbers will leave as a result of beefing up the French asylum programme and moving them to other centres throughout France, away from the Calais area. My information is that significant numbers of African refugees are taking up that choice and being relocated voluntarily.

Andy Slaughter *rose—*

Richard Harrington: I would love to take the hon. Gentleman's intervention, but there is a very small amount of time left. I will happily talk to him outside the Chamber if I may.

It is an important point that the hope is to halve the number in the camp. In terms of specialist accommodation for children and other people, it is significant that the number of vulnerable people is in the hundreds and expected to increase. Given the scale of the problem, one may argue that that is just a small part, but the British Government are pushing the French Government on that. The joint declaration is a programme of work that is being monitored all the time.

This is not quite as simple as it sounds. The UK is not saying, "We wash our hands of it—it is not our problem." We accept that people are going to Calais because they believe that they want to come to the UK. We have officials there who explain to people what life in the UK is like and that, actually, a lot of the reasons why they thought they could or should come to the UK are not valid in reality.

The French Government are being pushed by us to beef up their asylum programme. To take up the final question the hon. Gentleman asked about the family reunion side for children in particular, of course if those children can, under guidance, claim asylum, they can then apply through our family reunion scheme to come to this country. I believe that such requests through the normal channels for those with family in the UK would be looked at favourably. However, they must have it explained to them how to become asylum seekers in France. The French policy is to make them become asylum seekers in France, because they then get a whole lot of benefits and things that they otherwise would not.

This is a complicated subject that must be seen in the context of what the UK is doing overall. We are not the only country: there are all the countries in Europe and others who are trying to deal with the refugee situation. However, I am proud of what the Government have done. That does not mean that we can say, "Calais is nothing to do with us," because, as everyone knows, it is only 22 miles away from parts of Kent.

The British and French Governments are working together well. I hope that what the French Government have said about reducing the number of people under canvas will happen shortly. I also hope that the enhanced security will work and that our money, through the French NGO, will really help those most vulnerable people.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Food Security

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): I should apologise for being late: I have been reshuffling on my own and it took a little longer than planned. I call Derek Thomas to move the motion.

2.31 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered food security.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. This is my first Westminster Hall debate; I will try to follow all the correct procedures.

I requested this debate because the past year or so has been particularly difficult for most farms, big and small, and specifically those in the dairy sector. Since securing this debate, I have been encouraged by the fact that so many MPs share my concern about food security. I thank in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who has given me some insight into the difficulties faced by farmers in her constituency. She is unable to attend as she has Select Committee responsibilities.

Farming remains an important part of the economy. That is particularly true in my constituency, St Ives, which includes west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. I grew up among farms and live today at the bottom of a farm lane—do not get that wrong: I live in a house, but at the bottom of a farm lane—so I see first-hand the hard work that is put in and the challenges to which farmers are exposed, year in, year out. Living in a rural area such as west Cornwall brings home the contribution that farmers make and the vital role that they play. They preserve, maintain and protect our countryside, and create jobs not only in farming but in sectors such as food processing, engineering and tourism. Most importantly, they feed the nation.

Maintaining food security has long been a concern of mine. We must take it much more seriously. Conflict around the world affects food security, and population growth leaves more mouths to feed. Food security is defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as

“when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

I recognise that imports are included in the calculation when food security is measured, but for the purpose of this debate I would like to concentrate our minds on the ability of British farmers to produce the lion's share of the food we need and to ask what more can be done to ensure that they continue to feed our nation. That is important, because it would be unwise, and there would be moral implications, were we to assume that whatever we cannot produce for ourselves can simply be imported. As the world's population grows, and taking into account growing unrest and conflict that threaten some regions' ability to produce food, we should not assume that affordable imports will always be readily available. Indeed, we must not, because every tonne that we import is a tonne less that is available to other nations that might not have the ability to produce as we can.

As a parliamentary candidate of eight years and an MP of eight months, I have had ample opportunity to meet local farmers and gain an insight into their industry.

I am grateful for the time that farmers have taken to explain their work to me. I have learned that the challenges are considerable and the solutions complex. Having seen how hard farmers work, I would never claim that their business has ever been easy or straightforward. Nevertheless, 2014-15 was a particularly difficult period for British farming. Farms have been more productive, largely as a result of investing heavily in technology and machinery, but farmers are having to work harder for their money and, in some cases, getting less for their product than 20 years ago. That is particularly true in the dairy industry.

Dairy prices hit the headlines last summer. The price of milk continues to fall, and the dairy sector in Cornwall has a particular problem because of the limited markets available. Basically, there is Dairy Crest for cheese, Arla, which includes Rodda's, and Trewithen. The latter two pay between 22p and 24p per litre.

Cauliflower growers have had a terrible winter—admittedly because of the warm weather. They tell me that they need to be paid 48p per head to have a future that they can invest in, but prices have been between 18p to 22p per cauliflower.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned the difficulties with dairy prices, which the House has been discussing for more than a decade. Will he join me in pressing the Minister for an update on the concrete steps that the Government are taking to support dairy prices?

Derek Thomas: I welcome my hon. Friend's intervention. I first met him at a farming industry event at a conference many years ago—probably when I was first selected as a parliamentary candidate. I will certainly continue to press my hon. Friend the Minister on that matter.

Income figures for 2014-15 from throughout the UK show the harvest down by 9%, with a 24% drop in general cropping, a 25% drop in income for pig farmers, a 20% drop for poultry farmers and a 29% drop for mixed farms, so the situation is bleak. Basic business sense says that no one will invest in a business when they have no idea what the return will be from one month to the next, and no one can expect a business to survive if they are consistently paid less than the cost of production. Yet that is the daily reality for large parts of the British farming industry. They persevere when any other business would pack up and go home. We cannot afford for British farmers to pack up. We must not ignore the threat to British producers.

For many farmers, the price they are being paid does not cover the cost of production. If that continues, we will see farms disappear and less food produced—indeed, we already have. We need to create an environment in which farmers are consistently paid a fair price so that they have the confidence to invest in their businesses, employ the workers they need and produce food and drink to meet UK demand and beyond. Why is that so important? Because British farmers play such a vital role, as I said earlier. They protect, maintain and preserve our natural environment. They provide jobs in farming, processing, engineering and tourism—some 3.8 million jobs in food and farming alone. They contribute £10 billion to the UK economy. In rural Cornwall, it is primarily our farmers who keep our Methodist churches open. Most importantly, our farmers feed the nation.

It is difficult to establish exactly how much of the food and drink that the UK needs is produced by UK farmers. The widely accepted figure currently stands at around 62%, but a recent National Farmers Union report suggests that as things stand, taking into account predicted UK population growth, it will drop to just over 50% when my children reach retirement age. The UK does not want to be in a position where we rely on exports for nearly half the daily food and drink we need. It does not have to be like that.

It is widely acknowledged that there is an opportunity for the UK to import less indigenous fruit and vegetables. The UK supplied only 23% of the fruit and vegetables it needed in 2014, yet frustration exists in the industry and further afield with what appears to be an inability to tackle the issue and maximise the potential of our food industry for the future. The National Farmers Union has done some very useful work in that regard, which the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), reinforced in January 2014 when he said:

“By buying seasonal fruit and veg we can improve the nation’s health, help the environment and boost the economy...As British farmers and food producers, you know that we grow some of the best food in the world here, so why is 24% of the food eaten in the UK imported when it could be produced here? We have a top-class fruit and veg sector which produces everything from green beans to strawberries, yet we imported £8 billion of fruit and veg in 2012.”

It is in our interests to produce as much food as possible. If we want to ensure that good quality food continues to be available to us at a reasonable price, we must support our farmers.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a powerful argument, and I congratulate him on securing this important debate. Is it not the case that we need to be absolutely clear with our food labelling? My local paper, the *Yorkshire Post*, has a “Clearly British” campaign to label food. Clear labelling will obviously help the whole process and help our hard-hit dairy industry at the same time.

Derek Thomas: I am glad my hon. Friend raised that point, which I will come on to. Clear labelling is a powerful tool for consumers, because they know exactly what they will get when they buy their produce.

The NFU’s recent “Back British Farming” campaign, carrying the slogan “Want great British food tomorrow? Buy great British food today”, makes it clear that the time for action is now. With a growing global population, there is every reason for us to produce more. We have the opportunity to grow because there is a huge international demand for food, and we want to be part of the solution.

Earlier I referred to complex challenges that require equally complex solutions. I am grateful to be speaking as a Back Bencher; I do not envy the position of my hon. Friend and colleague the Farming Minister, who is required to respond to this debate. However, there is some capital we can build on, which I believe is ripe for the taking—I hope Members will excuse the pun. If we get it right, it will help the British food industry no end.

UK farmers enjoy significant levels of good will from the British public. Recent research shows that 88% of the UK public think that farming is important to the

economy and are concerned that we have a secure and safe domestic food supply. The British shopper wants to support the British producer. Over the recess—this takes me on to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy)—I wanted to see how easy it was for shoppers to support producers. I visited five supermarkets with two simple questions in mind: can I be sure that I am buying British produce, and can I be sure that the farmer is receiving a fair price?

To the credit of the Government, suppliers, retailers and, most importantly, consumers, the issue of labelling and country of origin has largely been resolved. Although legislation only requires the country of origin to be shown for products from outside the EU, we can often see the county of origin as well as the country of origin when buying fruit, vegetables, dairy products and meat. It is clear that the industry has responded favourably to consumer demand. However, I did find some butter that simply stated it was produced in the UK, whereas all others stated they were produced using British milk in the UK. I also found some salmon that was labelled as being from “Scotland or Norway”, which I found curious, as I had not previously met a salmon with such an identity crisis.

Despite various claims on packaging, I left each of the five supermarkets unsure whether the farmer received a fair price. I am not suggesting that they did not, but I found the packaging confusing. What consumers need, as they seek to support British producers, is absolute confidence that the product is British and that the farmer is getting a fair price. Unless we can provide that assurance, consumers will not be able to fully support the British farming industry, especially if they are being asked to pay a little extra.

We have seen consumers demonstrate that they are willing to pay more for milk and dairy products once they have complete confidence that the product is British and the farmers are getting paid a fair price. If they do not have that, they will continue to buy cheap milk. No noble-minded British person wants to give more money than they must to the supermarket bosses, but they would to the farmer, because they value British farmers and are concerned about food security. The truth is that we do not necessarily need to pay more. If I had purchased a Cornish cauliflower before Christmas, I would have parted with £1, knowing full well that the grower was getting just 18p for the cauliflower. It is possible to pay a fair price to the grower without hiking supermarket prices on many of the goods that the UK produces.

The great advantage of being a Back-Bench MP is that I have the space and privilege to do some blue-sky thinking. My blue-sky thinking is this. With such solid support for our producers from British consumers, with increasing concern about future food security and in the light of the torrid time our farming industry is enduring, is this the time for the Government to establish a UK fair trade brand, giving the consumer a rock-solid guarantee that when they choose to buy British, British farmers will get a fair price for their products? We need to remove all confusion and empower consumers to support the British farming industry further.

My objective is clear: to support British farmers and producers by encouraging consumers to buy locally farmed and produced food and by enabling them to

[Derek Thomas]

easily identify genuine domestic products that have rewarded the farmer fairly. I want to see a Government-backed initiative to deliver that objective.

To conclude, I would like to ask the Minister to address a few short questions—which I gave him in advance, to allow him time to prepare. [Laughter.]

Daniel Kawczynski: How very generous.

Derek Thomas: Well, I have got to see the man on the train every week.

What can the Government do to give consumers confidence that when they buy British, British farmers are getting a fair price? What can the Government do to ensure that the public sector is playing its part and is buying as much British produce as it can to feed our children, our armed forces, our patients and others in its care? What can the Government do to support the NFU's "Back British Farming" campaign to enable consumers to choose to buy great British food today, so that they can continue to buy great British food tomorrow?

We do not expect farmers to tolerate a price below the cost of production, but as consumers we quite often expect to pay half the price for a pint of milk than we would for a pint of bottled water. What can the Government do to quash the myth that milk is cheap to supply and should always be cheap to buy? What can the Government do to reassure consumers that buying British produce has the added benefit of supporting good welfare of livestock and achieving the highest standard of food hygiene and production? What can the Government do to create an environment in which British farmers are consistently paid a fair price, so that they can invest in the future of their farms, attract new blood into the industry and weather the storms, whether they are Russian, Chinese or just wet and warm? What can the Government do to help the nation to celebrate the great British food and drink industry and to provide food security strengthened by increased self-sufficiency?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Order. I am sure we can avoid a time limit and get everyone in if Members observe a bit of discipline.

2.49 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am ever mindful of your guidance on time, Mr McCabe, and I will keep to it. It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, and it is nice to follow the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), whom I thank for bringing this very important debate to Westminster Hall. I declare an interest, first as a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union, the sister organisation of the NFU, and secondly, as the chair of the all-party group for eggs, pigs and poultry.

It is only recently that food security has become a point of discussion again within the United Kingdom. Between the end of the second world war over half a century ago and the end of the last Labour Government, this was not even a talking point. It is sad to think that

what we thought we had put to bed is now raising its head again in the 21st century, especially in an advanced country such as ours.

My constituency of Strangford is mostly rural-based, with certain urban concentrations in the towns of Comber, Newtownards and Ballynahinch. Down the Ards peninsula, in and around Ards, over towards Comber and further on towards Ballynahinch is some of the most exceptional land in Northern Ireland. We have the largest milk production in the mid-Down area in the whole of Northern Ireland, as well as excellent produce. We have some of the best beef cattle—I say that in all honesty, because we do—and a very active, strong Strangford co-operative for lamb. The pig industry has felt some pain over the years, with reduced staff and fewer people producing pigs, but some of the guys who are in it are massive, which has probably compensated for that. Down in Portaferry we have a 1,000-sow unit, which is quite large for Northern Ireland. We also have a very productive egg sector, and cereals and vegetables are produced there as well.

To whet the appetite, I could suggest nothing better to any Member in this Chamber than to start off their meal with vegetables from Killinchy. They could follow that up with the Comber spud—the name, "Comber potato", is guaranteed and secured under EU legislation—and what would go better with Comber potatoes than a bit of Strangford lamb? And they could finish it off with a third course—not from my constituency, of course—of Armagh apples. There we have it: all three courses—two from my area and the third, unfortunately, we have to bring from Armagh. I say that a bit in jest, but it does illustrate clearly what we have.

In Northern Ireland, as 70% of the production line in Northern Ireland for agriculture is exported, we depend to a great extent upon the export industry and it is highly important to us. In my constituency we have Rich Sauces, which exports and has to do so. We have Willowbrook Foods and Mash Direct. At Kiltonga we have Pritchitts, which takes its powdered milk all over the world—as far as the far east and down into south America, as well as across all of Europe and Africa. These are key factors for us in my constituency; we need to export to survive. Some 20,000 people are directly employed in agriculture and the agri-food sector is worth £1 billion per annum in Northern Ireland. It is a massive industry and its importance cannot be underlined enough.

With the instability across the world and the links between food production and climate change and extreme weather, we cannot take food security for granted. Even when we are enjoying food security across the nation, we should be taking steps to reduce waste. A proactive rather than reactive approach is what is needed to ensure that we prevent food security being affected by influences such as climate change.

The Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has already considered all aspects of UK food security in its reports and has highlighted that as a key issue. I understand that the Committee met yesterday with health officials to discuss this matter. If the Minister is in a position to do so, I would be keen for him to give us some idea of how those discussions went and what took place. The positive situation with regard to food

security will not last unless the Government plan for the future and allow for future changes in UK weather and global demand for food.

“Buy British” is what the hon. Member for St Ives said. As a member of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, I look upon myself very much as British. I want to be part of that “Buy British” campaign and I ask the Minister whether it is time, as I believe it is, to do joint initiatives for promoting the food that we produce in Northern Ireland collectively. In the past I have said the same thing to my Scottish colleagues on my right, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) and the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). We can sometimes do this better if we do it together. I am of course a great believer in doing it better together—*[Interruption.]* I am not sure whether these two men would agree we should do everything together, but I think we should, because I am very much committed to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The NFU and the Ulster Farmers’ Union have also stated that.

I want to put this point in *Hansard* for the record. I understand that there have been some discussions with the farmers union about the need for a market-led, not production-led, strategy. I would like to hear the opinions of the Minister and shadow Minister on that. I think we need to be market-led, when the contract and business is there and then the production comes in behind that. However, we need to know perhaps how that works. Some discussions may have taken place with the NFU and I hope that the Minister is in a position to respond to that point.

Although the UK does not have the growing conditions to produce all types of produce, or some produce, as cheaply as other nations, we need to take the opportunity to import less non-indigenous fruit and vegetables. That will be good for the economy, reducing our already huge fruit and vegetable trade deficit, which amounted to some £7.8 billion in 2014. Again, perhaps the Minister has some ideas about how that can be addressed. We could, we should and we must do more.

I understand that the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board has been helping UK farmers to extend their growing seasons for cherries, strawberries and asparagus, and I hope that we can see a similar approach to improving our self-sufficiency in fruit and vegetables.

The UK food security assessment from 2010 noted that UK food security depended on being able to source food from a variety of countries, and that that diversity of supply enhanced security by spreading risks, widening options and keeping prices competitive. One production farmer in the agri-food industry in my area told me one day that it is actually cheaper—I find this impossible to comprehend—to import some vegetables from south America to use in his salads in Northern Ireland. I do not understand how that works economically, but he tells me it is cheaper. We need also to have the checks, because we are very conscious of “farm to fork”, and we need to be able to track the movement of food so that its history is traceable, from where it is produced to where it ends up. We need to know whether there are any problems; we need food security. Where does food security come in when it comes to importing food from other countries? Ensuring that in addition to backing

local producers, we have an array of different producers in different countries will ensure that food security is not too adversely affected by any extreme or unusual weather in the UK.

Just last year, we saw throughout the UK mass protests by dairy farmers over milk prices. We had farmers across Northern Ireland and farmers in my constituency suffering because of abusive monopolies driving prices below the costs of production. Although it is not a topic for this debate, we also have the EU bureaucracy and red tape that choke and strangle the farmer and make it very difficult for them to produce. Of course, everyone wants to pay less for things and milk is no exception, but should a debate like this ever come up again, we need to make sure that we are on the side of the everyday, normal, hard-working people in our food sector who produce the food and continue to give our great nation a comfortable and secure level of food security.

What discussions has the Minister had with the devolved Administration, the Northern Ireland Assembly, and in particular with the Minister responsible, on how we can have that food security across the whole United Kingdom and how can we promote our food much better?

UK food is, on the whole, the cheapest in the world after the United States and there are some positives to take from that. Inflation is as low as it can go. Food prices, along with fuel prices, have played their part in that and it is making life easier for many of our citizens. We cannot ignore that; it is important that people do not pay too much. Too many are still dependent on food banks, but we are moving in the right direction.

In conclusion, with the right support and long-term strategic thinking, we can ensure that the United Kingdom enjoys food security for generations to come, regardless of what the climate or global economy may throw at us. Only by taking a proactive approach and addressing concerns head-on, rather than reacting to preventable problems, can we ensure that our citizens are secure when it comes to their access to food. Thanks again to the hon. Member for St Ives for giving us the chance to speak on this issue.

2.59 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this very important debate. When I was first elected 10 years ago, we set up the all-party group for dairy farmers, given the perilous conditions that they were facing in Shropshire—all the difficulties that they were facing with supermarkets and the prices that they were getting for their dairy products and milk. An extraordinary number of MPs—290—joined the all-party dairy group, which made it the largest all-party group in that Parliament, and we had a very good secretariat.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his initiative at that time. Does he agree that we still need the good measures that were introduced in the last Parliament to help farmers to combat bovine TB with a roll-out of the badger cull, so that they do not face such hardship as in the past?

Daniel Kawczynski: I agree with my hon. Friend and I will come to that.

It is worrying that, despite all the work that has taken place over the last 10 years, we are still receiving anecdotal evidence from farmers that they are under strain from prices. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives referred to the pressure on milk prices. I am keen to hear from the Minister—I have come here specially—how the Groceries Code Adjudicator is getting on. When we set up the all-party group, we spent a year preparing a report on the critical issues and the measures that needed to be implemented to help dairy farmers. We came up with two solutions. One was a groceries adjudicator to regulate and control the supermarkets and to make them realise they could not continue with their pernicious actions towards farmers and suppliers. We also called for a limited badger cull to control bovine tuberculosis.

When we took those proposals to the then Secretary of State, David Miliband, we were laughed out of his office, being told that both were ridiculous and not feasible. I am pleased that under the Conservative Administration we have seen progress on them, but I am keen to hear from the Minister what additional powers he will give to the Groceries Code Adjudicator, how the adjudicator is getting on and what further needs to be done to ensure that supermarkets comply with the important proposals that we set out.

On bovine tuberculosis, which my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) mentioned, in 1997 we slaughtered 47 cows in Shropshire as a result of bovine TB. Last year, that figure was over 2,000. I have been with some of my dairy farmers—I have referred to this in previous speeches—on their farms after their entire herd has been taken away. One farmer and I sat together at his kitchen table and cried unashamedly together, such is the raw emotion of what happens to farmers and their families when herds are taken away for slaughter and such is the extraordinary pressure they face with finance and devastation of their herds after all the work to create them. It is important to take action to deal with bovine TB.

Interestingly, what is the biggest organisation in Shropshire? It is the Shropshire Wildlife Trust with 5,000 members. What is the trust's symbol? The badger. Some people in the trust would like me hanged from the nearest lamp post—they would have difficulty as I am so tall at over 2 metres—because they believe it is appalling that any Member of Parliament could advocate a badger cull. It is a polarising issue and they feel strongly about the need to protect badgers.

I have sat on the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, taken hundreds of hours of evidence from scientists and professors from around the world and heard how bovine TB has been eradicated in France and many other countries with a cull of badgers being part of that process. It is extremely important that it is considered. I would like the Minister today to give an update on the badger cull trials and, if they have been successful, to say, when they will be rolled out in other parts of the country and whether he will consider Shropshire as one of the next places for the cull to be implemented.

I am passionate about British exports and pay tribute to a colleague, Martin Oxley from UKTI. I have worked closely with him in exporting Shropshire dairy products to Poland. I want the Minister to be aware of the

tremendous success of UKTI in exporting not just Shropshire dairy products, but many British dairy and agricultural products to Poland. It may be like selling coal to Newcastle because Poland is an agricultural country, but we must not forget how strong the British brand is. The international perception of animal husbandry and its excellent quality in this country, which is unsurpassed, and the quality of the British brand are why marketing attempts to sell British agricultural products abroad have been so successful.

I would like to hear from the Minister what is happening in UKTI to continue to prioritise British exports. I recently met Lord Maude, who has taken over the strategic management of UKTI. I would like it to have a dedicated team supporting the export of British agricultural products, and I would appreciate further updates from the Minister on collaboration between his office and UKTI.

I have asked the Secretary of State to visit Shropshire this year and she has promised to visit either the Shropshire show or the Minsterley show, which are our two main shows. The Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee came last year and went down extremely well. It is very important that farmers have the opportunity to meet politicians and the people at the head of DEFRA who make the decisions. I am still waiting to hear which show the Secretary of State will visit, but she has promised to visit Shropshire this year and I would be grateful if the Minister will pass that on to her and ensure that she—or indeed he himself—comes to one of the main agricultural shows in Shropshire this year.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): If the remaining speakers take between six and seven minutes each, we will be able to accommodate everyone, including the Front Benchers, and give Mr Thomas a moment to reply.

3.7 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on bringing forward this debate. I agree with most of his comments and particularly liked his suggestion of a fair trade logo for UK produce. The title of the debate, "Food Security", allows a wide-ranging debate and I may have a scattergun approach—I will see what I can do.

The World Health Organisation has defined food security as existing,

"when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life".

That definition means that food security will not exist until the wider world population has access to a sufficient and nutritious diet. That means an end to conflict, true implementation of the Paris COP 21 agreement, control of climate change, greater land reform, the ending of harmful deforestation, and more crops grown seasonally for domestic markets. I do not have any answers but we are a wee bit away from that utopia, so—like most of the previous speakers—I will concentrate on UK issues, including Scottish ones.

At present, just over half of the UK's food is produced in the UK so greater consideration should be given to reliance on the wider EU single market against the benefits of greater self-sufficiency. The farmers' unions would certainly like to see the latter, and it has come out in previous contributions. I agree with that philosophy.

We all accept that the UK will always import some produce; indeed, some of our favourite meals rely on imported ingredients. Imports can also help to provide better balance in diets overall, particularly in the winter months. However, nearly 20% of the food eaten in the UK comes from just four EU countries, and the UK supplies only 23% of the fruit and vegetables eaten here. I suggest that the upcoming EU referendum could provide a further risk to food security, and the Minister needs to make contingency plans with regard to the risk of a leave vote.

As we have heard, it makes sense for the UK not to import such quantities of indigenous fruit and vegetables, and that was flagged up in the EFRA Committee's 2014 report on food security. If we are to maximise the amount of indigenous fruit and vegetables produced here, farming in this country must, first and foremost, be more profitable. This year, I have met Scottish farmers and heard first hand that farmers across all farming sectors have suffered, even where they have diversified. Measures must be put in place to encourage continued diversification so that the wider industry can survive and, I hope, produce greater amounts of indigenous fruit and vegetables for the domestic market.

Growing more produce in the UK for UK consumption clearly reduces our carbon footprint, which is a must in terms of wider climate change issues. As I have suggested, those pose a risk to food security around the world.

The continued promotion of domestically grown produce in supermarkets will clearly help when done in conjunction with wider country of origin labelling. I therefore welcome the Farming Minister's recent comments that the Government will continue to pressure the European Commission on country of origin labelling for dairy products. The high percentage of country of origin labelling that is already undertaken voluntarily shows that it can be done and that it should not be too cost-prohibitive to do it more widely, and I would certainly like to see it introduced on an EU basis.

For some customers, budget considerations will, of necessity, override considerations of origin. However, there is no doubt that proper, true labelling would encourage people in this country to buy British or, in some cases, regional. I would also like to see the Scottish brand promoted.

I echo the call for a Government commitment to take up the EFRA Committee's recommendation to extend the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. We cannot have another dairy farming crisis, and it would be good to see what the Government are doing about the issue with regard to the long term.

On the wider issue of farming sustainability, there are two clear issues for farming in general, and these particularly affect Scottish farmers: common agricultural policy payments and continued membership of the EU. CAP payments account for an average of 70% of Scottish farming profits. The Scottish Government have rightly identified that farming needs to be more profitable and sustainable, but the hard fact is that those payments are literally the difference between survival or otherwise.

Also on CAP payments, Scottish farmers feel they have missed out on the pillar one convergence uplift that was given. That amounts to €230 million, which should have been allocated to Scottish farmers up to 2020. If we have an EU exit, and the UK

Government maintain the equivalent of CAP support for farmers, it is vital that we have a clear policy position from them.

I would go on, Mr McCabe, but I realise that I have to draw to a conclusion. We all agree that more support needs to be given to farmers, and I again applaud the hon. Member for St Ives for bringing the issue forward.

3.14 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for securing the debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I am proud that we have quite strong Cornish representation here today, but we are also joined by my hon. Friends the Members for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), for Hendon (Dr Offord) and for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), so the debate is not entirely Cornish led.

I was part of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee when it did an in-depth study into food security. The report was published in June 2014, and I have a copy here—I would be happy to furnish my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives with one if he has not seen it. During the production of the report, we received 50 written submissions and undertook five oral sessions. We left the House to conduct visits, and I was pleased to welcome members of the Committee to the world cheese award-winning Cornish Cheese Company in my own constituency. The report was very timely, as is this debate. It is incredibly important that we have enough for the people of the UK to eat. We must look at the changing global demand for food as population increases, at the impact of weather changes on production and at the dangers of disease.

The world and UK populations are growing. With the world population likely to hit 8 billion in 20 years, even on the lower UN projection, and the UK population likely to hit 70 million over the same time span, we have to prepare for extra demand. It is simple: production must increase, or people will go hungry.

I do not need to say today that the weather in the UK is changing. As we have all seen on our television screens, many people have suffered over the festive season, and my thoughts are very much with them, given what they have had to endure. However, with flooded fields and destroyed crops, we need to take these issues into account in any future plans.

We do not have to go back to Ireland's potato famine to see the dangers of disease. We can all remember the haddock—sorry, the havoc—that BSE caused and that TB is still causing today. We can also look abroad to new threats. Only this week, a 26-year-old woman died from a strain of bird flu, and another woman is reportedly in a serious condition, according to health authorities in southern China.

I am keen that we back our farmers and fishermen and assist them by coming forward with solutions. That includes backing British production and the important Red Tractor labelling scheme. It is important to know that the food we buy comes from a trusted source. All products that carry the Red Tractor mark meet responsible production standards and are traceable back to independently inspected farms. The mark is the easiest way for consumers to be sure of the provenance of the food they buy.

[Mrs Sheryll Murray]

We must do what we can to protect our producers. We must take steps to ensure that our route to production is disease-free, and we must take steps at our borders to help to limit the possibility of disease entering this country.

We must recognise the importance of food production when we look at flood defences—a priority that seems, possibly, to have been overlooked in the past. We must also look at the regulatory framework that our food producers operate under, much of which comes from Europe. I want to work to ensure the best deal for farmers under the CAP.

I want, however, to limit the rest of my remarks to supporting those other food producers—our fishermen. Speaking as an individual, and not as the chairman of the all-party group on fisheries, I would like to raise my strong concerns over the common fisheries policy and the disappointing result for my fishermen in south-east Cornwall of the latest round of quota negotiations.

If we are to have food security in terms of our fishermen, we must now vastly reform the common fisheries policy or pull out altogether. That is why I said at the start of my remarks that this is indeed a timely debate. I believe in the importance of food security; for our fishermen, that means fundamental change in the way that the rules under which they operate are put in place. It is vital that the Prime Minister recognises that in his negotiations with Europe. If that does not happen, we should vote to leave the European Union.

3.19 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I thank the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for calling this important debate. As he said on his website,

“we take future food security seriously, given that we are an island nation”.

Food security is a subject that lends itself to a focus on agriculture, but—rather neatly, as I am following the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray)—I feel that as an island nation we should not forget in this debate the vital role played by our fisheries industry in providing food for Britain.

Fish is one of the healthiest sources of protein and a rare source of essential fatty acids, but fishing also sustains a significant industry, which employs thousands of people in coastal communities and at food processing sites across the country. To take perhaps a slightly different perspective from the hon. Member for South East Cornwall, people in the industry in my patch, Great Grimsby, tell me they are cautiously optimistic about the current state of the sector.

Not only does the fisheries industry feed people in Britain; fish exports are worth £1.6 billion a year to our economy. The industry has proved itself able to operate in a sustainable way. Fish stocks are up 400% in the last decade, allowing a welcome increase in quotas for 2016. This year fishermen will be able to catch 47% more haddock in the North sea, twice as much plaice from the channel and 20% more Celtic sea hake. While consumers have understandably been concerned about declining stocks in the past, people can now have their hake and

eat it too. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ooh!”] I know—but the hon. Member for South East Cornwall had a “havoc” and a “haddock”.

Many colleagues have rightly raised the challenges that agriculture and farmers face, but there are very few workers who have it tougher than fishermen. I would like us to regard them as the farmers of the sea. They can be out at work and away from their families for weeks at a time. The task itself is tough, dangerous and often not well paid. It is not surprising that it can be a tough sell to get young people to consider it for a career. The workforce are ageing, and there is a risk that the skills in the industry today will be lost. I have asked the Minister before, and I will ask him again, how the Government plan to address that. The industry needs a proper strategy to secure its long-term future.

Mrs Murray: Is the hon. Lady aware that the Seafish training authority does a lot of training for young fishermen, and in particular people who want to move into the industry? Perhaps she would like to contact Seafish to ensure that those courses are run in her constituency.

Melanie Onn: I believe that that was mentioned in the debate on fishing before the December break, and I feel that it needs to be expanded and heavily publicised, although the hon. Lady is certainly doing her part and assisting with that. I shall take her advice.

Daniel Kawczynski: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady’s predecessor, Austin Mitchell, who I knew well over 10 years as a Member of Parliament. He was a great advocate for fishermen and I would like her to take our tribute to him, if she is in touch with him.

Melanie Onn: I thank the hon. Gentleman; I am sure that I will be able to tweet him. I believe he is in New Zealand, but he remains a strong advocate for the fishing industry and the fishermen of Grimsby and the surrounding areas. In particular, he played a strong role in ensuring that appropriate compensation was delivered to those fishermen when trawler owners were being given significant compensation but the people doing the work were not so lucky. I entirely concur with the comments of the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski).

What discussions has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Department of Health, for instance, about promoting healthy British food such as seafood? As the Government look to tackle obesity and unhealthy eating, surely fish has a role to play as a nutritious, local and environmentally sustainable alternative to other foods. What are the Government doing to encourage supermarkets to act responsibly when sourcing and purchasing fish products? That should be a top priority in securing the sustainability of this major food source. Does the Minister believe that public procurement has a bigger role to play in supporting the industry, as the hon. Member for St Ives mentioned? Does he believe that the public sector, starting with Whitehall and the parliamentary estate, does enough to support the UK’s fishing industry?

3.24 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate my Cornish colleague, my hon. Friend

the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), on tabling this important debate. I agree wholeheartedly with everything that he and my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) have said in the debate. In view of the time restraints, I will not repeat everything that has been said that I wholeheartedly agree with; I will pull out a few of the main points that I believe are worth reinforcing.

It is clear, and I am sure we all agree, that food security is increasingly becoming one of the most important issues that the country will face. As we have heard, the increasing population in our country and globally, the rapid growth of the middle classes in developing countries, and world security issues mean that food security for the UK will become very important. Climate change will also increasingly be a factor. I recently visited Kenya and saw for myself the impact that the changing climate is having on food production in that part of the world. When all those things are put together, it is clear that we will not be able to rely as certainly on food imported into the country as we have in recent decades.

That is why I believe it is important for us to do all we can as a country to become as self-sufficient as possible in food production. Various figures are bandied around, but I believe the most reliable is that we currently produce about 65% of the food we need. We need that figure to go up. It is unlikely ever to be 100%, and I am not sure we would ever want it to be, but we certainly need it to move nearer to that.

The food supply chain is a complex matter, but our farmers and, as other hon. Members have been saying, our fishermen are at its very foundation. We need to do all we can to support them. I should probably declare an interest at this point, by saying that I married a farmer's daughter 30 years ago this year and that at the moment her father, my father-in-law, is still—in his mid-80s—to be found every day in the fields on his farm on the Isles of Scilly; and a great inspiration he is. Our farmers are facing some of the most challenging times that they have faced for many generations. We have already talked about the downward pressure on prices both from supermarkets in the UK and from global markets. The increasing costs and bureaucracy in farming are making it harder than ever for farms to remain viable and sustainable businesses. We need to understand those challenges and do everything we can to give support, and to address them.

Farming is viable in this country only because of the significant subsidies that farmers receive, but I think we need to be clear.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment that there was nothing in the EU negotiation about reform of the common agricultural policy or the common fisheries policy?

Steve Double: Absolutely—I agree wholeheartedly. It is a point that I want to come on to. I am very disappointed that there is nothing in the renegotiation in our relationship with the EU on seeking to reform either the common agricultural policy or the common fisheries policy. I believe that they are things that need to be reformed, and that is one reason why I am quite likely to vote to leave the EU. We need to recover our own powers over those aspects for this country and not to be so reliant on the EU for them.

We also need to be clear that the subsidies paid to our farmers are, in effect, subsidising not farmers but British households. They are there to keep food prices down. We need to kill the myth that somehow farmers are subsidy junkies. They receive those subsidies only because of the downward pressure on prices. Virtually every farmer I know and speak to would say that they would rather have a fair and sustainable price for the food they produce than to be so reliant on subsidies.

In the recent crisis involving milk prices, we saw that the British consumer is willing to pay a bit more when they know that a product is local and the farmer will receive a fairer price for that product. That is particularly true in Cornwall. The Cornish brand for locally produced food is incredibly strong; there is a very strong feeling in Cornwall that people are willing to pay a bit more if they know that something is Cornish and that local farmers are getting a fairer price for it. The Government would do well to push that further. We have already talked about better labelling for locally produced food. The Red Tractor scheme has been mentioned. That is a very good label, but we need to do more to promote such schemes so that the British consumer can know for certain that they are buying local food.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives did not intend the debate to become dominated by the issue of TB, but we cannot avoid the subject. When I go out and speak to local farmers in my constituency and ask them, “What is your No. 1 concern that you would like the Government to do something about?”, the most common response is, “Address the issue of bovine TB.” I congratulate the Government on the steps they have already taken to address the issue, despite strong opposition, but I firmly believe that we need to allow those who live off the land to manage the countryside. They know best, and I encourage my hon. Friend the Minister and the Government to press ahead and do everything they can to rid our farms of that awful disease. I can assure him of my full support in any steps he takes to do that. We need to make no bones about it. Again, as we have heard, this is not about just saving a few badgers. Hundreds of cattle are slaughtered every week as a direct or indirect result of TB. We must address the impact that that is having on the sustainability of locally produced food.

To sum up, we need to do everything we can to support British farmers. I know that I do not have to twist the Minister's arm to do that, but I encourage him to take the clear message back to Government that we want to see a very strong positive message from the Government about supporting British farmers and getting behind them in every way we can.

3.32 pm

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): This feels like a visit to the Celtic Connections festival. We have the Irish, the Cornish and the Scots; we just need a few more Welsh. I do not know where—*[Interruption.]* Does Grimsby count? Not really!

Thank you, Mr McCabe, for giving me the opportunity to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this important debate. He kicked it off superbly well by emphasising how important rural farmers are to the rural economy in many ways. It is not just about the food that they produce, but about

[Calum Kerr]

the way they contribute to the land and the communities in which they live. The hon. Gentleman also outlined the severe pricing challenges, which has been a common theme throughout the debate.

I am acutely aware of the importance of labelling—not just the labelling of products but how they are sold in supermarkets. I wrote to the chief executive of Tesco about its selling of New Zealand products under a Scottish banner and received a fairly poor response, which I have had to follow up on. Supermarkets need to be clear in their practices when selling as well as in their labelling. There may well be salmon that have been to Scotland and Norway, but we need a lot more clarity than just lumping different geographical locations together.

I always enjoy having the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) here. I will not even try to compete with the number of products that he referenced from his constituency—he wins hands down.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski). I will come on to the issue of the Groceries Code Adjudicator; I agree that it is important. Bovine TB is clearly a big issue down here, but less so north of the border. I agree that it should be at the forefront of our minds lest it spread and become an issue for other parts of the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) focused on the need for farming to be profitable. I will return to a couple of the themes that he raised.

It is always a pleasure to be in Westminster Hall with the hon. Members for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) and for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), who fly the flag or rather sail the ship for the many fishermen around the country.

It is also a delight to see the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). Taking part in this debate also serves the purpose of making me more familiar with my many wonderful fellow MPs. He can now visit his father-in-law safe in the knowledge that he has referenced him in a debate in Parliament, so I congratulate him on that.

Jim Shannon: Has it convinced you of the need for the Union?

Calum Kerr: There are many unions, so it depends on which one the hon. Gentleman is referring to. I personally would prefer to stay in the European Union and I look forward to the Westminster Hall debate on Cornish independence as well.

Food security is vital. That is why food supply is classed as a critical national infrastructure sector and DEFRA assesses it annually. Of course, large elements of this area are devolved to Scotland, and last June the Scottish Government drew up their own agricultural discussion document, setting out a vision for Scottish agriculture, which includes contributing to global food security, with a particular focus on Malawi, where the Scottish Government have an involvement.

International interdependence is critical. More than half the food in the UK is home-grown and on the whole, as we heard, our prices are the lowest in the world after those in the US, but we still need to maintain

strong supply chain links to other countries. There will always have to be imports, as the UK does not have the growing conditions to supply all the types of produce for which there is demand, but that also offers an opportunity in terms of the capabilities for exports.

I am particularly interested in branding—national or regional branding—for both food and drink. That is particularly important in Scotland, where the sector has promoted itself to great effect with its reputation for high-quality, distinctive and environmentally sustainable produce. We have just finished promoting our Year of Food and Drink and it has been a great success story. Turnover has risen by more than 24% since 2008 to more than £14 billion, and the industry is on target to reach next year the figure of £16.5 billion.

Before raising a couple of specific points on agriculture, I would like to mention fishing. When we talk about food security, it is easy to forget about fishing, yet it is a fantastic contributor to food security and the Scottish economy, with exports worth £600 million. Fishing takes a lot of pressure off land production. Of course it has to be sustainably managed, which presents some challenges, as we heard from the hon. Member for South East Cornwall, but when done well, it is a very profitable and successful source of food.

Let me now talk from a farming perspective. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun has already raised a couple of the old chestnuts that the Minister is very used to. However, it is worth emphasising again that the CAP is critical. I think that as Members of Parliament we have to be very careful with our language in this area, and I welcome the comments about getting away from the idea of subsidy. Our farmers need support. Most farmers in Scotland would be underwater financially if it were not for the CAP payments. As we go into a debate on the EU referendum, which has been mentioned several times, we have to be very careful on and clear about what an EU exit would mean for this industry. For farming in Scotland, without a comparable payment system, it would be a disaster.

The supply chain is well established, but I totally agree with the comments about the importance of addressing the inequalities in the supply chain. That affects all areas of farming, but in particular the dairy industry. It is of course important that we have reasonable prices, because lower income households are hit disproportionately hard by higher costs, but farmers have the right to a fair price for their quality product. We need to do more in terms of regulation in this area. I appreciate that it may not be a DEFRA area of responsibility, but it is clearly an area in which the Minister takes a keen interest.

The office of the Groceries Code Adjudicator was set up in 2013 to oversee this area, but the powers do not go far enough and she cannot respond adequately to the failures in the supply chain. The adjudicator can deal only with retailers with a turnover of more than £1 billion and with direct suppliers, and can act only if a complaint has been received. Those are things that need to be visited and addressed so that we can reduce the inequalities in that area. When I raised the matter with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, she told me that she seeks an adjudicator that will operate across the EU, and better transparency in the European

supply chain. Regardless of that, I am keen for efforts to be made and clarity to be achieved in this area as soon as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun raised the convergence uplift, and I appreciate that I am something of a broken record on that subject. Slowly, elements of progress have been made on the timescale, but we need to push the Minister harder on the matter, and I look forward to future discussions with him. We have a meeting coming up at which I will seek clarity on the process and some timescales for achieving a resolution in this area, where we feel that Scottish farmers have been badly let down.

Overall, we need longer term thinking, and strong, durable, fair, safe and secure supply chain relationships. As the NFU has pointed out, those are key to success. Farmers in Scotland and the UK are the primary source of our food security, as well as being major economic contributors, hugely important sources of rural employment and guardians of our landscape. They support us, and we need to support them in return. Let us ensure our food security and sustainability by doing so.

3.41 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I thank the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for introducing the debate, and I thank the many colleagues who intervened and made contributions. The hon. Gentleman raised important concerns about the dairy sector and spoke with real energy about supporting British producers. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) showed his usual deep rural knowledge, and suggested three courses of home-produced food for us; his serious point was about reducing food imports. The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) raised important questions about the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, and sought visitors to his great county's shows this summer. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) talked about the importance of consumers buying more fruit and veg. He spoke in support of country of origin labelling and, unsurprisingly, Scottish branding.

The hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) reminded us about the impact of climate change and flooding in recent weeks on people around the country, and she expressed strong support, as we would expect, for Cornish fishermen. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) said that her fishing industry was optimistic, and she gave us the best pun of the afternoon when she suggested that we could have our hake and eat it. She was making an important point about public procurement and eating our great fish from this country.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) talked about the impact of climate change on food production in Kenya, and made a powerful point about how it is reducing the certainty of food imports from that country. He also spoke with real vigour in support of the red tractor label. The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) gave a great round-up of the debate, and warned everybody about the loss of EU funding for farming across the country.

The Government's chief scientific adviser said in 2013 that food security in the UK was dependent on two things: well-functioning markets and a vibrant farming and food industry. I celebrate every penny of the contribution that agriculture makes to this country, and the millions of jobs and the billions of pounds in exports that it creates. Against those factors, however, I see not a job well done, but a job that should be done better. I see farmers at the mercy of a supply chain where they hold none of the cards, gaps in research funding in areas that are vital to enable us to compete on a global scale, and a market where the food that we can and do grow is supplanted in the supermarket aisles and at the tills by billions of pounds worth of imports. All the while, the Government, who rejected a Labour plan that made food security a priority, have dragged their heels over an alternative.

The problem cannot be solved with quick fixes—although with the heavy cuts in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I doubt that quick fixes will be possible anyway. Instead, we need to tackle the issue of food security properly. The difficulties that farmers have faced over farm-gate prices are one area in which real differences could be made. Despite the price boost to some producers, the average farm-gate price for milk is lower than it was in October 2014. Lamb prices are under pressure, and even wheat has fallen 9% since January last year.

Although organisations such as the NFU recognise that such problems are among the perils of farming, they put at massive risk the sort of investment that is needed for farmers to grow and thrive—that is, for the farmers and businesses that are lucky enough not to go under as a result of the price drops. Unfortunately, as has been said several times today, when policies have been suggested such as increasing the powers and scope of the Groceries Code Adjudicator to give producers more bargaining power, the Government have poured cold water on those ideas, because they would require legislation. Why is that too great a hurdle to clear, if such action would protect our food producers across the country?

I turn to the question of the food that fills our shelves. Like many colleagues, I have delighted in the range of foods from around the world that we can now buy in our supermarkets and shops. Of course, there always will be food imports, but why does the UK supply just 23% of its own fruit and vegetable needs? The £7.8 billion trade gap between exports and imports in that area is shocking. The Government will soon embark on their “Great British Food” campaign. Promoting our foods to be sold around the world is a good venture, and to be applauded, but can the Minister assure us that the campaign will include efforts to promote British fruit and veg on our shelves?

I note that the Department has made little headway with convincing Europe on country of origin labelling for the likes of dairy products. Instead, it has “encouraged” retailers in Britain to use the voluntary country-of-origin labelling scheme, even though 86% of shoppers want to buy more traceable food that has been produced on British farms—and in Scotland, too. Will the Minister ensure that the supermarkets play ball and give British producers a chance to stand out?

Although such measures can help to ensure well-functioning markets and a vibrant industry, food security is something that will play out over decades and centuries,

[Nick Smith]

not just over years. Climate change, which has come up a number of times this afternoon, and the rapidly increasing population of the UK and of the world may stretch, or even render obsolete, current farming methods.

We need a long-term strategy that ensures sustainable gains in economic growth while replenishing the natural environment over which we hold stewardship. Top agri-tech research will be required to meet that challenge, but both the Committee on Climate Change and our all-party group on science and technology in agriculture have noted Britain's stagnation when it comes to research and development. In a global market in which other countries are surging ahead, the NFU predicts, as the hon. Member for St Ives has pointed out, that by 2080 we will be forced to import more than 50% of our food unless we do something now. We have finally had a commitment from the Government for a big investment in agri-tech support, but my question is simple: why, when organisations across the spectrum have called for it, has that taken so long? Valuable time has been wasted.

It would be remiss of me, in a debate on food security, to ignore the plight of the more than 1 million people who now use food banks in the UK. Food bank usage increased by 18% from 2013-14 to 2014-15. Any food security policy must be about not just producing more food but giving everyone in the UK access to safe, healthy and affordable food. The previous Labour Government knew how important food security was for the UK; in our "Food 2030" strategy, we reckoned that it was as important as energy security to the country's wellbeing. That strategy would have been the start of a consumer-led, technological revolution, with the aim of producing more food in a sustainable manner with a smaller environmental footprint. Instead, 2010 saw this Government consign those plans to the scrapheap. I believe that they are playing catch-up to this day, and our food and farming industries have paid the price.

3.49 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): May I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing the debate? His constituency neighbours mine and I know that he champions the interests of farmers in his constituency. Indeed, we often jointly attend west Cornwall branch meetings of the National Farmers Union, and in the autumn I had the pleasure of speaking at a village called Madron in his constituency, which ran a series of events on the future of farming.

I worked in the farming industry for 10 years. I care deeply about the industry, and the Government value the role of agriculture and our food industry because it is the biggest industry in the country. Food manufacturing is our biggest manufacturing industry—bigger than the aerospace and automotive industries put together. It is worth about £100 billion a year throughout the supply chain and employs about one in eight people. That is why we made a manifesto commitment to put in place a 25-year food and farming plan, which is currently under development and will be published in the spring. It will look at how we attract new skills to the industry, how we use technology to improve productivity and use of

resources, how we open new export markets, and how we develop risk management tools for the agricultural industry.

As my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) pointed out, there is growing consumer interest in food provenance. People want to know where their food comes from. There is a growing interest in local sourcing and local brands, particularly in Cornwall where we have some strong local food brands. We are keen to develop that, so 2016 will be the year of great British food. Our Great British Food unit will champion those artisan food producers throughout the course of the year.

We are also doing a huge amount on exports. My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) asked about that. At the end of last year, the Secretary of State went to China and was successful in opening new markets for British barley and for pigs' trotters. In fact, we have been opening about 100 new markets a year over the past two or three years. Our food exports are now rising to £19 billion a year.

We have made some very good progress on exports, but I do not deny for a moment that farming is going through an incredibly tough and difficult time, due to a number of factors. The exchange rate of the pound against the euro is not favourable to farmers; the weakness of the euro has put pressure on all commodity prices for British farmers. Set against that, there has been a global oversupply in many areas and some key markets have been disrupted. In Europe, milk production has risen by about 10% due to very good weather and favourable conditions for production. That has had a downward pressure on prices and, as many hon. Members have said, many farmers are experiencing prices that are well below the cost of production.

There has been difficulty in other sectors such as pig production, where the market in Russia has been disrupted, exacerbating the problems. There has also been difficulty with lamb. New Zealand lamb has been finding it more difficult to get access to the Chinese market, so there has been a surplus of New Zealand lamb on the world market. Despite those short-term pressures, my message is that the long-term prospects for our farming industry remain good. As my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) said, there is a growing world population. It is set to reach about 9 billion by 2050 and many projections suggest a rise in demand for food of about 60%. That brings me to the issue of food security.

As the shadow Minister said, we are clear that there are two key elements to delivering food security in the world. One is that we must have open markets and the second is that we must have a vibrant, profitable and successful food production and supply system. The reason that self-sufficiency and food production alone is not enough to guarantee food security is that farming is always at the mercy of the weather. If there is a severe weather event in one part of the country, we need to be able to move food around the world, so open markets are crucial to ensuring food security.

Although our self-sufficiency is lower now, at about 64%, than it was at its peak in the late 1980s, we should recognise that then there was an incredibly distorting common agricultural policy. It was an era of grain mountains, butter mountains, wine lakes and so on.

That had a distorting effect. Against historical standards, we are still producing far more of our food than we have done in the past. Indeed, in the 1930s just before the second world war, our food self-sufficiency was only about 30% to 35%, so things are not as bad as some would suggest. However, if the Government do what we want to do—produce more, sell more, export more and import less—over time I hope that our current self-sufficiency will improve.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives posed a number of questions. He raised the plight of cauliflower growers in Cornwall, many of whom are in my constituency. That situation is wholly driven by weather. The autumn has been warm and many of the varieties have come in simultaneously, which has caused particular problems. I agree with him about country of origin. The UK has been at the fore of arguing in the EU for mandatory country of origin labelling—successfully when it comes to beef, pork, poultry and other fresh meats. We have been arguing tenaciously for country of origin labelling to be mandatory on some dairy products. I have to say that the Commission is pushing back on that at the moment, but we will redouble our efforts to improve the voluntary code in that regard.

My hon. Friend also asked what supermarkets are doing. It is important to recognise that and to give credit where credit is due. For instance, Morrisons has its “Milk for Farmers” brand. Many people scoffed at that when it came out, but it has actually been very successful. It pays an extra 10p a litre to farmers and its sales have well exceeded expectations, which shows a consumer interest in helping British agriculture. The other thing is that many of the main supermarkets, including Sainsbury’s, Tesco, M&S and the Co-op all have aligned contracts with virtually all of their liquid milk suppliers. The farmers supplying some of those supermarkets with liquid milk in particular are still quite often getting somewhere in the region of 29p to 32p a litre. There is a wide spread of fortunes in the dairy industry currently and we should recognise that some supermarkets are supporting farming through aligned contracts. Tesco is experimenting with the idea of an aligned contract on cheese, although that is more difficult because it is more exposed to commodity markets. M&S has also experimented with aligned contracts in other sectors, such as lamb.

On the other questions asked by my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives, public sector procurement is an important issue. We set up the Bonfield report to set out a balanced scorecard so that more locally sourced food is bought by the public sector. He asked what we are doing to back British farming. We have our Great British Food campaign and we will be working with organisations such as the NFU. He is right to highlight the benefits of animal welfare that we have. In fact, World Animal Protection rates the UK as top in the whole world for farm animal welfare. When it comes to getting a fair price, we are doing things to try to improve risk management so that farmers can mitigate the price volatility that they experience.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned the issues in Northern Ireland. There has been a particularly difficult situation with dairy in Northern Ireland and we have recognised that by arguing for an increased share of the support fund from the EU in November. My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham asked about the Groceries Code Adjudicator. That will be reviewed later this year by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. We have now put in place the ability for it to levy fines of up to 1% of turnover. In fact, looking at the survey data, the number of complaints about supermarkets has gone down slightly and Christine Tacon reports that more buyers and more suppliers to supermarkets are using the code in the way that they should.

The hon. Members from the Scottish National party mentioned convergence uplift. I am meeting NFU Scotland later this week. I have committed to reviewing that once everybody is on an area-based payment system, and we will continue to do that. Finally, a number of hon. Members, including the hon. Members for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) and for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall, made a very important point about fisheries. I completely agree with that, although I do not share the analysis of my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall that it is all bad news. We have seen big uplifts for plaice, haddock and cod this year, which shows the benefit of sustainable fishing.

In conclusion, we have had a very good debate in which lots of interesting points were raised. I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives on securing the debate.

3.58 pm

Derek Thomas: Mr McCabe, thank you for chairing the debate so well. I thank all Members for contributing and I especially welcome the support of my Cornish colleagues. It has been good to hear such a wide range of issues covered and addressed. I thank the Minister, who is extraordinarily patient with me and my constant pestering regarding farmers and fishermen in west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. He probably gets tired of that.

I welcome the Minister’s words and look forward to the publication of the 25-year food and drink strategy, but I ask that we step up our efforts to back British producers in any way that we possibly can. I am genuinely concerned for the future of many farms because there is considerable pressure on farmers to look at alternative uses for their agricultural land. There are only so many green fields that can be lost to house building and solar farms before we seriously compromise our ability to feed ourselves in the future. I hope the debate has served to empower the British consumer to support British products further and I hope that it is something that we continue to look at closely throughout this Parliament.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered food security.

Broadband Speeds: Northern Ireland

[SIR DAVID AMESS *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered broadband speeds in Northern Ireland.

I welcome this opportunity to raise an issue that is incredibly pertinent to the constituents of all Members representing constituencies in Northern Ireland. I am pleased that the Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy is present to hear our views. I have received correspondence from a number of individuals, families and companies who are frustrated by the slow progress on this issue and its economic impact. I have also been in touch with business owners and individuals from my constituency who have detailed the impact that “not spots” and poor internet connectivity have had on them, on their children’s education and on driving economic growth and productivity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting the issue of broadband and superfast broadband in Northern Ireland. It is obvious to me as an elected representative, and to all elected representatives in Northern Ireland, that better superfast broadband is essential for creating jobs and employment and for helping the economy to grow even further. Does she feel that the Minister needs to endorse that and to support our Minister in Northern Ireland?

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Of course, I agree that faster broadband is critical to driving economic growth and fuelling productivity. I am anxious to hear the Minister’s response and how he is working with the Northern Ireland Executive and with BT and the other providers, because there is no doubt that the majority of people now expect reliable and accessible broadband as a matter of course, yet in rural constituencies such as mine and many others in Northern Ireland there are businesses, families and farmers who are denied the necessary internet access and speeds that are the norm in urban areas, which may be due to topographical reasons. The lack of adequate broadband in other rural communities across Northern Ireland and Britain has created a digital divide that will only be exacerbated without meaningful action from the Government.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Is the hon. Lady aware that Fermanagh and South Antrim have two schemes that are being pushed at the moment?

4.3 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.11 pm

On resuming—

Ms Ritchie: On 6 October 2015, I received an email from the Minister indicating that Northern Ireland received £11.6 million for phase 1 and/or phase 2 of the superfast broadband programme, but that would allow for only two thirds of premises in my constituency of South Down to have access to superfast broadband by 2017.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way and for securing this debate. She may be aware that when I was on Belfast City Council we secured the second largest amount—£13.7 million—from the urban broadband super-connected cities scheme for Belfast. However, does she agree that there is still further work to be done by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to secure such a scheme for rural areas, which need it most?

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his helpful intervention. While the concentration of that money was clearly in city areas of Belfast and Derry, there is still a need to concentrate funds within rural areas, working in particular with the alternative technologies that are currently being promoted, because we all want to avail ourselves of those.

Danny Kinahan: I will have another go. I just wonder whether the hon. Lady, who I thank for bringing this subject forward, is aware of the Avanti rural broadband schemes in Fermanagh and South Antrim, particularly in leisure centres. Would she support looking for private companies to come in, because there is a hint that Virgin might help us as well in the future?

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. At this stage I will perhaps argue slightly against my political ideology and say that there is a need for increasing competition between private investors—*[Interruption.]* As Virgin and others have said, incentivising take-up has been proven to be a more effective driver of improved coverage of superfast broadband speeds.

Let me say to the Minister that many of my constituents in rural areas who have direct access to broadband have speeds of only 2 megabits per second, but there are other parts of my constituency—in much higher drumlin country and also in the mountainous areas of the Mourne—that do not have any access at all. That leaves people at a distinct disadvantage, whether they are families, business people or farmers. That issue needs to be addressed by working in partnership with other bodies, but the Government need to pay particular attention to it.

There was the voucher scheme, which many businesses in Northern Ireland availed themselves of. Sadly, around 12 October 2015 that funding ceased—because, I suppose, demand exceeded supply of resources—and many businesses found themselves without that resource and lacking the capacity to develop their broadband expertise and their business, and to fuel productivity and economic growth.

I believe that speeds of over 100 megabits per second are technically possible, but many of my constituents and those of my colleagues who are here today would be happy with speeds that just meet the Government’s own definition of superfast broadband, which is 24 megabits per second, and the EU level is defined as 30 megabits per second. There are homes and businesses throughout Northern Ireland that struggle to access a meagre 2 megabits per second. Effective and reliable access to broadband should not be a luxury. We would rightly not accept such a speed on the parliamentary estate, and nor should it should be acceptable for any of our constituents.

The recent Ofcom report of June 2015 highlighted that although 83% of small and medium-sized enterprises

felt that their businesses were well catered for by the communications market, a significant number expressed concerns about broadband speeds and availability, quality of service, and choosing between providers.

Today I want concentrate on possible solutions, which the Minister might also wish to concentrate on. All of us have experienced the frustration of a delayed or broken broadband connection, yet for people who experience that frustration on a permanent basis it is a lot more than just a minor frustration. It becomes a serious impediment to everyday life, to social inclusion and, of course, to economic development. Thousands of people across Northern Ireland are being denied that connectivity, so I want to concentrate on the solutions. I have talked to Virgin Media, I talked this morning to the internet broadband group, which has many members and looks after that level of connectivity for them, and yesterday I also talked to Vodafone. They all have a collective vision that there needs to be a greater level of partnership between Government, the devolved Administrations and the community.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The Scottish Government have invested in research as part of their world-class Digital 2020 vision. Two such projects are the free-space optics project at Edinburgh University and the white space project at Strathclyde University. Does the hon. Lady agree that the UK Government must invest in research if we are to have any chance of providing the level of service that our constituencies deserve?

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very helpful intervention. I agree that there needs to be more evidence-based research to highlight the areas that are not yet covered by good quality, high broadband speeds, particularly those areas that are so distant from the cabinets. There also needs to be an emphasis on bringing fibre to the premises. FTTP needs to be a part of digital infrastructure and needs to be investigated.

There is also a view that Openreach should be structurally separated from BT, as BT is the sole provider, to allow Openreach to invest in delivering an effective infrastructure for the whole telecommunications industry. Communication providers could then consider investing in an independent Openreach. Ofcom should look at that, and the Minister should also look at it, perhaps to refer it to the Competition and Markets Authority.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): When the hon. Lady and I enjoyed each other's company—I certainly enjoyed her company—in Downpatrick just before Christmas, I was mightily impressed by the way that the local council was providing a vast range of services online. Is there any evidence that there is a failure of take-up in those essential council services because of the lack of connectivity, particularly in the Mournes region?

Ms Ritchie: I thank my hon. Friend for his helpful intervention and for his good visit to South Down on 5 December. He is right: businesses that are not near the cabinet and premises that are not served need much better levels of technology. It is our local economy and local services that lose out.

Another issue is that structural separation will take time, so there is a need to move quickly to open up BT Openreach and provide better access for competitors, including to the network infrastructure. For example, other countries in Europe have managed to do that through physical infrastructure access under the existing regulatory regime. Spain and Portugal are leading examples of that. There is also a need to investigate the research into the whole rural broadband scheme, which has not been terribly effective. Alternative technologies need to be investigated. I met the Internet Services Providers Association this morning. It has a broad umbrella membership, and people and companies within it are doing that work. We need to look at alternative technologies that are capable of delivering the superfast speeds that are already universally available elsewhere. Subsidising take-up would be a more efficient solution for remaining rural areas.

The Government should focus any intervention on stimulating demand by subsidising the up-front costs of satellite broadband take-up. I would like to see the re-introduction of the broadband voucher scheme, which businesses found useful. I thought it would have happened in the autumn statement, so perhaps the Minister can reflect on that issue. In a recent written answer, he stated that

“this Government is working closely with Ofcom to implement the broadband Universal Service Obligation by 2020, as recently announced by the Prime Minister.”

There is doubt and apprehension that that might not happen, because there is not that collaboration between the technologies. There is monopoly control by BT, and separation and structural reform needs to take place.

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Ritchie: No, I will conclude, because I think it is fair that the Minister has time to respond to the issues.

I hope that we do see that universal service obligation by 2020. To quote the Minister's written answer:

“This will give people a legal right to request a broadband connection no matter where they live.”

It will enhance business and economic opportunities and drive the economic growth and job creation that we aspire to for all our citizens, as well as ensuring the social and economic development of all our peoples. I look forward to the consultation that the Minister will announce later this year, and I hope he can give us some information about that today.

There are two issues. In 2015, 77% of Northern Ireland premises had access to superfast broadband at speeds greater than 30 megabits, compared with the UK average of 83%. Suffice to say that my colleagues representing Northern Ireland constituencies are looking for a substantial improvement on that. Another interesting fact is that superfast coverage in Northern Ireland remained static from 2014 to 2015, while UK-wide it increased by 8%.

It is important that all the issues to do with technologies and increasing superfast broadband speeds are addressed. We need assurances that cable and fibre cable will be provided to premises and not solely to cabinets, because some find themselves at quite a distance, and speed reduces with distance from the cabinet. The bottom line is that we want to see our local economy and productivity

[*Ms Ritchie*]

grow. We want to see an enhancement of job creation. We do not want to see anyone left at a significant disadvantage. Obviously technologies—

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Lady give way? She has until 16.42.

Ms Ritchie: Well—

Jim Shannon: Thank you very much.

Ms Ritchie: What is my response to that?

Jim Shannon: I remind the hon. Lady that we have an extra 12 minutes.

Stephen Pound: Not 1690.

Jim Shannon: No, but it will be 1690 again some time. In my constituency, Excel in Newtownards has increased its business online and has sales across the world. It could do even more and employ more people if superfast broadband was available. The incentive to getting it in is that it would create more jobs and more lift within the economy. That can happen in Northern Ireland if the right things are done.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which relates to the points I have been making throughout this debate. We need superfast broadband, higher speeds and better connection. Working with all those in the industry and allowing that structural reform to take place will enhance our local industrial base and the availability of educational opportunities to many of our students. It will also ensure that our rural populations, particularly those in mountainous regions, will not feel disadvantaged in any way. I look forward to the Minister's response. I will feel free to intervene on him.

4.26 pm

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. This is the second debate I have replied to today. The first was at 2.15 this morning on the future of S4C. I was debating the issue with my colleagues and other Members from Wales. Yesterday, I was in this Chamber with my colleagues from England debating the importance of regional theatre. I know that that subject is close to your heart, Sir David, as a Member representing one of the cultural capitals of England in Southend. This afternoon, it is a pleasure to be with my colleagues from Northern Ireland, including the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who is an honorary Member for Northern Ireland, given his passion for the area. I am a frequent visitor to Northern Ireland. It was a pleasure to go to Derry/Londonderry when it was the first UK capital of culture. When it won that bid and took it forward, getting good broadband for Derry/Londonderry and the support of BT were important. It is a pleasure to visit Belfast and see the fantastic Titanic quarter, the home of "Game of Thrones" and the fantastic, burgeoning creative industries sector in that fair city.

Ms Ritchie: Will the Minister tell us what the Government are going to do about obtaining better superfast broadband speeds?

Mr Vaizey: I certainly will. Like an ageing router, I am gearing up to move at speed towards the substance of the debate. The point I was trying to make was to praise my hon. Friends from Northern Ireland for bringing such passion and expertise to a subject that is important not only for their constituents, but for constituents across the United Kingdom.

To begin at the beginning, we work closely with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which is in charge of the broadband roll-out. In the devolved nations, the devolved Governments take ownership of the broadband roll-out scheme, and we work closely with them to ensure that it is under way. Northern Ireland was ahead of the game at the beginning of the process, thanks to European funding, and had more fibre than most of the UK. It remains a very connected nation. Ofcom's recent "Connected Nations" report said that overall coverage is around 77% and that the availability of superfast broadband to rural homes had increased, too.

The current Northern Ireland project will add 24,000 superfast premises by March this year, and by 2017, a total of 38,000 premises will have been connected, thanks to our programme. Thanks to the £11 million of Government funding, we expect that Northern Ireland should have 87% of premises receiving superfast coverage by the end of 2017, which compares favourably with elsewhere. Small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland, for example, have the highest coverage of all the four nations for superfast broadband, according to Ofcom, the independent regulator. Also, I was pleased that Ofcom showed that the average download speeds for broadband in Northern Ireland increased from 50 megabits—already pretty substantial—to 56 megabits a second from 2014 to 2015, so we are definitely on an upward curve.

The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), who clearly knows her subject extremely well, covered various other important issues to do with broadband in Northern Ireland. She mentioned, for example, the scheme that we put in place to support small and medium-sized enterprises: our broadband voucher scheme. I am pleased to say that almost 2,500 businesses in Northern Ireland took advantage of that scheme. There has been cross-party support for the scheme, which has been a success. We will keep an open mind about whether it was right to reintroduce the scheme at a later date, but at the time it was time-limited. We wanted to get businesses to sign up to the scheme within a certain period of time, and I am afraid we had a deadline. However, I was pleased that more than 50,000 businesses in the UK took advantage of the scheme.

Importantly, wi-fi in public buildings was part of the scheme. In Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, 163 public buildings now benefit from wi-fi, but we need to go further. I have never made any secret of the fact that I hope that by the end of this Parliament we will have achieved 100% broadband coverage for the UK, and we need to do this in a variety of ways. First, we have our universal service commitment: everyone should have access to speeds of at least 2 megabits. We are doing this by allowing people who have speeds below 2 megabits to connect to satellite, and we will pay for them to be connected. That scheme is managed by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, so if any of the hon. Lady's constituents do not have access to broadband

speeds of at least 2 megabits, they can now apply for a voucher and be connected to satellite. That is our universal service commitment.

We have also put in place some trial pilots and a satellite scheme as part of the pilot in Northern Ireland and in Scotland, where some 300 premises have benefited from that trial scheme, which is designed to show us the costs of getting to the very hardest to reach premises—what we call the last 5%—and how we can get to them in the most cost-effective way. Northern Ireland has also benefited from the mobile infrastructure programme, and we are putting masts in “not spots” where there is no mobile coverage. Two of those masts are already live and another seven are being built.

Ms Ritchie: The Minister mentioned the mobile trialling project, which I understand was placed in South Antrim and in Fermanagh. Can he indicate whether that scheme is likely to be extended to other parts of Northern Ireland? He has indicated that there is a high level of speed in Belfast and in Derry, but I am concerned primarily about the rural areas that cannot access the speeds that are necessary for economic growth.

Mr Vaizey: If the hon. Lady is talking about mobile coverage, we have concluded the mobile infrastructure programme. At the moment there are no plans to build more masts, but, again, I will keep an open mind about that, because I am aware that some communities have not benefited from the scheme and would like to, and I will continue to keep that under review. It is worth reminding hon. Members that we have, in conjunction with the mobile operators, changed the terms of their licences, so that all four mobile operators are now committed to reaching 90% geographic coverage for 4G by the end of 2017. The distinction between premises coverage, which should be about 98%, and geographic coverage is important because there are many areas with very few premises, but that are large geographic areas, and we hope that the 90% commitment will see far wider 4G coverage for people in rural areas, and also for those of us who as passengers might use our mobile phone while being driven. Of course, we would not dream of doing that while we were driving ourselves. That is a very important point.

Going further into the future, the hon. Lady mentioned two or three issues that are important when we look at digital broadband roll-out over the next few years. The first is the potential break-up of Openreach, about which there is a lively discussion in this House and outside. The hon. Lady may be aware that Ofcom is conducting a digital communications review, and it is due to report towards the end of February, when it will make clear what it regards as the appropriate way forward for Openreach. We will wait to see what the independent regulator concludes in that respect.

I have already mentioned our universal service commitment, but the hon. Lady also talked about the universal service obligation, which is a different thing.

We will introduce legislation to ensure that anyone who does not have fast broadband can require a provider to provide them with speeds of at least 10 megabits, which is twice what the European directive requires. We intend to introduce that legislation over the next two years, so that by 2020 everyone should be able to apply for fast broadband, if they do not already have it, through our other various initiatives.

The hon. Lady rightly talked about fibre to the premises, which is, to a certain extent, the holy grail of superfast broadband. I was lucky enough to visit TalkTalk, which was conducting a trial in York, at the end of last year. It is delivering 1 gig to the premises. However, it is important to remember two things: first, it is very expensive to deliver fibre to the premises, and secondly, it is pointless to deliver fibre to the premises for people who do not necessarily want it. In the small tech world that I tend to inhabit, almost everyone I converse with thinks that everyone in the country wants 1 gig. Actually, most people want 10 or 20 megabits so that they can run a home office or a business from home, or take part in various consumer activities that they and perhaps the rest of their family want to take part in. Those are the sorts of speeds we want to give everyone in the country.

To reiterate, first of all, I welcome this debate. I think the hon. Lady is right to highlight the problems and issues faced in her constituency and in Northern Ireland as a whole, and I welcome the contribution of other hon. Members. As I have said, we have an £11 million roll-out of the broadband programme. We will get to 87% of Northern Ireland by the end of 2017.

Ms Ritchie: The Minister made reference, as I did, to fibre to the premises. He indicated that that was the Government’s holy grail: the top-level aspiration. Currently, less than 1% of the UK has fibre to the premises. Although I understand that it is costly, it could be one way of ensuring that those hard-to-reach rural communities could have access, so what plans do the Government have, working with the technological companies, to ensure that that is part of the pathway to a universal service obligation?

Mr Vaizey: As I was saying, fibre to the premises is very expensive and is not necessarily what the consumer wants at this moment in time, but we will certainly see individual companies over the next 10 years starting to introduce it more and more. It is worth reminding the hon. Lady that the technology that BT is already beginning to trial should see, for example, existing fibre to the cabinet solutions providing speeds 10 times faster than they currently do. So we could see people in her constituency, currently receiving 30 megabits, receiving speeds of some 300 megabits in a couple of years’ time and at very little cost. We intend to go forward with the universal service commitment, then the universal service obligation, as well as trialling alternative technologies. However, the hon. Lady is right to hold us to account. I would like to continue to work with her and her colleagues in improving broadband in Northern Ireland.

Healthcare: Yarl's Wood

4.39 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered healthcare in Yarl's Wood.

I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this issue today. Access to healthcare is a human right that is not adequately offered to the women of Yarl's Wood. I formerly worked as a practice manager in the NHS, so I have seen for myself the importance of delivering good quality healthcare to communities, including providing access to consultation rooms where people are treated with respect and dignity. That is particularly important for detainees, who often have to undergo intimate examinations to document past torture.

Across immigration detention centres, there have been six High Court findings of inhumane and degrading treatment and nine deaths in custody in the past three years. According to Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons, the situation in Yarl's Wood has worsened since G4S took over the contract for providing healthcare in September 2014. I want first to highlight the poor standard of healthcare provided, and secondly, to draw attention to the limitations that have recently been placed on independent doctors who are trying to work in Yarl's Wood.

My demands to the Minister are as follows. First, the Government must lift the restrictions on access to Yarl's Wood for independent doctors. The restrictions were put in place in October 2015, in contravention of detention rules. Secondly, they must ensure that legal rooms are refurbished, as has been done in other detention centres, to make up the extra space that Yarl's Wood management says is necessary to accommodate independent medical visits. Thirdly, they must ensure that rule 35 is properly used. Rule 35 processes are meant to protect people from detention when they have been tortured, traumatised or are extremely vulnerable in other ways. I share the British Medical Association's view that rule 35 reports should be written only by clinicians with relevant medical experience or appropriate training in identifying, documenting and reporting the physical and psychological signs of torture. Lastly, the Government must end the detention of pregnant women and those who are detained under the Mental Health Act 1983.

I want to start by highlighting the pervasive lack of confidence in the healthcare system. The detention services operating standards stipulate:

"All detainees must have available to them the same range and quality of services as the general public receives from the National Health Service."

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this excellent debate to Westminster Hall. Will she comment briefly on the recent debate in the Commons about the lack of a proper sentence, for want of a better word, which makes the question of healthcare even more important? If an individual does not know how long they will be in Yarl's Wood, their healthcare issues will be even more intense and difficult to cope with.

Kate Osamor: My hon. Friend highlights an important point. I know from first-hand experience that if women do not know how long they will be detained, it has an

impact on their mental health. I want the Government to take that fact very seriously. I will discuss it later in my speech. I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue.

In 2014, the report "Detained" by Women for Refugee Women found that 62% of those surveyed described healthcare in detention as "bad" or "very bad". In its latest report, "I am Human", 17 out of 38 interviewees raised the issue of healthcare without being prompted. The urgent need to review healthcare was also voiced by HMIP. In its most recent report on its unannounced inspection, which was published in May 2015, it stated that healthcare in detention centres has declined severely. One of the two concerns it identified is healthcare, which needs to be improved. The second is that staffing levels are too low to meet the needs of the population, which links to healthcare. The report shows that staff do not have the time to build meaningful connections with detainees, and no counselling is available. It states:

"Detainees' perceptions of health care were overwhelmingly negative. Their main concerns included poor access to prescribed medication, a poor overall standard of care, a poor attitude from health care staff, a corrosive culture of disbelief, and a lack of support with emotional and mental health needs."

The Care Quality Commission issued three requirement notices following the inspection.

In November last year, I went inside Yarl's Wood to meet women who had been detained. The two women I met were victims of trafficking; one was pregnant. Pregnant women are a particularly vulnerable group in detention. I call on the Government to review urgently their policy of detaining pregnant women in exceptional circumstances. In 2014, just nine of the 99 pregnant women who were detained in Yarl's Wood were removed from the UK. The removal of pregnant women is rarely medically safe, due to potential pregnancy complications and increased levels of severe malaria on arrival.

The human reality has never been so clear to me as when I went inside the detention centre. I know that the Minister has already visited Yarl's Wood, but I encourage him to do so again, if possible, on a healthcare visit.

Mrs Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): On the point about the unsuitability of detention for pregnant women and the statistic that the hon. Lady cited, there were 99 pregnant women in detention, but, as we understand it, there are now only two. I am sure she will join me in urging the Minister to ensure that no pregnant women are kept in detention, but the numbers have come down.

Kate Osamor: The right hon. Lady makes a valuable point. I agree that pregnant women should not be detained at all.

Meeting women in Yarl's Wood allowed me to hear the concerns that they do not have the power to voice to the outside world by themselves. I am here today as their voice. This debate is for them. They told me, unprompted, that the worst thing about Yarl's Wood is the healthcare. The women I met were depressed and exasperated by healthcare, but they were trying their best to stay positive about being released. They told me that the culture of disbelief in detention centres extends to healthcare staff as well, who are reluctant to take their illnesses seriously, and they assume that the staff are pretending to help with their asylum case. That feeling is compounded by the complaints process. Whereas

the majority of complaints receive comprehensive replies, usually on time, healthcare complaints in the months prior to the HMIP inspection had either not been responded to or were extremely late.

I want to highlight how damaging such healthcare systems are for detainees who are victims of torture and those who have mental health issues. Unsurprisingly, those groups are often intertwined. They represent a significant proportion of those in detention. According to Medical Justice, 50% of those held in detention are asylum seekers or have sought asylum at some point in the immigration process. More than 80% of those surveyed by Women for Refugee Women for "I am Human" stated that they had experienced gender-related persecution, and 30% had been on suicide watch at some point during their detention. During the previous HMIP inspection, 49% said that they had problems of feeling depressed or suicidal on arrival, compared with 39% at the last inspection. Despite those needs, there is no counselling. Only 68% of staff said to HMIP that they received adequate training in safeguarding adults, and only one said that they were aware of the national referral mechanism for victims of trafficking.

Rule 35 is in place to protect the most vulnerable and ensure that they are not unsuitably detained, but it is failing in Yarl's Wood. The most recent HMIP report states:

"Yarl's Wood is failing to meet the needs of the most vulnerable women held. These are issues that need to be addressed at a policy and strategic management level."

The report reiterates demands that rule 35 processes are appropriately followed. It states that Yarl's Wood's rule 35 reports were among the worst HMIP had seen. This included an exceptionally poorly handled rule 35 case in which a woman who had been raped was not considered to have met the criteria for torture even though she had clear symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Thanks to HMIP and independent organisations, the Government are aware of such concerns.

However, at the same time that the Government and Serco have announced reviews of operations at Yarl's Wood detention centre, access to healthcare is limited. In October 2015, Yarl's Wood informed Medical Justice that rooms in healthcare would be available only during a short lunch break on weekdays, severely restricting access for independent doctors, most of whom work in the NHS during the week and visit detainees on weekends. Such doctors therefore now have to visit detainees in inappropriate rooms with large windows and without examination facilities. That is wholly unsuitable. External medical assessments are most frequently carried out in order to assess whether someone has medical evidence of torture, which needs to be documented for their asylum case. If the doctor does not have a room where they can offer the woman the dignity of being able to undress and not feel threatened, how can that work?

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Returning to the "I Am Human" report mentioned by the hon. Lady, these women are already feeling quite vulnerable. If they are pregnant, they will feel doubly vulnerable. If they have access to medical treatment, but with a male member of staff, that is another issue. Perhaps we need some information on the male to female staff ratio. These women are already vulnerable and they are being managed by male members of staff.

Kate Osamor: The hon. Lady makes a valuable point. As she eloquently said, the woman may have experienced trauma at the hands of men and then may have to sit and talk to a man and undress in front of him, which could double or triple the impact of what they have been through. It would be wonderful if the Minister could provide some data on the ratio of male to female members of staff.

Furthermore, medical appointments often take several hours, much longer than the newly restricted one-hour lunch-break slot. Thorough medical assessments are vital in light of the poor quality of healthcare and are instrumental in helping to identify the most vulnerable detainees. Medical Justice wrote to Yarl's Wood in October 2015 about the matter and was told it was down to the Home Office. It subsequently wrote to the Home Office and has received no reply. I hope this debate will bring forward a proactive response.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. Does she agree that comprehensive trauma assessments for women necessitate a lengthy process over several sessions over a period of time, because people generally find it difficult to open up and discuss intimate details in a one-off consultation?

Kate Osamor: The hon. Lady makes a valuable point, and she knows from experience how much time it takes to be able to extract information when someone has been tortured. A one-hour slot is inadequate.

I want the Government to think about the harmful nature of detention as a policy, so I reiterate my requests that the Government lift restrictions on visiting times for independent doctors and refurbish legal rooms so that they can accommodate medical consultations in a dignified and professional manner; that they ensure that rule 35 is properly used to fulfil its function as a safeguarding mechanism for the most vulnerable; and that they end the detention of pregnant women and those detained under the Mental Health Act.

I hope that the Government will respond to my specific demands. I will say pre-emptively that while I welcome their efforts to address the matter through the Shaw review, its scope is limited. By not addressing detention as a policy, particularly for asylum seekers, it fails to deal with the root of many of the healthcare issues at Yarl's Wood: detention exacerbates existing mental health issues, particularly for vulnerable victims of torture, and has a lasting impact on their wellbeing. It is important that the Government consider the long-term impact of detention on the mental health of ex-detainees when reviewing their policy, especially given that the latest figures collected by HMIP show that the number of women released into the community is more than double the number of women deported. Women who had been previously detained in Yarl's Wood have told me of the devastating impact it has had on their mental health.

The Government must act now to improve a healthcare situation that has been severely criticised by women inside Yarl's Wood, ex-detainees, and independent organisations. I particularly hope that my first demand regarding independent visits can be accommodated as a matter of urgency.

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Order. The debate must finish at 5.39 pm and I will be calling Front-Bench spokespeople at 5.19 pm, so speeches will have to be brief.

4.56 pm

Mrs Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) on securing this important debate. As a longer standing Member of the House, I pay tribute to all hon. Members who have tried so hard to shine a light on the difficulties. I want to mention in particular Sarah Teather, the former Member for Brent Central, who chaired a detention inquiry, on the panel of which I sat, to take evidence from those who had gone through the detention system in this country.

I think the public will be quite surprised by some of the facts that come out of this debate. Each year, some 2,000 asylum-seeking women are locked up in Yarl's Wood. The majority of them are survivors of sexual violence and rape. Up to 93% of the women detained at Yarl's Wood claim to have suffered sexual violence of some form, so these are the most vulnerable women that we can think of in circumstances that are far from ideal. Being locked up in detention exacerbates physical and mental health problems, so it is even more important that the health provision should be to a high standard.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should never forget that those who are detained have neither been accused nor convicted of any offence? It is therefore particularly important that they are afforded the high-quality healthcare to which those who have been convicted of no crime are entitled.

Mrs Spelman: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I just do not think that the bulk of people in our society have any idea that the UK is the only country in Europe with no time limit on immigration detention and that one can be detained for an indeterminate period without charge. Most people in British society would think that impossible, but we are the only country in Europe that currently does it. My hon. Friend is right that people who are detained indefinitely without charge should not be denied the healthcare they need. That is one of the key reasons why securing this debate was so important.

The detention inquiry that took place in the last Parliament made six important recommendations to Government, one of which I want to reiterate:

“Decisions to detain should be very rare and detention should be for the shortest possible time and only to effect removal.”

Those recommendations were made to the coalition Government and I sincerely hope that the present Government's Minister will be able to say in his response what the Home Office is doing about those recommendations and the ones being made today.

We have heard about the types of health problems that women suffer from, but I will highlight the high percentage of suffering associated with sexual violence and the plight of pregnant women. Women for Refugee Women, an organisation already referred to, collected evidence from detainees in Yarl's Wood and, frankly, as a mother it makes my hair stand on end. For example, a woman recently detained while pregnant said that she had only one hospital appointment while in Yarl's Wood, which was for a scan at 20 weeks—as hon. Members

know, that is late for a first scan. Even then she was escorted by officers who brought the lady to her appointment 40 minutes late. How anxious and frustrated she must have felt—even when she was brought to the necessary scan, she was not presented in time and was not able to speak to the midwife after the scan because no time was left. As a woman who has been through pregnancy, I would expect such basic healthcare provisions for people.

Nusrat Ghani: On the issue of pregnant women, the contrast is between the treatment available to women in my constituency at an award-winning midwifery unit and what women in detention get. Pregnant women in detention cannot even request access to a midwife—surely that has to be discussed further.

Mrs Spelman: I could not agree more and that is why we are laying it on with a trowel today.

A further example from Women for Women Refugees distressed me greatly when I heard about it, just as the hon. Member for Edmonton was distressed by describing what women in detention have to go through. One woman had to wait three and a half hours for an ambulance while she was bleeding from a miscarriage. I suffered from multiple miscarriages and they can be a matter of life and death. If our constituents knew that a 999 call for someone suffering a miscarriage had taken three and a half hours to be responded to, they would soon be writing to the Secretary of State for Health.

We are at this debate to emphasise to the Government the urgency required to address the situation. What is it that deters the Home Office from taking a different approach to detention? In other countries, pregnant women or any of the people whom we would detain are detained in the community and kept at large there. Is the Home Office worried about the cost? I doubt it, because our system seems to be both expensive and unnecessary—holding someone in detention costs almost £40,000 a year and some of the detainees are held for a very long period. Community programmes are consistently found to be significantly cheaper. International evidence also demonstrates that such alternatives to detention support high levels of compliance. Perhaps the Home Office is worried about the risk of absconding? The Home Office is evaluating the UK's new family returns process, which makes minimal use of detention, and the evidence is that there has been no rise in absconding since the introduction of the new community-orientated process.

I urge the Minister, when he responds to the debate, to address such urgent matters of basic rights. We should expect all UK citizens and guests in our country to be able to rely on such rights and on an emergency service and proper healthcare to a standard that we would all expect to be available when needed. As far as possible, we should move away from how so many women are being treated.

5.3 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) for securing the debate. For me, as for her and for the right hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman), this is a powerfully emotive subject. It is a debate about pride and shame.

I am proud to be the Member for Walthamstow. When I was elected, the then Member for Blackburn told me that there were two divides in the House: between left and right; and between those who have to deal with the UK Border Agency and those who do not. That was a pretty accurate description.

I am also proud to be a member of the Set Her Free campaign and to work with Women for Refugee Women—some of those women live in my community and I have been proud to campaign with them about Yarl's Wood. Set Her Free is above all about giving voice, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton did so eloquently, to those women detained at Yarl's Wood now and whose voices we cannot hear unless others speak out for them. We are here today to speak out for those 2,000 women, the majority of whom we know to be the victims of rape and sexual torture and of persecution in their own countries. Yet when they come to our shores, this is how we treat them.

The healthcare problems are only the pinnacle of the injustice that Yarl's Wood represents in our community. Many of the detainees have mental as well as physical healthcare problems: one in five has tried to kill themselves and 40% of them self-harm. Those figures come from the valiant work done by Women for Refugee Women to hold us to account for the existence of Yarl's Wood. That work was cruelly disbelieved by the Home Office, so the report from Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons showing a tripling in the number of women self-harming in Yarl's Wood should be testament to the work done by Women for Refugee Women to uncover just what the truth is about such a place in our society here in Britain in 2016.

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is making a passionate and excellent speech. Will she join me in underlining that when there is no statutory limit on the period of detention those mental health issues such as the self-harming become worse?

Stella Creasy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for saying that, because she brings me to exactly what shames me. I feel shame about what is happening today in our country. I am ashamed that the UK is the only European country with no limit on detention, which absolutely compounds the mental health distress felt by many of those in Yarl's Wood. I am ashamed that the HMIP report also reveals that male members of staff are supervising women on suicide watch—as Women for Refugee Women warned us was happening. What does that mean in layman's terms? Vulnerable women are being watched as they sleep or as they use the lavatory. How is that happening in our country, on our shores?

I am also ashamed that all of that is futile, because two thirds of the women whom we lock up in Yarl's Wood are then set free and, as Members have talked about, 90% of the pregnant women are set free. What is the point of putting them through that torture? I am ashamed, because it is not even value for money. As the right hon. Member for Meriden pointed out, it costs us £40,000 a year to hold those women in detention. We could find much cheaper, much more humane and much more dignified ways in which to manage our asylum system.

Above all, I am ashamed that we do not hear the voices of those women. I therefore want to read directly from their testament. The right hon. Member for Meriden

cited a case, but I will read from the account of a woman who was not pregnant. The best way in which to guarantee the healthcare of women in Yarl's Wood is to close the place down altogether. Let me read this out:

“When I came to England I was destitute, I was homeless. I went to Croydon to the Home Office to explain my situation. Before I could say anything, the lady said to me, you are lying. I said, God knows if I am lying... Then they took me to a room. Nobody told me they were taking me to detention. A lady said to me, they are taking you to another immigration office. They put me in handcuffs. I did not know what was going on. Since I was born I had never left my country before. They put me in the van and took me to Yarl's Wood. They searched me. I wasn't able to ask what was going on, because I was too scared of them. Nobody told me what was going on. They said, you are in fast track, but I didn't know what that was.

While I was in detention, I was seriously sick, I was dying. My body collapsed. There were times when I could not walk. They took me to healthcare, they said you must eat, but I couldn't eat the food. I was skinny, I was dying.”

This is 2016. We have had such debates for a number of years. It is not cost-effective, moral or effective in the modern world to have somewhere such as Yarl's Wood in Britain. It should shame us all that it is happening on our shores. I ask the Minister, please, set her free.

5.8 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate hugely my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), because she has given those women a voice which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said, is being denied them.

At the moment a great deal of attention is rightly being given to those who are crossing borders to seek safety. It is important that we focus our attention on those who reach the UK and seek our protection, and that we ensure they are treated with dignity and humanity. Every year, around 2,000 asylum-seeking women are locked up at Yarl's Wood detention centre. Most are survivors of rape, sexual violence or torture. Because of their experiences in their countries of origin, those women are clearly vulnerable and many have serious physical and mental health problems. However, in spite of that, when they come to the UK for sanctuary they are locked up in detention, where they are re-traumatised, and the physical and mental health care available to them is wholly inadequate.

The chief inspector of prisons has called Yarl's Wood a “place of national concern”. He found in his most recent inspection report that, of all the areas in the centre,

“healthcare had declined most severely”.

His report also pointed to the lack of gender-sensitive health practices in Yarl's Wood. For instance, women who had newly arrived at the centre were expected to speak to male nurses as part of the health screening process and women who were placed on constant supervision, deemed to be so mentally distressed that they might kill themselves, were being watched by male staff in spite of their previous experiences of abuse and victimisation.

When Maimuna Jawo, who was detained in Yarl's Wood prison, gave evidence to the parliamentary inquiry into the use of immigration detention, she said:

[Sarah Champion]

“Anybody who is on suicide watch has sexual harassment in Yarl’s Wood, because those male guards, they sit there watching you at night, sleeping and being naked.”

The Home Office has promised that a new policy will be put in place to ensure that women are watched only by female guards, but while the proportion of female staff at Yarl’s Wood remains under 50% there are serious questions about whether such a policy will ever become practice.

There are also real concerns about the treatment of pregnant women in detention, as hon. Members have said. Research by Medical Justice found that pregnant women miss antenatal appointments and some do not have any scans while detained. The poor care provided to those women is particularly troubling when we consider that, as has been said, for most of them detention serves absolutely no purpose.

Mrs Spelman: I want to highlight one important point: staff from Yarl’s Wood were actually prosecuted for offences against detainees. It is important to place that on the record.

Sarah Champion: I am grateful that the right hon. Lady placed that on the record. It turns my stomach that we are in this situation. Ninety of the 99 pregnant women detained in Yarl’s Wood in 2014 were released back into the community to continue with their cases, so they were locked up and re-traumatised for no reason at all. One of the pregnant women who the charity Women for Refugee Women is in touch with, a survivor of trafficking, was recently released back into the community after being detained for almost two months, even though Home Office guidance says that pregnant women should be detained only if their removal is imminent.

Alex Chalk: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady’s excellent speech, but do we not have to be a tiny bit careful about making the point that people are sometimes released into the community and then continue normally? It happens in the criminal system that people who are remanded in custody subsequently have their trial and are acquitted, but that does not necessarily mean that, in all cases, there is not a public policy reason for such action. I understand her argument, but I wonder whether that is the strongest point.

Sarah Champion: I will come on to strengthen my point in a moment. It is welcome news that the Home Office has committed to consult on its policy of detaining pregnant women and I hope that it will engage with a wide range of stakeholders, including women who have been in detention while pregnant, to make sure that the process is meaningful. Standards of healthcare in Yarl’s Wood need to improve as a matter of real urgency, but we must not lose sight of the fact that locking up women who have come to the UK to seek our protection is harmful by its nature. However much healthcare services are improved, detention causes mental health trauma and exacerbates physical problems.

These women do not need to be in Yarl’s Wood in the first place. Their claims could be dealt with much more effectively in the community. In fact, two thirds of

asylum-seeking women are released from Yarl’s Wood to do just that. The Home Office’s own evidence on the new family returns process found no rise in absconding among families seeking asylum since children stopped being detained at Yarl’s Wood. We can and should learn from that.

Minister, locking up women seeking asylum is expensive, unnecessary and unjust. It is time that the practice is swiftly brought to an end.

5.14 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) on her heartfelt, moving speech. I want to thank her for crying—I am not the only one who does that in this place. She said that she wanted to be the voice for women detained in Yarl’s Wood and she has been that incredibly well today. Her demonstration of how deeply she feels will matter to them when they watch the debate.

If the UK Government need more evidence of the desperate human consequences of unlimited incarceration of vulnerable people, the shameful reports of inadequate healthcare as well as the dire treatment of female detainees in Yarl’s Wood should be telling enough for them to abandon their inhumane policies. I appeal to the Minister, who I know has a humane side to him—sometimes a very humane side—to do something now. We are waiting on the outcome of reports, but we already have significant reports, so we should not wait for more of them before we do anything.

Yarl’s Wood is a prison for people who have committed no crime, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) pointed out, where diabolical health and safety standards threaten the lives of innocent people, many of whom have already been victims of torture and trauma. Evidence of the degrading, inhumane consequences of indefinite detention shows the vital need for time-limited detention as a matter of urgency. The Scottish National party has long supported that. The UK Government are fundamentally failing to protect some of the most vulnerable women seeking refuge.

Yarl’s Wood fails to meet the most basic standards of health and safety for detainees and is a “place of national concern”. Those are not my words, but those of the chief inspector of prisons, Nick Hardwick. I sincerely hope that the Government will listen to that and do something as a matter of urgency.

I want to return to something that the hon. Member for Edmonton talked about. Last year, 90 of the 99 pregnant women detained were later released and not deported. I think it was the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and the hon. Member for—[*Interruption.*] She and the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy)—I do that in every debate—asked, if 90 of those women were later allowed to go to homes in the UK, what were they doing there in the first place? The hon. Member for Bishop’s Stortford—

Mrs Spelman: Good try—Meriden. [*Laughter.*]

Anne McLaughlin: The constituency names do not come up on the Annunciator in Westminster Hall. In an equally moving speech, the right hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman) noted that in 2015 there were—I

think she said—only two pregnant women in Yarl's Wood. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether that is because the Government are now politically opposed to the detention of pregnant women and whether we can expect that number to go down rather than up.

I also pay tribute to the right hon. Lady for speaking movingly about how deeply she feels about the situation, and in particular for mentioning her experience of miscarriage. That is not an easy thing to do, but she recognised her duty to do that to highlight the problems faced by other women.

I share the shame that the hon. Member for Walthamstow mentioned she feels. She did something important: she spoke in this place the words of women currently in detention. The hon. Member for Rotherham—I know where she represents—has been a true champion of those seeking asylum. She rightly questioned why 90 pregnant women were at Yarl's Wood in the first place if they were released.

The SNP has long called for an end to the unlimited detention—imprisonment, in fact—of migrants. It recently advocated that a 28-day maximum time limit be written into the Immigration Bill, based on evidence that being locked up for any longer would be catastrophic for the detainees' health. An unlimited period of detention not only causes damage to health, but is a fundamentally unnecessary and expensive exercise.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who is our immigration spokesperson, asked a parliamentary question in September about the cost per capita of detaining someone in one of these centres. The reply from the Home Office was that last year the average cost to hold an individual in detention was £91 per day. I would argue, as others have, that that money could be better spent elsewhere. The Home Office has also said that the UK detains immigrants only as a last resort, but in 2013 it detained just over 30,000. Germany detained just over 4,000, Belgium just over 6,000 and Sweden almost 3,000. During that time, Germany received four times as many asylum applications as the UK, and I do not think anyone would accuse Germany of being a soft touch. We are the only EU country to have no time limit on detention.

Many of the women detained at Yarl's Wood have backgrounds that include trafficking and torture, as well as physical and mental abuse. A young woman who fled persecution in Uganda on account of her sexuality talked about the lack of support for those with mental health problems and how the lack of appropriate healthcare in the detention centre led to suicidal thoughts. I understand that some counselling services were withdrawn last year; will the Minister give us an update on that? Surely that was a mistake and those services will be reinstated, because if anywhere needs it, it is that place. We must address the failures not only in Yarl's Wood but in the immigration system as a whole. We cannot put up with a prison-like system, not only because of the financial consequences, but because of the devastating human cost, which is simply not just.

I pay tribute to a choir that came to this place from Manchester at Christmas. In fact, they might have sung in this Chamber. They are called WAST—Women Asylum Seekers Together—and it was incredibly moving to witness them just before Christmas. All the women had been in detention and were now out, but the damage

that had been done to them, by not only the detention but whatever had happened in their past, was visible.

I conclude by repeating something I have said on more than one occasion in this place. I know that we no longer detain children, but I am going to use the words of a 10-year-old boy who I knew extremely well. He was in Yarl's Wood with his mother and could stand it no longer, and said to her, "Mummy, please can we just die? Please, dying would be better than this. Let us die." That child was 10 years old. It does not matter what age someone is; if we are doing something to people that makes them feel like they want to die, we have to do something about it. We cannot keep waiting for report after report after report. Listen to the reports that have come out already and take action as soon as possible.

5.22 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I, too, pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) for securing this debate and for her powerful and insightful comments. I am grateful for all the powerful and insightful comments that have been made this afternoon. It is a shame there are not more men in the room. This is a question not of women's issues but of human rights, and it is notable that there are not as many male Members present as there should be—this is not a party political point—both to contribute and to hear the contributions that have been made.

Of course, immigration rules have to be enforced and, in exceptional circumstances, detention is necessary, but it must always be humane and done to the highest standards, and there must always be safeguards. The point has already been made that, in relation to this particular type of detention, where there has been no conviction—no wrongdoing—it is particularly important that the detention service's operating standards are kept to, and that the same range and quality of healthcare services is provided in detention centres as is available on the NHS. That point was made early in the debate, and it is central to this issue, because it is manifestly not the case in Yarl's Wood.

There is clear evidence of repeated failures in relation to the rule 35 reports, in relation to the treatment and detention of pregnant women and the mentally ill, and in the provision of adequate healthcare more generally. Such repeated failings, and the reports on them, bring into question whether Yarl's Wood is still fit for purpose. That is the central question. But, instead of taking action, the Government repeatedly refer us back to reports that are due out, such as the Shaw review into the welfare of vulnerable people in detention. That review is important, but it has been with the Minister for some time now—I think it was completed in the autumn—so, in the light of the concerns that have been raised on many occasions and again in this debate, will he tell us when it will be published so that we can see its findings?

The rule 35 reports are central to the provision of care, welfare and healthcare in Yarl's Wood. They are intended to be a report of any case where continued detention is likely to injure the detainee's health, so they are central. They are sent, or are supposed to be sent, to the Home Secretary, who must consider and respond to

[Keir Starmer]

them. As has already been mentioned, the quality of the rule 35 reports in Yarl's Wood, these central reports that are supposed to flag up cases so that something can be done about them, is appalling.

Although part of it has already been read out, it is worth giving in full the quote from the 2015 report by the chief inspector of prisons, which said that the rule 35 reports

“were among the worst we have seen. All were handwritten and many were difficult to read, lacked detail and were perfunctory. Some responses were dismissive.”

That shows a manifest failing of a flagging system that is supposed to start the process and alert the Home Office to concerns so that something can be done. How can the rule 35 reports examined in the 2015 report be among the worst that have ever been seen?

It is clear that the Home Office's response to these reports has also been inadequate on occasion. A recent example is the case of a Sudanese refugee that went to the High Court. In that case, the medical practitioner at Yarl's Wood had filed a rule 35 report, which gave details of previous injuries caused by beatings with metal rods, knife wounds and even a gunshot. Despite the evidence of torture, the Home Secretary said that there were exceptional circumstances justifying detention. The High Court disagreed, finding that the woman had been wrongfully detained and calling the case “truly disgraceful”. What is the point of the rule 35 procedure if adequate responses are not made in every case?

A further problem that has already been touched on is the detention of pregnant women and the mentally ill. It may be that the number is coming down, but it is a very serious issue. There have been far too many in the past, and any detention of anyone who is pregnant requires exceptional justification. There is no evidence that those exceptional circumstances are made out in so many of these cases. As the director of midwifery at the Royal College of Midwives, Louise Silverton, has said:

“Some pregnant women have reported receiving inadequate healthcare, which clearly puts their unborn baby at risk as well.”

The law is designed to protect pregnant women and those with other vulnerabilities from being detained. It is not being applied properly, it has not been applied properly in the past, and that now raises the question of whether, if it cannot be applied properly, it should be applied at all. There are other provisions in relation to vulnerable individuals.

I am aware of the time, but I want to mention one other issue, which I think has already been raised: the investigations into the deaths in custody that have occurred in the past few years. In particular, there have been reports of the death of a 40-year-old female detainee in March last year in which it has been said that the detainee was denied medical assistance. I know that there has been an investigation, so could the Minister give us an update on that and tell us when we can see its findings? That might tell us so much more about the provision of healthcare in Yarl's Wood.

To conclude, it is not acceptable to wait for yet more evidence and yet more reports before something is done about the appalling situation in Yarl's Wood. Now is the time for action. Frankly, if the rules cannot be applied properly in Yarl's Wood and adequate medical

provision cannot be made to safeguard the health and welfare of some of the most vulnerable people in our society, the question is whether Yarl's Wood is fit for purpose.

5.29 pm

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. May I congratulate the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) at the outset on securing this debate and on her contribution? I know that she feels strongly about this subject and has been committed to it over a period of time and since she has been in the House. I know how deeply she feels about these issues, as her contribution showed. I am genuinely grateful for the manner in which she has approached this debate.

As the hon. Lady indicated, one of the first things I did following the general election and my reappointment as the Immigration Minister was to visit Yarl's Wood, recognising a number of the issues raised about the centre, and I specifically visited the healthcare centre at that time. I can certainly assure her and other Members of our focus on this issue and, indeed, the importance that the Home Secretary and I attach to the dignity and welfare of those in detention. That is of the utmost importance, and we take those responsibilities extremely seriously. I hope to talk about some of the generalities of the policy, to focus on Yarl's Wood specifically and to address rule 35 access to independent medical examinations, as well as some of the other points flagged up, in the time available to me.

Our policy is that vulnerable people should not normally be detained under immigration powers. Our processes are designed generally to prevent vulnerable individuals from being detained unless there are very exceptional circumstances and, when vulnerability emerges after the point of initial detention, we aim to act quickly and appropriately.

Reference has been made to the Shaw review. Indeed, the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) highlighted it in his contribution. The Home Secretary commissioned Stephen Shaw to carry out an independent review of welfare in detention—that is, in immigration removal centres, in short-term holding facilities and for detainees under escort. The review considered many of the issues discussed in today's debate. Mr Shaw was asked to look at current systems and policies, including those in place for identifying vulnerability, managing both the mental and physical health of detainees, providing welfare support, preventing self-harm and self-inflicted death, assessing risk, managing food and fluid refusal, and safeguarding. We have received Mr Shaw's report and, as I indicated on Report of the Immigration Bill, it is our intention to publish both the report and our response to it before Committee consideration of the Bill in the House of Lords. That remains our intention.

Stella Creasy: Will the Minister give way?

James Brokenshire: I was just about to address the detention issues raised by the hon. Lady, as well as those raised by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) referred to fast track in her contribution. I underline that I made the decision to suspend detained fast track—in other words, where an asylum case is

being considered—because I was not satisfied with the safeguarding provisions around vulnerability. I will reintroduce it only when I am satisfied that appropriate processes and procedures are in place to ensure its safe reintroduction.

Stella Creasy: Will the Minister confirm whether, when the Government respond to the Shaw report, there will be clarity as to whether they consider women who are victims of rape and sexual torture—that is, two thirds of the residents of Yarl's Wood—to be vulnerable in and of themselves, and therefore inappropriate for detention?

James Brokenshire: I will be careful not to pre-empt the Government's response, but the hon. Lady will not have long to wait for the Shaw report. I recognise the importance attached to it. Indeed, the Home Secretary commissioned the report because of the importance we attach to it. My comments today will be based on the position as it stands, but the Government will have more to say on these issues shortly.

Dr Lisa Cameron: I speak as the MP for the constituency where Dungavel is based, and also as a psychologist. When I visited that centre, it struck me that another issue of vulnerability for individuals who have suffered abuse and trauma is being detained alongside foreign national offenders who may be violent or sexual offenders. Will the Minister comment on how such risks are assessed, particularly given that it was pointed out to me that prison records do not always follow foreign national offenders into the units?

James Brokenshire: I assure the hon. Lady that risk assessment takes place. There is sometimes a mix of different people within an immigration removal centre: some of them will be foreign national offenders, and others will be there as a consequence of the removal process. It is worth underlining that we are talking about immigration removal centres. The primary purpose is the removal of people from this country, but there will be public protection issues, and risk assessment is clearly a core part of the operation of any immigration removal centre.

I am conscious that I now have four minutes left to respond to the various points made, so I will try to make as much haste as I can. Several Members mentioned indefinite detention. It is not possible to detain under immigration powers indefinitely. There are significant, long-standing and, we believe, appropriate protections against the arbitrary use of administrative detention by the state in this country.

I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman) and other Members that we are carefully considering alternative options to detention. Our published policy is clear that alternatives to detention should be used wherever possible. As I indicated on Report of the

Immigration Bill, we are considering the overall issues of the detention estate more broadly and are examining alternatives as part of that ongoing work. Members referred to the family removals process.

Catherine West *rose*—

James Brokenshire: I will make some progress, as I now have three minutes remaining.

On the specific complaints issues raised, our detention centre rules are designed to ensure that female detainees' rights, dignity and privacy are upheld. Should we receive complaints that contractors are breaching those rules, I assure hon. Members that such cases will be investigated fully and firmly.

On the issue of female members of staff and the availability of care and support, nurses are available 24/7 in Yarl's Wood but, as in the community, they will not always be female. Detainees have the right to request to be seen by a female doctor or nurse, which will be arranged wherever possible. Midwives from Bedford Hospital NHS Trust visit the centre once a week, and the frequency and length of attendance is determined by demand.

The hon. Member for Edmonton mentioned independent medical examinations. Detention centre rules require that a registered medical practitioner selected by or on behalf of a detainee is given reasonable facilities for examining detainees. IRC suppliers rightly take requests very seriously and seek to accommodate them in accordance with the rules, but I am aware that some groups have made representations and expressed concerns. We are examining those closely and considering this issue carefully. I assure the hon. Lady that I recognise that issue, and we are examining how best to address it.

The Home Office will be revising the template form that IRC doctors are required to use when completing rule 35 reports, in order to make it clearer what information the Home Office requires of doctors when they complete such reports. We have consulted on the proposed changes with the relevant stakeholders. The intention is to make the forms easier for doctors to use, thereby improving the content of rule 35 reports. That is an important aspect, in order to ensure we act on those reports and consider them appropriately.

On the CQC report, an action plan is very much in place, and I have had discussions with NHS England about that. It is being worked through, and we take these issues very seriously.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Edmonton for the constructive discussion today. I confirm the importance we attach to this issue and, if I may, I will seek to write to her on the other issues that time has unfortunately prevented me from addressing.

5.39 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Petition

Wednesday 6 January 2016

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Realignment of Diddington Lane in Hampton-in-Arden

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the proposal to realign Diddington Lane, published as part of the Additional Provisions of the HS2 London to West Midlands Bill, is inconsistent with the character of the existing lane; further that the proposal to realign the lane will severely affect the village and village life by the addition of hundreds of cars every day using the village roads as short cuts to the station; further that we need a better solution than that proposed by HS2; and further that a local petition on this matter was signed by 746 individuals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reverse the decision to allow Diddington Lane to remain open to all traffic, and allow a “Green Route” that would only be available to pedestrians, cyclists, equestrians, agricultural vehicles, HS2 Ltd maintenance vehicles and emergency vehicles.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mrs Caroline Spelman, Official Report, 14 October 2015; Vol. 600, c. 456.]

[P001549]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Transport (Robert Goodwill):

The High Speed Rail (London-West Midlands) Bill is a hybrid Bill which has been referred to a Select Committee of this House. This is a matter for the Select Committee to consider.

Residents of Diddington Lane have petitioned against the Additional Provision to the Bill and are due to be heard by the Committee in January 2016. They have recently received Promoter’s Response Documents from HS2 Ltd.

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Wednesday 6 January 2016

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PETITION

Wednesday 6 January 2016

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