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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 14 January 2016

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Domestic Abuse

1. **Mr Robin Walker** (Worcester) (Con): What recent steps the Crown Prosecution Service has taken to ensure that prosecutors are able more effectively to prosecute cases of domestic abuse. [903023]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Crown Prosecution Service legal guidance on domestic abuse was updated ahead of the introduction of the new offence of coercive or controlling behaviour in intimate and familial relationships. To support the introduction of that guidance, training has been developed and made available to prosecutors.

Mr Walker: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that answer. Women's groups in Worcester and national campaigns such as Women's Aid have warmly welcomed the new law of coercive control as a real step forward in the protection of victims. Does he anticipate a further rise in the number of domestic abuse cases coming to court as a result of that change in legislation?

The Solicitor General: I pay tribute to all those groups that do so much to support male and female victims of domestic abuse. Yes, I think we can expect a rise in prosecutions. There has been a similar precedent in the case of stalking and harassment offences, which were introduced several years ago, and I was proud to be the Minister who took the coercive control provisions through this House.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Given that conviction rates for rape, domestic abuse and other sexual offences have fallen in the past year, what reassurances can the Solicitor General give to the House that further budget cuts will not damage attempts to secure justice for the victims of those crimes?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman makes a proper point. Conviction rates for domestic violence remain broadly flat, but the volume of convictions continues to increase, which is good news for every single victim. For example, rape convictions now exceed

2,500 a year, whereas there were only 2,000 some five years ago. I assure him that the CPS, in the light of the comprehensive spending review settlement, is placing continued priority on rape and serious sexual offence units, and no prosecution will be prevented as a result of any budget problem.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The strength of the victim's evidence in a domestic violence trial can often depend on recalling recollections as close in time to the incident as possible. Does the Solicitor General agree that we should consider allowing victims to record evidence remotely, perhaps via an app on their phones, rather than having to flog off to a police station?

The Solicitor General: Like my hon. Friend, I am always enthusiastic about the sensible use of new technology. Police in London are already piloting body-worn cameras, which capture the immediacy of events of domestic abuse. That sort of technology needs to be very much part of the tools available to police officers when investigating such cases.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Solicitor General for his responses so far. Domestic violence accounts for about a fifth of all crime in Northern Ireland, with police officers attending 60 domestic incidents a day. That is massive, but we still have problems with people failing to come forward, particularly men. Is the CPS considering taking steps to work alongside police forces to encourage people to report all domestic incidents?

The Solicitor General: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of male victims. About 15% of domestic abuse victims are, indeed, men, and proper emphasis is being placed on the need to encourage men to come forward. It is not a badge of shame for someone to admit that they are a male victim of domestic abuse, and that message needs to be heard loud and clear throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom.

EU Renegotiation

2. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with the Prime Minister on the legal form of the UK's renegotiation deal with the EU. [903024]

7. **Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with the Prime Minister on the legal form of the UK's renegotiation deal with the EU. [903031]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): I regularly meet ministerial colleagues, including the Prime Minister, to discuss issues of common interest, including EU law matters, but I am not able to talk about the legal content of those discussions, because, by convention, whether Law Officers have given advice is not disclosed outside Government.

Jeff Smith: The President of the EU Council has said that we should expect a concrete proposal in February. Given the timescale involved, can the Attorney General tell us what legal form the renegotiation of the deal will take?

The Attorney General: Of course, I cannot discuss the legal ramifications of an agreement that has not yet been reached. When the agreement is reached, the House will, of course, be able to see it and form its own judgment, including on its legal aspects, on which we will be able to say more. The hon. Gentleman will recognise, however, that the final say on the matter will come from the British public, who will have a referendum to determine their verdict—a referendum that a Labour Government would not have given them.

Stephen Kinnock: Article 50 of the Lisbon treaty states that, on announcing its intention to withdraw from the European Union, the withdrawing state will automatically be excluded from all meetings of the European Council and, if agreement is not reached within two years, the withdrawing state will be automatically excluded from the negotiated terms. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that a withdrawing state is therefore liable to suffer what would amount to a punishment beating to dissuade others from withdrawing, and that therefore there is no such thing as a soft Brexit?

The Attorney General: These matters will be discussed in the course of the referendum campaign. The hon. Gentleman is several stages ahead of where we are now. The first thing that needs to happen is a renegotiation. Conservative Members believe that the renegotiation is necessary, and we wish the Prime Minister all success in achieving it. When he has, there will be a referendum to determine whether or not the British public believe it is a good enough deal. Both the renegotiation and the referendum were opposed by the hon. Gentleman's party. We believe that they are the right things to do.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): The plan appears to be to have an agreement as a first stage, which would later be confirmed in a treaty change. As the voters in Denmark and Ireland have shown in the past, the outcome of national referendums cannot be taken for granted. How can the Government be certain that any proposed treaty change in the future would actually be approved by each of the other 27 EU states?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend, too, will recognise that these matters will be debated fully in the course of the referendum campaign. I know he will play a full part in that campaign. Of course, in relation to both Ireland and Denmark, international agreements were reached and subsequently enacted. The Government and the public will of course wish to consider that, if that is the outcome of the renegotiation.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Were this country to vote to leave the European Union, would the Attorney General's advice to Her Majesty's Government be that the article 50 direction ought to be tabled straightaway so that the negotiations for our exit, which the British people would have so willed, could begin straightaway?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend will recognise that we are some way away from that. I know he will also recognise that, as I said in my initial answer, I cannot discuss in the Chamber or elsewhere legal advice

that I may or may not give to the Prime Minister. I hope my hon. Friend will therefore forgive me for not doing so now.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): One of the risks of leaving the EU is that the UK will no longer be able to rely on crucial EU criminal justice measures to fight serious and organised crime and terrorism. Has the Attorney General given any advice on that risk, and if so, to which Departments?

The Attorney General: I am afraid that I am going to sound like a broken record. I think the hon. and learned Gentleman, like most Members of the House, understands full well that I cannot discuss in the Chamber the advice that I may or may not have given to the Government, and I am not going to do so.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): In my view, the legal position surrounding the so-called renegotiation is confused at best. It appears to me that this confusion may be delaying potential withdrawal from the European convention on human rights. Do the Government intend to hold the EU referendum before addressing the UK's membership of the ECHR?

The Attorney General: I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman says about the position being confused. As I have already said, I cannot comment on the legal status of an agreement that has not yet been negotiated. In relation to the ECHR, he will know that my ministerial colleagues in the Ministry of Justice are working very hard on the Government's proposals, and he will hear them in due course.

Sexual Violence

3. **James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con):** What recent steps the Director of Public Prosecutions has taken to improve co-ordination between prosecutors and police in the handling of cases involving sexual violence. [903025]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): To ensure a consistent approach to the investigation and prosecution of rape cases across all CPS areas, a joint CPS and police national steering group and a delivery board have been established, and they meet regularly.

James Berry: What assessment has my hon. and learned Friend made of the CPS's action plan to improve the investigation and prosecution of rape and sexual assault? Does he agree that the publication of the action plan demonstrates the willingness of this Government and of the CPS to increase the number of prosecutions in those areas?

The Solicitor General: I agree with my hon. Friend. The publication of the plan shows a very clear line of intent. That is reflected in the increased volumes of prosecutions, and in the careful consideration given to any withdrawal of prosecution cases before a jury has properly considered them.

Syria

4. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Whether he has given advice on the legality under international law of the bombing of Syria. [903026]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): As I have mentioned, the long-standing convention adopted by my predecessors in Governments of all hues is that neither the fact nor the content of Law Officers' advice is normally disclosed outside the Government. In this case, the Government's legal position in relation to taking military action against Daesh in Syria is reflected in the Prime Minister's response to the Foreign Affairs Committee. The hon. Lady can take it that I am in agreement with that position.

Deidre Brock: I appreciate the fact that the right hon. and learned Gentleman's advice to the Government is privileged, and rightly so, but will you do Parliament the courtesy of sharing your view on the legality of the current military action in Syria either now or in a statement?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have no view on the matter.

The Attorney General: Well, Mr Speaker, I do have a view on the matter. My view is that these were legal actions. As I have said, the Government's legal position on these matters has been set out, I believe with clarity, so the House is aware of it. I do not intend to set out the specific advice that I have given, either on the individual drone strike in Syria or on military action against Daesh, but, as I have said, in both cases the Government's legal position is set out and I fully agree with it.

Wildlife Crime

5. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Director of Public Prosecutions on the role of the national wildlife crime unit in increasing conviction rates for wildlife crime. [903028]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Crown Prosecution Service's senior wildlife champion and the head of the national wildlife crime unit work together closely and regularly discuss policy and casework issues. Both parties sit on the partnership for action against wildlife crime, which is chaired by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Jessica Morden: Does the Solicitor General agree that if conviction rates for wildlife crime continue to increase, it is crucial that the Government commit to funding the national wildlife crime unit not just for a year or two, but as part of a much longer-term wildlife crime strategy?

The Solicitor General: In the year from July 2014 to June last year, the overall conviction rate was 71%, which compares favourably with other types of crime. There were 605 defendants prosecuted, with 349 entering guilty pleas. The decision on the funding of the wildlife crime unit will be made very shortly.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): In my constituency and in the wider south-west, the wildlife crime unit plays a crucial role, particularly in cracking down on poaching, but also in protecting hares, other precious creatures and birds' eggs. If the unit were disbanded, there would be no one else to step into its shoes, so I urge the Solicitor General to think carefully before withdrawing what does not amount to very much funding for so much valuable work.

The Solicitor General: I hear what my hon. Friend says, as I am sure do DEFRA Ministers. With about £1.7 million of funding since 2010, the unit has indeed played an important role in the prosecution of these serious offences. As I said, a decision on funding will be made very soon.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Does the Solicitor General feel that there is enough protection in current legislation not only for wildlife, but for individuals who are involved in rural sports?

The Solicitor General: Britain has led the world in legislation that criminalises acts of cruelty against wildlife and that relates to the protection of wildlife. While the relevant laws are in place, they will be properly enforced and prosecutions will be applied using the tests that prosecutors have to use, following the evidence wherever it leads them.

Crown Prosecution Service

6. **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Director of Public Prosecutions on the consequences of the Law Officers' Department's spending review settlement for the Crown Prosecution Service's operations. [903030]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The Director of Public Prosecutions and I have regular discussions about Crown Prosecution Service operations. We both believe that the spending review settlement enables the CPS to respond effectively to a changing case load and an increase in complex and sensitive cases. We also continue to discuss how the CPS can be more efficient and effective in the work that it does.

Judith Cummins: Does the Attorney General agree with the former Director of Public Prosecutions, Lord Macdonald, that as the CPS is forced to shed thousands of jobs, a potentially dangerous situation could develop in which the CPS no longer has the necessary expertise to do its important job of delivering justice to the people of this country?

The Attorney General: No, I do not agree, and, more to the point, neither does the current Director of Public Prosecutions. I draw the hon. Lady's attention to two things in the settlement and what they have led to. The CPS can almost double in size its counter-terrorism unit, which has a growing case load, as she will appreciate. It can also recruit 100 more prosecutors to conduct work on serious sexual cases. In both those areas, the number of cases that the CPS has to deal with is growing substantially, and it is now in a position to do so.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Will the Attorney General confirm that his response is entirely consistent with the evidence that the Director of Public Prosecutions has given recently to the Select Committee on Justice? The willingness of the Crown Prosecution Service to look innovatively at the ways in which it organises itself is being reinforced by its co-operation with the chief inspector's proposal to carry out thematic reviews of its financing at a corporate level, which will drive further efficiencies.

The Attorney General: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend, and it is important that the Crown Prosecution Service inspectorate takes that role. As I have indicated, it is keen to ensure that its work is conducted as efficiently as possible, and it will need to do that in continuing difficult economic times. It is not right to suggest that the CPS does not have the resources that it needs to do its job well.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): This time last year the Director of Public Prosecutions asked the Attorney General for an extra £50 million to prosecute complex cases properly, but the spending review revealed a real-terms cut of 2.1% to the Law Officers Department. Given that the vast majority of the budget is taken up by the CPS, will the Attorney General confirm that the DPP is saying that she no longer needs the extra £50 million for which she was pleading just 12 months ago?

The Attorney General: May I start by congratulating the hon. Gentleman on his well deserved promotion? I point out, however, that I think four people have done his job in the time that I have been doing mine, so I wish him at least a comparatively long career in opposition.

As he knows—we have discussed this issue across the Dispatch Box previously—it is important to listen to what the CPS is saying now, not what it said a year ago, and what it is saying now is what I read to him in my initial answer. At the time, the CPS comment, with which the DPP fully agrees, was:

“This settlement will allow the CPS to respond to a changing caseload and the significant increase in complex and sensitive cases, such as terrorism, rape and serious sexual assaults and child sex abuse.”

That is what the DPP believes. She says that this is a good settlement, and I agree with her.

Mr Speaker: Grahame Morris is not here. I call Mr David Hanson.

Domestic Violence

10. **Mr David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What recent steps the Crown Prosecution Service has taken to improve the conviction rate for rape and domestic violence. [903034]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The CPS has taken a number of steps to improve the conviction rate for rape and domestic violence abuse cases, including refocusing resources to strengthen the rape and serious sexual offences unit's extensive training on rape cases for prosecutors, an update of domestic abuse legal guidance, and closer working with the police.

Mr Hanson: That is all very well, and I am grateful for the Minister's reply, but it will not hide the fact that the conviction rate for rape has fallen by 5.6% in the last four years, and is now just over 56%. The conviction rate for domestic abuse has also fallen. Clearly, something is happening, and I would welcome the Minister's view of what that might be, and a clear indication of what action he will take to increase conviction rates, particularly for rape.

The Solicitor General: The right hon. Gentleman has taken a long interest in this matters, and he is right to raise those issues. I remind him that the volumes of outcomes continue to increase to their highest ever levels. I have mentioned rape, but domestic violence outcomes have also increased dramatically to their highest ever levels, which means justice for thousands more victims. It is incumbent on the CPS to examine the reasons why prosecutions do not succeed, and the key for the Attorney General and me is to ensure that the prosecution does not bring charges and then drop them without good reason. It should allow such cases to go to a jury, so that juries and magistrates can make decisions.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): May I take a slightly contrary view? As we all know, about a year ago a colleague of ours was found innocent of rape, and more recently a young student was also found innocent of rape. It is important that the Crown Prosecution Service does not prosecute people lightly, and if it thinks that a person is innocent, it should ensure that they are not prosecuted.

The Solicitor General: I assure my hon. Friend that in every case the prosecution must apply the test of a reasonable prospect of conviction, and of whether that prosecution is in the public interest. That should apply to everybody, whether they are in this House or any other part of the country. There must be equality before the law, and the evidence must be followed wherever it leads.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Despite what the Solicitor General has said, conviction rates for rape, other sexual offences and domestic abuse have all fallen, and the Government need to do far more to reduce the incidence of those offences, as well as more to support victims. Last year the Labour party made a manifesto commitment to legislate with a violence against women and girls Bill, just as the groundbreaking Welsh Labour Government have done. The Bill would include provisions to appoint a commissioner to set minimum standards to tackle domestic and sexual violence. Will the Government do the same?

The Solicitor General: First, may I warmly welcome the hon. Lady to her position? It is a pleasure to see her. Indeed, we worked together for many years in the south Wales legal fraternity.

The Government are absolutely committed to funding the combating of violence against women and girls. A cross-ministerial group, of which I am a member, meets regularly, and we have introduced new legislation to criminalise coercive control. We have enhanced the tools the police and the prosecution have at their disposal, which is why the number of prosecutions for domestic abuse and rape continues to rise.

Mr Speaker: Now a lawyer who is not a member of the Welsh legal fraternity, but we want to hear from him anyway. I call Huw Merriman.

Police: Firearms

13. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the law on the discharge of firearms by police officers. [903037]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): For the purposes of clarity, Mr Speaker, I am not a member of the Welsh legal fraternity either.

In the aftermath of the tragic events in Paris last month, the Prime Minister asked for a review into the legal framework and investigatory processes relating to incidents involving police use of firearms. I will play my part in that review, which will conclude later this year.

Huw Merriman: My name may suggest otherwise, but Wales is not my home.

Last week I met the chief constable of Sussex police. We agreed that our firearms officers do a job that is difficult and often dangerous, and that they are more likely than ever to be called on to protect the public. They fully understand, quite rightly, that they will need to account for their actions if they use lethal force. Is the Attorney General comfortable that our investigating authorities support this difficult balance?

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend. As he says, it is important that incidents are properly investigated, but it is also important we recognise the need to treat police officers fairly. If, as we do, we need to recruit more police officers to do the difficult work of using firearms, and we need to retain experienced officers who already do that work, then they need to feel as though the system will treat them fairly. That is, I hope, what the review will do.

Homelessness

14. **Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government on the effect of the Supreme Court ruling of 13 May 2015 on local authorities' ability to meet their legal duties towards people facing homelessness. [903038]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I have to observe the proprieties of the Law Officers' convention, but the Government welcome the clarity the judgment provided. It explains that any assessment of vulnerability must be made in the round, looking at all aspects of a person's situation.

Mr Burrowes: A rough sleeper is likely die by the age of 47. Homeless people are inherently vulnerable. Can the Solicitor General assure me that, as the law currently stands, a safety net is provided for vulnerable and homeless people who are unintentionally homeless?

The Solicitor General: I commend my hon. Friend for the considerable work he has done on this issue, both in the capital and generally. The Government intervened in that case precisely because they were concerned that the test would disproportionately affect vulnerable homeless people. I am glad the Supreme Court has rebalanced the law in what I think is a fair way.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Child Poverty

1. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the effect on equality of recent changes to the Government's definition of child poverty. [903004]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): Before I begin, may I, on behalf of the whole House, welcome the new female First Minister in Northern Ireland, Arlene Foster, to her role and wish her all the very best? I am sure the whole House will also want to offer its support to my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), who made his personal statement yesterday.

The Government have not changed the definition of child poverty. As the Prime Minister set out on Monday, we are committed to attacking the root causes of poverty and improving children's life chances. In the spring, we will publish a comprehensive life chances strategy. Our proposals in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill introduce new measures on worklessness and educational attainment.

Alan Brown: I thank the Secretary of State for her comments. Those of us on the Scottish National party Benches agree with what she said about the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) and the First Minister for Northern Ireland.

If we are only talking about additional measures to tackle poverty, I agree that they would be useful. However, it is clear that the Welfare Reform and Work Bill abandons the poverty reduction targets in the Child Poverty Act 2010. Given that 64% of children living in poverty are in working families, does the Minister agree with the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, the End Child Poverty Coalition, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Child Poverty Action Group and the Resolution Foundation that income assessment must be retained? Otherwise, the new measures will remove children from poverty in statistics only and not in reality. That is a cynical manoeuvre.

Nicky Morgan: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman's last remarks. We remain absolutely committed to tackling child poverty and making sure that as many children as possible do not grow up affected by the blight of poverty. Since 2010, the number of children growing up in workless families has fallen by 480,000 to a record low. As I said, we want to tackle the root causes of poverty, and worklessness and educational attainment, both of which we are measuring, make a critical difference to whether a child grows up in poverty and continues to live in poverty throughout their life.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Since 2010 I have seen more people destitute, homeless and dependent on food banks in my constituency. Do the Government understand that changing internationally agreed definitions of poverty will seem like a cynical attempt to mask the true condition of Britain?

Nicky Morgan: I also suspect that the hon. Gentleman sees more people in work and being helped into work in his constituency. As I said, we remain absolutely committed to tackling the root causes of poverty—worklessness and low educational attainment—and to making sure that children do not grow up affected by the blight of poverty. He will probably agree that an arbitrary consideration of whether somebody is over or under a financial income line by a matter of pounds does not change lives. What changes lives is tackling the issues set out by the Prime Minister in his speech on Monday.

16. [903021] **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Secretary of State insists that the Government are not changing the definition of child poverty, so will they accept the findings of several respected organisations, including, most recently, the Resolution Foundation, which has indicated that, as a direct result of the summer Budget alone, between 300,000 and 600,000 children and 3.7 million and 3.9 million people on these islands will move into poverty by 2020? What discussions has she had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about the likely impact of the changes on poor children on these islands?

Mr Speaker: I gently point out to the House that there is a difference between asking a question and leading an Adjournment debate.

Nicky Morgan: Some 11.8% of children live in workless households, which is down by 4.4 percentage points since 2010. If the hon. Gentleman wants to talk about the impact of Budgets on people in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK, he might like to know that 176,000 women in Scotland have been taken out of income tax since 2010 because of UK Budgets. Those sorts of measures have a direct impact on children's life chances and families' prospects.

State Pension Age

2. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What discussions she has had with her ministerial colleagues on the effect of the increase in the state pension age on women. [903005]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara): Ministers regularly discuss matters of policy spanning their responsibilities, and the hon. Gentleman will be aware that this issue was debated very recently.

Jeff Smith: That is correct. Last week's Back-Bench business debate resulted in a unanimous decision, with Members on both sides of the House calling on the Government to correct the unfairness in the rules. Is it not time for the Government to lay down a strategy for introducing transitional arrangements to help the women most affected by these rules?

Mr Vara: I gently refer the hon. Gentleman to the direction given by the Deputy Speaker following that debate in response to a point of order, when she made it absolutely clear that the Government were not bound by any vote or decision taken in a Back-Bench business debate.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is estimated that, with the new threshold to qualify for auto-enrolment set at £10,000, 1.28 million people will miss out on accessing their pension. Does the Minister agree that the Government's pensions policy negatively impacts women, and will he support the establishment of an independent pensions commission to look at all pensions issues, including investigating the inequalities facing women in the current system?

Mr Vara: A lot is happening in the pensions world at present, and I think it important that we prioritise making sure that all that goes through, rather than thinking of new innovations.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Does the Minister share the Prime Minister's view that the good settlement for pensioners extends to 1950s women, and will he explain the bits of that settlement that are best for them?

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that in a debate of 2011 a concession was made and the time period was reduced from two years to 18 months, at a cost of £1.1 billion to the Exchequer.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I was disappointed with the Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith). The Minister is correct that last week's Back-Bench business debate is not binding on the Government, but will he admit that the Government have absolutely lost the argument on this case? Will he commit to justice for those women born between 1953 and '56, who now face a huge pensions pay gap after they led the fight for my generation on the pay gap in the workplace?

Mr Vara: This issue was not in the manifesto of either the Labour party or the Scottish National party. That is not surprising, given that undoing the 2011 measures would cost over £30 billion. If the hon. Lady persists in pursuing this policy from the Labour Front Bench, it is important for her to outline from where it would get that £30 billion.

Detainees: Pregnancy

3. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): If she will discuss with the Home Secretary the treatment of pregnant women detained for immigration purposes. [903006]

10. **Callum McCaig** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): If she will discuss with the Home Secretary the treatment of pregnant women detained for immigration purposes. [903013]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary takes these matters very seriously. Last year, she commissioned Stephen Shaw, CBE, former prisons and probation ombudsman, to carry out a review of the welfare of vulnerable people in detention. Mr Shaw's report will be published today, and the Government will take appropriate action in response to his recommendations.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am grateful for that answer, and we look forward to hearing what Stephen Shaw has to say, albeit that we are slightly sceptical about the remit that he was operating under. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that Government policy of detaining only in exceptional circumstances is, at the very least, put into practice and is not fiction? It would be even better if she ensured that the detention of pregnant women came entirely to an end.

Karen Bradley: It is Government policy that pregnant women should be detained only in exceptional circumstances. In normal circumstances, they should not be detained. Where a matter affecting a pregnant woman being detained comes to light, it is looked at with the utmost urgency.

Callum McCaig: I draw the Minister's attention to the all-party parliamentary group's report of 2014 on immigration detention, which dealt with the issue of women in detention centres more widely. Many women had been subject to quite horrific violence, including sexual violence. What steps is she taking to ensure that detained women, whether pregnant or not, are safe? Does she agree with me that these centres should not be detaining women at all and that detention should very much be a last resort?

Karen Bradley: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that detention should be a very last resort. It is regrettable in many ways that we have to have detention, but as part of an immigration system that is fair to all, detention is needed in those exceptional circumstances where people refuse to leave the country when they have been ordered to do so. Women are treated with the utmost dignity, and it is important to treat all people in detention with dignity.

Body Confidence

4. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to address the issue of low body confidence in girls and young men; and if she will make a statement. [903007]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): Strong body confidence is obviously really important for both physical and mental health wellbeing. That is why the Government are working with partners on projects such as media literacy that equip young people to be resilient and realistic about body images that they see in print and on our screens.

Michael Fabricant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She will know that photographs in glossy magazines have been retouched by Photoshop, with little wrinkles smoothed out and little bulges slimmed in—in my case, of course, you see what you get—[*Interruption.*] Well, part of what you see is what you get, but we will not go into that. Does my hon. Friend agree that schools have a role to play in educating children in having realistic ideas about what is possible and what is not?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman's status as an exotic Member of the House is not in doubt.

Caroline Dinenage: I entirely agree with you, Mr Speaker: there is almost nothing we could do to enhance the appearance of my hon. Friend—in my book, anyway.

My hon. Friend is right and his interest in this important issue is commendable. We want all young people to be informed and resilient. That is why we aim to improve media literacy. Our PSHE Association guidance on body image helps teachers to approach this topic sensitively and points them to the best quality-assured material. We also produce media-smart literacy resources for parents and teachers of primary school children to help them better to promote understanding of the images that young people see in the media.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): PricewaterhouseCoopers estimates that the cost of eating disorders to society is about £15 billion a year. What extra measures are the Government introducing, not only for prevention purposes but to support those who are currently experiencing eating disorders, in order to ensure that the problem is tackled adequately?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, absolutely right: this is a key issue. We know that anorexia kills more than any other mental illness. On Monday, the Prime Minister set out our commitment to investing in mental health services. We will invest nearly £1 billion in a revolution in mental health treatment throughout the country, which will include the first-ever waiting time target for teenagers with eating disorders. They will be able to obtain help within a month of being referred, or within a week in urgent cases.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Young trans people can struggle greatly with their body confidence. Will the Minister, and her colleagues throughout the Government, undertake to look at the first report of the Women and Equalities Committee? It is published today, and it makes specific recommendations on how to improve the lives of young trans people.

Caroline Dinenage: Absolutely. I warmly welcome that report, and I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee—and, indeed, the whole Committee—for the valuable work that they have done. The report follows the Committee's first inquiry, and it sends a clear signal about the importance of this issue. I look forward greatly to working through the report carefully and thoughtfully with those in other Departments, and looking closely at every one of my right hon. Friend's recommendations.

Revenge Porn

5. **Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): What discussions she has had with her ministerial colleagues on tackling revenge porn; and what assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the revenge porn helpline. [903008]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): As I have said before, the Government are absolutely clear about the fact that what is illegal offline is illegal online. We have criminalised this abhorrent act, and the revenge porn helpline has supported more than 3,000 callers since its launch last February. It is there to support anyone who is affected, regardless of gender,

sexuality, race or age. No one should have to suffer as a result of this repulsive crime, and we will ensure that we continue to support those who are affected by it.

Mr Burrowes: Will the helpline, and other measures, help more victims to come forward for support? Will they also help to take down the vile and abusive content from the internet, and prosecute and, indeed, take down the vile and abusive offenders?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Obviously it is important for victims to receive the right support, but we want to go further and make it clear, through education and awareness, that this is a crime and that it will not be tolerated. The internet can be a huge force for good, but it can also be a platform for abuse and intimidation. Staff monitor the helpline and provide support, but they have also been very successful in ensuring that content is quickly removed from the internet, and they work directly with social media and website providers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her earlier comments about the elevation of Arlene Foster to the position of First Minister. The Stormont fresh start agreement already looks brighter with her in charge.

My question relates to the ever-increasing digital society. The press is still full of stories about revenge porn incidents. Does the Minister recognise the need to raise awareness of people's rights, and of the new offence in the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, which is intended to tackle the increasing amount of online revenge porn?

Nicky Morgan: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. This is an offence of which people are more aware, but, sadly, that means that there are more cases of it, which is why we have criminalised it and established a helpline to offer support. However, we must go further and make it clear that this is not an acceptable way for people to behave. We must also give guidance to potential victims, advising them to think very carefully about images that they share and how they could then be abused.

Sanitary Products: VAT

6. **Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab):** What progress the Government are making on negotiating the removal of VAT on women's sanitary products. [903009]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): I have written to the European Commission and to other member states setting out our strong view that member states should have full discretion over what rate of VAT they can apply to sanitary products, and that the matter should be considered in the context of the Commission's action plan on VAT, which is now expected to be published in March

Mr Hanson: I am sure that the letter is very good, but I think the Minister should do more than that: I think that he should pursue the issue. When he does so, and when he succeeds—as I am sure he will—will he ensure that the money that he is currently providing from this unfair tax to finance domestic violence services is raised from general taxation? As a man, I think that it should be, so that the whole of society owns this problem.

Mr Gauke: In terms of the action the Government are taking, the right hon. Gentleman will be aware that VAT rules currently do not allow us to reduce the rate below 5%, which is why when the previous Labour Government reduced it, they reduced it to 5% not zero. But we are making the case to other member states and the European Commission, and the right hon. Gentleman highlights the fact that, as the Chancellor announced in the autumn statement, for the first time we are using the funds collected from VAT on sanitary products to provide support specifically to women's charities. We will, of course, review that in the event that we are able to reduce it to a zero rate.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Minister will know that I voted with the Opposition on this issue. He is a good man and I am sure he is doing his very best to battle away on this issue, but is it not the case that those who want a zero rate on sanitary products at the earliest possible opportunity should find the easiest way of doing that, which is by voting to leave the European Union, and then we would be able to do it straight away?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend's answer to this question does not entirely surprise me; it is in fact his answer to quite a lot of questions. The Government are engaging constructively with other member states and the European Commission. It is the case that EU rules prevent us from lowering the rate below 5%, but we are engaged in negotiating with other member states.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): While any action is better than nothing, it does not appear that the issue has been placed alongside the Prime Minister's other demands in the EU membership renegotiation, so we may not even have a report back prior to the referendum. Can the Minister reassure the House today that women's rights are not a second-class issue on this Government's European agenda by making those commitments, and will the Prime Minister or Chancellor come before the House to make a statement on this, as they have done on other EU issues?

Mr Gauke: The Chancellor of the Exchequer addressed this issue in his autumn statement, when he announced the additional funding for women's charities, reflecting the sums that are raised from VAT on sanitary products. The Government are taking this issue seriously; previous Governments have done so too, but we are doing everything we can, and we are, I think, the first Government who have gone to the European Commission and to other member states and made the case for flexibility.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Will my hon. Friend explain why this is not part of the Government's renegotiation strategy? Surely this country and this Parliament should be able to decide levels of VAT not just on sanitary products, but on fuel, defibrillators and so on—on all of which I think it would be better if there were no VAT?

Mr Gauke: We are engaged in a wide-ranging renegotiation addressing issues about economic competitiveness and the roles of Parliament and so on. This is not explicitly part of that renegotiation, but we are, as a Government, going out making the case to

other member states, and we will have the report from the Commission in March and we have made our position very clear.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The funding the Government are putting into services for women fleeing sexual and domestic violence has been described as like filling a bath with the plug pulled out. End Violence Against Women says the tampon tax cannot possibly fill the gap, while across the country refuges and specialist services are closing. Will the Minister commit to a full review of the effect of the Government's fiscal policies on the availability of services and to publishing the information?

Mr Gauke: We have already announced £40 million in funding for domestic abuse services between 2016 and 2020, as well as a £2 million grant to Women's Aid and SafeLives to support early intervention. The hon. Lady raised a very broad point, and, in reply I would say the best future for the entire country is to ensure we have strong public finances, a credible economic policy and a long-term economic plan that delivers jobs and growth. That is what this Government are doing.

Kate Green: I am afraid that the Government's economic policies are not protecting women from violence. Research published yesterday by Professor Sylvia Walby of the University of Lancaster shows that violent crime against women has been under-reported and has in fact been rising since 2009. That is a result of cuts to services, cuts in the police, a lack of housing to move into, financial pressures on relationships and difficulties accessing justice. Does the Minister not recognise that the holistic effect of the Government's policies has been to place women in danger? Will the Government take urgent action to address this?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Lady makes the point that domestic violence is under-reported, and we accept that that is a problem, although reporting has increased. Indeed, the number of convictions has increased. She also made the point that there had been cuts in police services. The Chancellor made it clear in his autumn statement, however, that because the economy was performing better than had been the case before, we could afford not to cut police funding over the course of this Parliament. Again, I make the point that Labour can oppose every single cut and every single change that we make to try to bring the public finances under control, but if we do not take those decisions, I am afraid that we will run into a crisis. That was what the 2015 general election was fought on, and the result was very clear.

Misogynist Bullying: Social Media

7. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What steps she is taking to tackle misogynist bullying on social media. [903010]

14. **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What steps she is taking to tackle misogynist bullying on social media. [903018]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): Bullying of any kind, whether online or offline, is absolutely unacceptable. There is also no place for misogyny or trolling in our society. My Department has

set up the Stop Online Abuse website to provide women and LGBT adults with practical advice on how to recognise abuse, including on social media. I also want to echo the welcome for the report from the Women and Equalities Select Committee on transgender equality, which was published today. It makes specific recommendations for addressing online safety and the treatment of transgender people, which we will take very seriously.

Liz McInnes: What conversations has the Minister had with social media providers about misogynistic online abuse, and will she make a statement?

Nicky Morgan: I and other Ministers, including my hon. Friend the Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy speak to social media providers all the time about these issues. I welcome the recent statement from a Twitter director saying that it thought it was doing better on dealing with trolls, but I think it recognised that it needed to do more.

I hope that the hon. Lady will also recognise that there are issues closer to home. She will remember the statement made by her own party leader at her party's conference last autumn, when he had to appeal to activists. He said:

"I say to all activists, whether Labour or not, cut out the personal attacks, the cyber bullying and especially the misogynistic abuse online".

I hope that the hon. Lady will tackle her own party in regard to this issue.

Steve McCabe: Will the Secretary of State tell us what evidence there is of improved data collection to give us the true scale of this abuse? What evidence is there that police officers up and down the country are receiving appropriate training to enable them to identify and deal with the perpetrators of the abuse?

Nicky Morgan: I will have to come back to the hon. Gentleman on the question of data collection, which I am happy to do. I suspect that some organisations are better than others. I mentioned the revenge porn helpline earlier, which clearly is monitoring and keeping data. We want to evaluate such data one year on, in February or March of this year. I have already said that what is illegal offline is also illegal online, and that has been made very clear to all police forces up and down the country. We continue to make that case to them.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the increasingly digital world in which we live makes it absolutely vital to help children, parents and carers to deal with this vile online abuse and cyber-bullying?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course it is much better to educate young people against any of this in the first place, to ensure that they are robust and resilient if they come across unwanted images or cyber-bullying. She is also absolutely right to mention parents and carers. There is a range of websites and organisations to help parents to understand how to discuss these issues with children, and the Government Equalities Office and the Home Office have invested £3.85 million in a new phase of our This is Abuse campaign, which tackles abuse within teenage relationships and will be launched later this year.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Following on from the earlier response to the question of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), will the Secretary of State recognise the huge amount of online bullying that is being directed towards the trans community, leading to high levels of mental ill health and suicide within that community? Will she ensure that it is tackled when she reviews the trans inquiry?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is a member of the Select Committee and I warmly welcome the landmark report that has been published today. It has highlighted lots of actions that are needed to be taken across government. He is absolutely right to mention the issue of social media and online bullying, which I have already mentioned, and the effects that that has on mental health, and the ability of members of the transgender community to take part in life, the workplace and elsewhere. We take such issues very seriously. We need to look at all the action we have taken on online abuse, and work out how we can ensure that it is also accessible to members of the trans community.

Mr Speaker: Carolyn Harris not here.

Gender Pay Gap

9. **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): When the Government plan to publish their response to the closing the gender pay gap consultation, published in July 2015. [903012]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): I am delighted that our consultation on closing the gender pay gap has had such a positive reaction, receiving around 700 responses, including more than 200 from employers and business organisations. We will publish the Government's response to the consultation shortly.

Lucy Allan: I thank the Minister for her reply. Excellent work has been done on tackling the gender pay gap, but regional differences remain. In my constituency of Telford, women in full-time work earn 16% less than men in full-time work. What further action can be taken to address that kind of discrepancy?

Nicky Morgan: The gender pay gap regulations, when published and put into practice, will help, because they will get employers to start thinking about these issues, and reporting on them. I encourage my hon. Friend to host an event in her own constituency. As a proactive and new Member of Parliament, she can highlight best practice and show the advantages of narrowing the gap. She might also like to think about the breakdown of the businesses within her constituency and work out how we can get more women and girls to participate in sectors such as manufacturing and financial services.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The north-east has one of the highest gender pay gaps in the country owing in part to the disproportionate numbers in the public sector, which has been cut, and in the sort of low-paid jobs that the Prime Minister yesterday called "menial". Does the Secretary of State agree that failure to publish a response to a consultation six months after its publication is disrespectful to the many organisations and individuals who responded to it in the hope of doing something about the situation?

Nicky Morgan: I am really sorry to hear the hon. Lady make those points, because they are not worthy of her. First, on the north-east, she is wrong. The gender pay gap in the north-east fell by 0.4 percentage points between 2014 and 2015. People want us to get the Government response right and to ensure that we have thought through the regulations and their impact. I have said that we will publish the response shortly, and that is exactly what we will do.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I hope that the Secretary of State, and indeed the whole House, will welcome the establishment of the all-party group on women and work, of which I am vice-chair. I know that she sent a member of staff to it the other day. Will she resolve to work with the all-party group to look at the challenges faced by women returning to work after having children or caring responsibilities, the impact of which is often seen in the gaps in their income, their progression and their career?

Nicky Morgan: I thank the hon. Lady very much indeed. I warmly welcome the all-party group. Another group has also been set up on women and enterprise. I really welcome the fact that parliamentarians are setting up these groups, which will work on a cross-party basis. Of course Ministers and I will work with all of them. She is absolutely right. Evidence was given to the Select Committee which showed that, if women take more than a year's maternity leave, it becomes much, much harder to get back into the workplace; we must change that.

Older Carers

11. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help older female carers balance the demands of work with caring for older relatives. [903014]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): Unpaid carers are the unsung heroes of our society, which is why the Care Act 2014 gave carers new rights, focusing on their wellbeing, which includes their employment. In 2015, the Government extended the right to request flexible working arrangements, and we are also investing £1.6 million in nine pilot sites, exploring ways to support people who are combining work and caring responsibilities.

Huw Merriman: I thank the Minister for her response. According to a recent report from the Department of Health, the cost to the Exchequer of carers being unable to continue working has been estimated at £1.3 billion a year. Will the Minister confirm what incentives are in place for employers to support carers in the workplace?

Caroline Dinenage: The report my hon. Friend refers to was a landmark one in demonstrating the business case for investing in carer-friendly policies. The Government have been working to raise awareness among employers of the issue and of the cost of leaving it unaddressed. Our £1.6 million project will be invaluable in helping us to establish the most effective forms of support for carers. We are also backing the Employers for Carers network run by Carers UK, which provides resources to implement carer-friendly policies.

Domestic Violence

12. **Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): What discussions she has had with her ministerial colleagues on securing long-term funding for domestic violence services. [903016]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): The Government have already announced £40 million of funding for domestic abuse services between 2016 and 2020, as well as a £2 million grant to Women's Aid and SafeLives to support early intervention. We will shortly publish a refreshed cross-Government violence against women and girls strategy setting out how we will do still more to secure long-term funding for domestic violence services and support for all victims.

Keir Starmer: Domestic violence is an enduring stain on our society, and while Government funding is welcome, a long-term sustainable approach is needed. What discussions has the Minister had with service providers, including Rape Crisis, about the long-term solutions, and what does she consider to be long term in this context?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for his questions. I must admit, I am used to seeing him on the Front Bench, but it is nice to see him anyway. As part of refreshing our violence against women and girls strategy, I have taken part in a number of round tables with service providers, commissioners and others to make sure that we understand the issues facing them and to look at that long-term solution, because he is absolutely right: service providers need to know that their funding is on a sustainable footing, so that they can continue to deliver services and focus on victims, as we all want them to do.

FTSE Boards: Gender Balance

13. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve the gender balance of the boards of FTSE companies. [903017]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): We appointed Lord Davies in 2010 and have fully supported his work ever since, which has achieved an unprecedented increase in the number of women on boards. We welcomed his final report and back his new recommendations for a business-led 33% target for

FTSE 350 boards. We are also in the process of establishing a new review focusing on the all-important executive layer.

Craig Tracey: What plans do the Government have to ensure that businesses of all sizes understand the financial and productivity benefits of diversity in their senior teams?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: companies with more diverse boards benefit from better decision making and better corporate governance; they are more responsive to the market and they can access the wider talent pool. It is a no-brainer: diversity is better for business. We have seen real progress with our business-led Government-supported approach, but we are not complacent by any means. We will continue to engage with businesses of all sizes and in all sectors to push this work forward.

Health Inequality

15. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If she will discuss with the Secretary of State for Health ways to address the relative inequality of health outcomes for men and women. [903019]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): There are gender differences across a range of health outcomes. Women live longer than men, but that gap is closing. The Government are tackling health inequalities by addressing the social causes of ill health and promoting healthier lifestyles, all now underpinned by legal duties. Action is led locally to ensure that there are solutions to local gender and other health inequalities.

Mr Hollobone: Over the past 30 years, female suicide rates have declined from 11 per 1,000 to five per 1,000, but male suicide rates have remained stubbornly high, at 19 to 20 per 1,000, and in that period 130,000 men have committed suicide. What will the Minister do, together with the Department of Health, to tackle that very serious problem?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), was keen to be here today, but she is at an LGBT conference. Suicide is the largest cause of death of men under 50, so this is a really important issue. That is why the Prime Minister's commitment earlier this week to investing in mental health services will be so important in this space.

Business of the House

10.33 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the leader of the Out campaign give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 18 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Energy Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 19 JANUARY—Opposition day (16th allotted day). There will be a debate on the cost of public transport, followed by a debate on prisons and probation. Both debates will arise on an Opposition motion.

WEDNESDAY 20 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Psychoactive Substances Bill [*Lords*], followed by a motion to approve statutory instruments relating to the proceeds of crime.

THURSDAY 21 JANUARY—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 22 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 25 January will include:

MONDAY 25 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Childcare Bill [*Lords*], followed by business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 26 JANUARY—Motion to approve a money resolution relating to the Charities (Social Investment and Protection) Bill [*Lords*], followed by remaining stages of the Charities (Social Investment and Protection) Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 27 JANUARY—Opposition day (17th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 28 JANUARY—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 29 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

I should also inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for Monday 25 January and Monday 1 February will be:

MONDAY 25 JANUARY—Debate on e-petition 115895 relating to tax reporting for small businesses and the self-employed.

MONDAY 1 FEBRUARY—Debate on e-petition 110776 relating to transitional state pension arrangements for women born in the 1950s.

Chris Bryant: May I start by warmly congratulating the Secretary of State for Scotland on joining the ranks of out gay MPs yesterday? His announcement was made with considerable charm, I thought. He said he hoped that he would not be treated any differently because of his sexuality. May I assure him that being gay does not necessarily make you any better as a politician? [*Laughter.*] Oh, I did not think that was very funny.

It seems particularly appropriate that we should be having a debate this afternoon on space, especially following the death of David Bowie, the ultimate Starman.

I asked for a debate on the English language last week. May we have a debate on the use of the word "menial"? The Prime Minister used it yesterday with quite a sneer on his face, but is that not where he gets it

wrong? Those are the people who really graft in our society and he does not demean them by using such language; he demeans himself. There are no menial jobs, only menial attitudes.

May we have a debate on a series of mysterious disappearances that have happened over the past week? It is a bit like Agatha Christie's "And Then There Were None." First, there was the mystery of the missing Health Secretary. They sought him here, they sought him there, but oh no, even when the first strike by doctors for decades was happening, he was nowhere to be found, not even in a television studio, which he normally loves. Surely he should be here, explaining how he has completely lost the respect and trust of the whole medical profession.

Then there was the disappearance of the Government's consultation on the future of the BBC. I know the Tories all hate the BBC, but the closing date for the consultation was 99 days ago today and it is still nowhere to be seen. The charter runs out in less than a year, so when will the Government publish the consultation and the new draft charter?

It is not just consultations that have disappeared, though. On Tuesday afternoon a whole Committee disappeared—European Committee A, which was meant to meet at 2.30 pm in Committee Room 10 to consider the Ports Authority regulations, something I am sure all hon. Members think is very important. Members of the public turned up from far and wide in their droves to hear what the Minister had to say, but the Government had pulled the meeting. Why? This is an important matter that affects 47 UK ports. Port workers are very concerned about it. The European Scrutiny Committee has said that it remains

"deeply concerned that the Government continues to refuse to have a floor debate on this issue".

How can the Leader of the House portray himself as a serious Eurosceptic when he will not even allow the House to debate EU measures?

That is not the only debate to disappear. Do you remember, Mr Speaker, the Leader of the House's promise of a debate on abolishing student grants, which he made here on 10 December? Yes, that is what he said, is it not? I know he is doing his huffy-puffy "I'm going to get very angry about this later" face, but he should admit it. His precise words were:

"On student finance regulations, the hon. Gentleman is well aware that if he wants a debate on a regulation in this House all he has to do is pray against it. I am not aware of any recent precedent where a prayer made by the Leader of the Opposition and his shadow Cabinet colleagues has not led to a debate in this House."—[*Official Report*, 10 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 1154.]

We took the Leader of the House at his word. Early-day motion 829 is on the Order Paper praying against the statutory instrument.

[*That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2015 (S.I., 2015, No. 1951), dated 29 November 2015, a copy of which was laid before this House on 2 December 2015, be annulled.*]

Therefore, according to the Leader of the House's own promise to this House, we should be having a debate in this Chamber. But that is not what is happening, is it? Instead, he has arranged for the only debate to be held not in this House, but in a Committee at 11.30 this

morning. Because it is in a Committee, even if every single member of that Committee voted against the motion, it would still pass into law. That is not democracy; that is government by diktat.

Let me be absolutely clear that this should not be introduced by secondary legislation. This is a major change that will deprive around half a million of England's poorest students of maintenance grants, forcing them to graduate with debt—[*Interruption.*] The Deputy Leader of the House is talking a whole load of guff. If she does not know the rules of this House, she should go and get another job. Those students will be forced to graduate with debts of up to £53,000 for a three-year course, rather than £40,500 at present. Therefore, as a man of his word, will the Leader of the House now ensure that there is a proper debate and vote in this House before 23 January?

That brings me to the curious case of the missing ministerial backbone. I thought that Ministers were men of integrity and principle, and that when they believed in something, they would fight for it. Last week I suggested that it was time the Leader of the House came out as an outer. There is a vacancy, because the outers want a leader. Surely the time has come—“Cometh the hour, cometh the man.” Come on down, Leader of the House, the new leader of the Out campaign. Mr Speaker, you heard it here first.

I am delighted that the Leader of the House has started to take my advice. He has even written a piece for *The Daily Telegraph* about it. I was hoping for a proper, full-throated, Eurosceptic, intellectual argument from him. But oh no; it is the most mealy-mouthed, myth-peddling, facing-both-ways piece of pedestrian journalism that has ever come from his pen. What is the phrase from the Bible? It is,

“because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.”

I know that the Leader of the House was born on 1 April, but he cannot treat all of us like fools. I know that he is desperate to keep his place in the Cabinet, and even—God bless us!—become leader of the Tory party, but this is becoming a farce. He is pretending to support the Prime Minister's renegotiation strategy, when really he is desperate to burst out of his pink shirt and mount the barricades with the banner of English nationalism. Apparently the Business Secretary is going to pretend that he is in favour of leaving the EU in order to bolster the prospects of his favourite candidate for leader, the Chancellor.

But this really is not a game. It is not about the leadership prospects of one or other Tory Minister; it is about our constituents' jobs and our standing as a nation. It is the most important decision that this country will make in this generation. The Leader of the House says that it would be disastrous for us to stay in the EU. I say that it would be disastrous for us to leave. It would abandon our historic destiny at the heart of Europe, it would leave our economy on the sidelines of the largest market in the world, and it would undermine the battle against environmental degradation, international crime and terrorism. You leave; I'm staying.

Chris Grayling *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before we proceed, may I—keeping the temperature down—thank the shadow Leader of the House for referencing so favourably my

childhood hero, David Bowie, the most innovative and talented rock star I ever had the pleasure of seeing or hearing?

Chris Grayling: First, may I endorse the shadow Leader of the House's words about the Scottish Secretary? As a colleague of his, I am very proud of the statement he made yesterday. I also send the good wishes of this House to the people of Indonesia, after this morning's dreadful terrorist attack. I also wish you, Mr Speaker, a happy birthday for next week.

I also wish to thank you, Mr Speaker, and all the Clerks for the work you all did to ensure that the first England and Welsh Grand Committee, held under the new Standing Orders, passed smoothly on Tuesday. In our manifesto we committed to introducing English votes for English laws, and we have now delivered that. Those of us on the Government side of the House thought—I suspect that you did, too, Mr Speaker—that it was a tad ironic that the longest contribution we heard in that debate was from the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). His claim that he was being excluded from the debate seemed a little on the hollow side.

I remind hon. Members that the Joint Committee considering the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster is currently consulting Members and staff who work in the Palace, with a closing date of 26 January. There will also be consultation with members of the Committee and Members and staff in both Houses. I encourage any Member with an interest in the project to take part in the consultation.

Let me now turn to the shadow Leader of the House. Today we have heard another seven-minute rhetorical flourish from the hon. Gentleman, with his usual wit and repartee. But what on earth does he think he is doing? He represents Her Majesty's loyal Opposition. Last week, on the day that Kim Jong-un announced that he had developed a hydrogen bomb, the hon. Gentleman was joined at the shadow Cabinet table by a shadow Defence Secretary who believes that we should unilaterally disarm our nuclear defences. He sits alongside a shadow Chancellor who attended an event with the organisation, CAGE, which has claimed that Jihadi John was a “kind and beautiful young man”.

The hon. Gentleman works for a man who sacked the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) for having the effrontery to criticise terrorists. Over the past week, we have seen several more junior members of his Front Bench have the courage to stand up to a situation that most people in this House regard as utterly distasteful and wrong. They gave up their places on the Front Bench while the hon. Gentleman and more senior people clung on to their jobs. So it is all very well his coming here on a Thursday morning and cracking a few jokes, but I have a simple question for him: given the disgraceful turn of events in the Labour party, what on earth is he still doing here?

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): May I call on the Leader of the House to hold an urgent debate in Government time on the recommendations that have been made today by the Women and Equalities Committee in our first report on trans rights and the real problems that trans people face in Britain today? The Government

[*Mrs Maria Miller*]

need to take swift action on these problems, and a debate on the Floor of the House would demonstrate the commitment of the whole House to resolving them.

Chris Grayling: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the work she is doing. I am proud to be a part of a Government who are leading the way in addressing equalities issues, and she reflects the best of this House in also doing so. Of course, the Government will consider very carefully the report that she has brought forward this morning. I commend her and the Committee for this work. I have no doubt that she may also look to the Backbench Business Committee to ensure that there is an opportunity for the House to debate her report.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I, too, thank the leader of the Eurosceptics and putative leader of the “Britain out” campaign for announcing the business for next week.

It is like the proverbial bus, Mr Speaker—you wait decades for a nasty, brutal, inter-party civil war to come along, and two come at once. I listened very carefully to the Leader of the House’s mild-mannered right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) lambasting him today for his Euroscepticism. This is serious for us in Scotland. It is quite likely that our nation may be pulled out of Europe against its will. We need to hear a statement from the Leader of the House to say that he will respect the views of Scotland on this issue. Meantime, it is popcorn time here for me and my hon. Friends as we watch both the UK parties not only knock lumps out of each other but knock lumps out of themselves.

Earlier this week, I felt pretty much like an international observer as the first meeting of the English Parliament got right down to business. It was quite a remarkable event—the first time a quasi-English Parliament has met since the 18th century. We had to make sure it was done properly, and what did the Government do? They put signs in the Lobbies saying “England and Wales”. We looked in vain for the “No dogs and no Scots” signs, but thankfully they were not there. Suspending the House’s business while you, Mr Speaker, had to go and seek out the Clerks to see if something needed to be re-certified is no way for one of the great Parliaments of the world to conduct its business. [HON. MEMBERS: “Once great.”] Indeed, a once-great Parliament, as my hon. Friends say. It was a sad day for any notion or idea of a unitary Parliament of the United Kingdom being a place where all Members are equal. I am sure that the Scottish people were observing these events where their Members of Parliament, who they had so recently elected, became second-class and diminished in this nation. There is real anger in Scotland; a Union-saving exercise this is not.

There was a written statement from the Secretary of State for Scotland—who I, too, congratulate on the dignified way in which he announced his sexuality this week—that ruled out a post-study work scheme for Scotland. Now, let us forget about the fact that a post-study work scheme is wanted by all the higher education institutions in Scotland, all the business organisations, all the employer organisations and even the Scottish Conservatives; the Scottish Affairs Committee,

which I chair, is currently undertaking an inquiry, with a report, on post-study work schemes. That report is made practically irrelevant because of that written statement. What do we have to do in Select Committees now? Should we seek a statement from the relevant Department before we undertake such inquiries? That written statement was a gross discourtesy and showed gross disrespect to a Select Committee of this House, so I am interested to hear the Leader of House’s view on these things.

This has been a week when the real Opposition—the new Opposition—have established themselves in this House. It was us who led the opposition to EVEL, as the Leader of the House noted, it was us who had the debate on trade and the economy and it will be us leading the two important debates today, including the one on space. You are absolutely right, Mr Speaker, and I was devastated at the news of the death of David Bowie this week. I saw him several times. We have lost an absolute musical icon in this country. One of the things that thrilled me—and, I am sure, thrilled my hon. Friends on the Benches behind me—was an endorsement from Sulu from “Star Trek” for our space debate today. That shows that when Labour and the Conservatives are ripping themselves apart, it is the Scottish National party that is boldly going where no party has gone before.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman’s party was of course previously led by one of this House’s foremost Trekkies, so there is probably a juxtaposition there.

I have to say, as I always do on these occasions, that I have the greatest regard for the hon. Gentleman, but he does talk an awful lot of nonsense at times. The first thing to say is that my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and I have been friends for more than 25 years and we will carry on being friends. The difference between those of us on the Conservative Benches and those on the Labour Benches is that when we have a debate, we do it with good grace. When Labour Members do it, it is because they hate each other—and they really do hate each other, Mr Speaker.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the real Opposition, and it still baffles me how those who purport to be sensible figures in the shambles that is the Labour party today can hold their heads high and still sit on the Opposition Front Bench representing a leadership that I regard as being utterly beyond the pale and something we should keep completely away from ever having the chance to run this country.

Let me return to the hon. Gentleman’s propensity to exaggerate just a little bit. I have to say that his comments about the debate on Tuesday did not really ring true. The idea that he is excluded from the debate—a debate in which, if I remember rightly, he spoke for the best part of half an hour, to the great enjoyment of my hon. Friends, who enjoyed his rhetorical flourishes enormously—is, I am afraid, stretching the point just a little bit. I remind him that every poll that has been conducted in Scotland says that the Scottish people support a fair devolution settlement for Scotland and for England, and that is what we are delivering.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words about the Scottish Secretary. I would also like to extend the thanks of myself and my colleagues to the Scottish First Minister and other leading figures in his party,

who also made some very gracious statements about the Scottish Secretary yesterday. We all very much appreciated that.

On the post-study work scheme, it is right and proper that we have a managed immigration system. People can come to this country to do a graduate-level job, but it is also right and proper that we have appropriate safeguards in place. That is what our electors expect, it is what we will deliver and have delivered in government, and it is what electors across the United Kingdom—of which, happily, we are all still part—all want us to do.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I am glad that the European Scrutiny Committee, with all-party support, forced the Government to cancel the European Standing Committee on the ports regulation, which may yet continue to damage 350,000 jobs in the United Kingdom. This is a vital national interest. Does the Leader of the House recognise that the issue must be debated on the Floor of the House and voted on? Furthermore, does he accept that, because of the European Union arrangements, the Government are effectively in a position where they can only wring their hands or accept either a majority vote or a seedy compromise, and that this is a perfect example of why so many people in this country want to leave the European Union?

Chris Grayling: Raising an issue in business questions can be effective and I hope that my hon. Friend will take comfort from the fact that his raising this issue last week has led to the changes he suggested. The Chief Whip and I have been talking about how to address what are issues for many hon. Members. We will, of course, revert to them shortly and I thank my hon. Friend for the work he has done in raising this and other issues.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): My constituents have been suffering all week from cancelled trains because of a landslide on our local rail line. Can we have a statement from the Transport Secretary, because the knock-on effect is complete chaos on all lines? People have received no information from Southeastern about when the service is likely to be reinstated and they are suffering trying to get to and from work. Businesses are also suffering, so we really need someone to get a grip of the situation.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely understand the problems that such events cause the hon. Gentleman's constituents and, indeed, others. Other parts of the network have also suffered in recent weeks because of extreme weather. I will make sure that his concerns are drawn to the attention of the Transport Secretary this morning. The Transport Secretary will be here in 10 days' time, but the issue is clearly urgent so I will make sure that the hon. Gentleman's concerns are passed on immediately.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): My accent states my interest, although I believe a declaration is not necessarily required. Will my right hon. Friend persuade the Government to have a debate on the UK's relationship with the Commonwealth, particularly the old Commonwealth? I have just returned from visiting New Zealand. It is definitely there and I am very conscious that, in our drive to reduce immigration, the UK is losing out on highly educated English-speaking people, generally graduates, who have very much to offer this

nation in health, education, agriculture, banking, research, the armed forces and—dare I say it?—even rugby. There are kith and kin issues with such nations. They have stood with us—and they continue to stand with us today—in major and less major wars. We need to recognise that.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend has family roots in and originates from New Zealand, so he has a particular understanding of the issue. Of course, we try to maintain a sensible balance in our immigration system. It is necessary, right and proper to have controls. At the same time, we have routes for experienced people to come to this country and work. Many from Australia, New Zealand and other parts of the Commonwealth have done so over many years. I am sure that Home Office Ministers will have heard my hon. Friend's comments and that they will do their best to take as pragmatic an approach as they can, but he will understand that there have to be limitations—our electors expect it.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Given that the abolition of student grants will hit 500,000 university students from the poorest backgrounds, can the Leader of the House explain why it will not be debated on the Floor of the House? People in my constituency certainly did not vote for those on the Government Benches, and their democracy is under assault.

Chris Grayling: The statutory instrument will follow the usual route. If it is prayed against, it will not pass without a vote of the whole House, and it will be debated again in this House, which is more than just this Chamber. The Labour party, as I have just announced, has a number of Opposition days coming up. If this is a significant enough issue, I suggest to the hon. Lady that she encourage her Front-Bench colleagues to bring it to the Floor of the House.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minsk agreement is supposed to settle the dispute between Russia and Ukraine. Part of the agreement says that all illegally held persons should be released or exchanged. Will the Leader of the House arrange an early debate and join me in calling for the release of Nadiya Savchenko, who is a Member of the Ukrainian Parliament and of the Council of Europe?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I hope that due consideration will be given to it by those involved in the detention, and I am sure that my Foreign Office colleagues are aware of and are pursuing the issue. Clearly, we want a peaceful situation between Russia and Ukraine and for all areas of dispute to be resolved quickly.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Last October, the Government hosted a steel summit at which the UK steel industry laid out the urgent actions it needed them to take to protect it in extremely challenging times. Can we have an update from Business, Innovation and Skills Ministers on how fast the Government are acting? Although there has been some movement on energy costs, many areas still need Government action and the situation is critical.

Chris Grayling: Obviously, this is an ongoing concern for Members, and not just those with steel concerns in their constituencies. I will certainly ask for an update from my colleagues in the Business Department. They are not due back in this House soon, so I will ask them if they will write to the hon. Lady with an update. There was due to be a Westminster Hall debate on steel this afternoon, but I believe that the Member who secured it has withdrawn it, which is a shame. I have no doubt there will be other opportunities to debate the issue shortly.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): In the light of my right hon. Friend's important article in today's edition of *The Daily Telegraph*, will he organise an early debate in Government time on the issue of ever closer union and on how to ensure legally that the European Court of Justice and EU majority voting rules cannot prevent this sovereign Parliament from being able to exercise its sovereignty in future?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. That is one of the things that the Prime Minister has put at the heart of his renegotiation. When he returns from the Council in February, or whenever the negotiation reaches a conclusion, he will undoubtedly include it in the package he will put forward. The people of this country can then judge whether the package is sufficient for their future to be in the European Union or to leave it. I suspect that there will be a lively debate.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): There are many reports in the media today that a mini-beast has spoken on the subject of Brexit. Has the Leader of the House considered making time available for his own mini-personal statement to update the House on the views of his constituents who work in the EU, whose children aspire to study or work in the EU, who have homes in the EU, who want to retire to EU countries or who are EU citizens about the impact of Brexit on their ambitions and opportunities?

Chris Grayling: The only mini-thing I am aware of in the Chamber at the moment is the Liberal Democrat cohort, which has been reduced from 56 to eight in the past few months.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Following my right hon. Friend's important contribution to the EU debate today, may we have a wider debate in the House on the merits of leaving or of remaining in the European Union? In such a debate, we would be able to see that the only arguments of those who want to remain in are scaremongering arguments. We would also be able to see that those most enthusiastic about our membership of the EU are exactly the same people who were most enthusiastic for this country to join the euro. They include the shadow Leader of the House, who, despite loving the sound of his own voice, seems to be very reticent about his past enthusiasm for joining the euro.

Chris Grayling: That is certainly true.

Chris Bryant: No, it's not.

Chris Grayling: Oh, it is.

My hon. Friend makes his point with his customarily articulate and strong views. He is right about the debate that lies ahead. There will undoubtedly be extensive discussions in the House and around the country as, over the coming months, both politicians and, more importantly, the public as a whole decide where the future of this country lies.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): When can we debate what the *Daily Mirror* has described as the "grave train" of 25 former Ministers in the previous Government who are enjoying lucrative jobs in areas that they once regulated, and of the five former Select Committee Chairs who have jobs in firms on which they once adjudicated? Is that grave train not bringing this House into disrepute, because of the feeling that people are hawking their insider knowledge to the highest bidder? Last week, the right hon. Gentleman said that he was happy with the situation and that all is fine. Previous holders of his office have led in making reforms in the House. When will he, as Leader of the House, start to lead?

Chris Grayling: In response to the issues raised in the *Daily Mirror* article, there is of course one simple two-word answer: Tony Blair. As I said to the hon. Gentleman last week, there are plenty of opportunities for him to raise his concerns with the relevant Committees of this House. I suggested last week that he should do so. I am sure that he will make his point and seek the changes to the rules for which he is asking.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Drum Hill in my constituency has served scouting and other uniformed organisations and community groups for 90 years. A 45-year-old wooden building, which is collapsing, is to be demolished, which will leave the organisations with the problem of raising funds to replace it. Will my right hon. Friend facilitate a debate in which we can explore how such big society organisations that serve the wider community are able to access funding to replace much-loved facilities?

Chris Grayling: I pay tribute to the volunteers in my hon. Friend's constituency, who are clearly doing a fantastic job of working with and providing opportunities for young people. Every one of us as constituency MPs has a story to tell about voluntary sector groups, whether the scouts or other groups, doing fantastic work to help our young people. One thing that I hope the Backbench Business Committee will do with the time available to it is hold one or two annual debates, such as one to celebrate our voluntary sector. I think that would be in tune with the wishes of this House and it would provide precisely the opportunity that my hon. Friend has just asked for.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): With more job losses announced in Aberdeen this week, the UK Government need to take action to ensure that a drive for increased productivity in the North sea does not come at the expense of health and safety on the rigs. When can we hear a ministerial statement on this matter?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady makes an important point. The North sea oil industry remains very important to the United Kingdom. It is, of course, under great

pressure because of the fall in the oil price. We do not wish to see safety standards in the North sea compromised as a result. We will debate the Energy Bill next week, which contains measures that we believe will bring costs down for the energy industry. All of us should work together to do everything we can to help that industry through what is clearly a difficult time.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I pay tribute to Sir Albert McQuarrie, a great parliamentarian who died yesterday.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the impact of the c2c timetable changes on Southend commuters? There are health and safety issues such as overcrowding, lack of seats and the slow delivery of passengers to Fenchurch Street. I shall be joining passengers in a non-violent demonstration tonight at Fenchurch Street at 5.30.

Chris Grayling: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his continuing work on behalf of his constituents. The questions that we have had about Eltham and his line to Southend show that there is work to be done by our train companies in ensuring that they deliver the best possible service. The Secretary of State for Transport will be here in 10 days' time to take questions. I am sure that my hon. Friend will take advantage of that opportunity to raise this issue again. As I said to the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford), I will make sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is aware of the concerns he has raised today.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): As a Greater Manchester constituency MP, I am really concerned that Greater Manchester fire and rescue service has been treated disproportionately once again, when compared with other fire and rescue services across the country. The £16 million of cuts equates to the removal of 16 fire engines from action on the streets of Greater Manchester. These are the very engines and community heroes who responded to the recent floods in our city region. Will the Minister grant Government time to debate the cuts that are being imposed on Greater Manchester fire and rescue service following the comprehensive spending review?

Chris Grayling: Of course, it is our hope and belief that as we unify many of the aspects of the workings of our emergency services, including the sharing of political leadership through police and crime commissioners, that will provide an opportunity to deliver savings while ensuring that we protect front-line services. That is the approach that we are taking. My right hon. and hon. Friends in the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Home Office will work to try to ensure that that happens. There is no option but to take tough decisions to address our financial challenges. We are doing so in a way that we believe will make efficiencies without affecting services.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): May we have a debate on the activities of Network Rail in landscape-sensitive areas, such as the area of outstanding natural beauty in which the Goring gap sits? Nobody wants to hold up electrification, but sensitivity in such areas over the installations that are used to carry the electrification wires would be very much appreciated.

Chris Grayling: I am aware of the concerns that my hon. Friend raises. Indeed, I walked through the Goring gap recently and saw the work that is taking place on the line. The electrification of the Great Western main line is great news for people in his constituency and, indeed, in south Wales, so it will be of benefit to the constituents of the shadow Leader of the House. It is long overdue. When Labour was in power, only 10 miles of railway were electrified. We are now doing the job properly. However, my hon. Friend is absolutely right that Network Rail needs to be careful and thoughtful in areas of outstanding natural beauty to ensure that this essential work does not damage the landscape.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), in the wake of recent floods there have been calls for flooding to be made a statutory responsibility of fire authorities. The answer from the Government seems to be that if there is an emergency such as flooding and the fire brigade are called, it will attend—which, of course, it will. However, fire brigades attended fires for many years before it was considered a good idea to make it a statutory responsibility for them to do so. Is the Department for Communities and Local Government likely to make a statement to determine whether it is examining that issue, because at some point in future flooding ought to be a statutory responsibility of the fire service?

Chris Grayling: I have high regard for the hon. Gentleman and his work in this House, but I am afraid that we simply disagree on this issue. The idea that we need to pass a law to tell the emergency services to respond to emergencies would be a waste of Parliament's time, utterly unnecessary, and frankly insulting to a group of professionals who work hard on our behalf, day in, day out, and week in, week out.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): A record 10.2 million passengers passed through Birmingham international airport in 2015. With all the attention currently on Heathrow, will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the positive economic contribution of the UK's regional airports, and how the Government could further support them?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. Birmingham airport is an essential part of the midlands economy. It has been particularly encouraging to see the development of routes between Birmingham and far-off parts of the world where there are strong business links, such as the Indian subcontinent and the middle east. That has been helped by the work of local Members of Parliament, who have argued in support of the economic development of the area. My colleagues in the Department for Transport regard this issue as immensely important, and they will listen carefully to what my hon. Friend has said. I know they will continue to work alongside him and other midlands MPs in an attempt to continue the successful development of that airport.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): What message does the Leader of the House believe he is sending to young people watching our proceedings today, when a Government elected with a majority of just 12 on a

[*Wes Streeting*]

minority share of the vote, and with no manifesto commitment, in a Committee that most of our constituents will never have heard of, abolish student grants, which will hit the poorest students the hardest?

Chris Grayling: I say simply that this matter will be voted on by this House, and the House may choose to vote against it. It will be before the House and be divisible on the Floor of this House, and if Members want to vote on it, they can do so.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), is unfortunately indisposed; we send him our best wishes for a speedy recovery. On behalf of him and the Committee, may I invite Members to apply for the opportunity to secure a Backbench Business Committee debate, as the Leader of the House has just set out? We currently do not have a huge amount of requests for debates. Through your good offices, Mr Speaker, may I ask Members to complete the forms thoroughly, and to follow the guidelines so that the process is speeded up?

One current concern is that the transport unions are threatening three further strikes on the London underground, which will bring misery to commuters across London. May we have an urgent statement on what is to be done to prevent that action from inconveniencing commuters and disrupting the business of London?

Chris Grayling: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that he and his colleagues on the Backbench Business Committee are doing, and I echo his call to Members. We are making a lot of time available to that Committee; there are sections of time during the parliamentary week, and over the next couple of weeks a day and a half or even two days are available for debates such as that on the rail sector which has just been raised. I hope that Members who are raising issues to be debated, as my hon. Friend has just done, will look on the Backbench Business Committee as a vehicle to bring those matters to the attention of Ministers and before the House in order to address them.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): In my written question No. 20725 I asked the Chancellor “what discussions his Department had with financial institutions prior to the introduction of new rules for Tier 1 Entrepreneur visas in January 2013.”

The subsequent response said simply that the Government have met financial institutions many times since 2013, which is completely inadequate. Can the Leader of the House assist me in getting a more substantial written response?

Chris Grayling: If that had been raised as a point of order, you would offer advice to be persistent, Mr Speaker, and to keep asking questions that are more specifically targeted on individual groups, people, institutions or meetings. The City Minister, or those Ministers involved in migration matters, have regular meetings with representative groups and will discuss such issues on a regular basis. The hon. Lady should not think that such matters are not discussed, because they are.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): A recent report on UK consumer spending found that 2015 was the second strongest year since 2008. Such figures are encouraging and are reflected in my constituency. May we have a debate on the steps that need to be taken to ensure that this positive trend continues?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend’s question speaks for itself as a sign of continued economic progress. It is encouraging that we are seeing that economic progress in the midlands and in the north, where the economy has been growing faster than the economy in the south. There is a lot of work still to do. We have a lot of ground still to cover, but we are making good progress. The country is moving in the right direction. All I can say is thank goodness that it is we who are steering the country at a difficult time, rather than the Labour party with a set of economic policies that would be disastrous.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Despite the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’ stating, in response to my question on 5 November, that she would be happy to discuss the future of the National Wildlife Crime Unit, and despite a number of emails chasing a response, the matter remains unresolved. Given that Members across the House showed support for the unit at an event last week, will the Leader of the House arrange a debate on the issue in the near future?

Chris Grayling: This is a matter of concern and I understand the issues. Wildlife crimes in this country are not just those that take place within the United Kingdom. We all wish to see the smuggling of rare species, bush meat and products from endangered species stamped out. I will follow up the hon. Gentleman’s question. If he has not received a response, I will seek to ensure he receives one quickly after today’s debate.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): EU membership is particularly unpopular in my constituency because of the damaging impact of the common fisheries policy. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement to reassure my constituents that reform of the CFP is taking place during the renegotiations?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely understand the concerns my hon. Friend raises. The fishing industry is enormously important to his constituency, as it is to the constituency of the shadow Deputy Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn). It is a long-standing and important part of the economy in their part of the world. There have been many calls over the years for more responsibility for the fishing sector to be taken at a local level. The Prime Minister has set the principle of subsidiarity at the heart of his renegotiation. Whatever the outcome of the renegotiation and the referendum, I think we can all agree that decisions should not be taken at a level above that which is necessary.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Yesterday, I and colleagues from the Energy and Climate Change Committee met the Vice-President of the EU Commission, Maroš Šefcovic, and I asked him about the European Union’s position on Chinese market economy status. He said that that debate

had to happen and that the decision would be taken in autumn. Energy-intensive industries such as steel, chemical processing and manufacturing are really relying on that decision. Why is it still the case, and may we have a statement on why it is still the case that the Government, irrespective of whether we will be a member of the EU or not, are backing Chinese market economy status without any clarification or qualification?

Chris Grayling: It is clear that China is one of the largest economies in the world. It is a country with which we have historical links. It is right and proper that we engage with China economically. China has also, as we saw at the recent Paris summit, now recognised the imperative of addressing environmental issues. Thanks to the work of several international figures, including my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, the outcome of the summit has started the world on a path going in the right direction.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): MidKent College in my constituency is doing a phenomenal amount of work to encourage and promote apprenticeships. It informs me that its greatest challenge is to ensure that young people and their parents see apprenticeships as a good and viable alternative to university. May we have an urgent statement on the Floor of the House on what the Government are doing to assist colleges such as MidKent to promote apprenticeships as an equally valuable career option?

Chris Grayling: Apprenticeships are one of the Government's great success stories. Since 2010, we have seen 2.5 million young people start apprenticeships. That is clearly a step in the right direction. My experience, and I suspect my hon. Friend's experience, is that I am starting to see young people in my constituency recognise the potential of apprenticeships. There is still a lot of work to do, however. We all have a duty as constituency Members to promote apprenticeships in our constituencies. Some colleagues have held apprenticeship fairs in their constituencies. The point he makes today is one we should continue to deal with and debate on the Floor on the House.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): First, may I thank the Leader of the House for his excellent timing of the Easter recess—or, rather, the lambing recess—which he could not have timed any better? I also draw his attention to another constituency matter—early-day motion 936, in my name and that of many colleagues, on the goodness of Stornoway black pudding and its recognition as a superfood.

[That this House welcomes the recognition of black pudding, Marag Dhubh in Gaelic, as a superfood; notes that its calcium, iron, magnesium, potassium and protein-rich nature make the black pudding an excellent addition to a healthy, balanced diet; expresses pleasure at the economic benefits to Stornoway butchers of its EU Protected Geographical Indication, one of the many great benefits of EU membership; and encourages everyone to discover the great taste of Scottish food.]

Black pudding is rich in calcium, iron, magnesium and potassium; it is protein rich; and it has a low glycaemic index—very healthy indeed. Will the Leader of the House keep himself in good health and google “Stornoway black pudding” so that he can again time recesses perfectly?

Chris Grayling: The most unusual email I have had since taking over this job was from the hon. Gentleman, who asked me, “Could you tell me when the Easter recess will be, because I need to work out when to put the ram out with the ewes?” We should have a taste contest between him and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) to see whose constituency can deliver the tastiest black pudding. Perhaps you should be the judge, Mr Speaker. Next week, they should bring in some fare from their own constituencies and you could be the arbiter, although I suspect that a draw might be diplomatic.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) and the unusual have always been very much more than nodding acquaintances.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): I recommend the Bacup black pudding from Rossendale.

May we have a statement on the use of smart technology for reporting potholes? Tomorrow, national pothole day, is a great day for people to download the “Tell Jake” app, developed with streetrepairs.co.uk, which has seen the number of potholes in my constituency reported and sorted double and the response times for repairing them slashed. It is a really good bit of technology that the Department for Communities and Local Government should encourage local authorities to embrace.

Chris Grayling: I think I see the emergence of an all-party black pudding group.

Particularly at this time of the year, with all the rain we have had, potholes are an issue for constituencies across the country, so my hon. Friend makes an important point. I am sure Members with an excess of potholes in their constituencies will take note of his comments and offer guidance to constituents affected, but of course we hope they will be repaired as quickly as possible.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): At the last general election, the Conservative party promised to protect social security for disabled people, and, in addition to the cuts proposed in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, just before Christmas—just two years after they introduced it—the Government announced a consultation on the personal independence payment process that will, in effect, reduce disabled people's eligibility. Will they explain why they have reneged on their promise, and when may we have a debate in Government time on this important issue?

Chris Grayling: The whole point about the PIP system was that its predecessor, the disability living allowance, was not being used for the purposes intended. DLA and PIP were designed to provide extra financial resource for people with disabilities, to help them cover the extra costs incurred in their daily lives, but DLA had become a sickness benefit and was being used by people who self-referred and had temporary illnesses rather than disabilities. The system was designed to pay benefits to people who needed them for their disabilities, not to those who did not have genuine disabilities but had health problems. That is what the new system was designed to achieve, and it is perfectly reasonable to review it two years in, to make sure it is delivering that objective.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Yesterday saw the launch in the terrace pavilion of Open Doors' 2016 "World Watch" report on the persecution of Christians, which regrettably is growing and has reached the stage where Christians are now the most persecuted group. Will the Leader of the House welcome the work of Open Doors and ask for an update from our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development on how we might implement its proposal that the UK use its position as a major aid donor as leverage in ensuring plurality and proper respect for faiths in aid-recipient countries?

Chris Grayling: I am happy to do both, and I think we should say very clearly as a Parliament and as a nation that the persecution of Christians around the world is to be abhorred. This is a world that should respect the freedom of individuals to follow their religion. No one should be persecuted for their religion. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that around the world, some Christian minorities are being persecuted for their religion. It is for this country as a beacon of liberal democracy to stand up for them—we should do that and we will.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Leader of the House may be aware that yesterday the House allowed my ten-minute rule Bill on the English national anthem to pass to Second Reading. Downing Street has briefed that it is open to allowing time for this to be properly pursued. It would be a great shame—there is a huge amount of interest in the subject—if when the Bill next comes before us, it is simply batted away without a debate or a vote. What steps can the right hon. Gentleman take to enable the voice of England to be heard and to decide on whether to have a different national anthem?

Chris Grayling: Yesterday's debate was certainly interesting, but I am not sure that there was complete unity among his Front-Bench colleagues on the subject. I believe "Jerusalem" to be a magnificent part of our musical heritage, but I have to say that as it was being broadcast on a loop yesterday morning around Westminster and as I heard it for the 20th time, I was beginning to think it might be appropriate on selective occasions. I commend the hon. Gentleman for the work he is doing on an issue that will be discussed further. It is a matter that he could bring to the attention of the Backbench Business Committee and have it debated on the Floor of the House if it agreed to that.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I am sure that the whole House will support the proposal to erect in Trafalgar Square a reconstruction of the Temple of Bel arch from Palmyra in April and May this year—and perhaps for longer. That proposal coincides with the Queen's Speech, with which my right hon. Friend will be involved. To increase the symbolism of our defiance against Daesh, will he include in the Queen's Speech the ratification and bringing into UK law of The Hague convention, which has complete cross-party support? This could be concluded swiftly here and in the other place, and it would be an important symbol for this country.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We have all looked with dismay at the gratuitous destruction of parts of our collective heritage in the

middle east at the hands of a group of people who are nothing short of barbarians. If my hon. Friend will forgive me, it would not be appropriate for me to give advance billing of the Queen's Speech, but I know that this is a matter of concern to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the whole Government. I welcome what is happening in Trafalgar Square. We need to work collectively across the world to try to protect the architectural and archaeological treasures that should be a part not simply of our heritage but that of future generations.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): My constituent Mark Middlehurst is in a critical condition in hospital in Perth, Western Australia, after suffering a severe brain injury as a result of an accident. Unfortunately, Mark did not have travel insurance, and his family need to raise over £50,000 so that he can make the journey back to the UK, accompanied by a full medical team. Will the Leader of the House ask the UK high commissioner to Australia to make urgent representations on this matter, and ask the Foreign Secretary to publish a written statement next week with the response?

Chris Grayling: Let me first extend my best wishes to Mark and his family and to the hon. Gentleman for the work he is doing. It is always distressing to us as constituency Members when we come across tragic cases such as this one. After business questions has finished, I will ask my office to contact the Foreign Office and to follow up the hon. Gentleman's points. Clearly, it is unfortunate when people travel without insurance, and we would all advise our constituents not to do so. I am sure, however, that the diplomatic service will wish to do everything it can to help the family.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Following the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), will my right hon. Friend meet members of the all-party parliamentary group on cultural heritage to discuss The Hague convention and how to ensure that it becomes part of UK law in the next Queen's Speech?

Chris Grayling: I would be happy to discuss the issue with my hon. Friend and colleagues. Of course, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport will be here for questions next week, providing my hon. Friend with an opportunity to raise the issue with him. The Government are well aware of this issue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There are growing concerns across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland about sharia law and the use of sharia councils. There can never be two legal systems in the United Kingdom: the law created and processed by this House is the only law of the land. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement on this most important legal matter?

Chris Grayling: Let us be absolutely clear about this. We have one law of the land which applies to every single citizen of this country—to every single person who is in this country—regardless of race, colour or creed. That is beyond question, and, in my view, it can never be different. Systems that offer arbitration services

within, for example, religious groups are ultimately not legally binding. Ultimately, the only places in our country that deliver legally binding rulings are our courts, and people in this country can always have recourse to the courts in the event of matters of challenge in their lives.

I know that this matter is of concern to the Home Secretary. She will be here next week, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise the issue with her, as, indeed, will I.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Figures published today reveal that there has been a 30% increase in the number of acid attacks over the last two years. These brutal attacks leave their victims with a life sentence, which is often longer than the sentences that the perpetrators receive. May we have a debate on ways of tackling acid attacks, including better regulation of the most corrosive substances?

Chris Grayling: I had a brief discussion about this very matter with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice a while ago. I know that it is a matter of great concern to Home Office Ministers, who have been considering and discussing it in recent days. It is clearly a matter of great concern, because the lasting impact of an acid attack on an individual can be profoundly life-changing. We must always condemn such attacks, and always try to stop them. I will ensure that my hon. Friend's concerns are raised after this session.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Last Monday saw the deadline pass for responses to the consultation on the Greater Manchester spatial framework, which sets out housing land supply for the next 20 years. It is bad enough that very few councillors in Greater Manchester knew that the consultation was taking place, but it is atrocious that the public did not know either. May we have a debate in Government time on the accountability of combined authorities, to the electorate in particular, but also to the members of the constituent councils?

Chris Grayling: I have listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman has said. I will pass his concerns to the Department for Communities and Local Government, which will undoubtedly be anxious to ensure that the new systems work effectively. Of course, councils and councillors have a duty to communicate what is going on to their members and their constituents. When that does not happen it is not always the fault of the people at the centre; nevertheless, there is that duty to try to ensure that the message gets out.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I was pleased to hear during Women and Equalities questions that the Minister welcomed the publication today of the trans inquiry report. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) asked the Leader of the House for a debate on the report in the Chamber. I must defer to the expertise of the Clerks, but as far as I know there has not previously been a debate about the trans community on the Floor of the House. In the light of my right hon. Friend's report, will the Leader of the House host such a debate?

Chris Grayling: I think that that would be a very sensible thing to do. The deputy Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), is present, and will undoubtedly have noted my hon. Friend's question. In order for such a debate to take place, a formal request must be made to the Committee, but I think that both the time that it is able to provide and the time that is available in Westminster Hall present ideal opportunities for discussion of the report, and of an issue that I suspect has not previously been debated on the Floor of the House, although it is a very real and genuine issue.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Leader of the House will be well aware of the fate of six British sailors in Chennai, including my constituent Billy Irving, of Connel, near Oban. Having been detained for nearly two years, they were each sentenced to five years' rigorous imprisonment in an Indian jail. The case, and the sentence, has shocked and caused great upset to the men and their families. Will a Foreign Office Minister make an urgent statement to the House as soon as possible about what the Foreign Office plans to do to help these men?

Chris Grayling: I know the hon. Gentleman has been a vigorous campaigner on behalf of these gentlemen and their families. After this session of questions has finished, I will pass that message to the Foreign Office and ask it to respond to him. Of course, such situations are much more challenging to address once a court has ruled, because we have to respect the justice systems of other countries, but I absolutely understand the concerns. It may be that these gentlemen choose to appeal, and if they do so I would expect the usual consular support to be made available.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): It has been reported that President Obama will be visiting this country in May, no doubt at the start of his farewell tour. More disturbingly, it has also been reported that he will be invited by the Prime Minister to comment on the merits of Britain staying in the European Union as part of an increasingly desperate attempt to shore up the increasingly threadbare proposals for us to stay in the EU. Will the Leader of the House, as the representative of this House, write to the United States ambassador, not only to welcome President Obama to this country, but to make it clear to the ambassador that the President should not be commenting on very important domestic issues, important to the people of this country?

Chris Grayling: I think I can reassure my hon. Friend in that I suspect such a letter is not needed, because I have no doubt that the American ambassador closely follows the proceedings in this Chamber and that the comments of my hon. Friend will be reported to him. I am sure that message will filter back to the Americans.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): May we have a debate on the rather bizarre decision reached by the fisheries Minister, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), at the European fisheries and open opportunities meeting, whereby gillnet fishing is to be allowed to continue of the endangered bass species, whereas domestic anglers are told they are to have a zero-take bag? It seems to me and many domestic anglers an absolutely unfair decision that stops their

[Mrs Madeleine Moon]

recreational fishing while hugely increasing the take of an endangered species by fishermen, including in the fisheries Minister's constituency.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady is not the first Member to raise this concern. I am not aware of the detail that has prompted the decision, but I can understand why hon. Members think it is somewhat strange. I will ask my hon. Friend to write to her after this meeting to explain the reason for that decision and what, if anything, happens next.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Can the Leader confirm that, sadly, the Government have a new year's resolution to further deregulate Sunday trading in the forthcoming Enterprise Bill? Why do the Government not publish the results of their Sunday trading consultation, which may have got lost in the Christmas decorations bag, and realise that this is a new year's resolution that makes no business sense and no family sense, and should be broken as soon as possible?

Chris Grayling: I know my hon. Friend feels very strongly about this issue, and I would simply assure him that if any proposals are brought forward, the House will be properly informed and all appropriate information will be provided.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): After the Legislative Grand Committee on Tuesday, there were some rather forlorn-looking Clerks in the Division Lobbies packing away iPads that had not been used, having been specially set up to record English votes for English laws. Given that these tablet devices have been paid for and exist, why not put them to use to record all Divisions in the House as the first step towards a 21st-century system of electronic voting?

Chris Grayling: I think that is the intention. The House of Lords is already using iPads to record Divisions, and it seems to me entirely logical that we should do the same. The system is now in place for the double majority votes, and it is my hope and expectation that we will move to general recording in the very near future. There is no reason not to do that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Businesses across York have been seriously impacted by the floods as people have stayed away due to the images of floodwater. York has dried out, cleaned up and is open for trade. May we have a statement from the Business Secretary on the costs of the floods to businesses and further support to be made available for affected businesses, and will he make it clear that the best way to support cities that flooded, such as York, is to visit and take advantage of the fantastic bars, cafés and shops?

Chris Grayling: May I first extend my good wishes to the hon. Lady and her constituents and commend them for the work they have been doing to mop up after the floods? She is absolutely right: York is a large place and the floods were deeply damaging to parts of the city—but only parts of it. Many businesses were unaffected, and many others have done a sterling job in turning things around quickly and reopening. We should be encouraging

people to go into the city to visit, to shop, and to eat and drink, to ensure that its economy flourishes. That is true not only of York but of Carlisle, the centre of Manchester and elsewhere.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Next week, the High Court will hear a judicial review brought by, among others, my constituents Rebecca Steinfeld and Charles Keidan, who wish to enter into a civil partnership but cannot currently do so, in breach of their article 8 and article 14 rights. We are aware of the Leader of the House's love of the Human Rights Act—perhaps he will apply for Shami Chakrabarti's job, given that he will be looking for one soon—but this is a matter for Parliament. Will he find Government time to legislate to allow different-sex couples to enter into civil partnerships?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman has made this point before, but if this matter is before the courts, it is not appropriate for us to discuss it today. The Government have considered the matter before and they do not currently have proposals to make a change, although Ministers and this House will always keep it under review.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The Energy Secretary has noted her frustration that the five-year low in wholesale energy prices has not been passed on to consumers, but quite frankly, my constituents are less interested in what frustrates the right hon. Lady than in finding out what action she is going to take as Secretary of State. May we have a statement from her to tell us exactly what she intends to do to help hard-pressed businesses and households that are currently paying through the nose?

Chris Grayling: The most straightforward option is to shop around. There have been price reductions, and they tend to be among the smaller, newer entrants to the market. We have taken significant steps to encourage a broader range of providers to enter the market, and the number has risen from six to the best part of 30 providers. There are now some much better deals around. The way to get a cheaper price is to shop around, and we should do everything we can to encourage people to switch easily and to chase the best option.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): May we have a debate on the recent report from the Museums Association, which reveals that nearly one in five regional museums has closed a part or a branch to the public over the past year, with the north of England being particularly affected because of reductions in local authority funding from central Government?

Chris Grayling: We cannot dictate what local authorities do with their money, but what I can say is that in the spending review we protected the money that goes to cultural institutions precisely because we recognise their importance. We as a Government will continue to do that, but it is for local councils to set their own local priorities.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that the Welsh Grand Committee meets from time to time. Indeed, I think he appeared in front of it in Wrexham once. He will

therefore be aware that any time the Committee meets in Wales, its members may make representations and speak in either English or Welsh. However, when the Committee meets in a Committee Room in this place, its members are permitted to use only English. In view of the fact that there are two official languages in Wales, and that we have a Welsh Grand Committee coming up on 3 February, will the right hon. Gentleman make a commitment that all its members may use either English or Welsh?

Chris Grayling: I will not give the hon. Lady a commitment about that, but she makes a serious point and I will take a look at it. Clearly it is important that that happens in Wales, and I was not aware that it was not possible in this building. I will go and take a look at that for her.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Every piece of evidence shows that scrapping student grants will deter students from poorer backgrounds. Regardless of the merits of the proposal, is this not also about democracy? The proposal, which did not appear in the Conservative manifesto, will affect more than 500,000 people, and it is going to be decided in a back room by a small number of people. Is that not a shoddy way to do business? Is it not about time that the Government showed the courage of their convictions and allowed a full debate and a full vote on the proposal on the Floor of this House?

Chris Grayling: If Labour Members feel so strongly about this matter, they could use the Opposition day next Tuesday to debate it. A statutory instrument of this kind cannot pass into law, against the wishes of Members of this House, until it is voted upon the Floor of this House. Every night, as part of the remaining orders of the day, we address motions, and if people disagree with them they pray against them and they are then divided upon. That can happen, and it will happen if the Opposition choose to make it so. I remind the hon. Gentleman that, for all the stories that have been told by the Opposition in recent years, the number of young people from deprived backgrounds going to our universities has actually been going up, not down.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on cervical screening for women under the age of 25, too many of whom have died after being refused a smear test? Emma Louise Fisk died at the age of 25 after being refused a smear test approximately 10 times, having been erroneously diagnosed with a urine infection. Many Members across the House will welcome the opportunity to ask Health Ministers whether it is time to offer young women tests on request, as well as to do more to promote take-up of smear tests among women of all ages and ethnicities.

Chris Grayling: It is always a difficult challenge for the health service to set the framework within which it offers tests. The hon. Lady makes a point that has been raised before. It is tragic when situations such as the one she describes take place. I will of course ensure that the Health Secretary is made aware of the concern that she has raised. None the less, these things must be a matter for the professionals to decide what to do and what not to do, but she makes an important point and I will pass it on.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Today, we have a debate on space technology. In sharp contrast, the Leader of the House may be aware that the Department dealing with child tax credits will take faxes but not emails for MPs' constituent inquiries, which is hardly 21st-century technology. In a written answer this week, the Treasury advised me that that was because standard emails are not secure, and yet the Department for Work and Pensions responds to emails that contain sensitive information. I am concerned that that implies that MPs' emails are not secure. Can we have a proper ministerial statement, or a debate, on the security of the IT systems managed by the Government?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The matter of parliamentary emails is under discussion as it is of ongoing concern. The new head of security, who has been in place for a few months, has said that he regards ensuring integrity and security around our IT systems as an important area. I assured him that both the authority of this House and Mr Speaker are indeed concerned to ensure that that is the case.

Points of Order

11.47 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Leader of the House has twice now said that the student finance measure, which started consideration in Committee at 11.30 this morning, will automatically be voted on by the whole House, as it will end up appearing on the Remaining Orders of the Day, but that is not the case. I say gently to him that he does not understand the rules. The simple situation is that, because the measure is going through the negative process, unless there is a motion formally tabled and carried in this House that says it shall not pass into law by 23 January—the motion must be tabled by him, by Government, or, theoretically, by us on an Opposition day—it cannot come to pass. He should not inadvertently mislead us by suggesting that this will happen automatically. If he is saying that he will table such a motion and allow for a debate, we would be very grateful, but he should not inadvertently mislead the House.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the shadow Leader of the House is not making a speech to, or at, the Leader of the House. What he is really doing is asking for my guidance, which I am happy to provide. If that guidance happens to coincide with his own interpretation of matters, I dare say that he will dance around the mulberry bush in exultant celebration. Let me tell him and the House what the position is. I understand that the regulations are indeed being debated in Committee as we speak as a result of a reference moved by Ministers in response to a prayer—that is a motion against the regulations. I am sure that the House is with me so far. That is a perfectly commonplace, almost prosaic, procedure. It is open to Ministers to bring forward the prayer for decision in the House without further debate, or it can be brought forward by the Opposition on an Opposition day for determination by the House. That is the situation.

Chris Bryant *rose*—

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman is quizzical, I would not wish him to remain so.

Chris Bryant: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful for that guidance. May I seek a little bit more? I was not sure whether you heard the Deputy Leader of the House say, “Yes, that is what’s going to happen,” because that is not what, thus far, the Government have said—

Mr Speaker: What is “it” in this context?

Chris Bryant: That they will bring forward a motion, so that there is a vote. It does not happen automatically. As I understand it, the Government have to decide to do it. If the Leader or Deputy Leader of the House would nod to indicate that that is what they are going to do—

Mr Speaker: Look, the hon. Gentleman is an extremely important Member of this House, and no one is more keenly conscious of that fact than he, but it is not for him to seek to persuade, cajole or exhort people to nod. If the Leader or Deputy Leader of the House wishes to give the House a clear indication now of the Government’s intentions in respect of this matter, specifically the centrality or otherwise of the Chamber to its resolution, either of them is perfectly free to do so, but neither of them is under any obligation. It is a case of speak now or, if not forever hold your peace, for the time being do so.

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not going to announce the business of the House, because the Leader of the House has already done that, but any Member can go and participate in that debate now. It is then for the Government to decide whether to bring the matter forward, as you have already pointed out in your guidance, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think we will leave it there for now. Right hon. and hon. Members will make their own assessment, and I thank the Deputy Leader of the House for what she has said.

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: UK Delegation

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Select Committee statement. Mr Bernard Jenkin, the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, will speak for no more than 10 minutes, during which time, I remind colleagues, no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Mr Jenkin to respond to these in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning. I call the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee of the House, Mr Bernard Jenkin.

11.52 am

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to make this statement on PACAC's report on our brief inquiry into the appointment of the UK delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which is published today.

When the membership of the new delegation was announced in November, there was some disquiet among some right hon. and hon. Members, including myself and other members of the Select Committee, about the way the delegation was chosen and appointed. Concerns were raised by colleagues and the media that the way some Conservatives voted to defeat the Government on an amendment to the European Union Referendum Bill might have influenced those decisions.

It has been established practice, until this Parliament, for the existing members of the delegation to choose to retire from it, and for potential new members to express an interest in joining. This was not the case in November, when certain right hon. and hon. Members were simply removed from the delegation by fiat. Some of those so removed had wanted to continue, including my hon. Friends the Members for Christchurch (Mr Chope) and for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan). The House should note that my right hon. Friend is a member of PACAC, but she therefore recused herself from the Committee's proceedings on this matter.

Following a debate in this House to elect a new delegation for the present year, which saw a Back-Bench motion defeated by the payroll vote, PACAC received a letter from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) and the Committee resolved to invite the Leader of the House to give oral evidence on the matter. We also received written evidence from my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), who is the newly appointed leader of the UK delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. We also received written evidence from my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, although it was very late in the process. I apologise to him for the fact that we had completed and resolved to make our

report before his evidence reached me or the members of the Committee. I do regret this and apologise to him for it. Nevertheless, his evidence is published on our website. It would not have altered the substance of our recommendations, but it speaks for itself.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe does not much restrict how its delegates should be appointed. It Rules Committee states that delegates are "elected . . . or appointed from among the members" of each Parliament

"in such manner as it shall decide".

My Committee heard that the Conservative party used a system based on patronage of the leader or the so-called usual channels, meaning the Whips Office. As such, PACAC concludes that the Government have not broken any rules of the Assembly. However, the Rules Committee of the Assembly said that the UK Parliament should

"review with the utmost diligence"

the way in which the delegation is appointed to

"bring it fully into line with . . . democratic principles".

Parliament is not bound to take any action on that advice. Nevertheless, we recommend that the House should revise the way in which delegates are chosen in the future, on the basis that this is how a great Parliament makes decisions, and we should represent the highest standards of democracy and accountability to our fellow European parliamentarians. We therefore recommend that, in future, the delegation should be elected, not appointed by the Prime Minister as now, and moreover elected by the membership of the House of Commons along similar lines to those on which the House now elects members of Select Committees, but also providing for the gender balance required in this case.

This means that the House can object to the inclusion of delegation members who may be considered unsuitable, as is the case with motions on the appointment of Select Committees. This has not been the case before. Following the success of the Wright Committee's recommendations to reform elections to Select Committees, it seems only right that the same principles should be extended to parliamentary delegations. The key recommendation of this report is that future delegations are chosen by free, fair and open elections. Subject to the approval of this recommendation by the House, the Procedure Committee would consider how the reform might be implemented, also so as to reflect the gender balance requirement.

We recommended that this system of election could be extended to other delegations, such as NATO, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly.

I very much hope that the House will welcome this proposal for democratic reform in the way that the UK appoints its most significant parliamentary delegations, and that the House will vote to approve it soon.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Yet again, we appear to be intruding on the private grief of the Conservative party. Although I take no joy in that, I welcome the statement and the report to which it refers. It echoes the collective view from the Opposition Benches that the UK delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe should be chosen on a democratic basis. We wholeheartedly agree with the proposals in the report.

[Melanie Onn]

Will the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) please confirm that this is the first and only such examination of how this House chooses its parliamentary delegation and that, if the report is agreed, under the rules of the Council of Europe it will be incumbent on the Conservative party to comply with the report's recommendations?

Mr Jenkin: I believe it is the first time that any review of the procedure has been undertaken. That complies with the request made to us by the Rules Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly, but it is a matter for the House as a whole how it takes this matter forward. The Committee cannot bind the House on how it should proceed. Perhaps the official Opposition will provide time to ensure that the House has an opportunity to debate our recommendations.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) and the members of his Committee for this very thorough report. What does he intend to do to try and ensure that his recommendations are carried forward, even in the face of implacable opposition from the Government? How can this House of Commons take control of the matter and ensure that its own choices are appointed to the Parliamentary Assembly?

Mr Jenkin: I would recommend either that Back-Bench business time be provided so that my hon. Friend can bring forward a motion, or that that is done by Her Majesty's official Opposition, who clearly feel strongly about the matter. I imagine that every member of my Committee would support that.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): As a member of PACAC, I am delighted to support the report and to applaud our Chair on what he has said. Do the Government accept that there has been a cultural change over the past 15 years and that we now decide most things like this by election? The power of the Whips to stuff Committees with their favourites has more or less disappeared, certainly for Select Committees, and that is a very welcome change.

Mr Jenkin: I very much agree that there are now different expectations about how these matters should be decided. I have in my hand a written ministerial statement issued only yesterday, entitled, "UK Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe". Admittedly, it only removes one peer and appoints another, but it was issued by the Prime Minister. He, of course, is a parliamentarian and the leader of a political party, but I think that the expectation now is that these matters should be handled by the two Houses and clearly ought not to be decided by the Executive. We all know what "the usual channels" means; it means decisions being made in secret, reasons not being given, and there being very little accountability. I think that people expect us to improve on that in today's age.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I very much welcome what my hon. Friend has said about Members being elected to the delegation, rather than appointed. We await the Government's formal response to the report,

but has he had any indication that they might be sympathetic to its conclusions, and can he confirm that it was agreed unanimously by the Committee?

Mr Jenkin: I can confirm that the report was agreed unanimously. The only evidence we have taken from the Government is the oral evidence from the Leader of the House. As we are learning, what a Minister's private thoughts might be on certain matters might not reflect what they say as a Minister. I hope that the Government will reflect on the Wright Committee and the success of Select Committee elections and recognise that times are changing. The days when they could hand out delegation places to Members of Parliament on the basis of grace and favour are over. That does not win us respect in the Council of Europe or among other parliamentarians across Europe, to whom this House should be setting an example.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): As the longest-serving member of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe, I congratulate the Committee, and particularly its Chair, on the impartial way that this matter has been dealt with. Never in all the years that I have served in the Council of Europe did I envisage a day when one of its committees would tell the UK, which has been the gold standard for democratic integrity for the past 70 years, that we should bring our standards of democratic accountability up to those of Azerbaijan and Bulgaria. This has been a shameful period for the United Kingdom. It is not just the delegates who are not elected; neither is its leader. Neither Conservative delegates, nor those from other parties, have any role whatsoever in that. We will be going back on the spirit of the Wright reforms unless that is changed quickly.

Mr Jenkin: I pay tribute to the longest-serving member of PACAC, or whatever name it had in previous Parliaments. The hon. Gentleman has been an enormous fund of institutional memory on that Committee, and that is extremely useful. During our inquiry, he pointed out that his party already has a form of elections for its delegates that provides for the complexity of providing gender balance. Some of the objections that have been raised to say that we cannot do this are therefore clearly confounded by the experience of his party.

I think it would be a mistake to say that this episode has brought shame on our country. The hon. Gentleman is right to make comparisons with other countries that do things better. However, the Rules Committee made it clear that people might have misunderstood the confusion of roles that we have in this House whereby the Prime Minister is also leader of the governing party and sits as a parliamentarian. The more classical separation of powers that is expected does not exist in our constitution. That is not a matter of shame for us, but we are now a little behind the times. We should be demonstrating how, in our procedures, we expect the best, and the most open and democratic, practices to be adopted—not from the age of deference but the age of popular democracy.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I, too, commend the Chairman and the Committee for this report. I confess to finding it strange that the Prime Minister should have sought, in a fit of pique, to exclude troublemakers from the delegation to the Council of Europe, because in my time as a Whip we thought that was one of its

purposes. Why does the Chairman think that the Prime Minister did not heed the unfortunate experience of Tony Blair and Robin Cook when they disastrously tried to intervene to change the chairmanships of the Transport and Foreign Affairs Committees? Can he explain this case of prime ministerial hubris without any regard to the inevitable arrival of nemesis?

Mr Jenkin: Without straying too much into Greek terminology, I think that what Prime Ministers have they tend to want to keep and not give up. There was perhaps a failure of imagination about the effect of what people wanted to do, but that has provided this House with an opportunity to review, to debate, and, I hope, in due course to decide on how to make sure that we bring our procedures into the democratic age.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his statement and the way he made it, and thank him and his Committee for producing this report in a most timely fashion since the controversy arose. He has lifted the stone from the rather murky, grubby world of the use and abuse of Government patronage. I congratulate him on doing that and support his recommendations.

With the Select Committee example, we have a perfect opportunity to elect all our delegations to international bodies on a full, free and fair basis. As a member of the Backbench Business Committee, may I invite him to present to us his case for his recommendations to form part of a motion that could be voted on by this House? Now that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) has said that we have the support of Opposition Front Benchers, and given the importance that the Council of Europe attaches to motions of this House, but not necessarily to the views of Her Majesty's Government, it would be a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate that this House is fully behind his recommendations.

Mr Jenkin: I am very grateful for, and flattered by, my hon. Friend's invitation. It is important to say that were I to undertake to do this, I would want some assurances from those who say they support these proposals that they will make strenuous efforts to make sure that people turn up and vote for them, because we often have debates in this House where very few turn up, and then the Government decide to take no notice. The Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) is nodding and saying that that may well be the case, so it will be a very worthwhile thing for me to do. I will consider it and hope to bring forward a motion proposed by every member of my Committee.

Backbench Business

Space Policy

12.9 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House notes the scientific, cultural and technological opportunities arising from exploration of outer space and the significant contribution the space industry makes to the UK economy; further notes the increased public interest in space exploration resulting from Major Tim Peake's mission to the International Space Station (ISS); welcomes the global co-operation that has led to the development of the ISS over the last forty years; takes note of the shortlist of airports and aerodromes that could host a UK spaceport published by the UK Government in March 2015; and calls on the Government to bring forward further advice and support for organisations considering developing such facilities so that they might be operational by the Government's target date of 2018.

If hon. Members read the motion, they will see that it covers the incredible breadth and depth of the space industry and its amazing potential. I hope that that will be covered during the debate by Members from different parts of the United Kingdom. Some people are likely to stoop to using some fairly poor puns. At this point I would like to register the fact that I accept no responsibility for that. I lay the blame at the feet of the Prime Minister, who has stooped to using some pretty shocking puns at Question Time recently, something for which he needs to be penitent.

Some people who follow the media will be aware that our former First Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), has used as a travelling pseudonym the name of that famous captain of the USS Enterprise, but for a debate as important as this, I felt we should contact the real McCoy. I therefore have a message to the House of Commons from William Shatner:

"Space is one of the last known frontiers, mostly untouched by mankind and his politics. In opening a debate on this subject my hope is you take the tenets of Star Trek's prime directive to universally and peacefully share in the exploration of it. I wish you all a wonderful debate. My best, Bill".

As some people will have seen, we have also had a message on Twitter from George Takei—otherwise known as Mr Sulu—wishing us luck as we venture to the stars.

This is not a debate about fictional astronauts. We tried to get the debate on this day to honour a real astronaut, Major Tim Peake, who is currently in the international space station. We sought it today because tomorrow he will be making a spacewalk. Contrary to some slightly sloppy journalism, he is not actually the first British astronaut. That honour fell to Dr Helen Sharman from Yorkshire a quarter of a century ago, in 1991. I find it incredibly appropriate that, prior to that, she was a research chemist for Mars. [*Laughter.*] It'll get worse.

However, Major Tim Peake is our first astronaut through an increased engagement with the European Space Agency. While Helen Sharman was on the Mir station, he is in the international space station, and tomorrow he will certainly be taking part in the very first British spacewalk. It will start, hopefully, at 11.30 GMT tomorrow morning. I would encourage all schools, children and youngsters of all ages to log on to principia.org or

[*Dr Philippa Whitford*]

NASA TV on the internet, where it will be shown, as it truly is an historic moment. He has been tasked with changing regulators on the solar panels. As they are high-voltage regulators, the walk has to be carried out entirely on the dark side.

I am a member of the parliamentary space committee. We had the great opportunity to have a private tour of the “Cosmonauts” exhibition in the Science Museum, which I would recommend to anyone. The museum spent four years negotiating with Russia to bring incredible artefacts to this country—the space capsule of Tereshkova, uniforms of Gagarin and all sorts of pieces of hardware that even people in Russia did not know existed. What struck me as we went round the museum was the fact that, during points of incredible friction between Russia and the US and across the world, back channels always remained open. Co-operation always continued on the international space station. We have seen that in these few years of setting up the exhibition, during which we have had the Ukrainian crisis, Crimea and friction over Syria. If we can work so well together in space, it would be great if we could work a little bit better here on earth.

Any Members who were in the Chamber when I made my maiden speech will remember that I referred to Prestwick in my constituency as being on the shortlist for consideration as a space port. I remember that whenever I talked to anyone about that during the election, they would always just laugh, because in this country we think that space is for other people—the big boys: north America, Russia and maybe even China, but not us. That is something we have to change. We need to believe in what we can do, and I think Major Tim Peake’s mission will achieve that. We see the interest of school children and the Science Museum was packed on the day of the launch, and we had Members in this place watching it live on screen. We hope it will lead to an interest in STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths—and an absolute belief in the space industry here in the United Kingdom.

The space industry is new, but the UK has a proud aviation history, which includes Rolls-Royce and supersonic flight. We need to take the next step and grasp that opportunity. The industry has changed over the past five years, and I applaud the decisions taken in 2010 that led to the formation of the UK Space Agency. It is now an industry with a turnover of £11.5 billion. It employs 35,000 people, three quarters of them in graduate jobs, and a third of its production is exports, but the vision of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is that it should grow to become a £40 billion industry. For that, we really need to take action.

If it was not a political decision, there should not really be any great doubt that the choice should be Prestwick. We already have almost everything that is needed. We have a runway that is touching 3 km. We are in a coastal position, to allow start-off over the sea. We have the northern air traffic control centre in our campus, which allows the planning of what will be some pretty clever management of airspace, and obviously we have relatively empty airspace. We are close to Glasgow University and Strathclyde technology catapults and we have, uniquely, an aerospace cluster on the airport campus. It contains BAE Systems, Spirit AeroSystems and many others, all of whom are interested in the idea of a space port.

Up the road from us is Clyde Space, which makes small CubeSats that are only a litre in size. Early communication satellites were weighed in tonnes and were the size of a double-decker bus, but the UK, through Surrey Satellite Technology, has led since the ’80s in producing satellites that are about the size of a fridge. That is a step change. It has been shown that if the cost of getting a satellite into space gets down to the tens of thousands, everyone is going to want one. We will have to look at regulating that, otherwise space will be full of junk, but it enables all sorts of possibilities. However, we do not have a domestic launch site. That is why the aim is to have a UK space port by 2018.

As well as all the physical attributes of Prestwick, 20 years of Met Office data show that, despite preconceptions, it has the clearest weather, compared with Newquay, which people would presume is the closest contender. Low cloud is suffered by Newquay 31% of the time and only 11% of the time at Prestwick. Less than 5 km visibility is suffered by Newquay 15% of the time and only 4% of the time at Prestwick. I live in Troon, which is next door, and I can vouch for the fact that we have a weird little weather system, locally known as the Prestwick hole. People can fly into it, drive into it or walk into it. They can be surrounded by thick cloud, but they will look up and see a large hole of pure blue sky. That is what has made Prestwick the clear weather airport for the United Kingdom for decades.

I call on the Minister to look not just at having one space port. I think this is an industry that will mushroom. We need to accept that all sorts of sectors will develop that we have not even thought about. It will diversify. This is a real industry. It is not about saying, “Beam me up, Scotty,” or fretting about the dilithium crystals that we see on the telly; it is a multi-billion pound industry. I call on the Minister to be imaginative, to be brave and to be boldly going where no Minister has gone before. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ooh!”] Nearly done.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): More!

Dr Whitford: Oh, I am sure the Minister will have about two hours more.

Prestwick was Scotland’s first ever passenger airport and it was founded by Group Captain David McIntyre, the first man to fly over Everest. That is the kind of imagination and drive we need. I call on the Minister to please be imaginative and to support the industry across the entire UK so that it can live long and prosper.

12.20 pm

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). In fact, I am beginning to question why we are not in the same party, because every time she speaks I find myself agreeing wholeheartedly with her on a variety of different issues.

The hon. Lady will not know that, in my maiden speech in 2010, to some colleagues’ surprise I spoke about the UK space industry. In fact, I was advised by some wise owls in these parts that I should not speak about the space industry, because I would be ridiculed as the spaceman of the House of Commons.

A year or so later, I secured an Adjournment debate in this Chamber, in which I discussed the rather esoteric subject of microgravity. During my speech, I spoke about the value of protein crystal investigation, the potential for doing a variety of biotechnological and medical experiments in space, and how that could advance our knowledge base. Major Tim Peake is doing all those experiments now. I like to think that that Adjournment debate led in part to the Government's decision to invest in the European Space Agency's European Programme for Life and Physical Sciences. That investment led to Tim Peake, whose field of expertise is microgravity, travelling on the rocket to the international space station.

The space industry has hardly any presence in my constituency, so why did I decide to talk about it in my maiden speech in 2010, and why did I subsequently take up the House's time to talk about microgravity in an Adjournment debate? It was because, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire has already eloquently pointed out, there is something about space and the exploration thereof, particularly manned exploration and flights, that is truly inspirational to everybody. Whenever I visit schools during their science, technology, engineering and maths week, invariably I see pictures there of planets and rockets. There is something about space and the exploration of it that inspires young people. When engineers were asked why they had done an engineering degree at university, up to 40% of them said that they had done so because of the exploration of space and that their interest had first been stimulated by images from space.

I made my maiden speech in an Opposition day debate on industry. I thought it was important to talk about the space industry, not only because I think that the future of this great country is wedded to the success of science and technology and that that will increasingly become the case, but because the space industry is, in and of itself, so inspirational and such a great success that it needs as much support as possible from Governments, of whichever colour. The previous Labour Government did some very good work and UK space policy made some significant advances as a result. I hope and expect that this Government will follow suit.

When I made my maiden speech, the estimated size of the space industry was £6.8 billion, but the figure now is £11.6 billion. That increase has happened in five or six years. The space industry has grown so successfully during that time that we would struggle without the tangible value it provides.

I have been vice-chairman of the parliamentary space committee pretty much ever since I made my maiden speech, and I have often experienced pushback when I talk about the value of manned space flights. As the hon. Lady has said, there is a sense that somehow space is for others, not for Britain, that the exploration of space is very expensive and that we should be concentrating on other things. However, let us remember that for every dollar the US Government spent on the Apollo space programme, there was a remarkable \$13 dollar return on their investment.

The returns were not just financial. In December 1968, a very famous photograph was taken by Bill Anders on Apollo 8—the so-called “Earthrise” photograph. The value of that photograph cannot be calculated in financial terms alone. Imagine where the environmental lobby

would be if it did not have a photograph of the earth as seen from the moon. Imagine how those astronauts felt when they put up a hand and hid the earth with their thumb. Our perception of this wonderful planet was changed by that investment by the US Government. Of course, it was driven by a race with the Soviet Union, but the return was not just financial. We recognised the fragility of this planet and how fortunate we are.

I would argue that, in the process of the achievement of putting the first man on the moon in July 1969, man rediscovered the value of exploration. Now we face the next challenge, which is to place a person on the surface of Mars—perhaps it should be a woman. Increasingly, women are deployed in fighter jets because of their ability to withstand G-force, so perhaps it will be a woman who first stands on Mars. I think that Britain should be part of that. The cost may seem large, but we should consider it in proportion to the rest of the money we spend as a nation and, indeed, as a world. If we are not prepared to explore space, push back our boundaries of knowledge and discover things that we did not realise we were going to discover, then what on earth are we about as a species?

Space is an exciting subject and I cannot think of another subject that is so truly inspirational. British Governments, of whichever colour, should play a greater part in it and recognise that they have a role to play in mitigating risk and that private investment alone will not bring it about. If we do that, this country will have a very bright future indeed.

12.27 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I think this is the first time I have been called to speak in the Chamber without there being a formal time limit on speeches, but I will do my best not to go to infinity and beyond. I thank my co-sponsors of the motion, and the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the time to have this debate at relatively short notice. As my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) has said, the debate has come at an opportune moment, the day before Major Tim Peake makes his spacewalk.

Adjournment debates secured by the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) notwithstanding, I understand that this is the first time since a 2005 Westminster Hall debate that the House as a whole has considered space policy, so this debate is very timely indeed. It is great to hear that today's important deliberations have been recognised by good wishes from Captain Kirk and Mr Sulu themselves. Indeed, our very own chief Trekkie, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), who usually occupies the spot on which I am standing, has sent us his best wishes as well. On space issues, there is a close link between the inspiration provided by both science fiction and science fact. Perhaps I will come back to that later.

It is also appropriate to finish the week in which the English votes for English laws procedures were used for the first time by discussing matters about which there can be no question but that Scottish National party Members have a mandate to speak and vote on. Later today we will discuss the House of Lords, which is reserved. Schedule 5, part II, section L6 of the Scotland Act 1998 proudly and clearly reserves to the Parliament of the United Kingdom,

“Regulation of activities in outer space.”

[Patrick Grady]

If a Starman waiting in the sky read that, he might think it was quite a claim or question whether Parliament really has the power to regulate the infinite majesty of all creation, although I am sure some Members think that it does. However, the explanatory notes to the legislation make it clear that the reservation applies specifically to matters regulated by the Outer Space Act 1986.

The 1986 Act gave effect to a number of international treaties on the exploration and, for want of a better word, the exploitation—I will touch on that later—of outer space. The principles behind the treaties are hugely important, particularly those in the 1967 United Nations outer space treaty:

“The exploration and use of outer space...shall be carried out for the benefit and in the interests of all countries...and shall be the province of all mankind”,

and:

“Outer space, including the Moon and other celestial bodies, is not subject to national appropriation by claim of sovereignty, by means of use or occupation, or by any other means.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire spoke powerfully about the role played throughout the cold war by the development of the international space station, which demonstrated that global co-operation was possible even at a time of significant political tension. The ISS has been described as the most complex international scientific and engineering project in history. It is the largest structure that humans have ever put into space. It can be seen on a clear night if not quite with the naked eye, except perhaps through the Prestwick hole, then certainly through binoculars or a home telescope. It was the result of collaboration between five different space agencies, representing 15 countries. It has been permanently occupied since 2 November 2000, or just over 15 years, which is a truly remarkable achievement.

It will be interesting to hear whether the Minister will recommit the Government to such principles of space law today. In particular, will he offer any reflections on the possible impact of recent legislation passed in the United States recognising the right of US citizens to own any resources they obtain from asteroids? A number of academics and observers have expressed concern about that, especially if other countries begin to follow suit. Indeed, Gbenga Oduntan, a senior lecturer in international commercial law at the University of Kent, has said that the US Space Act 2015 represents

“a full-frontal attack on settled principles of space law”,

and is

“nothing but a classic rendition of the ‘he who dares wins’ philosophy of the Wild West.”

Space should be for exploration, not for exploitation in any sense that excludes anyone from the benefits it can provide, or what the motion calls

“scientific, cultural and technological opportunities”.

In drafting the motion, we were very careful to list those aspects of space exploration and opportunity before mentioning the economic impact of the space industry. Indeed, UKspace, the trade association, has said that the Government must

“ensure its positioning maintains the balance between economic growth, excellent science and the inspiration of young people”.

As we have heard, we have certainly lived through an inspiring era of space exploration. In recent years, there has been huge interest in the Philae lander and the Rosetta mission, the evidence of water on Mars and the New Horizons fly-by of Pluto. I was particularly struck by NASA’s use of the “children will never know” hashtag when images were first beamed back from Pluto. The new generation of children will never know a day when they could not see images of Pluto in such great detail. Sadly, children born today will also never know the thrill of the space shuttle, which certainly inspired me when I was growing up. I remember watching the final launch of Atlantis back in 2011, and thinking about all the other things then going on in the world.

Dr Lee: I apologise for being a bit of a pedant, but the first British-born astronaut to walk in space was Michael Foale when he was on the US space shuttle.

Patrick Grady: That is a fair point. It is important to recognise the huge achievement of all the astronauts of various heritages and from various parts of the United Kingdom. There is certainly no intention to play trumps.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Did not that gentleman change his nationality? He had dual nationality, and did not fly with the Union flag on his suit, as Helen Sharman did.

Patrick Grady: My hon. Friend was absolutely correct to pay tribute to Helen Sharman. I remember that as well. I was particularly young at the time, but I will leave Members to work that out for themselves, if they want to look up my biography.

The shuttle programme was a huge inspiration to many people. It is a very sad loss, but if its end several years ago was a low, we are now going through something of a renaissance. There have certainly been a number of highs recently, as I have mentioned. The fact that 15,000 people attended events to watch the launch of the Principia mission just before Christmas, including those of us in the Jubilee Room and later in Portcullis House, demonstrates how the international space station continues to serve as an inspiration.

Many of us who watched the amazing opening ceremony of the Glasgow Commonwealth Games will remember that, just when we thought it could not get any more exhilarating, a live broadcast was beamed down from the ISS. I was not at the ceremony, but with thousands of other people on Glasgow Green on that great day of celebration. There was a real coming together, with exactly the kind of inspiration that the hon. Member for Bracknell spoke about. It was humanity at its finest: people coming together from all over the world to take part in sporting endeavour and being supported by their fellow human beings hundreds of miles above the ground. It was particularly appropriate because, as we have heard and will continue to hear, Glasgow—and indeed Scotland—plays a significant role in the modern space industry and in space science.

In December 2015, my old university, Strathclyde, hosted the annual Canada-UK colloquium on the future of the space industry, which was attended by the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs. Delegates visited two companies in the city, Clyde Space and Spire, which specialise in cube satellites technology and data. In the margins of that event, the First Minister

strongly backed the calls that we have heard and will no doubt continue to hear for a spaceport to be located in Scotland. She pledged that the Scottish Government will do whatever they can to ensure that one of the bids is successful.

In my constituency, the University of Glasgow has one of the leading centres for space science and research in the UK, or indeed in the world. Space Glasgow brings together more than 20 academics from a range of disciplines to co-ordinate research, especially under the key themes of exploring and understanding space, mission analysis, risk and technology.

One recent achievement has been the university's involvement in the launch of the European Space Agency's LISA—laser interferometer space antenna—Pathfinder spacecraft. The launch in December marked the end of a decade of work for a team from the university's institute for gravitational research, which helped to develop the craft's sensitive optical bench. The bench is a hugely complex and important technology. It has a laser interferometer. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) congratulates me on my pronunciation. It was developed, built and tested by the university's team, and is capable of detecting changes in distance between test masses of as small as 10 picometres. It is an outstanding scientific achievement in its own right, and the images and knowledge that the Pathfinder will produce will no doubt help to inspire generations to come.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Can my hon. Friend explain to the House what a picometre is?

Patrick Grady: A measurement of picos—*[Laughter.]* My hon. Friend may be able to enlighten us later, if she catches your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Like any academic discipline, research in space science and technology costs money and requires certainty. I am happy to back calls from researchers for greater transparency in the relationship between the UK Space Agency and research councils on funding decisions. It would be useful to hear from the Minister how the Government are engaging with research departments at the cutting edge of this important technology. Much of this technology has an impact on our daily lives, especially in the west, where we rely on satellite technology for everything from weather forecasting to our mobile phones.

We have spoken of the inspiration that space exploration can provide, so it is important that Governments in the UK and Scotland continue to support science and technological education, as well as initiatives such as dark sky parks. In boasting of our satellite technology industries, we must also remain vigilant about the risk of space debris, as my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire mentioned. Too many of our oceans and geological ecosystems are poisoned by the unthinking results of attempts at technological progress, and the same must not be allowed to happen in near or outer space.

Those of us on social media will have seen the internet activity about NASA's recruitment of a planetary defence officer recently. That is not as outlandish or as "outspacious" as it might sound. It is not simply about the risk of asteroids—I know that former Members who are no longer with us used to champion that issue—but about

the risk of near-Earth objects too. If the satellites we put into space are not properly managed and regulated, there is a risk that they will crash into population centres.

Dr Lee: Does the hon. Gentleman know that a piece of British technology has been developed that can be put into space to capture space debris and bring it back to Earth?

Patrick Grady: That is a helpful contribution that demonstrates the point that we are making about the importance of the space industry, not only to the economy but to the greater collective good.

I spoke of the relation between science fiction and science fact. NASA recently collaborated successfully in the production of the movie, "The Martian", which is about a man stranded on the planet after a mission goes wrong. It is based on a realistic understanding of the technologies and science that would be involved in a mission to the red planet.

I have spent the little free time I have had over the past 18 months reading through Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy, which is rightly described as a "future history". It was written in the 1990s with exceptional clarity and foresight. It was forensically researched, to the extent that after reading it for several hours, one can easily look out of the window and expect to see a Martian landscape unfolding. The trilogy is also a well-observed study of human societies and the possibilities open to mankind in building an economy and polity from scratch. There is much to commend in, and much to learn from, how science fiction authors have used the inspiration of space exploration to reflect on our current earthbound condition.

This is a valuable opportunity for debate, and I look forward to hearing further contributions from Members and a response from the Minister, particularly on the questions of ensuring the neutrality of and common access to space, support for education and science, the preservation of dark skies and the minimisation of space debris. We have talked about nationalities and laying claims. Scotland lays claim to one astronaut so far—Brian Binnie, who was brought up in Aberdeen and Stirling, and has test piloted a number of private space flights. Let us hope that the inspiration from the many space missions, which are growing in number, and not least Major Tim Peake's, will encourage more young people to pursue careers in the sector and that, before long, we will see more astronauts from Scotland and across the UK who will have the opportunity to contribute to the good of humanity, to explore strange new worlds and, if *Hansard* will allow a split infinitive, to boldly go where no one has gone before.

12.41 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I rise to put the case for Cornwall. We have heard a lot about Scotland, but we did hear some references to Newquay in the opening speech.

I want to put it on the record and make Members aware that Cornwall is already the home of the Aerohub. Newquay has a runway that can accommodate the fastest and largest civilian and military planes. Formerly the home of RAF St Mawgan, Newquay is an ideal location for the new space hub.

[Mrs Sheryll Murray]

Cornwall more widely has a lot of knowledge and history relating to space. Goonhilly downs had the first dish, Antenna 1, nicknamed Arthur, which started operating in 1962 and linked with Telstar. That led the way in UK communications. My constituency has the Caradon observatory, which Ken and Muriel Bennett funded themselves. It is in an ideal location. It takes fantastic photographs, thanks to the dark skies over Bodmin moor, that are published in space magazines.

I did not intend to make a contribution today, but I felt that I should point out that Cornwall has an extremely good case. It is one of eight locations that is being considered. I just wanted to make the case, as a Cornish Member of Parliament, and to say that we are still there. Being successful in this bid would not only be good for Newquay, but superb for the county that I call home.

12.44 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to hear the other contributions.

It is always a pleasure to hear the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). I look forward to hearing her speak about health issues, because she brings her wealth of knowledge to the House. Her contributions are always well worth listening to because we learn from them. That is why I enjoy them and I want to thank her. We have found out today that her knowledge goes beyond health issues: it extends to space policy and to places where no man has gone before.

Here we are in the Chamber with the chance to speak about this issue. It is always very nice to see the Minister in his place. I think that I can honestly say, without fear of contradiction, that if the Minister is in the House, I will be on the other side ready to ask him a question, and vice versa.

It is always good to consider this important and too often overlooked issue. Although it is not pertinent to Northern Ireland at the moment, I want to make sure that the Province is part of the Government's strategy for the space sector. That is why I wanted to make a contribution. I want to put down a marker for Northern Ireland and to ensure that we have the chance to be part of the strategy.

Northern Ireland has one of the youngest workforces in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as the Minister will know. We have a lot of well-educated young people with high skill sets who would benefit from jobs in the space sector. I believe that that would go some way to addressing the brain drain in Northern Ireland. Although that is declining, it is something that we need to get to grips with.

Perhaps in his response, the Minister will tell us how the space policy can interact with Northern Ireland. How can we get some of the benefits and spin-offs of it? How can we be part of the strategy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? We are better together, as he would say. It is good to see all the Members who are in the Chamber, united within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Shannon: I am very happy to give way, although I will probably regret it.

Mr MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the press stories today mentioning Stornoway. Indeed, the name David Bowie is linked with it as well. Just a little bit north of Malin Head, the hon. Gentleman will see the Outer Hebrides. It is a fantastic place—near Northern Ireland—for such space adventures.

Jim Shannon: Earlier, the hon. Gentleman was waxing lyrical about black puddings; now he is doing the same about Stornoway in a different way. It is always good to hear from him.

Mr MacNeil: Black puddings in space!

Jim Shannon: Absolutely.

Ensuring that the space sector has a place in Northern Ireland and is aware of what we have to offer will go some way towards addressing the brain drain issue of too many of our young people emigrating. I would like to hear from the Minister how the space policy can better connect with Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland has a proud history of air flight, although it is not linked directly to space policy. Henry George Ferguson, who was better known as Harry, a brother Orangeman, was a Northern Ireland engineer and inventor who was noted for his role in the development of the agricultural tractor. He was also the first Ulsterman and Irishman to build and fly his own aeroplane. The first ever airport in Northern Ireland was in my constituency of Strangford, in Newtownards, and was built in about 1910.

Northern Ireland has a fantastic aerospace industry with Magellan and Bombardier, which has been established for many years. I believe that there is a role for those aircraft companies to play in space policy and development. They can and should be part of it.

The space sector is fundamental to the future UK economy. I welcome the Government's civil space strategy and the goal that the space sector will contribute £40 billion a year to the UK economy by 2030.

Dr Philippa Whitford: The point that I was trying to make in my opening speech was that the bid talks about a UK spaceport, whereas I think there will be different sectors. One sector that will come in the not-too-distant future is hyperbolic sub-orbital flight. Once we get past the Virgin Galactic model of a plane and a wee rocket, we will have the combination of jet and rocket engines, such as SABRE—the synergistic air-breathing rocket engine—which will go from standstill to orbit and back down. We will be able to fly to Japan in a short period of time. Different sites around the UK may therefore follow totally different routes. That should be enabled, not blocked.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that significant and important intervention. She shows the vision that all of us in this House should have. There are no barriers to what we can do. Some of the things that are in "Star Trek" are not impossible, so let us look forward to those developments. I look forward to being able to travel from A to Z—from Belfast City to Heathrow—in a matter of seconds. If that is ever possible, we will be

able to get here and back a couple of times and to do business at home and here, all in the same hour. Is that possible? I do not know, but I hope it will happen.

Thinking back on how space has been discovered, I am always mindful of the first time man stepped on the moon. It was one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind. For me, and I think for many others, that showed us the immensity and size of the universe that God created, and it focused our minds on God's power and the fact that it was not for us as children, and that he is in total control of the universe.

Mr MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman quoted the historic phrase, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind", but what about the seriousness with which the space industry considered the Isle of Man a number of years ago? Those in the know in the space industry said that only the United States, Russia, China and India were ranked above the Isle of Man for the likelihood of getting the next person on the moon. That shows that if the political will is there, a lot can be achieved.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We should believe in what we want to achieve, and that goal is achievable if we are determined to make it happen.

The Deregulation Act 2015 is an encouraging development that will allow the UK to be more competitive globally in this future industry. It is important to consider that and to ensure that we are world leaders in offering somewhere for the space industry to do business. We want to be part of that business across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The 2010 space innovation and growth strategy is another welcome development that seeks to create a partnership between industry, Government and academia to develop, grow and make use of new space-related opportunities.

This debate is important because of the possibilities of what can be achieved, which enthuse us all. Although there were encouraging developments during the last Parliament, it is disappointing that space did not receive a mention in the Government's 2015 manifesto. I am sure that the Minister will correct that when he responds, and clearly set out Government policy and strategy. I hope this is not a sign of the Government taking their eye off the ball.

The Government are hoping that the new regulatory framework enabled by the Deregulation Act will allow the creation of a commercial spaceport in the UK by 2018—again, a marvellous vision of what can happen in future. That is a welcome development because commercial space travel is an industry in which we can, quite literally, reach for the stars. In "It's a Wonderful Life", James Stewart talked about lassoing the moon. We are not going to lasso the moon; we are going to reach it and beyond, and it is important that we have that possibility.

The value of the space sector in the UK has grown from £6.5 billion in 2007 to £11.8 billion in 2014—it has almost doubled, and there is the potential for it to double again. With Tim Peake's recent mission sure to rekindle interest in the space industry, that trend is sure to continue, and the ability to offer commercial space travel will make us world leaders in the space industry.

Dr Lee: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman remembers this, but he was one of the few Members of the House who attended my Adjournment debate on microgravity. Prior to that I had been contacted primarily from America by Boeing and various other companies on the subject. They pointed out that the microgravity research industry had a potential \$100 billion of growth. The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the future potential for the space industry.

Jim Shannon: I do remember that. It was one of those Adjournment debates that I am known to attend, and I remember intervening along those lines. It was three or four years ago.

Something else that I enjoyed, and that I think was positive, took place last week when Tim Peake was able to make radio contact with young people in a school. The inspiration that that gave to those young people was fantastic, as was the fact that it happened. Those young people were inspired, and they had a photograph and a TV show that showed him in their school making direct contact. I know it was a bit rehearsed, but it was exciting for us to watch. How much more exciting must it have been for the children, both male and female, to have that ambition and inspirational drive to try to be the next Tim Peake in space? As we seek to obtain secure jobs for the future, we need more such encouraging developments, and this has been a welcome opportunity to contribute to a debate on an issue of great importance to the future of our country and its economy.

In conclusion, the new national space policy, the Deregulation Act, and the space innovation and growth strategy are all signs that we are heading in the right direction. The positivity that comes through this debate will be noted not just in this Chamber by MPs, but outside the House and further afield. We can play our part in space travel and policy in future, and I hope that off the back of this debate we can maintain momentum and ensure that those plans turn into real delivery for the "better together" space industry and future economy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

12.54 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for securing this debate.

Tim Peake's six-hour adventure tomorrow, as part of a team of two Tims, to replace a solar power connection unit in space will be watched with awe by children and adults alike—hon. Members will be glad to hear that I removed from that paragraph a cliché that has already been used.

Tim's iconic voyage into space, living and working on the international space station, is beamed into our lives tweet by tweet, which is fascinating. He has paid tribute to David Bowie's "Starman", and he sends us extraordinary aerial views of the planet, alongside spacesuit selfies. He really gives a feeling of life on the space station, as well as those iconic visions and views, and he raises our aspirations to the farthest frontiers. Let us make the most of this chance to spark young people's interest in the careers of the future.

[Liz Saville Roberts]

The spirit in which this motion is presented is to be greatly appreciated, and there is perhaps potential for not just a single spaceport site, but for a number of sites across the UK. Members with vested local interests in a possible spaceport site in their constituency will inevitably take the opportunity to set out their individual stalls—that is our representative duty. However, the proposal to ensure that fantastic scientific, cultural and technological opportunities arise from UK spaceport development must benefit the United Kingdom as a whole.

With that semi-apology, I will turn to the possible spaceport site at the former RAF camp near Llanbedr. It is in a coastal location surrounded by sand dunes between Cardigan bay and the hinterland of Snowdonia. The site has a 50-year track record of airspace management and operations. It comprises three main runways, the longest of which is oriented in such a way that flights pass over sparsely populated areas. Unique among all the candidate sites, Llanbedr already has access to 2,000 square miles of segregated airspace over Cardigan bay. The airfield was bought by the Welsh Government in 2004 as a strategic asset, and since 2008 it has been leased by Llanbedr Airfield Estates on a long-term lease.

So far the site has mostly been used for testing, evaluating and developing remotely piloted air systems and unmanned aerial vehicles, commonly known as drones. Its most recent initiative relates to the use of drones for protecting fisheries. The site is included in the Snowdonia enterprise zone, which has facilitated improvements including a £1.5 million spend to upgrade its facilities and infrastructure. The Civil Aviation Authority has rightly identified safety as the overriding operational principle for a spaceport. That applies not only to any members of the public and workers using that port, but also to the “uninvolved public”. That would imply that the combination of relative isolation, coastal location and segregated airspace satisfies those requirements as fully as possible.

It is safe to say—others have already made an excellent case for this—that the economic potential for a spaceport, both in the immediate locality and further afield, is immense. The county of Gwynedd is to a great degree dependent on public sector employment and the leisure industry. The constituency of Dwyfor Meirionnydd suffers from seasonal and minimum wage employment, and although official unemployment figures are low, chronic economic inactivity is a very real issue. The demographics of the area indicate a steadily ageing population, as young people move away for higher education and employment. That is the price we pay for dependency on the seasonal tourism industry, a shrinking public sector, and scant Government investment in well paid employment.

Of course, this is in no way simply a local investment in a far western corner of the United Kingdom. Llanbedr has the potential to benefit the whole of north Wales, with its educational powerhouses in the University of Bangor, Wrexham's Glyndwr University, Grwp Llandrillo Menai, and Coleg Cambria. Indeed, it goes much further than that, because the northern powerhouse would have that development within easy reach, and it is the nearest site to the international travel hubs of Manchester,

Liverpool, Birmingham, Cardiff and London. It is also the closest candidate site to the UK space gateway at Harwell in Oxford.

This has the potential to make a real difference to Gwynedd, and indeed to the economy of the wider area and the UK as a whole, yet we are still waiting for the Government to bring us out of the limbo of expectation by providing the operational criteria for the UK spaceport. It is impossible to move ahead, as we do not yet know what we are bidding for. It is difficult even to quantify, in terms of jobs both locally and further afield, until we know the operational criteria. We need them as a matter of urgency. The uncertainty impacts locally, as caravan sites in the area tell me their customers are reluctant to commit to new contracts until a definite decision is made about the future one way or another.

I spoke to a student at my local sixth-form college, Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor, who happens to live in the next village to Llanbedr. He told me that his fellow students think this is a cloud cuckoo project that will never happen. How could it ever happen in somewhere like Meirionnydd? But then I could see a flash of hope and a realisation that yes, this could happen, this could happen here and I could be part of it. Like Buzz Lightyear, we can turn falling with style into infinity and beyond.

1 pm

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. I congratulate the hon. Members for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on securing it and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to it. There have been far too many references to “Star Trek” at the expense of “Star Wars”, so let me try to even it up a bit. Space policy has not been debated as much as it should have been in this House given how important it is, but I am pleased that, as a result of the tenacious attitude of the hon. Members for Central Ayrshire and for Glasgow North, the force has awakened. [*Laughter.*] That's the only thing you're going to get.

As has been mentioned, Tim Peake's mission on the international space station is a fantastic achievement. I think the whole House and the whole country wish him well as he embarks on his spacewalk tomorrow. His mission is important for a number of reasons. First, he is undertaking practical experiments and research that will have positive applications back on earth, a point to which I will return in a moment. Secondly, as has already been mentioned, Major Peake's space mission is undoubtedly inspiring and motivating a whole new generation, rather like a previous generation was inspired by the Apollo programme. I remember the inspirational words of President Kennedy:

“We choose to go to the moon...and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard”.

That inspiration and ambition are incredibly important.

The young people looking at what Major Peake is doing—following his journey and progress on Twitter, Facebook and so on, and perhaps even interacting with him as he conducts experiments in space—will have their eyes opened to the enormous and often unlimited potential available to them in their lives and careers. They might not necessarily want to become astronauts—I still have a wish to be an astronaut; I think everyone in this debate does—but they will see the dizzying potential

and scope of science, technology and engineering. I hope that the impact of Tim Peake's mission into space will last for decades, as young people are inspired to go on to have an impact on science and research throughout the 21st century.

The third reason why Major Peake's mission is so important is that it showcases a true British industrial success: the UK space industry, and that is what I want to focus on. Most people walking the streets today will not be aware, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said, that Britain has a space sector. People will perhaps automatically think of NASA and, possibly, Russia. They might consider a space industry linked with putting people regularly into space or, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North said, with missions such as New Horizons and the exploration of Pluto and the Kuiper Belt. Major Peake's journey gives us the opportunity to celebrate a great British economic success and highlight what I hope is a shared ambition—it certainly is in today's debate—to see the sector grow.

I think the Minister would agree that the UK space sector is the very model of the type of modern, successful sector that Britain should be focused on: innovative and high value, and providing well-paid and highly rewarding—in every sense—careers. It taps into Britain's strengths, based on the very best of science, engineering and world-class British research, but with a very clear nod to British excellence in professional services, such as legal, financial and regulatory work. It is a rapidly growing sector throughout the world—perhaps it is best to say above the world—and the British comparative advantage should be used to capture even more wealth and value for this country in the future.

We have been quite canny in this country in identifying precisely where in the space sector, and throughout its value chain, Britain excels. We have skills in upstream activities, such as satellite construction. I visited Airbus in Stevenage and saw the great work that goes on there. I saw satellites being built and walked on the surface of "Mars", which was absolutely fantastic. Our real strength and potential, however, lie in the industry's downstream activities, such as user equipment, applications, services and data. Our strengths in professional services such as legal, regulatory and financial services allow Britain to lead the world in raising capital to finance space technologies, as well as the expertise to provide licensing arrangements. It is these downstream activities that will increase demand in the future so that Britain is well placed for future growth.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire and others have already mentioned the figures, but it is important to reiterate just how successful the UK space sector has been in recent years. It generates almost £12 billion for the UK economy, which is almost double the value of the sector just a short time ago in 2007. The industry directly employs 37,000 people in this country. That figure rises to 115,000 when one considers the supply chain, and supported and indirect jobs. UK space has seen an annual growth rate of 8.6% since 2008-09.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I think you were in the Chair yesterday when we discussed, in an Opposition day debate secured by the Scottish National party, some of the structural weaknesses in our productivity and trade positions. Frankly, if all other sectors in the British economy were performing at the same rate as the UK space industry, this country would be doing well. Productivity

is three times the national average, with a value added of £140,000 per employee in the sector. Exports are twice the national average, representing about a third of the sector's turnover. That success bodes well for the future. The global space industry is set to grow even further to about £400 billion by 2030. The UK space sector's ambitions are challenging but achievable; the national space policy's objectives are for Britain to have a 10% market share in the global space industry, provide £40 billion of value to the British economy and employ an additional 100,000 workers by 2030.

I hope there is a real consensus across the House, regardless of party affiliation, for that ambition, and for backing the Government and building on the back of previous support for UK space, regardless of which party is in government. Tribute must be paid to Paul Drayson, who launched, as it were, much of the Government's interest in UK space. To be fair, David Willetts continued that policy in an excellent way throughout the coalition Government, providing all-important policy continuity and certainty that transcended Parliaments, and allowed confidence in the sector to grow and gave potential investors the reassurance that has provided much of the success for British space.

Given the characteristics of the UK space sector—a high-value, innovative, productive, export-focused industry that has identified our specific key strengths within the sector and built on that comparative advantage to secure more global market share in the future, assisted by a strong and long-standing partnership between industry, Government and research to provide policy certainty—it is surprising that the Government do not want to shout more about the virtues of an industrial strategy. An industrial strategy has been part of the success of the UK space industry. The Secretary of State seems to have abandoned such aspirations, with the possible exceptions of the aerospace and automotive industries. That seems wrong. I am pleased that the Minister on the Treasury Bench is the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences. I would single out life sciences as another great skill for Britain. It is a marvellous sector, so why is it not also classed as strategically important? That approach is very important.

In his autumn statement, the Chancellor announced a movement of research funding away from grants to loans, with the exception of the aerospace and automotive sectors. That runs the risk, as mentioned yesterday, of investment not being attracted to Britain. For such a successful and promising sector as space, that is worrying. Will the Minister consider expanding the definition of the aerospace sector to include space so that it can take advantage of the security of research funding and grants?

Jim Shannon: In seeking to advance the space industry, is it not important to involve universities and their expertise and knowledge? Is partnership with universities not also part of this?

Mr Wright: That is incredibly important. Britain's unique blend of strong leadership and partnership between industry and Government, through things such as the UK Space Agency and the Space Leadership Council, and our world-class research expertise and strong university base, means we are well positioned to capture as much market value as possible.

[Mr Iain Wright]

Will the Minister accept—I believe he personally believes it—that industrial strategy works and commit to ensuring that the Government embrace such an approach so that sectors such as space and the life sciences can be exploited as much as possible for the benefit of Britain? I mentioned that the national space policy set out an ambition for 100,000 additional jobs in the space industry in the next 15 years—I think we would all sign up to that—but given the skills shortages in engineering and science-based industries throughout the economy, and the difficulty of encouraging girls and young women to consider science, technology, engineering and maths subjects in school, college and university and then as a career, what is he doing to address barriers to growth in the UK space sector? What further assistance, in terms of outreach activities, internships and apprenticeship opportunities, will be provided to motivate and inspire girls and young women to think about a career in space?

In criticising the space industry, it is often said that interest and investment in space is a luxurious folly and that, at a time of austerity and crisis in public services, we cannot afford a space industry: why are we sending a man into space, when patients are lying in hospital corridors? This is a false argument. To a vast extent, the UK space industry is driven by private sector investment—Government investment in the past 15 years has averaged 0.015% of total investment—and the value it creates grows the economy, employs people on good wages and increases tax revenues, thereby helping to fund public services. Research in space or in the space industry has positive applications on earth—for example, satellite technology and food crops or experiments into materials and how they react. Major Peake, while on the international space station, is carrying out experiments to measure pressure in the brain that could have important applications in serious trauma care. Investment in space results in tangible benefits for society on earth.

I am not just talking about the cost-benefit analysis. I was struck by the comments of the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee). Industry is important, and the bottom line is crucial, but as he said, exploration and imagination are fundamental to the human spirit, and it is difficult to think of anything comparable to space when it comes to letting our imaginations run riot. It is vital that we ensure an interest in space by showing what space can provide. The UK space industry is a huge success story, and has the potential to grow still further and inspire a whole generation, but that requires an ongoing partnership between industry, the Government and research. This debate shows that there is great consensus and that many people support the Government in ensuring that the UK space industry realises its potential.

1.14 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I have much to thank my hon. Friends the Members for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for. Anyone observing me in the Chamber today will have seen me smiling broadly all the way through this debate. It is an incredibly exciting opportunity. I remember, as a young child, playing with my Airfix kit of the Apollo 11, with its detachable parts and so on, seeing how it all worked,

so it is exciting to be in the Chamber today discussing the future of space policy—there it is, up on the annunciator; what an opportunity! It is just a shame there is so much space on the Benches—but I will try to avoid the puns and conduct myself with gravity.

I want to talk about the exciting opportunities out there. Yesterday in the Chamber, we discussed trade and industry and innovation, and again I want to talk most today about innovation and the skills required. There are so many wonders in space and so many things we can learn that we cannot comprehend at the moment. Without the investment that hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), have talked about, and without making sure we can learn those things, how can we hope to take full advantage of the opportunities to develop ourselves as a race? There are stars out there 1,500 times bigger than our sun, and how much do we know about them? 3c303 is a galaxy with a black hole in the middle of it that has the biggest electrical current ever detected in the universe. There are fantastic opportunities to find out how that happens. What can we learn from that about how we conduct our lives and protect our planet into the future? I was stunned to find out there was a gigantic raincloud out there, floating in space, that is not just the size of the Pacific ocean, but 100,000 times larger than the sun. It is an amazing thing to comprehend, but we do not know enough about these things. We have to invest.

The Scottish Government see huge potential for the space industry in Scotland, and we are pleased that the UK Government and the Civil Aviation Authority do too. We should be exploring these opportunities jointly. The Scottish Government have committed to supporting science and technological development in education and industry, having recognised science's contribution to a sustainable economy. The hon. Member for Hartlepool talked about opportunities. The space industry, 16% of whose employees are in Scotland, is growing by 7.5% a year. These are encouraging figures, but we must do more. There is a recruitment exercise to ensure that there are members to join the Scottish Science Advisory Council. The Scottish Government have engaged with the world-leading science sector on the post of chief scientific adviser for Scotland and are currently advertising for the post, which is the right thing to do just now. They are continuing to invest in four science centres and to support science festivals in Scotland. They continue to promote the value of science as a career for young people.

In my previous career as a councillor in the highlands, I was passionate about getting our young people interested and encouraging them to lift their sights and see the opportunities available, not just to us as a set of countries on these isles but to them. There are rewarding and meaningful careers and they can build something important for themselves. As a new councillor eight years ago, I saw an advert put out by the European Space Agency calling for the next generation of recruits to come forward. As an enthusiastic councillor, I thought I would put out a press release across the highlands saying, "Young highlanders should come forward." I was disappointed that it was met with scepticism from my colleagues on the council. They thought it was a mad idea to encourage highland children to get involved in the space industry. I was desperately disappointed by their attitude, but it highlighted to me the need to change people's attitudes to these opportunities and how they could take advantage of them.

I am pleased to say that one development from that is the science skills academy, which is starting up in the highlands. It is a collaborative enterprise that brings together organisations such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Highland Council and a range of private businesses and engineering firms, as well as other non-governmental operatives in the highlands. It aims to encourage young people from pre-school, throughout their education and beyond, to take advantage of the opportunity of gaining these skills, which directly transfer not just into the aerospace industry but to and from oil and gas, renewables and so forth. These are similar skill sets that can be transferred across. Embracing this into the future provides enormous opportunities. I hope that future attitudes in the highlands will be changed, but there is a job of work to be done in this Chamber, in the Holyrood Chamber and in all the devolved Administrations to make sure that we get the word out to our young people to raise their sights and look for an opportunity.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire for telling us that Helen Sharman was the first astronaut from Britain in space. It is important to repeat that message because we need to encourage young girls and women to consider these opportunities. Tim Peake is a fantastic ambassador for space and I have great respect for what he has already done in a short period of time, but let us imagine the impact if he had been Tina Peake and that message had gone out to young girls and women about such opportunities. When it comes to encouraging young girls and women into engineering just now, there are clear systemic problems in our culture that must be tackled. I call on the Government to join me and others to make sure that we change this attitude over the coming years.

Some 11% of engineers in the sector are women, but 21% of engineer graduates focused on the sector are women. This is the lowest percentage female employment rate in the sector in Europe, and we have the lowest retention rate in Europe. That is at a time when there are significant skills shortages at every level of the industry.

We have heard that many people are not aware of the opportunities in the space or the aerospace sector. I was delighted yesterday to meet Bridget Day, the deputy programme director for the national aerospace technology exploitation programme. I crave your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I would like to read something she sent to me, at my request. She said:

“I have worked as an Engineer in the Aerospace industry for nearly 40 years. I worked for 30 years in the supply chain for a heat exchanger manufacturer in Wolverhampton, starting as a graduate apprentice and becoming Engineering Director. In my personal experience there has been little progress in encouraging women into engineering. I currently lead a team of engineers helping aerospace supply chain companies with new technology”—within NATEP, as I have said. She continues:

“In a team of 24 there is only one other woman”,

That is a shocking figure. She continues:

“I know that engineering is considered difficult, dirty, and dying by the general public. This means that parents and teachers often encourage young people away from engineering, thinking that industry is something in the past and not for the future. The increasingly ‘green’ views of our youth are annoyed with industry building on green belt land and taking priority over wild life. So the reputation of industry publicly is not what my experience is. I have had a very varied working life, every day something different, everyday keeping me interested in solving problems with new ways of thinking, new materials, new possibilities. The amount of new possibilities is better than ever before and NOW”—

she capitalised it—

“is a great time to become an engineer. We are very short of engineers. As a woman in engineering I am often the only woman in the room, usually only 5% are women even at a large event. There is an assumption that I am the secretary and not that I am the boss. My reputation is never assumed, like a man’s often is, I always have to earn it.”

Jim Shannon: If I had been allowed to ask two questions at Women and Equalities questions this morning I would have raised this issue. The Government need to target girls-only schools and introduce the STEM industries, including engineering, to those girls.

Drew Hendry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his substantive point about engaging young girls and women with these industries, and I absolutely subscribe to that view. As I have said—I will continue to repeat it here until we get it right—this is an issue that we need to tackle together to ensure that girls are able to take advantage of these opportunities.

Carol Monaghan: Does my hon. Friend agree that one serious issue that has not been properly taken up is our major shortage of STEM-qualified teachers. Unless much more attractive and lucrative wages can be offered, this shortage will continue and it will impact on the number of girls coming through.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that education is the key. I mentioned the science skills academy, and the idea behind it is to influence children as they develop and give them these opportunities, but also to try to reach out to society in general and to say to parents and grandparents that they need to talk about this. It is also about saying to education professionals and to those who make the investments that lead to their recruitment that this issue has to be taken incredibly seriously.

Stakeholder activities going on at the moment are to be encouraged. For example, I congratulate *The Telegraph* on creating the women in space jobs resource, which includes educational resources encouraging women into STEM subjects. Another example is the Royal Society of Aviation, which established the women in aerospace and aviation committee in 2009.

On solutions, we need to increase public awareness of the UK space industry and its value to the economy. We need to increase engagement with young people through projects such as Scottish Space School. There will doubtless be others of which I am not aware, but we need to make sure that this sort of thing carries on. I support calls for the need to concentrate funding on research and development projects. We absolutely need to stop thinking about what is happening today and start thinking about the opportunities for tomorrow. We need to work to increase peer support to encourage female graduates to enter and remain in the sector.

Let me finish by citing Professor Alan Smith, head of the department of space and physics at University College London, who acted as rapporteur for an event hosted by the Scottish Government and the Civil Aviation Authority. He said:

“Scotland has embraced space. Space feels at home in Scotland.”

Let us make sure that all of us and all our children get the opportunity to feel at home in space, too.

1.27 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). He made some excellent points about women and equality in the industry. As a civil engineer, that chimes with me. My profession has seen a lack of women over the years, although it is doing its best to try to remedy it by engaging with schools. My hon. Friend has shown, both yesterday and today, that he is a great advocate for technology, and his enthusiasm certainly shone through in his speech. I congratulate, too, my hon. Friends the Members for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on bringing forward this timely debate. I welcome the chance to participate in it.

Let me start with a confession. Anyone who knows me personally will probably be somewhat surprised that I have chosen to speak in a space-related debate. Unlike the Members who have spoken previously, when I was growing up I never had the same fascination with space. Science fiction movies did not do it for me. Although I was born in 1970, I have still not watched the early “Star Wars” movies—[HON. MEMBERS: “Shame!”] Now I have got that confession out of the road, I should have everybody on my side. At least it shows they were listening to me.

Carol Monaghan: I am concerned that my hon. Friend has not watched the earlier “Star Wars” movies. Is he suggesting that he has watched the later ones?

Alan Brown: I have seen one or two, and I took the children along, so it was a family activity. I could not say what happened in them as I do not recall. The good news is that—in view of the earlier lack of interested nods—there will be no more puns in my speech.

I appreciate the importance of the science, technology and commercial aspects of the space industry, and I am right behind the United Kingdom Government’s proposal to focus on making the UK the European hub for commercial space flight and related space sector technologies. I also applaud the ambitious growth targets that have been set.

What other reasons have I for speaking in the debate? One of them was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady): it is great to be able to make a speech that is not preceded by the words “From now on there will be a three-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches”—although some Members may wish that there was a three-minute limit on mine.

The main reason for my participation, however, is my wish to give an unashamed plug to Prestwick airport, which I would like to become the United Kingdom’s first space port hub. It is in the neighbouring constituency rather than my own, but I can appreciate the benefits that it would bring to the surrounding area in general, and many of my constituents are already employed in the aerospace industry.

Unfortunately, my constituency is among the top 15% in the UK in terms of unemployment, and 200 skilled manufacturing jobs have recently been lost from a factory in Kilmarnock, so a jobs boost would be most welcome in my constituency and the wider area. However, despite the headline unemployment rate, Ayrshire in general has a great engineering pedigree, and there are still many

successful engineering and manufacturing companies in my constituency and its neighbours. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire, there is already a cluster of aerospace-related firms around Prestwick, and I know that they could easily expand to service a new space port. We have also heard that nearby Glasgow already contains space technology companies, including Clyde Space and Spire. That would be another advantage of choosing Prestwick.

The UK Space Agency has made clear that its activities are about much more than direct space technology, covering climate change analysis and other beneficial research on such matters as health and ageing, as well as materials innovation and plasma physics. I realise that, given that ongoing work, successful partnerships will already be operating, but there is no doubt that if Prestwick were chosen to be a space port, it could form links with the Scottish universities, which are among the best in the world. That is another advantage. As for transport infrastructure, Ayr Harbour is nearby. Prestwick also has a railway halt, and close links with the motorway network. I believe that it is easily the most accessible location on the shortlist that the Government are considering.

Yesterday I attended a breakfast hosted by the all-party parliamentary group for aerospace. One of the discussion points, which was also raised today by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, was education, and preparing kids for qualifications in STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—and technology design. The Scottish Government are making great strides with that in their curriculum for excellence, and the local authority of which I was a member before becoming an MP has produced a STEM programme for primary schools, as well as successfully running a business enterprise initiative for secondary schools.

In Scotland, the wider implementation of the Wood report has led to a recognition that school leavers must have a greater understanding of the working environment and what will be expected of them in that environment, and, crucially, of the fact that higher or full-time further education is not for everyone. Along with the Scottish Government’s investment in modern apprenticeships, that has given Scotland—and Prestwick in particular—a head start when it comes to renewing interest in STEM subjects and technology design.

Ayrshire is also home to the campus of Ayrshire college, which has recently won awards and, moreover, is willing to work in partnership with industry to develop tailor-made courses. An excellent example of that is the partnership that has been established to create courses for wind turbine technicians. That came about because the industry realised that, owing to the growth in renewables, there was not enough qualified expertise for the operation and maintenance of wind turbines. A new £53 million campus is due to open in Kilmarnock, which I expect to present fantastic opportunities for links with the space industry.

Prestwick has one of the longest runways in the UK, and it does not suffer from fog problems. It is often used when flights are diverted because of problems elsewhere. Unfortunately, there are not enough commercial flights from Prestwick to enable it to make a profit, but that does mean that there are no capacity or logistical issues that would prevent the creation of a space port there.

In fact, if that mitigated some of the losses that are currently being covered by the Scottish Government, there would be benefits for Scottish taxpayers, and funds would be freed up for investment elsewhere in Scotland. Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway are also home to the Dark Sky project, which could provide more links and other benefits if the space port were located at Prestwick.

The Scottish Government are very supportive and positive about development in this sector, as was demonstrated by Fiona Hyslop's attendance at the annual UK-Canada colloquium in Glasgow just before Christmas. The conclusions reached at that event will be presented to both Governments, and I am confident that they will underline the strong case that I expect to be made for Scotland in general. I urge Ministers to pay due heed to those conclusions.

Let me now move slightly away from the subject of Prestwick, although I am reluctant to do so. I agree wholeheartedly with the motion: this seems to be one sector for which the UK Government are outlining a positive vision. Like many of my colleagues, I have often complained in the Chamber about the need for the Government to spend more money on social justice, rather than on projects that some people consider to be vanity projects. However, as was pointed out by the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), wider benefits, which could be long-lasting, accrue from this investment.

There is no doubt that Major Tim Peake's mission could inspire another generation of scientists, explorers, engineers and innovators. If the benefits are to continue, however, and if the proposed space port is to have any chance of being an operational venture by 2018—with no loss of momentum, or of the interest that is currently being generated—the Government must set clear guidelines for the submission of the final bids. The final decision-making process must be transparent and non-political, in order to ensure the best possible value for money and future success.

However, given that the Government like to cut red tape and bureaucracy, if they do not want to go down that route, they could simply award the space port location to Scotland in general or, more specifically, to Prestwick. Alternatively, in the light of the speeches that we have heard so far, we could have a show of hands in the Chamber today. That would solve any problems.

1.37 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): So far, this has been a very interesting debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on initiating it through the good auspices of the Backbench Business Committee.

The fact that I have had an interest in space from an early age has proved most useful since my election last May, as the Government's social and fiscal policy is from another planet and completely alien to me. However, we are here to debate a subject which need not be, and, in fact, should not be contentious, and which will hopefully generate a fair degree of unanimity throughout the House.

Like many youngsters, I grew up fascinated by the stars, learning about the different planets, the missions of astronauts, and the work of NASA and other space agencies. I am sure that I am not the only Member

present who dreamt of becoming an astronaut. It was either that or a football player. You can be sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the one thing that no one in the Chamber grew up aspiring to be was a Member of Parliament, yet here we all are: astronaut, footballer, ballerina—rejects all. We may have lost out on our childhood dreams, but that does not mean that we cannot help the kids of today to fulfil theirs.

This is a dream that many children have, both girls and boys. There is something about space that captures the imagination of youngsters from an early age, and while many will never quite reach their dream, thinking big will undoubtedly lead to a fulfilling career. During the summer recess, I visited Gallowhill primary school in my constituency. More than half the kids put their hands up when asked if they wanted to be an astronaut when they grew up. I am sure that other Members will have had similar experiences when visiting schools in their constituencies, and I expect the number to become even higher as children learn about, and are inspired by, the important work that astronaut Tim Peake is currently doing at the International Space Station.

Moving on to the economic benefits of the UK space industry, it will no doubt surprise many outside this Chamber that in 2012-13 the UK space industry contributed £5.1 billion to our economy, which is the same amount as the railways. The latest figure is over £11 billion, and across the UK the space industry supports 68,000 jobs. It is hoped that the industry's output will grow to £40 billion by 2030.

Locally, the space industry is worth around £16.5 million a year to the Scottish economy; more than 30 companies in Scotland operate in the market. When talking about the contribution that Scotland makes to space exploration, we have to mention the impact and work of Glasgow-based Clyde Space. Clyde Space produces a number of products used by NASA and the European Space Agency. In 2014, it secured £1.2 million in funding to produce power systems that will be used for two ESA satellites.

One of the products of which Clyde Space is particularly proud is its UKube-1. This product was jointly funded by Clyde Space and the UK Space Agency and is the first satellite to be both designed and built in Scotland. The UKube-1 has been described as the most advanced nano-satellite ever made and Clyde is rightly proud of its innovation. I mention that as it underlines the point that there are companies throughout the UK who are producing high-quality products that aid the work not only of the UK Space Agency, but of the ESA and NASA as well.

It is important to note what we are doing to help nurture the astronauts, scientists and engineers of tomorrow, but first I want to make a wider societal point about dreams and ambition. I was struck by something Lord Empey said during a meeting with the aerospace industry yesterday. He was making the point that in Britain we tend to stifle ambition in the young, as opposed to fostering and positively supporting it. For too long a significant section of society—and I include myself in this—have had a play-it-safe, “walk before you can run”, “don't get ideas above your station” mentality. It has changed, but changed far, far too slowly. I do not pretend to have the answers, but I think we would do well to acknowledge that fact and work towards an equality of ambition and opportunity across all our young regardless of their background. A good start

[Gavin Newlands]

would be for aspirational industries such as aerospace to formulate a collective strategy and a curriculum enhancement that would engage with children early on and throughout their school career. As I heard yesterday, there are many companies doing good work in this area, but there is an ad hoc approach and very much a postcode lottery for children.

The pupils in my local area of Renfrewshire have been lucky; we have been fortunate that the Mission Discovery programme has come to Renfrewshire for the last two years. It is an educational programme—launched and supported by Renfrewshire council, the University of the West of Scotland and the International Space School Educational Trust—and it provides an exciting opportunity to 15 participants from the first and second year to learn from astronauts and other experts in space and science, as well as recruiting 15 paid mentorship positions for those in the third or fourth year.

Mission Discovery recruits astronauts, astronaut trainers, scientists and NASA leaders to help train local people studying in the area. The programme involves students working alongside space experts to carry out a number of tasks, including formulating an idea for an experiment that can be done in space. Not only the students benefit and enjoy this programme; the experts also value the time working alongside the students. In fact, former NASA astronaut and president of the United Space Alliance, Mike McCulley, said:

“Mission Discovery was, by far, the most comprehensive, interesting, and educational endeavour I have been involved with.”

The Mission Discovery programme was a great success in Renfrewshire. The students gained practical knowledge which aided their studies, and the programme made a real addition to their CVs. Programmes such as Mission Discovery help equip students with the necessary skills to be able to gain a career in the space industry, and that is vitally important as we attempt to grow the industry. Mission Discovery is a fantastic programme and I would urge other local authorities to attempt to bring it to their areas.

The potential of the UK space industry is huge and I expect that, used correctly, Tim Peake’s mission and spacewalk can act as a catalyst for fully realising that potential. To that end, I welcome the “National Space Policy” publication and hope that the Government can work with the sector to improve and increase the opportunities for the UK space industry. The growth of the space industry should not be viewed in a vacuum. If we achieve the goal of capturing 10% of the global market by 2030, that will create real opportunities for us, helping to create 100,000 new jobs for the youngsters I have spoken of and generating £40 billion for the economy.

I have some concerns about whether the Government will achieve the ambitious plans that they have set for themselves; they have not hit too many targets of late. To achieve the goals that the UK Government have set, they will have to commit more public funding to the sector. We have seen in other policy areas that the fixation with austerity has hindered investment, and I worry that this same economic mindset will prevent the Government from achieving the goals set out in the “National Space Policy”.

The amount of public spending allocated to the UK space industry has to increase; in 2013, UK Government spending on civil space research and development ranked seventh among all OECD countries. However, contrary to my natural instincts, I will not end my contribution on a sour note. I wish the Government well as they work towards achieving the vision set out in the “National Space Policy”. Having a vibrant and successful space industry is vital to growing our economy, creating jobs and contributing to our research output, and I hope that the Government can take advantage of the large amount of public interest and enthusiasm surrounding the UK space industry.

1.45 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I want to start by paying tribute to the original spaceman. I am not talking about Yuri Gagarin; I am talking about the legend who was David Bowie, and I am sure the House will join me in sending our condolences to his family.

I grew up in the 1970s and ’80s and there are three things I remember vividly from my childhood. The first was the excitement of the power cuts. That was maybe not so exciting for the industries, but, for me, as a child getting the candles out and wandering through the house in darkness always holds great memories. I remember Margaret Thatcher coming to power, too—probably the less said about that the better—and I remember space. I remember the space programme and the space shuttle programme, which started in 1981, with great excitement.

That excitement took off for me when the space shuttle made a surprise visit to the Paris air show in 1983, and for it to get there it had to piggyback on a jumbo jet. I was at primary school in Glasgow at the time, and we knew the jumbo jet would be flying over at some point in the morning. We had been told that when we heard the jumbo jet we had to stand, quietly put our chairs under our desks, line up at the door and all go carefully outside. Of course all order was abandoned when the noise of the jumbo jet was heard. Chairs were thrown, people climbed across desks, people were knocked down in the rush—[*Interruption.*] It was the west end of Glasgow. Eventually, out we went to see the incredible sight of the space shuttle perched—precariously, it seemed—on the back of this jumbo.

It was that single event in my childhood that sparked a major interest in me both in science and technology and particularly in physics. It was how I ended up choosing to study physics at university and eventually becoming a physics teacher, so the inspiration offered by space stretches across all strands of society.

At this point, I want to mention another physicist. He is a far more famous physicist than I am and has done great work for space: Professor Brian Cox. It was a great treat for my pupils at school to see clips of Professor Brian Cox taken from his wonderful DVDs “Wonders of the Solar System” and “Wonders of the Universe”. It never surprised me that the academic students would be interested, but what was really surprising to me was that the less academic ones wanted to see him as well, and regularly would say to me, “Miss, are you going to stick on that professor guy?” They enjoyed that. I was lucky enough to be at the Science Museum

on 15 December for Tim Peake's launch. There were thousands of schoolchildren there, and their enthusiasm and excitement reminded me of the incident from my childhood with the jumbo jet.

One of my colleagues asked me a couple of days ago: "What is the point of this debate? Is it really that important? Why does space exploration matter?" Well, it is absolutely crucial that we have this debate and it is timeous to have it at this point. I want to talk about the three aspects of space exploration that I think are most important. First, there are only two industries that push innovation in great leaps and bounds: defence and space exploration. Space spin-offs have found their way into all aspects of our everyday lives, through materials such as Teflon, solar cells and robotic arms, which have led to the development of prosthetic limbs. The basic memory foam mattress was developed as a result of providing cushions for astronauts during take-off. There is also a story about the space pen that NASA spent a great deal of money developing, only for the cosmonauts of the time to decide that a pencil would work just as well in zero-gravity conditions.

Space technology has wide-ranging applications. For example, the damping system on the launch pad has special fluid dampers to ensure that the launch can take place in a stable manner, and when the Millennium bridge just down the road developed vibration problems in the first couple of days after its opening, it was those same dampers, taken straight from the shuttle's launch pad, that provided the solution. Such applications happen throughout. Those spin-off technologies do not simply have an impact on our lives; they also have huge economic benefits, and it is important that we recognise that.

Secondly, the satellites that are in orbit have become fundamental to the way in which we live our lives. The largest satellite in orbit around the Earth is of course the Moon, which is of fundamental importance to our lives. It creates the tides, which create great benefits for life in the tidal areas. Artificial satellites that have been put into orbit provide us with television from around the world through satellite broadcasts that come to us via geostationary satellites in high Earth orbits more than 22,000 miles above the Earth.

Drew Hendry: Does my hon. Friend agree that micro-satellite technology is providing some really exciting opportunities to dramatically reduce the cost of putting satellites into space while still performing the functions previously carried out by larger machines? Does she also agree that, on that basis, there should be much more investment in innovation in order to take forward that work?

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. It is often not understood that satellite launches take place regularly. The next such launch is in fact on Sunday, but we have not heard very much about it in the news. The micro-satellites that my hon. Friend has just mentioned are providing us with more and more great services.

Patrick Grady: Geostationary satellites were first conceptualised as science fiction by Arthur C. Clarke. This reinforces the point that I was making earlier about the inspiration that space provides to the creative and cultural scene, which has a knock-on effect in scientific applications.

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. It is really important that science fiction writers continue to write, because they often provide ideas and encouragement for creativity and development.

Satellites are also important in other areas. I have mentioned television; I could also mention communications, and weather and climate monitoring. It was satellites up in space that first photographed the issues with the polar ice cap, and we have now been able to compare the photographs that were taken 30 years ago with those that are being taken now, which are showing the real impacts on the ice cap.

Dr Philippa Whitford: The United Kingdom obviously has the potential to be part of a world network of satellites, in that the geostationaries are likely to be launched from America, the United Arab Emirates and Singapore, whereas Australia and the northern hemisphere will be launching satellites into polar and sun-synchronous orbits. Obviously, another blatant punt for Prestwick is that we are further north.

Carol Monaghan: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Different areas can no doubt provide different services.

Possibly the most famous satellite is the Hubble space telescope. I have been asked why we should not simply view the stars from a dark area of the Earth, such as Chile or Hawaii. The answer is that the Earth's atmosphere is a fluid. Let us try to imagine viewing images through water in a swimming pool. That gives us an idea of what it is like trying to view space from the surface of the Earth. Getting out of that fluid and putting the Hubble space telescope up there have enabled us to get images that would never have been considered possible in the past.

The third really important, and really exciting, aspect of space exploration is the possibility of living in different environments. It was thought for a long time that two things were required for life to exist: an oxygen-rich atmosphere and liquid water. However, we have now seen evidence, even on Earth, of life existing in extreme areas—for example, at very deep pressures in the ocean and in very cold parts of the world. That gives us real hope that there might be life in other places, even within our own solar system. It also gives us the opportunity to think of living further afield beyond the constraints of the surface of the Earth.

We have mentioned astronauts already. I have counted seven British-born astronauts, although I might have got that number wrong. Two of them are space tourists, and a number of them moved to the United States in order to pursue their careers, but what was really exciting about Helen Sharman and Major Tim Peake is that they were both living here in the UK. That gives our youngsters great hope.

We must not forget, however, that space travel is extremely dangerous, particularly during take-off and landing. The Challenger disaster in 1986, in which seven astronauts were killed as a result of faulty seals in the solid rocket boosters, is an example of that danger. In describing the dangers of re-entering the atmosphere, I shall refer again to the fluid I mentioned earlier. Let us imagine skimming stones on the surface of a lake. That is what it is like trying to get a spaceship back into the Earth's atmosphere. It has to enter at a particular angle and at a particular speed. If it gets those things wrong,

[Carol Monaghan]

it will bounce off the atmosphere like a skimming stone. If the angle of entry is too steep, it will burn up very quickly. It is a very precise operation. We also remember the Columbia disaster in 2003.

When I was at the Science Museum just before Christmas with all those children, they cheered and shouted as the rocket was launched. I did not cheer and shout at that point, however, and the people in ground control at the European Space Agency also waited until the rocket had got into orbit proper before the celebrations really started. That is the point at which it is considered to have become a lot safer. We must pay tribute to the bravery of these astronauts. Theirs is a dangerous job, albeit a glamorous one.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned, Tim Peake is to do his spacewalk tomorrow. He will be outside the space station for more than six hours, which is no small task. It is highly technical and highly dangerous, and we wish him all the very best.

I have been pleased to hear so many Members talk about the importance of science, technology, engineering and maths and of getting girls involved in those STEM subjects. However, to do that, we need teachers in place, and a serious policy of recruitment and retention of teachers. We need to think about how we will attract people from other areas into teaching.

A few years ago, I was lucky enough to meet a NASA astronaut, who was talking to a group of my school children. He was asked by one, "What do I need to study in order to become an astronaut?" His answer was great. He said, "It doesn't matter. You must follow what you are passionate about—be that material science, engineering, physics, chemistry, biology or medicine. Follow what you are passionate about and then other things will follow." That is an important message for our young people.

Finally, I ask the Minister to commit to the space industry not just financially, but in terms of advertising and ambition. As my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) said, we must have the ambition and we must say to our young people, "This is for you and it is available to everybody." On the back of Tim Peake's mission, which has been so inspirational to watch, we really need to get the message out there that space is open for business. I now call on the Minister to make it so.

2.2 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Members for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on securing this timely debate and the Backbench Business Committee on allowing it. I also congratulate all hon. Members who have made contributions today on showing such expertise and passion for the subject. I join everyone in paying tribute to Major Tim Peake. We all watched his take-off at the end of last year with fascination and awe, and I wish him every success over the course of his mission, and particularly with his spacewalk tomorrow.

I was particularly excited today to hear that there are ongoing discussions about a live link-up between Parliament and the international space station, not least because I would love to see in *Hansard* the phrase, "Ground Control to Major Tim".

As the first UK astronaut to join the international space station, Tim Peake's journey is a significant milestone in this country's involvement in space exploration. I hope that this new interest in space exploration and travel inspires young people across the country and helps them to pursue careers in science and technology.

It is appropriate at this time, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North said, to pay tribute to those who lost their lives in the Challenger disaster, particularly Christa McAuliffe, a teacher, who went into space to inspire young people. On 28 January, it will be 30 years since that disaster, and we pay tribute to all those involved.

Tim Peake's achievement bears testimony to human ingenuity and progress, and it highlights the potential for the successful collaboration between Government and industry. The UK's new national space policy, which aims to increase the UK's share of the global space economy to 10% by 2030, has been worked on by specialists from Government, academia and industry. Its commitment to supporting the growth of the commercial space sector, underpinned by our world-class academic research, is particularly welcome. We on the Labour Benches support that kind of partnership, and believe that the Government should be doing much more of the same in other sectors.

Continued support for the UK's space industry is vital, as many Members have told us. It contributes some £11.3 billion to the economy, and supports a number of vital public services, including medicine, disaster relief, defence and transport. Although we associate the industry with space travel, it also impacts on all our lives on a day-to-day basis. I am talking about things such as satellite television, smartphones and sat-navs—I would never leave the house without my sat-nav. We are benefiting from technology produced by the UK space industry.

The industry is important to all our lives, so we need a long-term strategic goal for the sector. It is disappointing that the space, innovation and growth strategy reports that the ad hoc nature of Government funding for space programmes has hindered strategic planning. Although the Government's direct investment in the space industry is welcome, it must be accompanied by a wider strategy for skilling up future generations, and ensuring that the UK is leading the way when it comes to research and development.

We have heard from many hon. Members about the importance of the next generation of scientists and engineers. We must equip them with the skills that will allow them to undertake those jobs of the future. Unfortunately, the widespread shortage of skills in science and technology, the Government freeze on 16-to-19 funding and in the adult skills sector, and the huge upheaval in colleges from area reviews will not be helping that aim. I have particular sympathy with those who talk about bringing more women into this sector. We need to encourage our young girls and women to see that this is not a dirty engineering sector, but an area of great opportunities. I am concerned that we do not do that early enough. When girls are around the age of eight to 10, they are absolutely enthused by science and technology, but by the time they reach 16, the enthusiasm has waned considerably. We need to keep the enthusiasm going. As the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said, we need to offer encouragement and to look at the careers advice that we give to young women from all backgrounds.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I just say that it is so encouraging to see the number of women pilots in the Royal Air Force, particularly women fighter pilots who are showing not just that they are the equal of men, but that, sometimes, they can beat them hands down?

Yvonne Fovargue: Obviously, as a female myself, I would say that, quite often in many professions, we have to be not just as good as men, but better than men to prove that we are their equal.

We cannot hope to achieve the Government's target of growing the number of jobs in the space industry if we are not equipping the next generation with the necessary skills. Will the Minister tell the House what assessment he has made of the impact that cuts to the skills budget will have on the future success of the UK space industry? Furthermore, what is he doing to encourage young women to enter the industry?

If our space industry is to prosper globally, we must be pioneers in the field of research and development, but our public investment in R&D has not kept pace with our international competitors. We spend less on research as a share of GDP than France, Germany, the US and China, all of which are increasing their commitment to science and technology. In 2013, UK Government expenditure on civil space research and development was only seventh amongst OECD countries, well behind some of our competitors.

Investment is vital to science, but so is regulation. It is also important that the Government's regulatory regime creates an environment that enables growth in the satellite and space sector. Will the Minister explain what is being done to enable new players, such as small and medium-sized enterprises and start-ups, to access the market? As in many UK industries, businesses' ability to access finance remains a concern. What is the Minister doing to improve access to finance for companies in the space industry?

Throughout the debate, we have heard much about the achievements of space travel and innovation, and the considerable benefits they bring to our economy. Tim Peake's journey to the international space station has the potential to inspire a new generation and reignite the passion for space exploration felt by my generation when we saw man first set foot on the moon. This Government have to capitalise on that in the coming months and years and continue to work in partnership with the sector, allowing us all to reach for the stars.

2.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the Speaker's Office for granting the debate, and congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on securing it. I think it shows the House at its very best, capturing the mood of the nation and setting out an inspiring and challenging vision of how in the years ahead this country can do so much more in this exciting field.

As many hon. Members have said, the debate is timely. Major Tim Peake floats in orbit above us, looking down, and tomorrow he will conduct the historic and serious spacewalk. He is the first British European Space Agency astronaut and the first British astronaut to enter the international space station. The debate is also timely because of the sad passing of the iconic

David Bowie, whose lyrics in so many ways provided a backdrop to my generation's childhood and captured, at the time of the Apollo missions, the existential challenge and opportunity of pushing the boundaries of space, time and culture. That provides a rather extraordinary and unpredictable but moving backdrop to this moment in space.

Bob Stewart: I rise as the Member for the coolest constituency in the country. David Bowie lived and played in my constituency, and we are hoping that the bandstand where he played will be saved and restored properly. That is not happening at the moment.

George Freeman: I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), David Bowie's constituency, rose to speak at that moment.

This debate and story is about more than the space endeavour alone. It is about business—the UK space industry is an £11.8 billion industry, employing 35,000 highly skilled people. It is about extraordinary technology in optics, communications, rocketry and engineering. It is about an activist industrial policy and strategy, for which I am delighted to confirm our support, to encourage leading technologies and industry. I pay tribute to the work done by Paul Drayson and by my great friend and colleague David Willetts, now a Member of the other place, who in 2012 was instrumental with the Chancellor in securing the £80 million for the international space station, which was crucial to securing Tim Peake's role in it, and in securing the money for the reaction engines programme, on which this country is leading.

This debate is also about science, not just in space, but solar and earth science. Taking in rocketry, engineering, climatology, optics and communications, this is a deep science project to inspire all. It is about women in science, as others have said. Dr Helen Sharman was the first British woman in space, and the Italian Samantha Cristoforetti was the first European Space Agency woman astronaut; she did inspiring work and has become something of a legend and a role model for girls and women in science. It is also about our perception and consciousness of our environment. The "Earth dawn" photo changed perceptions of the fragility of the Earth's ecosystem.

The debate on space is also about geopolitics. Who, in the appallingly dark days of the cold war and intercontinental ballistic missile threats in which many of us grew up, could have imagined that we would now have an international space station in which Americans, Russians and people from across the world work together for the good of all? It is about defining a new common space for all and a new approach to our defence and security through common leadership. It is not a subject I get to speak much about at the Dispatch Box, but today's debate makes it possible to talk about mankind's destiny—the questing spirit deep in us all and in society to inquire, discover, imagine, explore and make possible whole new worlds and opportunities.

This debate is also about the power of ambitious, positive, global, purposive and internationalist leadership to inspire and unite to produce a better politics from us all. No one spoke better on that than JFK, in his inspiring inaugural address in 1960, when he famously said, on a frosty morning in Washington at the very height of the cold war,

"my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

[George Freeman]

He launched America on a mission of internationalism, and two years later, in his Apollo speech, announced that America chose to go to the moon not because it was easy, but because it was hard. He did so in the spirit of internationalism and of appeal to the best instincts of mankind. It is a beautiful thing, I think, that on the moon is left an inscription stating that mankind came to the moon in a spirit of freedom and peace. That mission captures so much that is best about our society and what we want to achieve.

It is for those reasons that the Prime Minister asked that we harness the inspirational power of Major Peake's mission to inspire the next generation of scientists and engineers and to bring the country together. All of us found it difficult to avoid the excitement associated with the launch and arrival of the first British ESA astronaut at the international space station. We held celebration events in Edinburgh, London, Cardiff and Belfast, at discovery centres throughout the UK, and here in Parliament. The Science Museum in London attracted almost 11,000 visitors, and if the sheer exhilaration of the 5,000-plus primary schoolchildren at the museum translates into an increase in future sciences, Tim Peake's mission will already have achieved its goal. In all, 35% of the viewing public watched the launch, and a further 3.8 million people watched the Soyuz spaceship dock with the international space station that evening.

Our Government are providing £3 million of support to the education and engagement programme associated with Tim Peake's mission, and we have been lauded by the ESA as the country doing the most to invest in and promote educational outreach. We will measure whether the excitement inspires young people to take up STEM subjects—several Members rightly commented on that—and increases public understanding of and engagement with science through an evaluation study being undertaken by York University. It is the first such research since the Apollo effect study in the 1970s.

The Peake mission is possible because of a decision made at the 2012 European Space Agency Council of Ministers meeting by the then Science Minister, David Willetts, which resulted in the UK joining the international space station and the related European programme for life and physical sciences—ELIPS. The UK made a further investment at the Council of Ministers in 2014. The total investment, which exceeded £80 million, provides substantial value for money, giving UK scientists access to a laboratory that has cost others up to \$100 billion and is testament to international collaboration in science. The three man crew on the Soyuz, which launched on 15 December, comprised Tim Peake, the American Tim Kopra and the Russian commander Yuri Malenchenko. It is early days, and evaluation of UK involvement is ongoing, but the current results are incredibly exciting.

Experiments for the ELIPS and subsequent experiments undertaken on the space station are selected on the basis of science excellence, which plays to UK strengths. We sometimes forget that this is a massive international set of experiments up in space. In the most recent competition, the UK won more than 10% of awards for experiments, although UK involvement in the space station is at about 5% of costs, so we are punching above our weight. About 40 to 80 scientists across the UK are involved.

Space is not just about national exploration; it is about critical national infrastructure and services, such as weather forecasting, satellite navigation and satellite television. Space-based technologies are used for tackling many global challenges. Satellites can assist with tackling illegal fishing, efficient urban and rural land use, resource management, safe implementation of autonomous vehicles, and myriad further uses underpinning new technologies and new markets. For example, over half the essential climate variables needed to understand climate change derive from our satellite observations.

The UK space sector is undoubtedly a massive and growing success story. There are real prospects for the young people inspired by Tim Peake and the Rosetta mission to work in our very strong and vibrant space economy in the future. It is currently worth more than £11.8 billion to the UK economy. That is growing at about 8% a year, which is three times faster than the average non-finance sector. It is characterised by an incredibly highly skilled workforce of more than 37,000 people, half of whom hold at least a first degree. Those direct jobs each support more than two jobs in the wider economy. The sector has a general value added per job of £140,000, three times higher than the UK average.

To reflect the strategic and economic importance of the sector, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills launched the national space policy on 13 December to coincide with the Peake mission. It showcases how deeply space now impacts on our daily lives, not least in the field of satellite data and information. It describes how the sector is a unique, strategic national capability which delivers science and innovation, national security, essential public services and prosperity. The policy spells out how the UK Space Agency has brought together the roles and responsibilities of 17 different Government organisations and other partners, such as research councils and Innovate UK which are involved with space.

Space-based activity is a long-term endeavour with international collaboration, industrial co-investment, skills development and considerable planning at its heart. Stability and certainty are important, and the national space policy is the Government's expression of our long-term commitment to seeing it through and to putting in place a policy landscape to support that investment.

The UK's involvement in space ranges from fundamental underpinning research into the origins of the universe, to understanding and protecting our planet, through to supporting the research that leads to UK companies launching entirely new multimillion-pound telecommunication satellites. Some 25% of the world's telecommunication satellites are substantially built here in the UK. Satellites operated under the disaster charter and earth observation data procured commercially were critical to effectively targeting the response efforts on the ground in the recent floods.

This is an exciting time for space. In 2016 the UK will be building the main experiment on the Plato mission that will search for new earths orbiting other stars, in pursuit of answers to the profound question about life elsewhere in the universe, and will precipitate key contracts for UK companies. We look forward to a major European Space Agency Council of Ministers meeting in November/December 2016, where we will negotiate to ensure that

the UK continues to play an influential part and benefits fully from European Space Agency programmes. The programmes that we are looking forward to in particular include the UK-led biomass experiment that will calculate the capacity of the world's forests to store carbon. As well as improving our ability to control climate change, this offers a considerable opportunity as UK companies are poised to win contracts to provide the craft that will host the experiment in orbit.

2017 will see the launch of the joint European-Japanese BepiColombo mission which will set out on a voyage to Mercury, using a very efficient ion drive electric propulsion engine manufactured by UK firm Qinetiq.

In the field of space flight, through companies such as Clyde Space and SSTL, the UK has become a leader in the manufacture of smaller satellites and has largely secured cost-effective launch by arranging "piggy-back" launches with larger satellites in a competitive launcher market which is not yet sustainable but is growing fast. This is connected to the growth of commercial constellations of tens or even hundreds of low-cost small mass-produced satellites that can provide ubiquitous communications across the globe or near real-time imagery from low earth orbits.

Indeed, we believe that commercial space flight is a market which, when combined with the emerging trend to use large constellations of small satellites, could provide a cumulative economic benefit to the UK of £20 billion by 2030. This will provide new and long-term manufacturing and service jobs and will stimulate high tech growth. This includes exciting developments such as single-stage to orbit launchers, the engines for which are being pioneered by Reaction Engines, a rapidly growing company in Oxfordshire.

This is the context for the UK to explore having a launch capability. We believe there is at least a two-stage process to achieving it. The first part of our ambition is for the UK to become the European hub for commercial space flight and related space sector technologies. The initial focus is on creating the necessary legislative and regulatory framework that will enable commercial suborbital space flights alongside existing civilian and military airspace operations. Alongside this, it is the Government's intention to select a preferred location for a UK spaceport that will be capable of operating horizontal commercial spaceplanes. We are closely examining what this process will look like, to ensure that it is fair, transparent and robust.

We will seek to draw on established Government approaches to appraisal and will ensure that the preferred location meets a number of key criteria—that it can deliver a spaceport technically capable of operating horizontal commercial spaceplanes, that it will be commercially viable, that it can ensure the safety of the uninvolved public, and that it takes into account the potential environmental impacts of the spaceport and will deliver local and national economic growth. These criteria are likely to form the core of any selection process, though we have not settled on the final criteria.

Drew Hendry: The Minister is outlining an exciting programme of opportunities and economic development. He has heard from a number of Members today about the need to encourage girls and young women to get involved in the industry. Will he take that message away to the Government and do something practical to promote that?

George Freeman: Yes, I certainly will. There are a number of initiatives in place which I have not had time this afternoon to set out, but I will happily take that point on board. We are seized of the importance of promoting women in the sector.

Developing a UK spaceport and a commercial suborbital operation are crucial steps to building the capability and credibility for a UK launch capability, with the aim of launching small satellites from the UK.

I shall touch on some of the key points that hon. Members made. I congratulate the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), whose introductory speech set the scene beautifully. I was delighted that she referred to me as a Minister prepared to boldly go where no Minister has gone before. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) who, in his maiden speech, was quick on to this subject and has been a leading advocate and vice-chairman of the space committee. It is great to see the cross-party support for this project.

A number of colleagues, particularly from Scotland, spoke about the importance of the Scottish cluster. In this field as well as in other technology areas, Scotland has a powerful cluster. Despite a number of powerful bids being made from Scotland, Wales and Cornwall, hon. Members would not expect me today to pre-empt the process of selecting appropriate sites, but I can assure them that we will conduct that process fairly, openly and against proper criteria. All their bids have been heard clearly today.

Let me address some of the key questions that have been raised. There was a question about our priorities. I hope my comments setting out our commitment and the commitments set out in the recently launched space strategy go some way to clarifying that. I was asked about research funding. In the autumn statement the Chancellor announced the historic ring-fenced increased commitment to science capital and revenue, and the Government are in the process of working through with the research councils how that science funding will be allocated to various projects. We will shortly make announcements on how we see that being taken forward.

There were questions about growth and what we are doing to ensure a joined-up strategy for the sector. We are working widely with industry to identify the key markets that we see delivering the main growth. The Space Leadership Council, jointly chaired by my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities and Science and the president of the UK space trade association, is actively working to develop a set of policies, and the blueprint for growth which was set out in our recently published national space policy sets out the framework that we intend to follow.

On the timing of the announcement of the spaceport location, as hon. Members know, this is an entirely new market. It is moving quickly, but there are complex issues to be dealt with in relation to regulations and the legal basis for safe flights that we need to get right. That work is ongoing, and I hope that my comments today have reassured Members that it is being taken seriously. The Government expect to be able to announce how we proceed as soon as we can in 2016.

Important questions were asked about space debris and regulation. This area is governed by the Outer Space Act 1986. No licence is issued to operators of space assets unless they can show that they are compliant and safe,

[George Freeman]

and minimising space debris is part of that process. Technical failures do occur, but we remain vigilant. The strategic defence and security review set up a cross-governmental committee, chaired by my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities and Science, to further ensure security in space, particularly in relation to space debris.

A number of hon. Members asked about careers in STEM. We have allocated £3 million to support education programmes to help young people benefit from Tim Peake's mission, and reaching out to girls and women is an important part of that. The European Space Agency has acknowledged that the UK is doing more to support that work than any other nation in the project. We are providing practical tools for teachers and lecturers.

There was a question about the University of Glasgow and how the Government are engaging with cutting-edge research facilities. Through the work of the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, the Natural Environment Research Council and the Science and Technology Facilities Council, we are actively looking at how we can use those research centres to support this project.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—on a previous occasion he described himself as a stalker of mine, because we appear to speak in all the same debates—made a powerful plug for Northern Ireland. The Government fully recognise the benefit that Northern Ireland's space industry and universities play in our space policy. That is why we were delighted to convene and take part in an event held in Belfast to mark Tim Peake's launch.

My hon. Friend the Member for a bit of Cornwall—the precise part escapes my memory right now. [Interruption.] My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) raised the important issue of Newquay airport. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said previously from the Dispatch Box that he recognises the importance of Newquay in this and in the wider Cornish economy. As I have said, we will look at all bids in time.

We have heard a lot of quotes in today's debate—some more original than others—not least from David Bowie. I wanted to close with one that we have not heard. In "An Occasional Dream" he sang about "tomorrows of rich surprise... Some things we could do"

He sang:

"We can be heroes, just for one day".

I think that this debate, and indeed this whole topic, captures the sense in which good politics can bring

people together to achieve the very highest goals. I am grateful to colleagues for raising it and pleased to be part of a Department that is committed to this sector and to achieving everything that this country can do in this very exciting race.

2.32 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford: We called this debate to celebrate Major Tim Peake's spacewalk tomorrow, and obviously the incredible work he is doing to engage children and young people. Many Members have spoken about the need to engage girls, in particular. I do not think that there is really a clash between us on whether Tim Peake or Helen Sharman is the first British astronaut; they are people we should be promoting together. There is no friction between them. Indeed, she has given him her copy of Yuri Gagarin's book to take there as a souvenir. Having spent 33 years in surgery, I know what it is like to be in a man's world. I remember being told formally during my third year at medical school that women could not do surgery. We have come a long way.

We have heard from Members from all UK nations bidding for their site, which I think is absolutely right. We have also heard about the incredible breadth of the industry, and there are many things that we have not even thought about today. I am grateful to hear from the Minister that the structure and licensing will be looked at, because I think that is really important. I look forward to the day when our hubs are called not aerospace, but aero-space—aero, hyphen, space—and I expect that we will have multiple clusters and hubs. A time may even come when we need more than one space port; perhaps one for tourism and suborbital parabolic flights to Japan or north America, and one for getting satellites up—satellites that will end up being the size of a packed lunch.

I am grateful to all Members who have taken part in what has been a fascinating debate. We want to encourage our young people simply to aim for the stars.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the scientific, cultural and technological opportunities arising from exploration of outer space and the significant contribution the space industry makes to the UK economy; further notes the increased public interest in space exploration resulting from Major Tim Peake's mission to the International Space Station (ISS); welcomes the global co-operation that has led to the development of the ISS over the last forty years; takes note of the shortlist of airports and aerodromes that could host a UK spaceport published by the UK Government in March 2015; and calls on the Government to bring forward further advice and support for organisations considering developing such facilities so that they might be operational by the Government's target date of 2018.

House of Lords Reform

2.34 pm

Martin John Docherty (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered House of Lords reform.

Not since 2011, when the then Deputy Prime Minister presented the case for reform, have Members of the House of Commons been offered the opportunity to debate and discuss the House of Lords on the Floor of this House. Therefore, before proceeding any further, I wish to extend my grateful thanks to the Backbench Business Committee, and to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) especially, for agreeing to this debate and for some sage advice, which was critical, given my novice plea.

During the general election there were various mentions of House of Lords reform. Critically, the Conservative party limited its vision in its manifesto to addressing only the size of the House of Lords, for clearly size matters to the Tory party. At its present velocity of expansion, the House of Lords will soon exceed the National People's Congress of China. It has already exceeded the size of the European Parliament, which is elected by over 400 million European citizens. Clearly, Parliament envy will soon see even this House displaced by the Prime Minister's expansionary tactics.

I know that at the previous general election the British Labour party took a more pragmatic view. I give credit where credit is due by recognising the work the previous Labour Government did to limit the hereditary peerage, although that work was sullied by the cash for honours scandal uncovered by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil). I wonder where my Labour colleagues are today.

At least on these Benches we have spoken with one voice. At the general election the Scottish National party placed our proposal before the entire community of Scotland: "Abolish it!" If this Parliament is to work as an effective and legitimate legislature in the British state, its upper Chamber should resemble less the congress of a communist state and more the revising and advisory role of a Parliament of a 21st century liberal democracy.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Gentleman about abolition, which is a theme I wish to speak about later. Does he agree that the power of patronage of Prime Ministers to appoint people they choose to the House of Lords is even more pernicious than having hereditary peers, who at least have the advantage of being independent?

Martin John Docherty: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He need not worry, because I will get there.

Let us return to the hope of many Members of this House—a hope that is shared, in particular, by my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who cannot be here today—that any future reform of the upper Chamber should not only consider its size, but limit it and remove with haste its ability, as an unelected and unaccountable Chamber, to generate legislation. That is an affront to my constituents and an aberration at the heart of the British political system.

Only a few months ago the Government were keen to play down any reform agenda. Their latest antics have the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) as Citizen Camembert rather than Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Prime Minister playing the good cop and leading man as the Black Fingernail. This is indeed a farce, if not a "Carry On".

While many Members across this Chamber would seek a long-term resolution of the undeniable illegitimacy of the upper Chamber in its present form, the Government tinker at the edges with the Strathclyde review, a botch job done in jig time for Christmas. Although the review offers a way forward, it seems to confuse the role of the House of Lords. Is it to be a mere stamper of Government policy, or is it a revising Chamber that tackles the Government on the tough subjects of the day? Critically, all options would offer an additional burden on the workings of this House and highlight the behemoth that is the Palace of Westminster. If the report were at least linked in some way or form to improvements in working practices such as electronic voting, which would allow us in this place to deliberate more robustly, in more depth, and with reduced recourse to statutory instruments, it would have been a slightly more useful document. For the record, however, I wish to commend Lord Strathclyde and all those involved for seeking to overcome the Government's obstacles.

While the report is welcome, it highlights the Dickensian, if not medieval, machinations and dubious working practices of this Parliament. It accidentally shows the Alice in Wonderland antics of the so-called liberal democratic practices of the mother of Parliaments. If the review was worth the paper it was written on, it would be my hope, and that of my hon. Friends, that it would seek to uphold the nature of our polyarchy and at least promote its first pillar, namely that control over Government decisions about policy should at all times constitutionally be invested in elected officials—Members of this House elected by their constituents, from whom they derive their political mandate.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and apologise for being unable to stay for the whole thing. He speaks about the legislative powers of Members of the House of Lords. Does he agree that even more pernicious and insidious is the soft power that is held by unelected Members? They can spend much time in all-party groups, have access to Ministers behind the scenes and all the other trappings that are not visible or even open to scrutiny through live coverage of the Chamber because they happen behind the scenes.

Martin John Docherty: I could not agree more. The way that operates within this Parliament is pernicious.

Sadly, I believe that in this Parliament, at least, the aspiration and will for change are a lost cause, given that in the previous Parliament alone the Prime Minister appointed 200 new unelected, unaccountable members of the peerage, and a further 45 in the short period in which my hon. Friends and I have been returned to this House. Appointees covering the great and the so-called good include, of course, large-scale donors to political parties and former bigwigs of county halls the length and breadth of the country.

[*Martin John Docherty*]

Of the peerage, let me turn specifically to a certain cadre—the archbishops and bishops of the established Church of England. While much has been made of likening their position to that of the theocrats of the Islamic Republic of Iran, my direct challenge to them is this: they have no place in debating—or voting on, should it occur—the civic or religious life of Scotland. I draw Members' attention to early-day motion 952, submitted by my own hand and signed by many of my hon. Friends from Scottish constituencies, which calls on the Lords Spiritual to desist in their well documented, historical interference in the affairs of the community of Scotland since the times of our late and noble King David. Their interference must end if this Parliament is truly to reflect the broad kirk of representation and communities of this political state.

Let us turn our gaze on the other members of the peerage of the realm. Yes, I will admit, through gritted teeth, that within their ermine-clad utopia there are a few souls who work hard. Yet, as exposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire in a debate in Westminster Hall only a year ago, we can see the limited work of so many who stipulate that their position is to stand for Scotland in the upper Chamber. The peerage has no constituency—we all recognise that—and yet they purport in that unelected Chamber to ensure that our constituents' needs are met. One prime example is those peers who have given attendance and full participation a cursory glance and claim substantial sums of taxpayers' money for the privilege of access to the Bishops' Bar.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I ask the hon. Gentleman, and his colleagues, whether he would like to have a member of the SNP in the House of Lords? I think that would be good idea.

Martin John Docherty: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for a good laugh, but the answer is no.

As per convention, I shall name no names, but I direct hon. Members to acquaint themselves with the debate held in Westminster Hall on this very day one year ago, where the record of the peerage is seen to be damning indeed.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is delivering a great deal of passion in his speech; it is just a pity that his passion is not shared by the public at large, or indeed, evidently, by Labour Members. What would he say to those who do not necessarily disagree with some of what he is saying but for whom, nevertheless, this is a low priority?

Martin John Docherty: Democracy is never a low priority in the Scottish National party. That is why the people and community of Scotland returned my hon. Friends in such numbers.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is little democracy in the fact that those who have been rejected by the electorate can then find themselves along the corridor from us, making law?

Martin John Docherty: I could not disagree with my hon. Friend on that very important matter.

The upper Chamber and its shenanigans reflect more a debauched imperial Roman senate than a functioning democratic parliamentary Chamber, bowing and scraping in a place in which the modern world is seen as an inconvenience. Since my election to this House, I have visited the unelected, unaccountable Lords, where I took my place in the Members of the House of Commons' balcony—a lofty vantage point across which to view the stoor and the oose of ages. It would seem that their lordships are followers of the Quentin Crisp school of housework. Like him, they firmly believe that after the first four years, the dirt doesnae get any worse. Four years of accumulating dust is nothing compared with the accumulation of centuries of privilege and unaccountability. It must end.

There are those who will see this as nothing other than Celtic hyperventilation against a conspiracy of anomalies, arrogance, absurdity, vanity and venality that poses as a pillar of the mother of Parliaments—and they may be right.

Patrick Grady: It is not simply a matter of vanity. In 2005, as I am sure Members are aware, the Scottish National party had a democratic vote at its conference never to accept seats in the House of Lords, confirming a convention that had been in place since the 1970s. At no point in the party's history has it ever considered taking a position in the unelected Chamber.

Martin John Docherty: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. For as long as I am the Member for West Dunbartonshire and a member of the Scottish National party, that is what I will be sticking to—saying no to seats in the unelected, unaccountable House of Lords.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on what has so far been a very colourful speech. He has been very clear about the SNP's position, but his partners in this House are Plaid Cymru, which does have Members in the other place.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): We do not have a separate jurisdiction.

Martin John Docherty: My very hon. Friend has given the answer from a sedentary position: Wales does not have a separate jurisdiction. That in itself is a disgrace and one of the main concerns for my hon. Friends in Plaid Cymru.

As I said, all this could be seen as pure Celtic hyperventilation about the unaccountability of the House of Lords, yet there are Members from beyond the Celtic fringe—although I wonder where they are today—who find the unelected and unaccountable nature of the House of Lords an affront to liberal democracy.

Kelvin Hopkins: May I inform the hon. Gentleman that there are some English people—I am English from generations back on all sides—who believe we should have one democratic Chamber, not an unelected Chamber full of place persons and hereditaries?

Martin John Docherty: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I do, of course, count Cornwall in the Celtic fringe.

Any debate that links the Government and Her Majesty's Opposition to some of the most damning political consequences and incompetence, as highlighted in the last Parliament by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, will fill even those Members—those hardy souls—with dread. Cash for honours sends a collective shiver down the spine of this House and, indeed, our parliamentary system. I seriously doubt that we have seen the last of it, not only in the upper Chamber but even here. The appointment process exposes beyond doubt the privileges of those Members of the House of Lords. In reality, there is no substitute for democracy and direct election.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I am delighted to join the Chamber to hear my hon. Friend's speech at such late notice. Does he agree not only that this debate is vital—it is a sheer disappointment that more Members are not here—but that it is incredibly perverse that we are about to reduce the number of democratically elected MPs in this Chamber from 650 to 600, at the same time as the House of Lords is ever increasing?

Martin John Docherty: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his interjection. He raises an important point. I am grateful that the Front Benchers of Her Majesty's Opposition are here, but where are the great reformers? Where are the Liberal Democrats, the great changers of the British constitution? They are in the House of Lords.

As to the future—I wish to address my hon. Friend's question directly—one clear clarion call should go out to the British Labour party and the British Liberal party: no more appointments. Enough. Stop. Renew, here today, the commitment to reform—not piecemeal; not lacklustre; not fiddling while the parliamentary democracy of this political state is sullied by the illegitimacy of the House of Lords. Be clear. Be concise: no more Labour or Liberal peers. Call the Government's bluff. Call the bluff of the unelected, unaccountable mire of cronies and warmehrs. Join us in demanding an end to privilege and patronage at the heart of Government.

There will be Members who will seek a resolution to this issue: unicameral or bicameral, one or two Chambers. I am open to persuasion about a bicameral system, although a unicameral system, as evidence from across the world shows, is no less a robust and decent system of parliamentary liberal democracy. If a bicameral system is to exist, here in this Parliament, then let it be fully elected. Let it be representative of the communities and nations of this political state. Let it reflect the lived experience of my constituents. While I am no Unionist, I believe in the sovereign will of the community of Scotland. If we should remain in this place, my constituents have been clear: change, and soon.

With a Prime Minister appointing more peers than Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and all before, I doubt that change will come, and the consequences for Scotland and the Union are well known. When unelected and unaccountable peers of the realm can stipulate the governance of Scotland while the evidence and proposals from its elected Members of the House of Commons are thrown in the Thames, the case for the re-establishment of a sovereign, democratic and independent Scotland is made not by members of the Scottish National party,

but by the very apogee of the British state. It would be easy—indeed, it is easy—for me to vent frustration at the pace of House of Lords reform, but that is not enough.

Today, just like every other day, I am wearing a tie, as deemed by convention in this House. The tie I am wearing today represents to me hope for a more equal and just society, in which the pupils of Bonhill Primary School in the mighty Vale of Leven—whose tie this is—should hope to live. That hope should be placed in a Parliament that reflects them and their peers, not a Parliament in which the oligarchs, cronies and chancers of an upper Chamber go about their business unelected and unaccountable. Let us be in no doubt that those pupils will place that hope closer to their experience and, indeed, to their need at home in Scotland. For sure they know,

A prince can mak a belted knight,
A marquis, duke, an' a' that;
But an honest man's aboon his might,
Guid faith he mauna fa' that!
For a' that, an' a' that,
Their dignities, an' a' that,
The pith o' sense, an' pride o' worth,
Are higher rank than a' that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. There are nine Members who wish to catch my eye before 4.30 pm, which is when I want to bring in the Front Benchers to wind up. That calculates at roughly 10 minutes each, so if Members can informally keep to about 10 minutes, that would be great.

2.56 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin John Docherty) on securing this debate and on his interesting, entertaining and, I think it is fair to say, at times angry speech, quite a lot of which I agreed with, because I would sweep away the House of Lords and replace it with an almost entirely elected Chamber.

I accept the fact that, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) said in an intervention, the issue is not exactly top of the charts for our constituents. I have only one constituent who writes to me about it and other issues, such as the changes to the Act of Settlement.

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is an extremely assiduous constituency MP and I suspect he spends most of his weekends knocking on people's doors to get their views. Is he able to recall the last time a constituent on the doorstep badgered him on the subject of House of Lords reform? I am really struggling to remember the last time a constituent troubled me on that matter.

Martin Vickers: My hon. Friend is right. I cannot recall anyone on the doorstep raising this particular issue, even when it was being debated day in, day out in this Chamber. The fact that it is not on the public's agenda suggests that it will not be on the Government's agenda—and, of course, it is not. The fact that the public do not care a great deal gives the Government an opportunity to kick it into touch.

[*Martin Vickers*]

Had I been here in the late 1990s when Tony Blair was tinkering with the House of Lords and sweeping away most of the hereditary peers, I would probably have been opposed to that, as a typical traditional Conservative. It would appear to me that they were doing no great harm, and if we are to be ruled by an unelected body, I would rather it be an unelected House of Lords than an unelected European Commission.

The reality, however, is that we cannot go on as we are. Changes, both significant and minor, have been made to our constitution over the centuries and we have tended to muddle along and accept them. On the whole, I think that the system has evolved into one which, with all its faults, gives us a better existence and life. We are well governed and have a functioning, honest judicial system and the like, so I think we have a lot to be thankful for with regard to the way in which things have evolved over the centuries.

Personally, I would go for a 90% elected upper House—or senate, as I would want to call it. The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire addressed the issue of bishops, archbishops and so on. My remaining 10%, the unelected Members, would be faith leaders. Mostly, they would be Christian leaders, since we are a Christian nation, but they would include representatives of the Church of Scotland.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): As a practising Christian, I must say that I am not comfortable with defining any nation as a Christian nation, or indeed as a Jewish or an Islamic nation. Is it not more correct these days to say that we are a group of nations historically ruled by people who in their words purported to follow Christianity, but whose actions were very far from the true teachings of Christ?

Martin Vickers: It is certainly true that there are now fewer practising Christians throughout the UK than there were in the past. As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, however, our heritage is of a Christian nature and the eternal virtues taught by the Christian Church are the basis of our society.

Kelvin Hopkins: The hon. Gentleman may have noticed that, in the last census, some 31% of the population said that they had no religion and that they do not feel that they would be represented by people of faith. I am a vice-chair of the all-party humanist group. Does the hon. Gentleman not think that humanists should also be represented?

Martin Vickers: Humanism has always seemed to me to be the absence of faith. We could debate the hon. Gentleman's rather philosophical point endlessly, and I would be very happy to do so some time.

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire referred to a unicameral system. It would be a mistake to move to a system with only one Chamber. However, I would point out that, with devolution, Scotland is almost a unicameral Assembly; I will leave that matter to Scottish National party Members.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Although the Scottish Parliament has one Chamber, it has a very strong committee system. It is not an Assembly, but a Parliament in which the Government sit.

Martin Vickers: In essence, however, it is fair to say that Scotland is becoming almost a unicameral nation.

It is often said that we benefit from the expertise of experts, many of whom are ex-experts. Many people at the other end of the corridor have a great deal of expertise and a lot to offer society, but that does not necessarily mean that they should be Members of the legislature. Over the years, Governments have found ways of including all sorts of people they wanted to bring into the process of governance—by establishing royal commissions, boards of inquiries and committees for this, that and the other—and it would be perfectly possible to get eminent lawyers, scientists and doctors into a group that provided the expertise that those of us in this Chamber certainly need.

Dr Murrison: I am very pleased that my hon. Friend has raised the issue of experts. If the public think about the upper House, they often think of it as a Chamber full of experts. Many of them are experts, but the trouble is that there is nothing more “ex” than an ex-expert. That point supports the argument he is advancing. To avoid the ex-expert phenomenon, should we put a limit on the number of years for which peers serve?

Martin Vickers: I certainly agree that, if we are to continue with an appointed or predominantly appointed House, a time limit would be desirable.

The point about such experts is that they tend to be London-centred experts. The reality is that an expert—a doctor, a scientist or whatever—is far more likely to be appointed to the upper House if they are from Kensington than if they are from Cleethorpes. There are exceptions. A few weeks ago, I was privileged to attend the swearing in as a Member of the upper House of the leader of North Lincolnshire Council, which covers part of my constituency. Not only has Baroness Redfern, as she now is, served the community through elected office, but she has roots deep in the Isle of Axholme, the part of North Lincolnshire from which she comes. However, peers such as the noble Lady are few and far between. It is a very metropolitan gathering.

It is often said that if there were two elected Houses, there would be power grabs by one House over the other. One mistake in the Bill that was introduced three or four years ago was that it said that the powers of the upper House would stay pretty much the same. That is fine, but it should be laid down in statute if we are to move in the direction that I am suggesting. Other countries seem to manage with two elected Chambers that rub along reasonably well, without constant power grabs by one or the other. It is important that the lower House should retain the power over financial matters. Any conflicts between the Houses should not be passed over to the judiciary. That is why the situation should be laid down clearly in any statute.

As I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), whether there is an appointed House or an elected House, there should be time limits. If I recall correctly, the Bill that was brought forward by the then Deputy Prime Minister in the last Parliament proposed terms of 15 years. Perhaps that was too long, but it would give people, although many of them may be party people, the independence that is necessary in an upper House.

Bob Stewart: I seem to remember that under the proposed legislation that was introduced in the last Parliament the elected Members of the House of Lords would have been elected by huge electorates of 3 million or 4 million people. Inevitably, people elected under such a system would say, “I had 2 million people voting for me and you had a poxy 66,000. Whose mandate is more important?” That was one of the problems that I had with the proposed legislation in the last Parliament.

Martin Vickers: I agree. I was not happy with that part of the proposals.

I am an advocate of first past the post when it comes to elections to this House, but I acknowledge that some form of proportional representation would be more appropriate for an elected upper House. Having said that, we must accept that people do not identify with massive areas or regions, such as those to which my hon. Friend refers. They tend to identify with their town or village and their county, as well as with their country. We need to devise a system that recognises those innate loyalties.

In closing, I urge the Government not just to tinker. I suspect that we will have more tinkering with the Strathclyde proposals, which I am not particularly enthusiastic about. The Government should go for it. I would rather have a Conservative Government reforming the House of Lords, because Conservatives recognise the value of evolution within the constitution and do not want to go for a big bang change. We have an opportunity to think carefully about this matter over the next year or two and to put forward serious proposals. We must recognise that an appointed House—an unelected Assembly—is not acceptable in the 21st century. It is time to think seriously about the way forward. I urge the Minister to acknowledge that it should be a Conservative Government who put forward the proposals. I very much hope to hear some dramatic proposals at the end of this debate.

3.9 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I will start by reading an amendment that was moved in this place during a debate on the House of Lords by a former leader of the Labour party. It was to add the words,

“the Upper House, being an irresponsible part of the Legislature, and of necessity representative only of interests opposed to the general well-being is a hindrance to national progress and ought to be abolished”.

I wholeheartedly agree with the sentiments of that former Labour party leader, Mr Arthur Henderson. He tabled that amendment during a debate on the House of Lords on 26 June 1907—never let it be said that Westminster rushes to reform. Predictably, the amendment was defeated, although it was part of a national debate that led to the introduction of the Parliament Act 1911, which made the supremacy of the elected Chamber over the unelected Chamber clear and beyond doubt. That was a very good thing, but we must go further.

I contend that radical change to the constitution is overdue, and that there is no place for a bloated, unelected Chamber of retired politicians, cronies and placemen in the modern day. It is 105 years since the Parliament Act, and I ask the House—not before time—to embrace democracy in all that we do. That means moving to an

elected second Chamber and the abolition of what we currently have. Democratic change is normal, and we must move towards that.

We must bring the governance of the United Kingdom into line with the 21st-century standards of democratic accountability to be found across the developed world—we would all like to think we are part of that. In 2016 we have a Tory Government who are committed to the protection of this unelected, unaccountable, political establishment, and whose only desire to reform the House of Lords stems from the Lords’ own efforts to stymie and oppose Government legislation. That problem was created because the previous Government were so effective at stuffing the place with their own appointees, and this Government would rather stuff more voting fodder into the already bloated second Chamber in order to get their way. Perhaps they are not content with the fact that the UK has the second largest appointed parliamentary Chamber after the Chinese National People’s Congress, and they want to show the world that when it comes to undemocratic and unaccountable government, nobody does it better than the UK.

In 2015, 45 new peers were appointed to the House of Lords, including 26 on the Government side. Make no mistake, the House of Lords is not impotent, despite the fact that the Parliament Act 1911 has only been used, I think, seven times. The Chamber possesses the ability to halt legislation that affects no fewer than 64 million people. That is not the democratic will of the people; it is the will of 821 unelected, permanent peers, 92 of whom hold their seat for their entire lives simply through an accident of birth.

Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): A small clique in Downing Street gets to determine who sits in the Lords. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that gives rise to a fundamental unfairness and means that there is no correlation between the number of votes cast and the composition of the Chamber? For example, it is possible for a party to get 4 million votes in an election, but have zero appointed peers. Is that fundamentally unfair?

Steven Paterson: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, and I think that it is fundamentally unfair and that we must move to democracy. Appointing peers is ridiculous and disgraceful in this day and age.

Dr Murrison: I am noting the hon. Gentleman’s comments on appointees, and such appointments are ultimately made by people who are elected. The concern that people overseas have, particularly in countries that are developing their democracies, is that here in the mother of Parliaments we still have as part of our legislature Members of the House of Lords who are hereditary peers. Although I have the greatest affection and admiration for many of them individually, and they give great service, it is a rather difficult thing to explain to people in other countries who are growing their democracies and who look to the United Kingdom for a lead.

Steven Paterson: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, and we must move to democracy. That means that the hereditary peers—they really do stick in the craw—will be among many who have to go. We should have elections to determine that, and perhaps we

[Steven Paterson]

should be holding conversations about how, not whether, we do that. I would certainly like us to move towards that point.

Bob Stewart: I support the idea of UKIP having a Member of the House of Lords. It is rather sad that there is no UKIP Member of that House, and I look forward to it happening. May I suggest that it might give the hon. Member for Clacton (Mr Carswell) a certain amount of pleasure if that Member's first name was Nigel?

Steven Paterson: I will let the hon. Member for Clacton (Mr Carswell) speak for himself on that one. My own view is simply that, whatever the country, people should get the representative Government they vote for. Whether I happen to agree with the hon. Gentleman's party or not, if people vote for it then that is who they should get as a Government—that is what I believe in terms of democracy.

How does the crooked, anti-democratic nature of the House of Lords manifest itself? To answer that, let us consider for a moment the curious case of the quite inappropriately named Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats were hammered at the ballot box—not before time, many of us would say. That happened first in Scotland in the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections, when they were reduced to a rump of five MSPs out of 129, and was followed up at the UK general election last year when they were reduced to a rump of just eight MPs out of 650. In a democracy, the people speak and the message is sent. That is not the end of the story, however. The Liberal Democrats defy democracy thanks to the House of Lords. There are an incredible 111 of them along the corridor there sitting—or sleeping—on the red benches, grazing, collecting their tax-free £300 when they pass go, occasionally contributing to the debates and maybe even voting. They are down at the other end of that corridor, unelected and unaccountable. They are Westminster's own political zombies. We really have to move forward. They are not elected and the people's views must be paramount.

Some would say that the House of Lords provides access to expertise that cannot be found among MPs in the House of Commons. I acknowledge, because I have met some, that there are some Lords who certainly have expertise, but there are many hon. Members in this place and it cannot be beyond the wit of this place to find experts on a range of issues.

Kelvin Hopkins: The hon. Gentleman talks about expertise. It would be possible to have an advisory body of experts. The Lords have legislative power—that is the difference.

Steven Paterson: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There are a number of things we could do and that suggestion is certainly one of them.

One of the many problems with the House of Lords is that it is stuffed to the gunnels with former politicians who failed to win seats but are none the less looked after by the powers that be. One of my predecessors as MP for Stirling is one such. Michael Forsyth has not won an election since 1992. In his 14-year career as MP

for Stirling, he was democratically chosen by the people of the constituency to serve in that role. He has now spent 17 years in the unelected Chamber along the corridor. This illustrates a fundamental problem. There is a long, long list of such former political big beasts out to pasture at the end of the corridor; former elected politicians of such inestimable stature as Jeremy Purvis, for example. There are then those apparently picked at random, perhaps for saying the right things at the right time to help the party in government, or making the requisite donation to their political party.

Wayne David: The hon. Gentleman makes many trenchant criticisms of the other place, a number of which I agree with. In the interests of even-handedness, however, does he accept that the House of Lords does some good and effective work in holding the Government to account, and that from time to time it makes a very principled stand, such as on tax credits?

Steven Paterson: Even a broken clock is right twice a day, but that does not mean you do not need a new clock.

Margaret Thatcher, at the end of her term as Prime Minister, said:

"I calculate that I was responsible for proposing the elevation to the Lords of some 214 of its present numbers."

My problem is that some of those 214 are still there after all this time: unelected spectres interfering in legislation to this very day. The serious point here is that they have legislative authority over the lives of millions of people across the UK with no democratic mandate whatever. Radical democratic reform or outright abolition of this tired, antiquated and undemocratic institution is necessary and long overdue. Just as successful reform was passed in 1911, reform in 2016 must effectively represent the necessary change to bring our democracy, kicking and screaming, into the 21st century.

3.19 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin John Docherty) on securing a debate on this most overdue of reforms to the UK's political system. As he said, what might seem like Celtic hyperventilation and hyperbole to some, to others is passion to mend that which is wrong.

As we have heard, membership of the House of Lords is fast approaching 1,000. As we have also heard, it is one of the largest Chambers on earth, second only to that in China, which, it is worth remembering, has a population 28 times the size of the UK's. Of course, not one of the 1,000 peers in the other place is elected by the public, although a few are elected by their peers, which is interesting. The House of Lords does not reflect the political views of the people or society in general. Over three quarters of peers are male and over half are over 70. I wanted to work out their combined age, but it was far too difficult, and we would have got into dinosaur aeons, I suspected. Seats are guaranteed for bishops of the Church of England, but not for the Church in Wales or the Church of Scotland, let alone for any other faith. Do the Government consider a non-Christian to be less of a citizen than a Christian? I hope not, but the existence of the House, in its present form, suggests otherwise.

I was astounded to learn that the fudged compromise whereby 92 excepted hereditary peers, who survived the cull of 1999, not only continue to attend the House of Lords and influence the democracy of the UK, but are replaced by yet more hereditary peers in in-house elections. I thought they were a tail that would gradually disappear, but, no, they are self-perpetuating. The evident democratic injustice of people being there because they were born to that position is perpetuating itself. The House of Lords is crying out for reform.

Plaid Cymru sees no place for a patronage appointments system in a modern democracy. None the less, for as long as decisions affecting Wales continue to be made there, we will push for Wales to have an equal voice in that Chamber. After all, we are not as fortunate as Scotland. Wales has not had a separate legal jurisdiction since 1536.

Wayne David: I hear what the hon. Lady says about the Acts of Union in 1536 and 1542, but what on earth does that have to do with membership of the House of Lords?

Liz Saville Roberts: Most of the laws made here also affect Wales, and if we are to influence them, we must take part. We have long been cursed with the “for Wales, see England” mentality, although things have changed since 1999 and might well change again in the elections this spring.

The House of Lords should be elected through the single transferrable vote system, with a Welsh constituency and weighting to ensure that Wales is heard in all matters. Some value the apparent freedom with which the second Chamber can hold the Government to account, but I remind them that more than 70% of peers vote along party lines and that 25% of those appointed since 1997 are former MPs who either resigned or were voted out by the public. It is the only legislature in the world where losing an election helps a person win a seat.

I appreciate that many in the other place are considered experts in their fields, but we have heard mention of the ex-experts. I do not accept that this is an argument against democracy. If they are experts in their fields today—as opposed to 20 years ago—they should be persuaded to stand for office in a local public election. I also suggest that the House takes note of figures from the Electoral Reform Society, which found that 27% of peers had “representational politics” as their main profession prior to entering the Lords. Most of them were MPs. A further 7% were political staff, and twice as many peers worked as staff to the royal household than worked in manual or skilled labour, which is extraordinary, given that most people work in the latter.

Bob Stewart: I am listening intently and enjoying this debate a great deal, because I agree with so much of it. Would it be a good idea for sections of society, such as doctors, teachers, dustbin men—if that is the right term these days—and nurses, each to have a part of the House of Lords that they appoint, so that they can decide who represents them?

Liz Saville Roberts: Were we to legislate for such a thing, we would need to consider that in detail, but we ought to consider whether these representative bodies actually represent society, and we should be judging them accordingly.

The House of Lords is not the oracle of all-encompassing knowledge that many would have us believe. I remind Members that while the Houses of Parliament include almost 1,000 Lords and, at present, 650 MPs—it is interesting to note that the number of Lords is going up and the number of MPs down—the Welsh Parliament, which is responsible for the NHS, education, economic development and many other vital policy fields in Wales, has only 60 AMs. When we discount Welsh Government Ministers and other office holders, only 42 of those 60 AMs are available to hold the Welsh Government to account and scrutinise legislation. That is 42 Members to scrutinise everything from the NHS to education, from business support to inward investment, and—soon—to hold the Government to account on income tax policy. That is 42 Members in Wales in comparison with the Palace of Westminster in England, which has in excess of 1,500 MPs and peers holding the UK Government to account on their performance.

I suggest that a proportionately elected second Chamber with a drastically reduced number of peers, coupled with an increase in the size of the Welsh Parliament, would make the UK a far more modern, balanced and effective democracy. This debate has indeed shone a light on the long-overdue need for reform, but it is now up to the Government to bring forward proposals to ensure that our democracy adheres to modern standards and reflects society and its views.

3.26 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, which I greatly welcome. I particularly enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin John Docherty). It was entertaining, but also serious, making many important points. The House of Lords has, of course, been in the news again recently, and the Government are clearly threatening change to rein in our allegedly noble colleagues. Yesterday's debate in the other place seemed to suggest that even Conservative peers were not entirely happy with what the Government want to do. My interest in speaking today is to argue for a unicameral Parliament. The majority of legislatures across the world are unicameral, and some European nations—Sweden, for example—have chosen to become unicameral. We should at least discuss that possibility and, I hope, move towards that system in time.

When I first entered the House in 1997, the New Labour Government—I emphasise New Labour with a capital N—established a royal commission to consider possible reforms to the House of Lords. Shortly into my time here, I attended a Labour party so-called regional policy forum—I am sure that Mr Deputy Speaker would understand what regional policy forums were like. It was in Watford on a Saturday afternoon with about 25 to 30 party members attending. A chairman had been allocated by the party machine, and we were addressed by a learned professor from the royal commission.

The terms of reference set out by the Government for the royal commission made no mention of abolition of the House of Lords as a possible option. I asked why that was, and suggested that abolition should be a possible option for discussion. Another member suggested that we should have a show of hands to test opinion and see how many members at the meeting favoured abolition—an innocent little test of opinion. At this, the chair became

[Kelvin Hopkins]

very agitated and said, icily, that there would be no votes. Clearly, not even a show of hands in Watford among a small number of Labour party members on a Saturday afternoon—it was no doubt raining outside—was allowed to express a majority view that we should abolish the House of Lords. I suspect that there was probably a majority for abolition in that room, but it was not to be discussed. It was clear that our leaders wanted to keep the House of Lords in some form and that discussing possible abolition was not to be tolerated. It was most interesting.

Some reforms were later enacted by the Blair Government, and remain in place, but abolition is still not being discussed. Some longer-standing Members may recall the later discussions and debates on reform, and the series of votes on possible alternatives that took place in March 2007. One Division effectively permitted a test of opinion on possible abolition of the House of Lords. Among Labour Back Benchers, 169 of my hon. Friends voted for a bicameral Parliament, but 155 of us voted against that, effectively in favour of a unicameral Parliament and the abolition of the House of Lords. That was almost half of the Labour Back Benchers, showing a substantial body of support for a unicameral Parliament. The fact that this option was deliberately excluded from consideration by the earlier royal commission was, I think, a scandal and clearly a political fix.

I tabled an early-day motion to that effect at the time, which received the support of 50 Labour Members, some 14 of whom are still Members today. It was clear that that was due to the simple fact that the Prime Minister at the time wished to retain his power of patronage to appoint Members to the Lords, for a number of reasons. I might add that, subsequently, many argued strongly for an appointed House of Lords, and for retaining a substantial proportion of appointed Members even if it became democratic.

One of those reasons was obviously the ability to offer Members of the House of Commons the prospect of elevation to the Lords, both as a means of keeping control and reducing the potential for rebellion in the Commons and, possibly, to help to persuade older Members with safe seats to agree to retire at a convenient time for the party machine to slot leadership supporters into those safe seats.

Peter Grant: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman recalls that, last time there was a major review of the boundaries in Scotland, the Kingdom of Fife was reduced from five parliamentary constituencies to four. The then Member of Parliament for Dunfermline, East, by the name of Gordon Brown, found himself without an obvious successor seat. The MP for Kirkcaldy agreed to retire from the House, Mr Brown became the MP for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, and very shortly afterwards the former MP for Kirkcaldy became a Member of the House of Lords. Is that the kind of democratic process to which the hon. Gentleman was referring?

Kelvin Hopkins: I do not wish to mention particular examples, because there are still hon. Members here who may or may not have experienced this process, but in my party I want individual Members to have the power, rather than party machines, and I certainly do not want leaders to have the power to select candidates.

I used the word “possibly” about selections of this kind because I cannot prove that such things occurred, and I do not wish to imply any criticism of other hon. Members who may have been selected in strong party seats. That may, of course, occur in other parties as well. It is clearly the case, however, that successive Prime Ministers, before and since, have jealously guarded their powers of patronage. I want to see those powers taken away in the interests of a more vigorous, intensive democracy in this House and outside, and to rein in the excessive power of the Executive.

I think that this is a serious matter, and I hope that, as and when we come to discuss the possible future of the House of Lords, the possibility of a unicameral Parliament and getting rid of this patronage will be raised again.

3.32 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin John Docherty) for securing the debate and opening it in his own inimitable and passionate style, and to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for it.

I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss how and why the second Chamber should be reformed to allow Parliament to work more effectively and democratically for the electorate throughout the United Kingdom. In its current form, the House of Lords can only be seen as an affront to democracy, and it has no place in a modern democratic decision-making process.

Since my election in May, I have become familiar with the strange traditions that surround this place. There are many outdated rules and conventions that range from the slightly odd to the ridiculous, and from trivial matters such as fancy dress to much more important issues like 15-minute votes which stifle the democratic process. However, the most outdated relic with which we have to deal is the unelected second Chamber of peers. What does it say about us that here, in the 21st century, we need to rely on an undemocratic body that includes religious leaders, defeated MPs, party cronies and donors to oversee and scrutinise the work of the democratically elected representatives of this place?

That bloated and out-of-date Chamber is the second largest legislative body in the world, with 821 peers. It is second only to the National People’s Congress in China, which has a similarly undemocratic basis. The number of peers in the House of Lords is growing continually, and after the recent election we saw the Government appointing party loyalists to “serve” there. Kenneth Gibson, a Member of the Scottish Parliament, has obtained figures showing that nearly 75% of those appointed to the Lords since the election are defeated, retired or deselected MPs, or former advisers. The United Kingdom also stands out among other western democracies in giving religious leaders seats in its legislature, as of right.

The Scottish National party does not put forward any individuals to be appointed to serve in the House of Lords. We have a long-standing opposition to that costly, undemocratic and bloated Chamber, and will continue to oppose it at every opportunity. In contrast, all the other parties regularly put forward individuals to serve as peers. In fact, 586 of the serving peers come from one of the main political parties that are represented in this Chamber.

As well as the long-standing democratic outrage, there is the equally long-standing financial cost of having such a ridiculous Chamber. In 2014-15 it cost nearly £95 million to run the House of Lords, with over £20 million going on Lords expenses and allowances. If we contrast that with the £87 million it cost to run the Scottish Parliament, we can easily see why so many of our constituents are royally fed up with the Chamber.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is new to the House. I have been here for five years now and I just want to say that not a single constituent of mine has ever mentioned the House of Lords. How many of the hon. Gentleman's constituents have brought up this subject?

Gavin Newlands: This point was made earlier on. Although many other issues do come up and this is far from being the No. 1 topic of conversation on the doorstep, it has certainly come up many times, and I am about to come on to the question of public levels of support.

It is clear to most people that the second Chamber needs radical reform if we want to be able to call ourselves a true modern democracy. In a YouGov poll of September 2015 people were given a range of options, and it found that 41% believe the House of Lords should be entirely elected, but crucially only 5% thought that the system was acceptable in its current format.

Even though the recently published Strathclyde review did not comment on the composition of the House of Lords, it provides an ideal opportunity to discuss the future of the House of Lords in more detail. This review was hastily announced by a Government in a petty huff following their humiliating defeat on tax credit cuts in the Lords. It is clear that this review was set up to curb the second Chamber's ability to hold this Government to account. These issues need to be properly debated, not pushed through hastily without the revising Chamber having full powers of scrutiny.

The UK Government want to muzzle the Lords in the same way as they have already muzzled charities and others who have criticised welfare reform and austerity. I accept that the Government have a majority of MPs in this Chamber; however, they should not confuse that with having a majority of wisdom. On matters of parliamentary procedure and set-up, the Government should be willing to listen to, and work with, those with different views, whether they be other MPs, parties or Parliaments, outside organisations, or indeed the second Chamber.

The SNP does not support the current approach to the House of Lords, how we pay those who attend and the privilege associated with it, but we have to acknowledge that on occasion the Lords can be useful, for example in helping to force the recent tax credits U-turn. The recent Lords review on the impact of the planned cuts to employment and support allowance led by Cross-Bench peers is another example of the kind of invaluable review of policy that we need a second Chamber to take forward.

I do not support an unelected second Chamber and believe fervently that the House of Lords must be abolished. In such an eventuality, there is the option of having a unicameral Parliament, as outlined previously, with a beefed-up Committee structure somewhat like

that of the Scottish Parliament, rather than a bicameral set-up. However, for the purposes of this debate I have presumed there is a settled will for having two tiers. Whatever arrangements are made, we must be able to properly scrutinise and hold this Government to account.

I have to be honest and admit to being very conflicted when we are forced to rely on the unelected Chamber to defend the welfare state against the cuts planned by this Conservative Government. It took the House of Lords, as flawed as it is, to tackle the planned cuts. It may well be down to the second Chamber to face the Government again as they seem determined to cut ESA, further penalising disabled people, some of whom lobbied Members in Westminster Hall yesterday.

It highlights the absurdity of the UK's current constitutional arrangement that we are relying on unelected peers to protect us from some of the worst aspects of this Government's policy agenda. This situation has caused a lot of anger in Scotland. Why are we forced to rely on unelected peers to defend our fellow citizens and their families? Scotland has seen unprecedented levels of democratic engagement during and after the referendum, so the idea of having to rely on this outdated, out-of-touch and undemocratic institution to defend the welfare state does not sit well with people—and it does not sit well with me.

The second Chamber in its current form is nothing more than an affront to democracy, and the way successive Governments have used the patronage system to reward party loyalists is only the tip of the iceberg. We recently learned that once again friends of Cabinet Ministers have been rewarded for their services with a place in the Lords. The numerous former MPs, special advisers and party aides who were awarded peerages after the election make the House look like a dumping ground or a retirement plan for party cronies. The numerous expenses scandals involving the Members of the second Chamber also do nothing to improve people's image of the Lords.

Whatever my feelings on this issue, however, I recognise the benefits of having a second Chamber at Westminster with the current Government in office. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. A range of reviews have been carried out into the current set-up, and several organisations have done a lot of work on the issue and come up with several options. Groups such as the Electoral Reform Society and the University College London constitutional unit have carried out in-depth research into the House of Lords and possible alternatives to it. We need a comprehensive and transparent debate on this matter in Government time, but I imagine that this Conservative Government would be reluctant to grant such a debate, judging by the way in which they have rushed through the Strathclyde review.

Labour and the Conservatives have been guilty in the past of failing to follow through on their intentions to reform the House of Lords. The introduction of the Parliament Act 1911 was the first indication of any Government's intention to reform the Lords, but after 105 years we are still waiting for any real reform to take place. The recent tax credits U-turn shows that the second Chamber has its place, but we need a Chamber that can hold the Government to account and properly scrutinise legislation. At the moment, the House of Lords is just one more outdated Westminster relic that should be consigned to history. Until that happens, and until we have a second Chamber that actually works, I will continue

[Gavin Newlands]

to speak up for change. It is time to ensure that we have a modern and flexible democracy by abolishing the medieval House of Lords. We need to look ahead, not backwards.

3.40 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): When I first wandered into the Chamber today, I thought I had come into the wrong debate, because the Annunciator shows the title of the debate as “House of Lords reform”. Neither my colleagues nor I believe that there can be any reforming of something that is so deeply undemocratic and rotten to the core.

There is no doubt that the general public across the UK are deeply disengaged from and alienated by much of what goes on in this place. It is dangerous for democracy when the very people it is intended to serve lose so much interest and faith in it. We can come up with warm words and grand ideas about how to tackle that, but perhaps the single most important thing we can do to repair some, although not all, of the damaging rift between those of us who serve and those whom we seek to serve would be to hear the calls—a deafening din in Scotland—to abolish the House of Lords. It is no better than a carbuncle on the face of democracy across the United Kingdom, and there is a deep sense of frustration with it across communities in Scotland. It has already been pointed out that this archaic, outdated and medieval and anachronistic institution has no place in any state that purports to be a modern, enlightened and forward-looking democracy. Just to be clear, we do not simply object to the personnel in the House of Lords, although we do; we do not recognise its legitimacy or its right to legislate over the citizens of the UK.

Kelvin Hopkins: I agree very much with what the hon. Lady is saying. The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) suggested earlier that this subject never came up on the doorstep. Does she agree that that is because people’s first concerns are jobs, housing, poverty and the health service? However, if people are asked about the House of Lords, many would say that we should abolish it.

Patricia Gibson: I absolutely agree with what the hon. Gentleman has just said. When people talk to us on the doorstep, their priorities are of course job security, benefit sanctions and putting food on the table, but if we scratch the surface, we find that the House of Lords is universally hated, across the UK in my view. There might be small pockets of support among what might be called traditionalists, but for the ordinary man and woman in the street, the House of Lords is an affront to modern democracy.

What I am about to say has already been mentioned earlier in the debate. That is one of the disadvantages of being so far down the speaking list. It is bad enough that the House of Lords is unelected, but it really is quite incredible to think that we are the only state in the world apart from Iran that has clerics pontificating on legislation. That further illustrates the absurdity of this relic.

Despite all the plaudits and feeble attempts to justify the other place, perhaps by those who have pals or cronies there or those who seek to retire there themselves

when the voters reject them, it cannot be justified to retain those who are unelected. They have often been actively rejected by the voters. It is arguably worse that some of them have shied away from presenting themselves to the voters at any time at all, despite having political ambitions. That really makes the House of Lords a laughing stock in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Steven Paterson: Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment that this Government, who made their one MP from Scotland Secretary of State, had to aggrandise or ennoble someone and put them in the House of Lords to fulfil the role of deputy—Under-Secretary of State—in the Scotland Office?

Patricia Gibson: Indeed, I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. I wish to add my disappointment at the fact that the Leader of the Opposition, who considers himself to have very left-wing credentials, has co-opted Members of the House of Lords into his shadow Cabinet. That is a travesty if ever there was one.

I may have been a huge fan of the political novels of Anthony Trollope in my formative years, but I have no wish to live in the 19th century. Madam Deputy Speaker, if you will indulge me for just a moment, I feel that I must share some figures with the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) has shamed me into doing this, and marital relations would become strained if I did not mention the fact that the distinguished—certainly he is in my house—MSP for Cunninghame North unearthed some figures that showed that nearly 75% of appointments to the Lords are defeated, retired or deselected MPs or former advisers. After every election, we actually hear the stamper towards the ermine, from this place to that place. If this matter were not so serious, I would be laughing. We have hereditary peers and Church of England bishops—I have often wondered whether that means that God is an Englishman.

Martin John Docherty: Does my hon. Friend agree that if God were a Scotsman, he still would not want a place in the House of Lords?

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely. We have in the Lords cronies, party donors, party-placed men and women—although there are fewer women than men—failed politicians, and retired politicians who are looking for a wee hobby in 2016. Perhaps that was fitting in Anthony Trollope’s time, but, for the love of God—Madam Deputy Speaker, forgive me—let us get a grip. I bet that when we do get rid of this relic, just like the smoking ban we will wonder why it took so long and why we waited so long. No one on these Benches is saying that there are not some folk in the House of Lords who are well intentioned or who have much expertise and skill to offer their country’s legislative process. No one is even saying that we should not enter into a debate about the relative merits of a second Chamber to revise legislation. That is a debate that we could and should have in the future. What we are saying is that anyone who seeks to pontificate over, revise, introduce or influence legislation in our Parliament should be elected by the people whom they purport to serve. It is as simple as that.

I am almost embarrassed to repeat the numbers for China’s National People’s Congress—as I have now made comparisons with China and Iran, I can see that we are in good company with those beacons of democracy.

Alison Thewliss: In his book “The Point of Departure”, the late Member of Parliament for Livingston recalled an incident at a Europe-Africa summit. A president of one African country said that they could not be criticised for failing to introduce full democracy after only 50 years of independence when Britain had failed to get rid of the hereditary principle after 500 years.

Patricia Gibson: As I have said, we are becoming a laughing stock all over the world.

In addition—and this is a very, very serious point—we are told that these are austere times. We cannot afford to help the so-called “benefit scroungers”, but we can afford to help the “strivers”—and the House of Lords is full of them. We must punish families with more than two children, because everyone knows that if a person has a third child, they are clearly trying to get money out of the taxpayer. Yet here we have in the House of Lords what many of my constituents would call a trough. It is costing £94.4 million. This dripping roast, as my constituents would call it, costs more than the Scottish Parliament—elected, accountable, forward-thinking, enlightened and representative of the people—and has even more Members than the European Parliament.

In my view, Clement Attlee was being extremely kind when he described the House of Lords as

“like a glass of champagne that has stood for five days”.

I much prefer the analysis that the best cure for admiring the House of Lords is to go and look at it. When we sanction vulnerable folk on benefits who are five minutes late for an appointment at the jobcentre, when we hammer women born in the 1950s by moving their retirement age further away, when my constituents see Scotland’s budget being squeezed and we hear this being called “a sustainable economic plan”, I and many others ask how that sustainable economic plan impacts on the waste, the affront to democracy, the dripping roast that is the House of Lords—and these people dare to pontificate on Scotland’s constitutional future. Even the Lords themselves hardly take it seriously: attendance is around 60%, although it has improved recently, perhaps because the dripping roast is drying up and much must be suckled in the dying moments of the House.

What a tragedy it is that the 2015 Conservative manifesto indicated that the party did not consider House of Lords reform a priority. No, let us instead prioritise bashing the vulnerable and taking benefits away from the poor. The Strathclyde review was a wasted opportunity—then again, turkeys do not vote for Christmas. They can tinker at the edges all they like; they will never make this affront to democracy palatable enough for the people in my constituency that they see it as having any legitimacy. Let us abolish this carbuncle on the face of democracy. Let us listen to the people. Then, they may begin to listen to what this place has to say. I urge the Minister to screw his courage to the sticking place, to get a grip and to get rid. It is time the UK grew up.

3.52 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): When the first automobile engines were developed, they were dirty, unreliable and inefficient, but they evolved and improved. When I want to get from A to B in a timely, reliable and comfortable fashion, I look to use a suitable vehicle. I do not use the 45-year-old project that I have propped up on bricks in my garage. Although there is a place in

my heart for the 1967 Sunbeam Alpine with twin Venturi carburettors, a 1725 cc engine with overdrive, a soft top and skinny tyres, I recognise that it does not fulfil the necessary criteria for day-to-day driving. Over the past 100 years, transport, communications, healthcare, education, foreign policy and defence have all evolved and are barely recognisable from their younger selves, yet the House of Lords has not kept pace. Utilising the House of Lords as an effective, efficient second Chamber of this Parliament in this day and age is as practical as using a horse and cart to travel down a busy motorway.

We have continued to govern from a cloistered and privileged place rooted in the past. Parliament should reflect the society it wishes to create. The House of Lords does not reflect any society that I wish to be part of. No doubt, there are capable, compassionate people who wash up in the Lords and who do care, can help to govern and are, in fact, the very people who could and would be democratically elected to a second Chamber, but far too many are there by accident rather than design. We require a second Chamber that reflects the 21st century—a Chamber that represents all religions and none; a Chamber that sits during recognised working hours; a Chamber that is elected and is not inhabited by the fourth generation offspring of long-forgotten generals, admirals and landowning aristocracy; a Chamber where seats cannot be bought for political favour; and a Chamber that is accountable for the behaviour of its Members.

Of course, reform of the House of Lords is not a new idea. The proposal to elect Members directly was first made over 100 years ago. It is probably due for a Second Reading any day now. Much more recently, when the lords a-leaping refused to play ball with the current Government and kicked out the proposals on tax credits, the Government sprang into action and ordered a review—nay, a rapid review, and who better to chair a rapid review of the relationship between the two Houses of Parliament than a former Leader of the House of Lords, a hereditary peer who had never been elected to any Chamber?

The outcome of the rapid review was—hon. Members should not get too excited—a new procedure. This new procedure would

“invite the Commons to think again”.

But Lord Strathclyde did not leave it there. Oh no. With the full force of Parliament he wielded his mighty pen and suggested—yes, suggested—that a review should take place, to be known henceforth as “son of rapid review”. The Government responded and allowed a full debate—in the House of Lords. On the back of this earth-shattering outcome, we all went home for Christmas and forgot all about rapid review and his offspring.

Not surprisingly, MPs continue to ask questions regarding the reform of the House of Lords. As recently as 14 September 2015 the Prime Minister responded to such a question by assuring us that he will be

“looking, with others, at issues such as the size of the Chamber and the retirement of peers.”

By size I presume he meant the number rather than the dimensions, as he is the Prime Minister who has created more peers than any other Prime Minister since the system was overhauled in 1958. I can only presume that he has looked, with others, and decided that we do not have enough.

[Ronnie Cowan]

There are many ways in which the House of Lords could be reformed—a Chamber composed of Members elected directly by the electorate, set terms for elected Members, a significant decrease in the number of Members, a secular Chamber, a fair distribution of seats for the UK's nations and regions, and measures to encourage a more diverse range of candidates, designed to represent civil society and minorities. There are many possible changes that could improve the House of Lords, but rather like the old joke, “How many psychiatrists does it take to change a lightbulb?—One, but the lightbulb has to want to change,” the House of Lords has to want to change, and this place has to want to change it.

Is reform required? Unquestionably. Are there many practical ways in which this could be done? Of course there are. Is there a will? If there is a will, let us hope that it did not bequeath a hereditary peer to the next ermine-robed incumbent in a long line of ermine-robed incumbents. Let us make this will a testament to reform. I appeal to this Government. If they genuinely want change, they should put it on the agenda and make it happen. If not, if they are content with the status quo, they should stand up and say so.

3.57 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the Backbench Business Committee for making time for this debate and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin John Docherty) on his outstandingly passionate speech. I hope he will not mind my mentioning that he has had other reasons over the past week for earning our warm congratulations and best wishes. We all wish him well in the new life that he is leading. All the best to him.

My hon. Friend started the preparations for the birthday of Robert Burns by quoting from not only the greatest work that Robert Burns ever wrote, but arguably the greatest humanitarian work in the history of literature. I was a bit disappointed because I thought he was going to continue with a section of that song that would almost sum up this debate in a few words:

Ye see yon birkie ca'd a lord,
Wha struts, an' stares, an' a' that,
Tho' hundreds worship at his word,
He's but a cuif for a' that.”

I have to confess, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I was very careful indeed not to check the dictionary before I came in here because I have a nasty feeling that if I had done, I would have realised that the word “cuif” could not be used in the Chamber. I am not entirely sure what it means.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman should know that as far as I am concerned, anything said by Robert Burns can be used in this Chamber.

Peter Grant: I am very grateful indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker, not least because I intend to quote the bard later on.

I find it astonishing that when we started the process of review of and consultation on how to repair the fabric of this undoubtedly magnificent and historic building,

it was based on the assumption that Parliament would continue to operate in exactly the same way as it presumably always has done. May I suggest that a golden opportunity was missed to start to reform the processes of not only this Chamber, but the second Chamber?

Indeed, this might be an opportunity to ask ourselves why we need a second Chamber at all. Other modern, inclusive, democratic countries manage perfectly well with one Chamber. If we think about it, the argument that the second Chamber is good at scrutinising and checking the actions of the first Chamber suggests that we are saying that the first Chamber is not doing its job, so perhaps we should literally get our own House in order and then consider whether we want another House just down the road.

Kelvin Hopkins: I agree with what the hon. Gentleman has said. In my speech I mentioned Sweden, which has abolished its second Chamber. Does he appreciate that Sweden has not become undemocratic as a result? It is as democratic as it was before.

Peter Grant: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. Imagine that this Parliament had historically consisted of a single, elected Chamber. Then imagine that someone comes along and suggests that we need a second, unelected Chamber in order to become more democratic. They would be laughed out of court.

I think that there are options available to us if we are prepared to look at having a second elected Chamber, assuming that we need a second Chamber at all. That would give us a chance to elect the House of Lords on a different electoral cycle from that of the House of Commons, in order to avoid the temptation for Governments to time their announcements and legislation with a view to getting re-elected in a few years' time. It would give us the chance, importantly, to elect a second Chamber by a different electoral method to help even out some of the undoubted inequities that exist in the first-past-the-post system. Yes, the SNP benefited from that system at the general election, but the system was not fair when it worked to our disadvantage, and it is no fairer when it works to our advantage.

Comments were made earlier about the place of the representatives of the Church of England in the House of Lords. I will defend and warmly commend the actions of a number of Churches and faith groups in helping to act as a social conscience of our nations. I think of the important work that various Churches have done in critiquing benefit sanctions and nuclear weapons, or in reminding us that the refugee crisis is about human beings, not burdens on our benefits system. I hope that faith groups, including humanists, who in my view are a legitimate faith group, will continue to do that. However, in this day and age should they have an automatic right to make laws that apply to the majority of citizens in these islands who choose to follow a different interpretation of their faith? I fully appreciate that that will be a difficult conversation for many, but it is one that we really cannot shy away from for very much longer.

It can be argued that there is a benefit in allowing people from all walks of life to play a part in scrutinising legislation, rather than just the relatively narrow “political elite”. There are two problems with that argument. First, the House of Lords is not a representative sample; if anything, it is more dominated by the political elite

than the House of Commons. Secondly, the House of Lords does not just scrutinise legislation; it can block it. It can even initiate legislation and ask us to scrutinise it.

As the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) mentioned, if there are benefits in having experts who are not Members of Parliament, or lay people, advising and scrutinising legislation, why not set up a system that allows appointed people to scrutinise and examine, but not to legislate or to overrule the will of the democratic Chamber? That is an option that I think is well worth further investigation.

There will be those who appeal to a deity called tradition, as if tradition was always a good thing. I think that tradition is important. Our traditions are what make us who we are, and if we lose sight of who we are, then we really are in trouble. But if we allowed tradition to be the judge of what happens in future, we would still be sending children up chimneys and down mines, and we would still be exploiting slaves from other parts of the world. More topically, if we continued to judge things according to the traditions that applied in this Chamber for so long, the right hon. Gentleman the Secretary of State for Scotland would have had to resign this week. Thank goodness we have moved away from traditions that were indefensible 300 years ago and are no more defensible today.

What does it say about democracy in this Parliament when the only organisation that consistently blocks any kind of proper reform of the House of Lords is also the one with the biggest vested interest in not reforming it? Most people in these islands simply cannot understand that. Even those who are not 100% convinced that the Lords should be abolished cannot understand why, when what is supposedly the sovereign Chamber in Parliament takes a decision to reform the House of Lords, the Lords itself can block any attempts to do so.

Even without legislation that can still be blocked or delayed indefinitely by the Lords itself, party leaders could give commitments that would get rid of some of the potential abuses, which, let us face it, we all know have happened. Although it is not possible to point to an individual appointment and know for certain that it was based on financial transactions, or on a deal made when somebody was still a Member of Parliament, the fact that the system can be vulnerable to that kind of abuse means that in the eyes of the public it very probably has been abused in that way in the past.

Let us look at the three worst abuses, which cause a lot of concern. I invite the Minister not to commit to dealing with them but at least to give serious consideration to how the parties could, right now, start to make the appointment system of the House of Lords a bit more acceptable, pending a proper and rapid review sometime in the next two or three hundred years. First, politicians who get kicked out by the democratic process can come back, arguably better off than they have been here, by being appointed to the House of Lords. Why not ban appointments of former MPs to the House of Lords, at least for a period of five or 10 years afterwards?

Secondly, there seems to be a high correlation between new appointments to the House of Lords and previous donors to party coffers. I am told that about 25% of all recent appointments by the Prime Minister were of people who had made substantial donations to the party coffers. I do not object to people giving money to causes they believe in, but there is an issue there that

damages the reputation of this place in the eyes of the public. Why not set a limit and say that anybody who has donated above a certain amount to a political party cannot then take a place in the House of Lords, again possibly with a five-year or 10-year cooling-off period?

Finally, there is an abuse of the system that we have seen here. Page after page of improvements to the Scotland Bill put forward by the people who were elected to represent Scotland were rejected by MPs who have no mandate to represent Scotland, and then promptly reintroduced by those same MPs through their friends in the House of Lords. When the amendments came back to the House of Commons a short time later, the people who had voted against them trooped through the Lobby to vote for them. That is a wrong use of the process. Why not invite the Government to consider the possibility of putting themselves under a voluntary ban whereby they will not introduce major legislation in the Lords unless it has been passed by this Chamber first, and will not introduce large numbers of significant amendments in the Lords when they have had the opportunity to have them considered in this place first?

Even those changes would not go far enough for me, or for a lot of people, but they would at least start to show the people of these islands, in good faith, that the Government are serious about tackling an appointments system, in particular, that has no place in a representative democracy.

Earlier, someone referred to Westminster as the mother of Parliaments. I have heard the story that once, during a hustings debate probably somewhere north of the border, somebody announced in a very pompous manner that he was proud to serve in the mother of all Parliaments, and a voice from the back asked him if he had any idea who the father was. I am not going to say which of those comments I prefer.

I started by quoting the greatest poem, or song, that Robert Burns ever wrote, but I think that the greatest piece of writing by Robert Burns is, surprisingly, not a poem or a song, but a piece of prose:

“Whatever mitigates the woes or increases the happiness of others—this is my criterion of goodness. And whatever injures society at large, or any individual, in it—this is my measure of iniquity.”

The way that Members of the Lords are appointed right now means that we have an iniquitous situation in this Parliament. If the Lords is not prepared to accept fundamental reform, then it can, will and must be abolished.

4.9 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am delighted to speak on behalf of the SNP in this Backbench Business debate on the House of Lords. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin John Docherty) secured the debate, although I am rather glad that he spoke some time ago, so that everyone could forget how brilliant his speech was by the time it came round to mine.

As has been mentioned, this issue is not something that gets people exercised. However, I would suggest that, in Scotland, membership of the SNP is not insubstantial. There are quite a few members of the SNP, and at the SNP conference in Aberdeen, at which there were 3,500 delegates, there was a huge cheer when it was suggested that the House of Lords should be

[*Kirsty Blackman*]

abolished. This is something that gets members of the SNP excited. It is something that genuinely gets mentioned on the doorsteps when we knock on doors. It is perhaps not the first thing that comes up—absolutely not—but parliamentary and constitutional reform come up a lot on the doorsteps in Scotland.

I am particularly pleased that this debate follows the one on space policy, because this place—these Houses of Parliament—is in another world from the one I normally inhabit. I have spoken to people previously about why they should dislike the House of Lords. Within the SNP and among people I have spoken to, there is a visceral, immediate dislike of the House of Lords, but people should not dislike it because the Lords swan along in ermine robes; they should dislike it because of the level of power that the House of Lords has.

This is not a way to run a democracy. Nobody creating a democratic system afresh would come up with the undemocratic, unwieldy and unaccountable second Chamber that we have. The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) mentioned that the UK muddles along, and that is what has happened. It has happened with parliamentary reform and, as I will mention a little later, with reform of the Standing Orders in this place as well.

This is bicameralism at its worst. Of the 192 parliaments recognised by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, 77 are bicameral and only the UK, Belgium, Zimbabwe and Lesotho have hereditary legislators. Belgium does not really count, though, because its hereditary legislators are related to the monarch and do not vote on anything, so the wonderful United Kingdom—proud defender of democracy; the mother of parliaments—is a member of a very select group that allows landed gentry to make law for our countries. Zimbabwe and Lesotho and us—there is nothing good about this situation.

I would like to take Members back to 1997. It is some time ago now, and things have changed a fair bit since then: I was still in primary school, Hanson were topping the charts with “MMMBop” and the Labour party was popular in Scotland. The Labour manifesto in 1997 said:

“The House of Lords must be reformed...the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords will be ended by statute.”

Despite a massive majority for the Labour party in 1997 and a clear manifesto commitment to rid our democratic system of hereditary peers, nearly 20 years on we still have 92 of them—92 Lords who are allowed to make legislation because their family owned land.

I was talking to a peer recently about hereditary peerages. The defence mentioned was that there was a hereditary peer who could trace her family back 400 years. The nature of humankind is that all our families can be traced back 400 years; otherwise, we would not be here. It is ridiculous, patronising and wrong to argue that a tithe paid to a monarch hundreds of years ago should qualify any individual to make legislation. The Conservative Government make all sorts of claims about working hard being the best way to get on in life and achieve a high-salary job, for example. There is a wilful downplaying of the inbuilt advantage accorded to those whose families owned large country estates. Many of those estates were won by force and held by oppression. There is not a

meritocracy in these islands. Working hard does not necessarily get anyone anywhere; where they are born and who their family are does.

Having said that and made clear my absolute disagreement with any system that accords a higher level of importance to anyone simply because of an accident of birth, I want to make clear my absolute lack of regard for the appointments system for life peers. Cross-Bench peers tell me how rigorous the process is for appointing them. I agree that it is thorough and they have to make major commitments to how much time they are going to spend in the House of Lords. However, there is no compulsion on the Prime Minister to ensure that non-Cross-Bench peers—or even Cross-Bench peers, for that matter—are appointed in that way. There is also no limit on the size of the Chamber, and one of the best ways to receive an excellent salary for life is to donate money to either the Conservative or Labour parties and be appointed to the House of Lords.

I want to expand on what my hon. Friends the Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) have said about former parliamentarians. Since 1997, 152 former parliamentarians have been ennobled. Twenty of them were given peerages within five years of losing an election to the House of Commons. So within five years of being rejected by the electorate, they were given a seat in the other House to make legislation for the people who had rejected them. It is a ridiculous situation.

The reforms enacted in 1999—which I admit were good and took us a step along the way, but nowhere near far enough—did have an effect on the behaviour of the House of Lords, including on the turnout figures. However, they also made the House of Lords more powerful, because peers felt that they had more of a right to be there and to make decisions about legislation, but that is not the case. The House of Lords is still an unelected legislature and it should not be making laws for this country. There is no accountability. Members of the public cannot access the Lords—they do not know who they are. Peers are out of touch. There is no compulsion on them to listen to people in the general community. What they learn about the general community is often garnered from newspapers, and we all know that they are not a true reflection of society.

The House of Lords is also massively lacking in diversity, which has been mentioned by various Members. Only 26% of peers are female, which is even worse than the figure for this place. The record in the House of Commons is deplorable, but the record in the House of Lords is much worse. In June 2015 there were more people who had been peers for more than 30 years than there were peers under the age of 50, and there were only two peers under 40 among the entire 800-odd Members of the House of Lords. That compares hugely unfavourably with elected politics in the UK. It does not constitute representative democracy.

The youngest age at which a current Member of the House of Lords received a life peerage was 32. Although I fundamentally disagree with appointments for life, it is bizarre that half of our legislature should exclude anyone who I would class as young. It is no wonder that, as a result, young people do not trust the democratic system. They look at this place and they see a bunch of old

people who they cannot relate to. If we look at elected Members as a whole, we will see that we are still woefully unrepresentative.

As has been said, some peers, particularly Cross Benchers, work very hard, but that cannot be used to legitimise the existence of the second Chamber, which is incredibly expensive. Some Cross Benchers have been, and continue to be, very active in their areas of work and fields of expertise, but there is no check on that. As the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) has said, people become ex-experts—their expertise goes away—very quickly.

The House of Commons has utterly failed to amend or rewrite the Parliament Acts to make any meaningful change to the House of Lords, which has not happened for the best part of 20 years. Actually, we have not made much change to the powers of the House of Lords since the Parliament Act 1911 and, subsequently, the Parliament Act 1949, which just tinkered with it. As I have said on previous occasions, I do not believe that the procedures of the House of Commons are fit for purpose. Given the opportunity, I would tear up the Standing Orders and start again, dramatically reducing the Executive privilege accorded to the Government of the day, thus requiring them to use their majority far more often.

The situation in the House of Lords is even worse. It is all done on the basis of convention. The Government got into such a pickle over tax credits because there is a convention—there is nothing in legislation—that the House of Lords does not vote on such things. On paper, the House of Lords is an incredibly powerful institution, and that is something we need to change.

The House of Lords is not a revising second Chamber. Nobody who makes the case for a revising second Chamber can hold up the House of Lords as the place that can revise legislation. It can still introduce primary legislation. It is not elected, but it can introduce legislation on behalf of the people of this country. It should not do so.

Martin Vickers: The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. As she knows from mine, I share her ambition to do away with an unelected second Chamber. However, can she explain her party's support for membership of the European Union, where real power lies with the unelected European Commission? The European Parliament is really a sideshow.

Kirsty Blackman: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, which I am sure will be discussed at length during European debates. Today, however, we are discussing the House of Lords, which is something that we have the power to change. Members of this place could pass a new Parliament Act. Elected Members have the ability to make mass changes to the House of Lords, and we should make big changes to it.

Peter Grant: Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be beneficial to introduce some of the European Parliament and European Commission's ways of working to this place? For example, the European Parliament has the power to sack the entire European Commission. Does she support giving the House of Commons the right to sack the entire House of Lords? I think that is what the hon. Member for Cleithorpes (Martin Vickers) was referring to.

Kirsty Blackman: I would be delighted if the House of Commons had the ability to sack the entire House of Lords. In fact, I think the Conservative Government would have been quite keen to sack the entire House of Lords earlier in the Session.

Martin Vickers: I just remind the hon. Lady and her colleagues that this Chamber has the power to sack the Government.

Kirsty Blackman: I am coming to the end of my speech, so I will now wrap up. The power of the House of Lords is dramatically greater than it should be. It has the ability to appoint people who have been rejected at the ballot box. People troop into that House rubbing their hands with glee at the untaxed £45,000 a year they can now earn. The expenses system and the payments system for the House of Lords—getting £300 day, which is classed as an allowance, and is not taxed—are abominable. That should not be happening.

The composition of the House of Lords is ridiculous. It is unrepresentative, and in no circumstances should it include hereditary peers and those appointed by religious organisations, whether from the Church of England or of any other religious organisation. I do not think there is any place for religious appointments in a legislative system. Lifetime appointments to any legislature are undemocratic. There are peers sitting there who have been peers for 70 years, which is an incredible length of time. Some of them are no longer active, but they still have the right to troop into the House and vote. How good is a peer at voting if they have been a peer for 70 years? They have a length of experience behind them—fair enough—but most people want to sit with their feet up and watch TV by the time they get to such an age. Appointments for high heijins and party donors are wrong and should not be happening.

The House of Lords is beyond reform. People have tried to reform it in the past, but it is still not an elected, accountable second Chamber. We need to abolish it.

4.23 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I genuinely congratulate the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin John Docherty) on opening the debate and on his very colourful and well-informed speech. I must say that many good points have been made. I emphasise the point made by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), which is that we must have a debate. It is very important to recognise the complexity and difficulty of reform, and we must begin by having an honest debate.

I congratulate Scottish National party Members on the consistency and uniformity of their arguments, by and large. They showed discipline. The number of times I heard reference to China's National People's Congress, I would not like to say. The hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) did talk about reform, rather than abolition. I welcome that because it is healthy to have a difference of emphasis within a political group, if not a complete difference.

Few people would genuinely say that our parliamentary system does not need fundamental change. It is important to remember that the biggest change to the composition of the second Chamber came under a Labour Government, when we secured the abolition of most of the hereditary peers. That was the start of a reform that we must complete as soon as is practicable, and it must be a

[Wayne David]

radical reform. I say radical reform, rather than abolition of the second Chamber, because I am not convinced that we should move away from a bicameral parliamentary system.

Kelvin Hopkins: Clearly we have a difference of view on this. My hon. Friend says that there has not been enough discussion about reform. There has been a lot of talk about reform, but there has not been much of a debate about the alternative of having a unicameral Parliament. That is what I want to see.

Wayne David: I respect my hon. Friend's view. That is one of the discussions that we need to have in this Chamber. He is perfectly right that we need to discuss not just how reform might be brought about, but whether we even need a second Chamber. I am of the view, although I am willing to take part in a debate, that we should have a bicameral system. There is a need for a second Chamber to scrutinise, modify, suggest amendments to and delay legislation, although I think that legislation should always emanate from this House.

It is deplorable that we are seeing two sustained attempts not to introduce more democracy into the second Chamber, but to exercise control over the second Chamber's ability to hold the Executive to account. It is important to remember that this Government have appointed more Conservative peers than Margaret Thatcher did in her 11 years as Prime Minister. There is also a debate taking place about Lord Strathclyde's report, which I would argue is all about undermining the ability of the other place to hold the Government to account.

We know why the Government are trying to control and weaken the Lords. It is not because they believe in democracy or because they have accepted the arguments of the SNP, but because they do not like to be scrutinised or challenged, no matter where it comes from. The issue is not the primacy of the House of Commons over the House of Lords; this is about the Government trying to minimise challenge and push aside opposition.

In the last Parliament, a great deal of time and effort was spent on debating reform of the House of Lords. Sadly, it came to nothing because the Liberal Democrats refused to have a constructive dialogue with reformers on the Opposition Benches and because—it is important to remember this—the Prime Minister did not deliver on his promise and Conservative Back Benchers defended the status quo.

What is needed now is a nationwide debate about the kind of democracy we need for the 21st century. The 19th-century, highly centralised nation state based on London is surely a thing of the past. Decentralisation must be the order of the day, not just to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but to the regions, cities and localities of England. There is therefore a strong case for a second Chamber—call it a senate if you like—made up of representatives of the nations and regions of the UK, possibly with people drawn from local government as well. Such a second Chamber might be made up of indirectly elected representatives or directly elected representatives. It would have the advantage of providing informed scrutiny by individuals drawn from all parts of the United Kingdom. It is a shame that most Members

of the other place are either drawn from, or have a focus on, London and south-east England. That cannot be acceptable.

When we talk about fundamental change to our constitution, it is important to remember three things. First, there must be debate and dialogue between all political parties and, if possible, a high degree of consensus about what kind of changes are needed. If it is believed that political advantage is a motive behind any constitutional change, that change will not work effectively and will ultimately fail. Secondly, it is important not to see Lords reform in isolation from other changes that are needed for our democracy. I have already referred to devolution, but I believe that in our country there is a widespread thirst for popular engagement. No longer are people prepared simply to sit back and allow those who are unelected to make important decisions. It is therefore important to have a broad perspective when considering changes to our democracy.

Thirdly, we must not believe that there can be a top-down approach towards political reform, or that we are the repository of all knowledge on these matters. The people of our country need to be fully engaged in the debate on democratic renewal, and that is why we believe that there needs to be a people's constitutional convention. Such a convention ought not to be made up of the great and good; rather, it should draw in people from all walks of life and all parts of the country. It must be focused in its discussions, and it must also inspire and enthuse people so that we give our democracy fresh life and inspiration.

4.31 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin John Docherty) on securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I think he said that it was his beginners plea when he made his case, but he knocked any sense of being a beginner into a cocked hat with his speech. He hoped that we would forgive his tendency for Celtic hyperventilation—I think that was the phrase he used. He was also kind enough to mention that he counted Wales and certainly Cornwall as part of the Celtic fringe. I may not represent Cornwall but I have a Cornish name, so I am glad to hear that he would include me in that group. I will try not to hyperventilate either, and the hon. Gentleman made a powerful and good case.

We also had the opportunity to compare and contrast our debate with the previous debate on space policy, which contained many quotes from David Bowie. In this debate we had many quotes from Robbie Burns. I will leave Members here present and those reading *Hansard* later to come to their own conclusions about the relative merits of those two bards, one ancient, one modern. I suspect that they will both be clasped firmly to different people's hearts during this debate.

Let me echo a point made by a number of colleagues during the debate and ask: where on earth are the Liberal Democrats? Where have they got to?

Martin John Docherty: The House of Lords!

John Penrose: Many of them are in the House of Lords. They are reduced to a small number of MPs, and none of them is here today. I regard that as a real

tragedy because in the last Parliament, and in previous Parliaments, they—they have not been the only ones—were pressing the case for reform of the Lords and other constitutional reform. All of a sudden, when they are hugely over-represented in the House of Lords relative to their representation in this House, they are nowhere to be seen. They are Macavity's cat when it comes to reform of the Lords and this debate. That is a tragedy, and people will draw their own conclusions about their relative levels of interest.

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire encapsulated a series of criticisms about the Lords, which have been widely echoed by many Members. I will not go through them all in huge detail when summing up the debate, but broadly speaking he made the point in a variety of different ways that the level of democratic legitimacy in the House of Lords is incredibly low. The only group that are elected are the 92 hereditary peers, and they are elected from an electoral college.

There are other criticisms—that the House of Lords is very large, and the bishops and hereditaries should not be there—that buttress the central charge of a lack of legitimacy and democratic principle in the Lords as it is currently constituted. I agree and that is reflected in my personal voting record on the issue. The hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) mentioned the series of votes on the issue in the 2005 Parliament. It was my first Parliament and I voted consistently for anything that would increase the level of democratic involvement in the House of Lords. In the 2010 Parliament, we had an incredibly long and drawn-out attempt to reform the House of Lords. I do not think that anyone could claim that there was not a determined attempt—probably the most determined attempt for several generations—to reform the House of Lords and to make it more democratically legitimate. I voted consistently throughout for those reforms, even though the form of election might not necessarily have been to everybody's taste—even mine. They were a step in the right direction, however, or at least they would have been had they been passed. I cannot argue, therefore, either from a personal or Government point of view, that the central charge is not valid. That is why the Conservative party's election manifesto said we remain committed in principle to reform. Our approach is not driven by an opposition to the central charge made by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire and echoed by many other hon. Members today.

Kelvin Hopkins: The Minister talks about making the House of Lords more democratic, which is second-best to abolition. How will he deal with the real problem: prime ministerial patronage?

John Penrose: If I can ask the hon. Gentleman to hold his horses, I hope to come back to that later. I am sure he will pick me up on that if I do not address it sufficiently.

At this point, I should declare a small, non-financial family interest. A couple of years ago, my wife was appointed to the House of Lords. When she was appointed, I had to point out to her that I had a long track record of voting multiple times to abolish her, and anybody like her, from the House of Lords in due course. She has forgiven me and I am sure the House will be delighted to hear that relations over the family breakfast table are

not too strained. However, I can reassure hon. Members that my personal views have not changed, despite the family involvement. Given the chance, I would vote to make them far more democratically legitimate.

I started by assuming, I think not necessarily entirely correctly, that the SNP was exclusively and purely a unicameralist party. I think we have heard support for that view during the debate from many SNP Members, the hon. Member for Luton North and, to some degree, my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers). I hope I am not putting words in anybody's mouth, but I think I heard some degree of qualified willingness to at least consider a more democratically legitimate second Chamber as an alternative to the perhaps favoured unicameralist view.

Peter Grant: Just to clarify that point, the view of the SNP and the Scottish Government was that, had we won the referendum last year, we would not have needed a second Chamber in Scotland because the Scottish Parliament works effectively. This Parliament, in the view of the SNP, is not working effectively and so a second Chamber is beneficial, but it must be democratically elected.

John Penrose: That is very helpful in clarifying the SNP's view and it leads me to talk about opportunities for reform. I, and the Government, would certainly favour keeping a second Chamber and making it more effective if the opportunity ever presented itself. There are huge advantages to having an effective second Chamber here. I say that because often the level of scrutiny imposed on any Government by the second Chamber is not a comfortable experience. It has not always been a comfortable experience for previous Labour, Conservative or even coalition Governments. Even though it is not necessarily easy or comfortable—on occasions it can be incredibly frustrating—I believe it is democratically justified and desirable, and that it results, at least in Westminster, in better law. I went along to the Lords yesterday and stood at the Bar, listening to its debate on the Strathclyde review. I challenge anybody to say it was not a high-quality and capable discussion, conducted at a high level and very clearly expressed. It has a great deal to offer, regardless of its legitimacy, and our democracy would be the poorer without a revising second Chamber.

As colleagues on both sides have said, however, we need to be careful about the Lords' powers and composition. The problem is agreeing not on the need for reform but on how we do it. As the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) said, we should be discussing not whether change is needed but what kind of change could be achieved. That is where we all come up against a serious and fundamental practical problem. While many people agree that some kind of reform and improved democratic legitimacy for the upper House is vital, agreeing on its form and creating a democratic consensus about what it should look like—as opposed simply to agreeing that there should be something—is a great deal harder. And that is what politics is all about; it is about forging the necessary democratic consensus. I think the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) mentioned the need for a democratic debate.

We need to forge a democratic consensus not on the need for change but on the form it should take. That is where the previous attempt in the last Parliament came

[John Penrose]

unstuck. There were far too many competing recipes for what the revised House of Lords might look like and a plethora of different approaches. It came unstuck not because of a lack of ideas but because there were too many ideas and not enough people agreed on any one of them, and therefore the opponents of reform won through.

Wayne David: I agree with the Minister. Do we not need to learn the lesson that, if any good fundamental reform is to take place successfully, there must be cross-party dialogue and debate and an attempt to find consensus across the House?

John Penrose: I would broaden out that point. It is hugely helpful, although not essential, for any constitutional change to be made with some cross-party agreement, if only because—this is one of the fundamental points of Britain's unwritten constitution—people need to be happy not just with how things work when they are in government but when the shoe is on the other foot and they are in opposition, because they need to bear it in mind that at some point they might not be in government. Good Governments and good Oppositions remember that point and proceed with caution and agreement wherever possible. It is not always possible, but when it can be done, it should be.

The challenge is not to agree that change is necessary but to define precisely what form it should take and to form a sufficiently large consensus to overcome the forces of inertia, which, if we are not careful, naturally tend to win—I do not know whether it is inertia or entropy, but either way, it is what happened last time.

Alison Thewliss: Will the Minister agree that part of the difficulty in arriving at a consensus is the many vested interests served by the Lords and the history of the appointees to it? It would be useful to bring in members of the public to open up the outlook on what a new constitutional arrangement might be.

John Penrose: That is one of the principles that underlie the support of the many people who are in favour of an increase in democratic legitimacy. With a democratically elected second Chamber, it is much, much harder for the forces of reaction and special interests to win through, because the antidote to most of those things is normally greater democratic involvement. So I think the hon. Lady's question enclosed its own answer, if I can put it that way; I certainly support her point.

Our problem therefore is choosing—not if, but how. There are currently too many different forms of possible election that could be looked at. There is the alternative vote, for example, and dozens of different forms of proportional representation. I regularly get letters from people who are cleaving to one or more of dozens of different kinds of electoral system. I am not sure what the democratic consensus would be on which one would be right, but I know that without a democratic consensus on choosing one, we will not be able to win the argument and get it done.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) interestingly suggested something based on occupation rather than on geographical constituencies,

and all these ideas are possible. They would all create alternative franchises that would not clash directly with the one used for this Chamber. Finding a non-clashing democratic mandate would be an advantage, but until such a thing can be done, we are inevitably on the back foot.

Kirsty Blackman: I hope the Minister is not saying that because it is so difficult, we should not do it. As the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) suggested, now might be a good time for this Conservative Government to think about taking this forward. If hardly any Members keen to maintain the House of Lords in its current form are willing to pitch up, it clearly means that there is an appetite for reform. Now is the time.

John Penrose: The hon. Lady made a series of powerful points, many of which I agreed with, but on that particular one I am respectfully going to disagree with her for a couple of reasons. We have heard from a number of different sides that the level of unprompted interest in the Dog and Duck in reform of the House of Lords is remarkably low. It might be quite high if we went along to the Bishops Bar, but that is probably the only bar in the entire country where that topic of conversation would come up naturally. Members of all parties are right to say that, when prompted, many people will agree that it is important to reform the Lords in some way. Without that prompt, however, it ranks a long way down people's lists of priorities.

We need to form and forge a democratic consensus, but it is difficult for all of us to do so when the issue is low down the list of priorities because other things are more urgent, more immediate or loom larger. It would be wrong to overstate the appetite for reform and wrong to ignore the practical difficulties of achieving it. I do not want to assume that because something is desirable but not simple, it can therefore be wished for and produced with a wave of a magic wand. We all understand, as elected politicians, how hard this is, and we can all see the trail of failed attempts to make big reform changes. We have seen how difficult equally talented politicians, some of them extremely talented politicians, have found it.

That said, there is a possibility for smaller steps to be made. In the last Parliament, there was a series of small reforms. I do not want to let anyone get the impression that we think that small reforms are a substitute for more thoroughgoing things, but in many cases they represent progress in the right direction. It would be wrong to let the best be the enemy of the good. When in the last Parliament, the House of Lords chose to change the rules on the retirement of its Members, this House agreed with it and it was a step in the right direction.

Many other issues are currently being discussed in the House of Lords, led by senior parliamentarians at that end of the building, including further reduction of the size of the House of Lords, looking at retirement ages and doing all sorts of other things. Those might not be to everybody's taste as a complete answer—many certainly do not deal with the point about democratic legitimacy—but they are steps in the right direction, and I think we should encourage their Lordships to proceed with them. We must not be guilty of saying that just because it does not fulfil our perfect world scenario, we should not give it at least the time of day.

I encourage House of Lords Members as well as hon. Members here present and others elsewhere—anybody who is interested—to try to address the question of how to achieve greater democratic legitimacy. What kind of franchise can be chosen that will not clash with the franchise of this Chamber? What levels of powers do we think should be approved for the upper Chamber?

Incidentally, there has been some criticism of the Strathclyde review today. Let me gently suggest to those who are critical that, while they may wish that the review had a broader mandate, at its heart is the aim of making the primacy of the elected House apply. I hope that Members can at least agree that that is desirable. The outcome will of course depend on which of the options are followed, but the current formulation would move us towards a much more regularised and clearly defined system of powers between this House and the upper House. A series of options are being considered in respect of the length of stay of those who are currently in the upper House, under the existing system, along with such matters as retirement ages. All those things are vital, but if we are to have reform, I urge all Members who are present today to try to create a democratic debate, and perhaps form a democratic consensus, with the aim of reaching a conclusion.

I want to give the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire a chance to sum up the debate for a couple of minutes—and perhaps to give us a little bit more Robbie Burns; I do not know—so I shall do something unusual for a politician, and sit down and keep quiet. I thank everyone who took part in the debate for their useful and thoughtful contributions. I should also respond to some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), because he asked me particularly to do so. He made a number of specific suggestions about people who might or might not be appointed to the House of Lords. I will take that as a submission, and will relay it to those in the House of Lords so that they can consider it as part of their current deliberations.

I look forward to hearing the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire sum up the debate.

4.51 pm

Martin John Docherty: I thank the Minister for participating in the debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) for informing the House about how we can make progress in the reform of an upper Chamber. I should make it clear, however, that for me and for my fellow SNP Members, the mandate from the constituencies of Scotland is that the reform

must begin with the abolition of an unelected, unaccountable peerage which can generate legislation in that other place.

I also thank the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts)—I managed to say that very quickly—my hon. Friends the Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), and for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), who is no longer in the Chamber, my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson), who I know is about to leave the Chamber to go home, and my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant). I especially thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who did much of the groundwork for the debate.

Let me now place before the Minister a couple of caveats on reform. The appointment of ex-Members of this place should be forbidden for a minimum of 10 years. It is abhorrent that those who are thrown out of public office by the electorate can be duly thrown into the upper Chamber. The 26 archbishops and bishops of the Church of England should be removed immediately and prevented from debating the legislation of the civic and religious life of Scotland.

John Penrose: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify his point about former MPs? Would he draw any distinction between those who were defeated and those who have retired?

Martin John Docherty: No.

Members of the House of Lords should be automatically forced to retire by the age of 80. Even members of the Roman Curia are forced to retire as cardinals of the Roman Church. Fundamental, real change requires abolition.

This is an issue in Scotland. It may not be seen as an issue in the rest of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—and I know that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) would have been present if he could have been—but to us it is an issue of inequality that is at the heart of our liberal democracy. I reject the House of Lords, because my constituents told me to reject it—for they are nothing, at that other end of the Corridor, but a bunch of sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beasties, and their time is up.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered House of Lords reform,

Hinkley C Connection Project

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Margot James.)

4.55 pm

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this important local issue in the Chamber today. I should start by saying that, while I am very critical indeed of the plans for connecting Hinkley C to the national grid, my support for Hinkley C itself is unwavering. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose)—who has just done a fine job at the Dispatch Box and is leaving the Chamber—my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), who have been engaged in the battle over these pylons for many years, as have my predecessors as the Member for Wells. I also congratulate, and pay tribute to, the councils and parish councils, particularly Mark, Badgworth and Biddisham, the Allertons and Cross and Compton Bishop parish councils, which have all worked tirelessly to represent the views of their parishioners over the past seven years so that their objections can be known. Equally, I congratulate the campaign groups and the fantastic public engagement that has meant that church hall and village hall after church hall and village hall have been filled with people wanting to make very clear their views on this pylon line.

With the announcement looming, therefore, I wanted to raise today a few issues that I think are yet to be resolved. I know there are certain constraints on the Minister given that the Department acts in a quasi-judicial role in this decision, but I hope she will be able to consider the issues I raise, and talk about the technical issues even if not in specific reference to the Hinkley Connection project itself. I am also grateful for the response I have had from my noble Friend Lord Bourne to the letter I wrote to the Secretary of State last week, in which he has assured me that the representations that have been made to the Department since the conclusion of the planning inspector inquiry—and which I assume will be included—will be considered.

My remarks will fall into three areas: first, Government policy as I see it; secondly, the fact that these pylons are untested and unwanted; and thirdly the importance of visual amenity and the impact that damaging that would have on our local economy.

It is clear from the Secretary of State's recent speech which reset the Government's energy policy that there is enthusiasm for marine energy generation. Offshore wind is the method that has been mentioned most keenly, but I think I am right in saying that there is an excitement for the opportunities presented by tidal and wave technologies, provided that—the Minister will nod, I am sure—they do not ask for too much money in delivering them. None the less, if marine energy generation is to be a key part of the Government's vision for the renewables sector in the future, it stands to reason, given the fantastic natural resource in the Bristol channel and the Severn estuary waiting to be harnessed by these technologies, that we might put in place a transmission infrastructure now that will service everything that might come in the future, rather than just Hinkley Point itself.

Yesterday and the day before I was with the Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change on a trip to Brussels, and although the “team Juncker” banners around the place were not too welcome to these Eurosceptic eyes, our meeting with Vice-President Šefcovic, who is responsible for energy union, was very refreshing indeed. He made some very interesting points about the plans that the EU and the Governments of the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, France and Germany have for a North sea energy grid. If we are looking at putting infrastructure in place under the North sea to facilitate marine generation and interconnection between the different countries that surround the North sea, why should it be so difficult to do so in the Bristol channel and the Severn estuary?

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Margot James.)

James Heapey: If Vice-President Šefcovic speaks with such conviction about the opportunities for subsea interconnection and transmission in the North sea, I do not see why it should be such a leap for National Grid to become excited about it elsewhere. Indeed, National Grid shares my enthusiasm and that of the Government for marine energy generation schemes. In its “Future Energy Scenarios” document, it talks keenly about the opportunities for tidal and wave energy, and indeed for offshore wind off the south-west of England and the south Walian coast and out into the Irish sea.

There is a disparity in the timelines that National Grid has used in its submissions for this planning application. It has done a cost-benefit analysis over 30 years, as far as I can tell, yet its “Future Energy Scenarios” document clearly sets out the opportunities for tidal and wave energy generation over the next three, four, five and six decades, so that extends to 60 years. The transmission line itself will extend far beyond that, so if we apply National Grid's own policy, there will be an opportunity to see the cost of connecting Hinkley C to the grid not just as a cost but as an investment because it aggregates the cost across all that might come in the future. Elsewhere, National Grid has been much more on the front foot with regard to undersea solutions. It has spent £1.1 billion connecting Scotland to England through the western link, which includes converter stations at either end, of the kind that it says are too expensive to construct in Somerset.

Ludicrously, National Grid also has a visual impact provision project, which is using £500 million of bill payers' money to take down existing pylons and put the cables underground, yet this project will put up new pylons on equally sensitive landscapes. I have looked at the plans, particularly those for the Dorset area of outstanding natural beauty, and it is clear that there are pylons outside that AONB that will be removed because they can be clearly seen from within the AONB. That will also apply in the Mendips. The cables will go underground through the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare, but anyone who sweats their way up to the top of the Mendips will see pylons stretching for miles in every direction.

Then there is interconnection. I am going to be slightly cynical and suggest that National Grid's rampant enthusiasm for interconnection—which is under the

sea—compared with its utter disdain for going under the sea in the Bristol channel, might have something to do with the opportunity to raise revenue from interconnection. I sincerely hope that that is not the case, but I have an inkling that National Grid applies its enthusiasm for interconnection using undersea technologies only when there is a revenue-raising opportunity attached to it.

As far as I can see, there is also an inconsistency in the existing legislation, which needs updating. The Communications Act 2003 clearly states that when a mobile phone mast is put up anew, there is a statutory requirement for the visual amenity to be considered. In the legislation governing the siting of pylons, however, there is no such provision. We just have the out-of-date Holford rules, which I will come to in a second. What we have seen in the mobile phone industry is that, because there is a statutory requirement to consider visual amenity, there has been a very clear effort to camouflage masts. Masts have got smaller and smaller, and more is spent on where they are sited, but, as far as I can tell, National Grid has not shown the same effort.

Let me turn now to the Holford rules. Rather than going through all of them, I will draw out a couple of the key points. The Holford rules are guidelines, and it is important that we note that. The siting of pylons comes down to guidelines, but the siting of mobile phone masts comes down to legislation. Rule 1 of the Holford rules says:

“Avoid altogether, if possible, the major areas of highest amenity value”.

That includes areas of outstanding natural beauty. I have said already that I see a clear inconsistency in putting pylons underground through the AONB, but not necessarily through the land that immediately abuts it, no matter how important that might be to the overall effect of the AONB.

Rule 2 says:

“Avoid smaller areas of high amenity value, or scientific interests by deviation”.

It clearly sets out the importance of missing out sites of special scientific interest. The Somerset levels have many areas that have been so designated.

Rule 4 states:

“Choose tree and hill backgrounds in preference to sky backgrounds”.

But we are talking about the Somerset levels here; there are no hills and there are no trees. Rule 5 says:

“Prefer moderately open valleys with woods”.

The same applies.

Rule 6 says:

“In country which is flat and sparsely planted”

we should keep high voltage lines to a minimum as far as possible so as to avoid a “concentration or ‘wirescape’.” As other transmission lines are in close proximity to the new line, and the wires in the new pylons are more concentrated, that rule simply cannot apply and is another flaw in National Grid’s plans.

If the decision next week is not to our liking in Somerset, I wonder whether the Energy Bill, which will come forward shortly, might be an opportunity for my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) and I to reintroduce the amendment that he proposed to the previous Energy Bill that sought to

insert in that legislation the same provision for pylons as currently exists for mobile phone masts. Will the Government consider working with us on that, as that would give us an opportunity retrospectively to use that legislation to amend the decision next week if it is not to our liking in Somerset?

I wish to talk about the T-pylon. Although National Grid is very chuffed with it, we in Somerset have real concerns about it. The Minister’s constituency is not too far from the National Grid’s test centre in Nottinghamshire. It is a beautiful part of the world. With its rolling hills, it is quintessentially rural England. This is where National Grid has tested the T-pylons. I have seen photos of them, and I have seen videos on National Grid’s website bragging about their brilliance. My observation is that the terrain looked a whole lot more hilly and a whole lot more dry than the flat, wet Somerset levels.

I am very concerned indeed about whether these pylons are ready to be employed under tension on a very wet landscape with a very high water table and where the weather will bring all sorts of pressures for them. There is also a danger that if they require additional concrete, it could affect the ability of that land to drain, and could therefore cause flooding. Equally, if it is decided that more concrete is not needed and if the sort of floods we saw in the winter of 2013-14 arrive so that the foundations of the pylons are under water for anything up to two months, will the foundations stand the test of that flood and remain solid; or are we risking leaving our newest nuclear power station without a grid connection because of the inappropriateness of the design?

The security of these pylons is another issue. Any number of terrorist organisations would delight in the opportunity to hit our infrastructure, and taking out a pylon might seem a reasonably easy way of doing so. I am sure that the lattice pylons that have been employed across our grid over many decades will be well tested in this area. I hope that the Minister can reassure us that the T-pylons have been similarly tested.

National Grid claims that the T-pylon is a wonderful concession to the people of Somerset and that we are hugely fortunate to be the first to receive it. It is a concession in National Grid’s eyes, but no one else’s. The lattice pylons that would have conveyed 420 kV of electricity would indeed have been the height of Nelson’s column—they would have been monsters. The new T-pylons, though, are still the same height as the roof of Westminster Abbey, so we are not talking about any massive improvement.

Their height is not the aspect that people least understand, though; it is their width. I wonder whether the camera operator for the Chamber has it in him to zoom out, because it needs to be understood that the width of the T-pylons is the width of the Chamber—not the floor of the Chamber, but wall to wall, from the back of the Press Gallery to the back of the Strangers Gallery. That is the size of the T-bar, plus the hanging rings on to which the wires go. Indeed, the hanging diamonds to which the transmission lines connect are about 10 metres in height. That means that if the T-bar and the hanging diamonds were to be put into this Chamber, they would fill it from floor to ceiling, from wall to wall. These are monsters, and we are seriously considering putting them across one of the most beautiful parts of this country.

[James Heapey]

What is more, lattice pylons are 90% air, whereas T-pylons are solid structures. They concentrate the wirescape and are solid white pillars—exactly like wind turbines. That leads me to my final point, which is about visual amenity.

We have rightly been rejecting applications to build windfarms across the country because of the impact they would have on our landscape. Locally, in the immediate vicinity of the proposed pylon line, we have rejected applications for two small windfarms, at Pilrow and Huntspill. I applaud the Government and the planning inspector for making those decisions, but how ridiculous it is that having turned down those big white pillars, which are roughly the same size—in some cases smaller—than T-pylons, we are now seriously considering next week approving dozens of exactly the same thing, strung out over 40 miles of the Somerset countryside. It makes no sense to me. The pylons, in effect, constitute a giant windfarm. Surely the same logic should apply.

No attempt has been made to value the visual amenity of the landscape. Everything has been about the cash involved in going underground or undersea, yet the land has huge value. The view from the AONB is important, the sites of special scientific interest are important, and the landscape is valued and loved by local residents. Surely that has a value, too. More important still, and perhaps offering a more quantifiable value, is the fact that this area is the shop window not just for Somerset but for the whole south-west. I do not know whether you have ever holidayed in the south-west, Madam Deputy Speaker, but if you have, you will know that you trudge your way along the M4 corridor or down the M5 from the midlands, you queue to get through Avonmouth, and then you come up over the hill and are released into the south-west of England. The Somerset levels extend before you; Glastonbury Tor is off in the distance in the east, the sea to the west.

Every holidaymaker who goes to the south-west of England—I do not flatter myself that millions are watching this evening—will know the stretch of motorway that I am talking about, because for so many it is where their holiday in the south-west starts. The visitor economy in Somerset is worth £1.3 billion a year. The pylon line will run almost parallel with the M5 in exactly the part of the country I have been describing. As people come over the Mendips they will crest the hill, and instead of the magnificence of the Somerset levels, with the sea and Glastonbury Tor on their right and left, they will see these giant white monoliths. It would be unforgivable to allow Somerset's shop window to be spoiled in that way.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I know that today you have been treated to some wonderfully highbrow cultural references—Bowie and Burns. I am afraid I am going to lower the tone by quoting Sebastian the lobster from Disney's "Little Mermaid". You will forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, for addressing you as "darling" just for the purposes of this quote:

"Under the sea, under the sea

Darling it's better down where it's wetter,

Take it from me."

Don't just take it from me, though, Madam Deputy Speaker. Take it from my colleagues in constituencies along the pylon line, from my predecessors, and from

the district councils, the parish councils and the thousands of Somerset residents who have engaged in the consultation process and made their opposition clear throughout.

Not enough consideration has been given to the strategic options that are available for other ways of transmitting power from Hinkley to the grid. Those have been resisted throughout on the basis of cost, yet there is the western link connecting Scotland and England, there is interconnection going on all over the place, and there is the visual impact provision project of the national grid taking down pylons elsewhere. The proposal has been resisted throughout on cost, yet no consideration has been given to the value of this land for other industries, most notably tourism.

Going under the sea is commonplace elsewhere, yet it has never been seriously considered for Somerset. We have turned down wind turbines on visual amenity grounds, yet we are considering dozens of solid white pillars as high as Westminster Abbey and as wide as this Chamber, and we are going to string them out across 40 miles of the most beautiful countryside in the United Kingdom.

We do not know what is in the Planning Inspectorate's recommendation. It may well be that this, my longest speech in the Chamber, will have been in vain because good news is already on its way, but if it is not—I appreciate that the Minister can give no indication today; I would not put her on the spot and ask her to do so—I ask that if bad news could possibly be on the horizon, all the points that I have raised today and that have been raised in this place by my predecessors and my colleagues in neighbouring constituencies are looked at one last time, and that a delay in making the decision be considered while those matters are looked into. I know that we would all be delighted to come and see the Minister to discuss our concerns further.

There is precedent. I was searching hard and saw that a pylon line between Llandinam and Welshpool was refused, despite the planning inspector's recommendation, because it would have impacted adversely on the visual amenity and on the environment, and other methods of connection did not appear to have been adequately considered.

Next week Somerset will rejoice or the decision will be reviled. Those pylons are untested, untried, unpopular and unwanted. We should be going under the sea, investing in infrastructure for the future and protecting a wonderful landscape. I hope next week to discover that the Minister agrees.

5.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey) on securing this debate on the Hinkley Point C connection project. He has spoken with enormous passion and I agree that he lives in a beautiful part of the country. He has made a powerful speech, and I know that this project is a matter of great interest to his constituency as well as to others along the proposed route of the electric line.

I know that my hon. Friend recognises that the delivery of new energy infrastructure is essential for ensuring that the lights are kept on and bills are kept low for UK businesses and domestic consumers. I am aware that energy infrastructure projects of all sorts can

have real impacts on local communities. It is also the case, however, that such projects can bring real benefits, so finding the right balance between the impacts and the benefits is a key issue in decision making by the Secretary of State.

Hon. Members will be aware that consent for the proposed Hinkley Point C nuclear power station, which would have a generating capacity of 3.2 GW, 7% of the UK's electricity demand, was granted by the Secretary of State in March 2013. EDF and CGN signed a strategic investment agreement in October 2015. EDF has confirmed that it will take a 66.5% stake in Hinkley, with CGN taking 33.5%, demonstrating a clear commitment from both parties.

Nuclear power offers clean, affordable, safe and reliable energy and is vital to the UK's cost-effective transition to low carbon generation. Existing nuclear plants across Britain currently provide around 16% of the electricity generated in the UK, but most existing plants are due to close by 2024. The Government have therefore prepared the ground for new nuclear power stations through a package of reforms and regulatory measures that remove barriers to investment and give developers confidence. Alongside gas and renewables, new nuclear is therefore an important part of our energy mix, now and in the future.

As part of delivering new electricity generating capacity, new transmission infrastructure is also needed. Network companies, such as National Grid, submit proposals for need and funding for new network infrastructure to the industry regulator, Ofgem, and for planning consent to the relevant planning authorities. These proposals are based, through stakeholder engagement, on an assessment of requirements for existing and new generation and, of course, the costs and impacts of different connection options. Network companies seek to identify opportunities to provide savings for the consumer by giving consideration to future possible connections in an area to ensure that the most efficient overall design is delivered. In doing so, an assessment of the risk of future connections not materialising is required to avoid stranded or underutilised assets, the cost of which would ultimately be passed on to consumers.

This approach is reinforced by the Government's national policy statements for energy, which set out the framework for factors to be considered when consenting to an infrastructure project of national significance. They make it clear that, for electricity networks, proper consideration should be given to other feasible means of connection, including underground and subsea cables. This includes costs, environmental impacts and network operability issues. The Government do not have a preference on the various network options. Instead, we expect network companies to use the most appropriate technologies available for the particular project, in line with planning and regulatory requirements.

New T-pylons have been proposed for some sections of the route. I have heard loud and clear my hon. Friend's message that he is not a fan of T-pylons. They were developed following an international design competition held in 2011 by my Department, alongside National Grid and the Royal Institute of British Architects, to help identify a new pylon design that would meet transmission safety and reliability criteria and would also belong to the 21st century. The winning design was produced by Danish architects who have since worked

with National Grid to develop and test prototypes that have informed the final design being proposed for parts of the connection.

The T-pylon is an interesting design. It is around 15 metres shorter than existing transmission lattice pylons and has the potential to reduce the impact on the landscape. I welcome this innovation as an alternative option that National Grid can use when designing overhead transmission lines in future. However, whether they are ultimately used as part of specific transmission projects, including Hinkley Point C, will be subject to both regulatory and planning approval.

The Planning Inspectorate completed its examination of the application for development consent for the Hinkley Point C electric line connection last July. The application is now with the Secretary of State for a decision. Hon. Members will understand that, as the decision is now under consideration in the Department, I cannot take part in any discussion of the pros and cons of this particular proposal.

In a previous debate in March 2012 on electricity transmission in north Somerset—before the Hinkley Point C connection application was submitted to the Planning Inspectorate—the then Energy Minister encouraged individuals and organisations with an interest in the proposal to engage with National Grid. I know that a number of hon. Members took note of that encouragement and were among the many people who made representations to the Planning Inspectorate during the examination of the Hinkley Point C connection application. Prior to examining the application, the Planning Inspectorate indicated that it would cover a broad range of topics that it considered to be of importance in assessing the potential impacts of the proposed connection. The topics on which views were to be sought included flood risk, landscape and visual effects, socioeconomic effects, traffic and transportation, and public rights of way. The inspectorate's report was submitted to the Secretary of State on 19 October 2015, along with its recommendation on whether consent should be granted or refused. It will now be for the Secretary of State to consider her decision in the light of that report and all relevant information. She intends to announce her decision no later than 19 January 2016, which is the end of the three-month decision-making period set out in the Planning Act 2008.

Large energy infrastructure projects inevitably attract considerable interest from people who may be directly affected by the proposals, as well as people who have views on energy projects in a more generic way. In the case of Planning Act applications, it is for the Secretary of State, as decision maker, to consider all the arguments that are made for and against these projects and that are set out in the Planning Inspectorate's report.

James Heappey: I sense that the Minister is moving away from a discussion of the T-pylon on to other things. Before she does, may I push her to clarify the technical issues that I raised about exactly how the T-pylon has been tested in a landscape similar to that in which it might be employed in Somerset, and the security concern I raised? Those are technical issues rather than planning issues, and one would hope that the Department already has the clarification at its disposal.

Andrea Leadson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that again. As he is aware, the design has been tested and piloted, but it is absolutely the case that there

[Andrea Leadsom]

will not be any compromise on any issues of safety and security—I can assure him of that. On the very specific technical points, I can write to him with further evidence. He should rest assured that whatever transmission method is used, it will be properly tested and robustly measured against all possible threats.

I assure all hon. Members that the Secretary of State's consideration of the Hinkley Point C connection application will be rigorous and fair, taking into account all the many issues that have been raised by those who are for and against, and in the Planning Inspectorate's

report. I hope that hon. Members are reassured that concerns raised by interested parties about the Hinkley Point C electric line connection are being thoroughly considered throughout the planning process.

I thank my hon. Friend again for his constructive and thoughtful remarks. He has done the people of north Somerset proud by raising this issue in such an impassioned way. I can assure him that they and he do not have too much longer to wait for the decision.

Question put and agreed to.

5.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 14 January 2016

[MR DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

VAT Evasion: Internet Retailers

1.30 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered VAT evasion and internet retailers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I think it is for the first time, so I hope that I will obey House procedure sufficiently not to get into trouble and be told off.

First, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving me time to talk about this subject with those who are interested. I only bid for the debate before the Backbench Business Committee on Tuesday at 2.30 pm, so to receive a chunk of time in Westminster Hall so quickly is a great honour and a bit of a surprise. Consequently, a number of Members who wanted to participate could not be here. For example, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) is holding a dementia event in the House at the moment, and even though she has been in this House for 23 years she still struggles to be in two places at one time. Thus she could not be here today to talk about how one of her constituents in particular, Mr Richard Allen, has been so gravely affected by the issue I will describe.

I guess I should open by giving a snapshot—a festive one. I do not think I am a cheapskate, but before Christmas I was looking for some cheap presents for my family online. I was particularly aiming for bargains available for next-day delivery. I hope Members will be interested to hear about these bargains; some of them might be partial to online shopping themselves.

Looking around, I was able to find an Apple iPhone 6 Plus, with 16 gigabytes, in gold. It was being sold at £572.64, which was £46.36 cheaper than buying it directly from apple.com. I found that offer online from a British-based seller. If I had purchased that iPhone—I did not, as it was way too expensive and far outside my ballpark figure—I would have been saving a great deal of money, and because it was a British-based seller, I would have been supporting a British small or medium-sized enterprise. I am a Conservative and we are, after all, in this together, and supporting SMEs is part of an important long-term economic plan.

I thought that price was a tiny bit unusual, but I did not spend too long thinking about it as I was Christmas shopping. I probably would not have thought of it again until, at one of the last events before Christmas where I met constituents, I met a business-savvy constituent of mine who had contacted me because he found himself in trouble. I bought him a cup of tea, we sat down and we went through what had been going on with his business.

My constituent had 20 years of experience in e-commerce, website development and internet marketing, and had set up an online retail business in 2010 selling goods on his own website, eBay and Amazon. He told me:

“Our sales grew to £689,000 a year by 2013 and we ranked in the top 5 sellers in our market sector on eBay. In early 2014, in the space of 6 months, our sales collapsed from £57,000 to £21,000 a month. In the past 18 months, our sales have increased to £30,000 and we struggle to compete on a daily basis”

with what was happening online among his competitors. He said:

“My company has now lost over £550,000 in sales and we are currently losing £25,000 in sales a month”.

He believes that is because a “VAT fraud” is taking place. He went on:

“Almost all of our UK based competitors have seen equally dramatic loss in business, with some shutting up shop completely.”

He said that many of his UK competitors had made their staff redundant and moved out of their warehouses. He himself has lost his life savings and is talking about selling his house. Some individuals are close to bankruptcy. He told me that he now lived in rented accommodation, running a business from his dining room.

He gave me an example of what is going on. He sells bicycle lights for £11.99, making a £1 profit, while other online sellers currently sell the same product for £7.99. That competition in price is a no-brainer for the consumer; the two products are identical, so which one would any of us choose to buy? That means that his turnover and profits have halved in two years.

If someone flicks through the website for that other retailer, which might well be a UK-based company, it seems to have a legitimate VAT number. However, it might be neither legitimate nor a VAT number, and then my constituent might have a problem, because that competitor would have an unfair advantage. My constituent told me that he has been ill with the stress that he has been caused, and he estimates that he and his family can last only another six months at the current pace, at the end of which his business will collapse.

Let me go into some more detail, because Members might wonder what caused such a change of fate for my constituent and his business. He told me the precise reason for it; he believes that it is VAT evasion. Of course, that is why I asked for the debate, and I intend to explain a little further the background to the problem and its growth.

Online marketplaces such as eBay and Amazon do not make it compulsory for sellers to display verifiable business information, such as an accurate company name, a physical business address and a VAT number. It is simple to see, through the online seller information, when a company is not UK-based and displays no VAT number. Several foreign companies have now decided to have a UK-based company number and, as I have said, they have put some sort of number in the field that shows they have a British, or even German, VAT number.

For non-established taxable persons—companies from outside the UK that warehouse in the UK and dispatch goods from the UK to customers in the UK—the correct procedure is to register for VAT as soon as they have any stock in the UK. Since 1 December 2012, all NETPs supplying goods in the UK have been required to register for VAT and to apply VAT to all sales from their very first supply of goods or services onwards. There is no threshold.

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

Sellers on online marketplaces used to advertise their business locations as UK-based, yet they would be a foreign company. That could be spotted through delivery times. When I used to go online, the delivery time for those companies would be from 21 days to 63 days, because the product was coming from China. That no longer happens. Consumers made a choice—they could pay a bit extra for goods that would turn up in the next few days; or a bit less for goods that would turn up after quite a long time.

To combat that problem, the online retailers introduced marking systems to allow customers to rate down a seller for late delivery, causing the seller from afar some problems and prompting the growth of fulfilment centres, as some retailers tried to overcome the bad reviews that they were receiving.

If we put together those two issues, it is suggested that small overseas sellers in their thousands are now importing goods into the UK in advance of orders and not properly registering for VAT. Sellers can then arrange for the online marketplace to dispatch the stock from its UK warehouses once orders are placed. Through that route, they not only reduce delivery time but benefit from the added bonus of avoiding VAT charges. They can therefore charge lower prices than their UK-based, VAT-paying competitors.

Chinese-owned fulfilment companies in the UK provide special eBay and Amazon fulfilment services for Chinese and other non-UK businesses. Chinese sellers allegedly send their stock, pre-packed and barcoded, to fulfilment centres in China. The stock is then forwarded on in bulk to their UK fulfilment centres. How Chinese sellers move their stock into the UK is unclear, as is whether they pay any duty at the time. Indications suggest that by using the low-value consignment relief and low-value bulk import procedures, Chinese sellers are bringing in vast volumes of goods, many of which are undeclared. They appear as items already sold to the UK, but they have been pre-sold and are held in UK fulfilment centres. Presenting themselves as a UK entity enables the sellers to claim that they are under the VAT threshold as a reason for not displaying a VAT number. That is an illegal practice, and it threatens the viability of UK SMEs in online retail, since those committing VAT fraud can undercut prices and provide fast delivery from their UK-based stock. British retailers say they are being put out of business by such foreign companies, particularly from China, selling their products through e-retailers such as eBay and Amazon.

To return to my Christmas shopping trip, I decided I would buy a handful of extra cables for my Apple iPhone. When I was clicking through the system, I thought the cables were being sold by a UK-based company, with VAT charged. I just looked at the price on the screen—I did not realise that I was almost certainly buying from a company that, although registered in the UK, had a fake VAT number. I did not realise that I probably would not be paying VAT on the cables.

By failing to account for VAT, sellers are acquiring a distortive advantage over UK businesses in the marketplace. The final price paid for goods by the consumer is much lower than it would be from UK competitors. Chinese and other non-UK businesses therefore now dominate many market sectors on eBay, and there are huge numbers of them on Amazon, too.

The unbranded Android smartphone and tablet market sector on eBay.co.uk generates sales of some £80 million a year. Chinese sellers account for 40% of those sales in the UK, representing about £32 million a year. The top Chinese seller in that market sector, which lists stock located in the UK, makes annual sales of £2 million a year and is not VAT-registered.

Adding insult to injury, fraud breeds fraud. Due to built-in online algorithms, those that sell more on web marketplaces get a prime position at the top of searches and listings. Given that they are then the first listing a consumer sees when searching for an item, they sell even more, pushing their VAT-paying competitors further out of the picture and ensuring that they remain at the top. That means that the sellers can monopolise online marketplaces, leading to price distortions in UK online retail and VAT-registered companies being unable to compete. Not only does that result in the UK taxman losing money from unpaid VAT, but the knock-on effects for UK business and competition are huge.

I will give some specific examples that have been highlighted to me. Photo Direct is making sales of just under £10 million. If it is evading tax, that equates to £1.67 million in VAT evasion a year. It started trading on eBay.co.uk 12 years ago in July 2003. It is one of the largest VAT-evading companies found trading on eBay and it runs two eBay business seller accounts. It specialises in selling VAT-free cameras, iPhones, iPads and tablets. Its stock is housed in the UK. It is using a Hove-based PO box not displaying a VAT number or full company name. In December 2014, it made sales on eBay of £838,412. Its bestselling item was the familiar Apple iPhone 6 Plus 16GB in gold, which is the one I described slightly earlier. Photo Direct sells it for £572.64, which is £46.36 cheaper than Apple.com. That item alone accounted for £36,649.21 of sales. On contacting the seller to inquire whether a VAT receipt would be issued for a £2,000 camera, the seller confirmed that the price does not include VAT. Its PayPal account traces back to a business in Cedarhurst, New York, called Robscamerastore.

Another example: eBay seller My-elink is run by CSJ Communications Technology Ltd. It started trading on eBay.co.uk eight years ago on 14 November 2008. CSJ Communications Technology operates seven eBay business seller accounts, all using the same company name and VAT number. Combined sales were £5,812,308 last year, equating to an expected amount of VAT of just under a million pounds, or £968,718. A company name, an address, which is in China, and a UK VAT number—150540153—are all listed. However, the VAT number is not registered to the Chinese company CSJ Communications Technology; it is registered to Pocketdeal Ltd, a UK-registered company that was incorporated on 23 August 2012. The VAT number does not belong to CSJ Communications Technology.

Those kinds of evasion have been found to occur online on at least the two major platforms I have already mentioned: Amazon and eBay. The extent of the evasion is dramatic. If I read out a list of the sellers that have been accused of committing such fraud, Members here today might become a little bored with me, but I will not let that stop me. The founders of vatfraud.org, working alongside trading standards officers, have identified 500 VAT-evading overseas business seller accounts.

To start with, I will go through a small range of the UK eBay sellers with no VAT numbers. I have talked about Photo Direct, but the eBay sellers universal-electronic,

richmondcam, mechanic_warehouse and right89hifi all have turnovers of more than £3 million a year. Further down the list, the 37th largest seller without a VAT number is digitalbravo2014. It had a mere third of a million pounds of sales. The company is registered in the United Kingdom with UK stock, but has no VAT number.

Transferring platforms, I could talk about Amazon stores with no VAT number listed. I could direct Members to Ringke Official UK Store, which sells phone cases and accessories. It is registered in Texas and has no VAT number listed on its Amazon.co.uk page. It also offers Amazon Prime free delivery. I can buy from that seller and get my goods much quicker than from another retailer, with the advantage of possibly not having to pay VAT. Zeto UK sells portable phone chargers, games, computers, headphones, electronic accessories and so on. It has no VAT number listed anywhere on its page, and its orders are filled by Amazon. Inception sells mainly Apple products. It has a customer services address in Manchester, a business address in Hong Kong, no VAT number listed and orders fulfilled by Amazon.

I will move further down that list of case studies. They are from vatfraud.org, so they are all online for Members and others to have a look at. When the case study was done, Rearth USA LLC, an iPhone and smartcase provider, was one of the largest sellers of such items on Amazon.co.uk, Mr Hanson. You might even have looked at the goods online yourself. It also has Amazon stores in other EU countries with no VAT numbers listed. A secret shopper bought a product from this company and asked for a VAT receipt. The company stated it was in the process of applying for one, apologised and refunded the notional VAT that would have been paid by the customer for that good.

So we have companies that are listed with VAT numbers that are not correct VAT numbers. We are able to check whether a VAT number is listed to the company we might have bought from. The European Commission website has free access, so it is easy to do so. A handful of such companies are trading on Amazon at the moment: JEDirect, Ipow-Official and EasyAcc U. There are also companies with no VAT number listed and none provided when asked. These include Hayesmall; Gugou; SLEO Accessories; Buyee, which has a UK local delivery service as well; InstaNatural EU; Ulike; Oxford Street; and Nestling Store. There are hundreds and hundreds of such companies.

Some, like GIL ENTERPRISE, state that all their prices include VAT but, again, refuse to provide a VAT receipt should someone ask for one. Companies with VAT numbers that do not match their business name populate the websites in great numbers: Avantek UK, which has the business name Claybox Ltd, and Simple Tek, which has the business name Shen Zhen Shi Futian Qu Sai Ge Dian Zi Shi Chang Qun Jian Dian Zi Shang Hang, so perhaps Simple Tek is better, but it is not right.

BUTEFO has the business name Shenzhen Kuanchuang Technology Company; LERWAY Technology Company has the business name shenzhenshi leerwei keji youxian gongsi; and Bravo Tech has the business name Wuhan Value Link E-Commerce Ltd. They all have VAT numbers that do not match their business names. I have pages and pages of such companies. To be sure of myself, I checked with the Clerks about privilege before I started talking today.

There are literally hosts and hosts of such companies out there trading in the United Kingdom. Anyone in this Room could go to the website—Amazon or eBay—and look for a good online, believing it was from a UK-based seller; it might even have a UK limited company number; and yet it is actually none of those things and is not paying VAT to HMRC.

It is alleged that the sellers are committing VAT fraud by failing to supply a VAT number, by presenting themselves as UK companies when they are not, or by fraudulently giving out a VAT number that does not belong to them. They despatch their stock in the UK on Amazon or eBay.co.uk. The combined sales on a list of more than 500 companies come to £300 million a year. If these sellers were allowed to trade for another three years, with the growth that they have at the moment they would generate estimated sales of £1.2 billion; if they evade VAT, they would evade about £200 million between them; and eBay would earn about £110 million in seller fees from them. These are just a sample. I am afraid it is likely that there are many more non-UK sellers committing VAT fraud on eBay, Amazon and other sites.

Paul Miloseski-Reid has been the lead officer on e-commerce for UK trading standards for the past nine years. Based on an analysis of thousands of marketplace traders, he estimates that up to £2 billion of VAT is being lost to the Exchequer each year. Paul estimates that online sales adding up to £10.8 billion annually come from overseas sellers who are not paying VAT. This huge number does not tell the full story. On top of the £2 billion that is lost through unpaid VAT, there are millions lost elsewhere through the indirect effects of this fraud. There is the loss of revenue and profit for UK businesses that are undercut and beaten on price and delivery time. Then there is the loss that comes from companies closing and the loss of jobs; the loss of corporation tax; the loss of PAYE and national insurance; and the loss of import VAT and duty through low-value bulk imports. Those are all big losses to our Exchequer. If we couple those with the fines that should be owed and backdated VAT payments, the £2 billion that could be recouped would undoubtedly be much more impressive and larger.

With such a large amount of money on the table, it may seem odd to Members that the practice is allowed to continue, but the firms involved insist that responsibility for charging the correct VAT lies with the sellers using the sites, and eBay and Amazon say that they cannot be held liable in cases of evasion. However, third party liability for VAT is now an established legal principle in the European courts. It was developed to combat VAT carousel fraud where some of those involved in the fraud were not necessarily the party fraudulently claiming the VAT refunds. *Axel Kittel v. the Belgian Government* and *the Belgian Government v. Recolta Recycling SPRL* were joined cases that introduced a test in 2006 for VAT fraud, which became known as the “Kittel principle”.

As HMRC explains on its website,

“The test in Kittel is simple and should not be over-refined. It embraces not only those who know of the connection but those who ‘should have known’. Thus it includes those who should have known from the circumstances which surround their transactions that they were connected to fraudulent evasion. If a trader should have known that the only reasonable explanation for the transaction in which he was involved was that it was connected with fraud and if it turns out that the transaction was connected with fraudulent evasion of VAT then he should have known of that fact. He may properly be regarded as a participant for the reasons explained in Kittel.”

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

The term “online marketplace” is not really a good description of what these websites actually do. In reality, rather than just offering space for retailers to operate like a marketplace would in the real world, they offer marketing, as well as payment and fulfilment services to third-party sellers. They not only advertise the goods but are handling the stock, issuing invoices and collecting payments. Some of them also offer the complete warehousing and fulfilment solution. Such websites claim, however, that they are unable to police sellers even if they were obligated to do so, which is obviously not true. It is not unknown for the websites to police sellers in relation to the products that they sell. Until the practice was banned by the EU, some of them prevented sellers from offering items on other websites at lower prices. If the websites can track something as complex as that, they can easily identify sellers who should be accounting for VAT on supplies.

Such websites regularly police sellers with regard to money laundering rules, EU directives and the like, and sellers have to provide details of their company address, passport details, copies of tax returns and other detailed information. Even to be able to start placing goods with them, the websites make their sellers sign up to terms and conditions that enable them to demand any data they require, including detailed sales figures and VAT data. It is therefore beyond doubt that these websites are able to establish the VAT status of a seller on their website. They could, and should, easily identify and exclude sellers that should be registered for VAT but are not. At the very least, they could detect and remove sellers that are using invalid VAT numbers, but they seem unwilling or unable to do even that.

The websites go far beyond what would normally be understood as the remit of a marketplace. The cost of the services provided in these so-called marketplaces is billed to the seller and included in the sale price of the item. It can, therefore, be demonstrated that the websites are effectively part of the production chain and so part of the supply chain. The websites objectively benefit from any fraudulent VAT transactions because the final sale price includes the VAT that should have been paid—fraudulently evaded VAT—from which they calculate their commission.

The websites benefit from the transactions and participate in them, they are part of the supply chain, and they are fully aware of the VAT status of the sellers on their site because they request VAT details from all sellers. They are also aware when supplies are made by sellers in the EU and in volumes that exceed the VAT registration value threshold. For all those reasons, they clearly do know, or at least they really should know, that VAT is due when sellers make such taxable supplies available for purchase in the EU. According to the *Italmoda* judgment, they are liable for any evaded VAT, as is any company in the supply chain upstream of the perpetrator. It is also a criminal offence for anyone to know about VAT fraud and not report it.

eBay has certainly been made aware of specific cases, and, bearing in mind the introduction of the non-established taxable persons provisions and the luxury of Amazon’s huge, lovely, wonderful legal department—which is definitely watching our proceedings—it is difficult to imagine that both companies have no idea that VAT evasion is occurring on their websites. The findings I have described and all

the accompanying information has been reported to HMRC’s VAT fraud team, the Treasury and trading standards. The latter has been working with vatfraud.org to identify non-UK businesses with stock located in the UK that are not displaying VAT numbers. Trading standards submitted an initial list of 150 such non-UK sellers to eBay, asking the sellers to update their business information and provide VAT numbers in compliance with the EU electronic commerce directive 2002. eBay stated that it was the duty of HMRC to establish which sellers were VAT-registered.

The issue has been growing and left unchecked for some time, and we do not know the full extent to which it might have damaged UK small and medium-sized enterprises and how much VAT we might have collected had it all been paid correctly. A former HMRC inspector tried to deal with unregistered sellers on eBay a number of years ago, and told me that HMRC came to a dead end when eBay refused to co-operate. Yet, under EU law, HMRC could have tried to establish liability on the part of eBay. VAT evasion on online market places is a problem across the internal market. If the UK initiated action in the courts, I cannot believe it would not be supported by the European Commission, other member states, and all legitimate VAT-paying businesses in the EU. Establishing VAT liability for fraud on online marketplaces would end a problem that undermines fair competition across the EU. It would also reaffirm the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s stated intention to make positive reforms to the EU’s internal market.

The problem has existed for long enough, and it is not difficult to find, as I did in my office last night, when in just a few moments of amateur detective work we found a factory in my constituency. There is a service whereby people can register their official UK company name and address. We found that more than 900 businesses had registered. By clicking through a number of them, we found that a vast number of Chinese-registered businesses had a UK company registered in my constituency. Some were trading on these online platforms, and we could find none with a VAT number. If my staffers and I, who are no experts, can find that so quickly in my constituency, I am sure HMRC can.

Yesterday, a number of Members raised this matter at a meeting of the Public Accounts Committee. It was reported quite widely in many newspapers. I was pleased to see that the head of HMRC, Dame Lin Homer, testified that HMRC is taking the issue seriously. Perhaps a little prod from my hon. Friend the Minister would be helpful to ensure that it is taking it very seriously. Today’s *Financial Times*, though, reported a worrying statement that was made in the Committee: will the Minister comment on the head of HMRC saying that e-retailers were not accountable for evaded VAT? I do not believe that that is the case, based on established tax and European law.

I would really like to know why something that is so easy for us all to spot and prevent has been allowed to grow to such a size. In a way, I feel a bit guilty myself for not clocking something so obvious. When I went online before Christmas, I was thinking, “That’s not a bad price. It’s probably a Chinese company, but they say they are UK-registered, and I am going to get my good in a day or two’s time, so I’m just getting a good deal, aren’t I?” I failed to clock that, if a deal looks too good to be true, it probably is. Unfortunately, in this case, not

being true is costing the tax collector, our Government, billions of pounds each year. I would like to think that the motion we are debating is the beginning of the end of that practice.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) has indicated that he wants to participate in the wind-ups, so I call Nick Herbert.

2.8 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Thank you very much for calling me, Mr Hanson. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris). I congratulate him on securing the debate and on the excellent way in which he explained the problem. He gave a thorough introduction, so there is little need for me to repeat his explanation of how this fraud is happening.

My interest in the topic dates from last year, when my constituent, Mr Neven Juretic, came to see me at one of my surgeries to explain what had happened to his business. I believe the Minister has met Mr Juretic—I am sure he will tell us more about that—who in 2010 set up an online retail business that grew very fast. He had a turnover of several hundred thousand pounds and employed quite a few people locally. It was all going well for the business, which was one of the top five sellers in its market on eBay, when suddenly, in 2014, it underwent a catastrophic loss of revenue, such that sales are now only about 5% of their previous level. That forced him to lay off a large number of his staff. He lost significant assets and now fears that his business faces bankruptcy.

Mr Juretic wondered what had suddenly caused the sharp loss of sales. He became aware that it was not because his competitors were selling better goods at better prices by running more efficiently and doing a better job than him, but because they were able to undercut his prices by about 20%. When he further researched the matter, he found that they were able to do that because, as my hon. Friend set out, they were evading VAT on their sales, which placed him at an immediate disadvantage. He teamed up with other retailers in the same position, and they have done an enormous amount of work. He set up vatfraud.org, to which my hon. Friend referred, which details the scale of the problem and sets out their concerns about the relative inaction in dealing with it.

There seem to be three sets of losers. First, there has been a change in retail practice as ordinary high streets have been affected by the growth of online marketing. The global trend is that people increasingly prefer to buy from online retailers. There is nothing wrong with that, but it has had an impact on our high streets. That is fine, provided that those online retailers sell fairly.

Secondly, there has been an impact on online retailers themselves, and small businesses are going under. Those small retail businesses were at least contributing to the economy and substituting for the high street businesses that were affected by the change in the way the market operates. The change is in consumers' interest, no doubt, but those small businesses, such as the one in my constituency, were growing and employing local people,

resulting in a change in employment patterns. They were successful UK businesses, and they are being clobbered.

Thirdly, there is a potentially significant loss of revenue to the Exchequer. I am sure the Minister will be the first to tell us that he wants to ensure that more revenue flows to the Exchequer, and that he wants to prevent a haemorrhaging of funds at a time when resources are in short supply. The fraud we are discussing has multiple effects, and it appears to be taking place on a substantial scale that justifies more effective action to tackle it.

Mr Juretic and his colleagues say that they have made some progress with trading standards, which is willing to investigate the issue, but they say that there has been inadequate co-operation between trading standards and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Their complaint is that they do not think HMRC is addressing the issue sufficiently seriously. As my hon. Friend said, it is possible to do research oneself and identify companies that are not properly VAT-registered, yet are selling stock that is clearly warehoused in the UK. That is the essence of the fraud. Mr Juretic and his colleagues identified 500 such companies—why is it not possible for agencies to go after those people? I ask the Minister in the spirit of openness, why has that not happened? It is clearly in the interest of the Exchequer and our national interest to ensure that businesses are not defrauded. Why is it not possible to go after those companies? After all, there is an audit trail, so it should be possible to identify companies that are not properly VAT-registered. They are meant to have a number, so they should be susceptible to that kind of compliance.

The situation is infuriating not only to the businesses that are affected but to the literally millions of law-abiding, tax-paying, VAT-paying small businesses that regularly find themselves at the sharp end of the tough VAT enforcement that we have in this country. HMRC never treats small businesses with kid gloves when it comes to paying their VAT. The hard workers, the strivers and those who employ a lot of people all pay their VAT and are absolutely slammed if they do not, so when they see that overseas companies are able to commit this kind of fraud, they get very angry about it. I feel angry on behalf of my constituent, given what happened to him.

Can there not be a more effective compliance mechanism? Is there a reason why it is so difficult? Perhaps there is, but it is important to communicate that to Mr Juretic and his colleagues, because at the moment they feel that there is just inertia. They have had a lot of meetings with HMRC and others, but they do not feel that they are getting anywhere. Their suggestion, which we should consider seriously, is that we should set up a special unit to focus on online retail businesses, given that that new sector is a huge growth area. It would be able to demand VAT numbers and pursue non-compliant companies.

What is the proper responsibility of the fulfilment houses? My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry was not willing to let them off the hook. At the moment, companies such as Amazon and eBay say, "We don't have responsibility for this. If you bring us evidence that there are companies that have evaded VAT, of course we will take them off our websites and won't allow them to advertise, but it's not our job to police them." I think that raises a big public policy question. Given that those businesses, which are often international businesses,

[*Nick Herbert*]

make large sums of money that do not find their way to the Exchequer as tax revenue, what responsibility do they have to ensure that people who sell in their marketplaces are selling properly? At the very least they should comply with efforts to track down companies that appear to be defrauding the Exchequer and the taxpayer, but perhaps they have a bigger responsibility to undertake proper checks themselves.

How hard would it be to insist that those companies require businesses to have a verified VAT number before they are allowed to advertise? It should not be hard. Amazon, eBay or anyone else could make a simple request. If somebody who is clearly a business rather than an individual—in the case of eBay, they come through that side of the website—wants to advertise, they should have to provide a VAT number, which is checked, and they should be allowed to advertise only when it is found to be valid.

If HMRC were to make a concerted effort and the authorities were to go after those companies, it would be possible to tighten up compliance quickly. At the moment, my constituent and his colleagues feel that a concerted effort is not being made, that the authorities are not co-operating sufficiently with each other and that the fulfilment houses are passing the buck by saying, “We don’t have any responsibility for this.”

We need to take the issue seriously, for the reasons I have set out. If there are real obstacles, of course I will listen to the Minister and relay his comments to my constituents. They have asked perfectly fair questions, as I am sure they did when they met him. If we do not take tougher action on this issue, it will be a growing scandal and an embarrassment to HMRC and the Government. It is in the interests of all of us to clamp down on it, and I hope the Minister will tell us that he plans to do that.

2.19 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) for securing this important debate. We have heard two wonderful, passionate speeches, which conveyed the anger that many people feel towards the devastation that can be caused in our constituencies as a consequence of VAT evasion. As well as anger we have had humour, wit and wisdom, for which I thank the hon. Member for Daventry and the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert).

Online retailers evading VAT clearly has an impact on the legitimate economy in this country. There has also been a clear impact on jobs and on individuals in both the constituencies already mentioned, where businesses have been put at risk of going under. HMRC has a responsibility to take the matter seriously given the loss to the Exchequer and the impact on the economy, and I hope that the Minister will address that in his response. Given the growth of the industry and its importance, it was a worthwhile suggestion that consideration should be given to the establishment of a special unit at HMRC. Those who operate marketplaces, the likes of Amazon and eBay, also have a responsibility. For the life of me, I cannot quite understand why they would want to walk away from the issue. They have to

consider the reputational damage to their businesses. If awareness of the problem grows, UK consumers would unquestionably expect to see Amazon and eBay take things more seriously.

I am grateful to the “fight against VAT fraud” campaigners, who have done so much to highlight the matter in great detail and who have brought forward case studies and other evidence. We have to take the matter seriously. HMRC has a duty to demonstrate that it is enforcing adequate measures to protect against VAT fraud, but online retailers must also recognise their responsibilities to society.

We have heard much about the figures from the campaigners, but the National Audit Office’s report on HMRC’s 2012-13 accounts stated that the total tax gap was estimated at £32 billion, of which £9.6 billion was related to VAT, equating to 10.1% of the actual VAT that could theoretically be collected. There is a wider point here about tax evasion, and we can all imagine the impact of £32 billion on the nation’s accounts and what it would do to the deficit and to our ability to invest in our public services. The NAO estimated that missing trader intra-Community fraud constituted between £0.5 billion and £1 billion of the VAT tax gap, but that was before the growth of these largely Chinese online retailers. It would be safe to assume that the figure has increased significantly over the past two or three years.

The hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) already mentioned the fact that the “fight against VAT fraud” campaign has identified more than 500 fraudulent retailers, generating as much as £300 million in sales in 2014, and there is the potential for growth over the coming years. The figures are eye-watering and must be taken seriously. The Government have a responsibility to do that, but so do the platform operators. Corporate governance and corporate social responsibility best practices should lead to these institutions recognising their responsibilities in establishing a fair marketplace and one where they have a duty of responsibility to make sure that those using their platforms are legitimate, and are meeting their VAT obligations and their obligations in all areas of taxation.

There are also wider issues with some retailers which seek to mitigate their own responsibilities to pay tax in the UK through various mechanisms. While this country has welcomed the likes of Amazon into our marketplace and recognises the attraction of such operators in adding to consumer choice, Amazon and others must recognise their social responsibility and that paying an appropriate level of tax is the price of doing business in this country. In providing a platform for other retailers, Amazon, eBay and others have a duty to make sure that businesses established outside the UK, but who are warehousing and dispatching goods located in the UK, are paying VAT. Such ventures are classed as non-established taxable persons, often referred to as NETPs.

The “fight against VAT fraud” campaign, which was established by legitimate retailers, has made a number of recommendations. Among them is the registration of VAT numbers, as mentioned by the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs, which must happen and could be done quickly. The campaign also states that a failure to display a VAT number and VAT status could be seen as a breach of UK tax laws, a theory which is informed by the rules and regulations under the EU

distance selling arrangements. The issue was the subject of a parliamentary question, answered on 16 December, when the Minister said:

“There is no requirement in tax legislation for a VAT-registered person to declare to a customer that they are registered or to provide a VAT registration number, unless they make a supply to another VAT-registered person, in which case they are obliged to issue a VAT invoice including their VAT number. However businesses are required to comply with the Electronic Commerce Regulations 2002 concerning the provision of this information.”

That should be revisited. It would at the least provide some transparency. If retailers have to have a VAT number when selling to other VAT-registered persons, what is the issue in extending that to all transactions?

The matter needs to be considered in the wider context of the debate on tax evasion and avoidance. The Scottish Government’s approach to devolved taxes demonstrates that we are serious about tackling tax avoidance in Scotland. We have taken a simple, clear but robust approach to tackling artificial tax avoidance. The Scottish general anti-avoidance rule was established by the Revenue Scotland and Tax Powers Act 2014 and will allow Revenue Scotland to take counteraction against tax avoidance arrangements that are considered to be artificial, even if they otherwise operate within the letter of the law. The Scottish general anti-abuse rule is significantly wider than the corresponding UK GAAR as set out in the Finance Act 2013, which is based on a narrower test of “abuse” rather than “artificiality”. Sadly, we have only limited powers to tackle tax avoidance on the land and buildings transaction tax and the Scottish landfill tax, but I expect that is a debate for another day. Under the current powers, including the Calman income tax powers, we have no power to tackle income tax avoidance, which falls to the UK Government and HMRC. Even after Smith is implemented, because income tax will be shared, we will still not have powers to tackle avoidance, which will also remain with the UK Government and HMRC.

The UK tax system is complex and inefficient. Unnecessary complexity, through exemptions, reliefs, deductions and allowances, creates opportunities for tax avoidance. HMRC attributed a £7.1 billion tax gap to evasion and avoidance in 2013-14 out of a total tax gap of £34 billion. Isobel d’Inverno, convener of the tax law sub-committee of the Law Society of Scotland and director of corporate tax at Brodies, has said:

“The general anti-avoidance rule that we have got in the Scottish legislation is much fiercer than the UK one. It’s a very much firmer ‘Keep off the grass’ sign than the UK one is. Revenue Scotland also appears very determined to collect all the tax that is due. There’s a whole series of different things that suggests they’re going to have a far more pro-active approach to stopping tax avoidance.”

In conclusion, we are dealing here with the specific issue of the VAT avoidance of many online retailers, but we are all responsible, particularly the UK Government, for making sure that we act tough on tax avoidance.

2.28 pm

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to appear before you for the first time, Mr Hanson. This has been an important and fairly short debate. The hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), whom I praise for securing the debate, indicated when seeking it that he thought an hour and a half would be enough because the issues are quite simple.

The solutions are quite complex, but the issue we are ventilating today is clear. It is about fraud. It is not tax avoidance, it is tax evasion.

I thank the House of Commons Library and Retailers Against VAT Avoidance Schemes or RAVAS, which I met on 17 November last year. At the same time, I also met Neven Juretic, who is the director of Maikai Ltd and a constituent of the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert). Mr Juretic suffered considerable losses, as the right hon. Gentleman outlined today. I also met Paul Miloseski-Reid, the UK lead trading standards officer. I have to salute Mr Juretic for the immense amount of work he has done not only in successfully lobbying his excellent local MP, but in producing an excellent document that proposes a number of solutions, as well as outlining the scope of the problem that our country faces.

The sector is huge and growing. The House of Commons Library tells me that UK average weekly internet retail sales are £1.1 billion, or about £57 billion a year, and growing. That is more than 15% of all UK retail sales, and the figure has gone up by two thirds since 2010—it is growing massively. Many of the frauds involve small consignments, such as tablet computers or iPhones, and the number of small consignments arriving in the European Union from outside the EU has gone up from 30 million in 1999 to 115 million in 2013, the latest year for which I could get figures. No doubt the number will have gone up considerably since then.

According to HMRC’s preliminary estimate of the tax gap for 2014-15, 10.4% of it, or £13 billion, is VAT. No hon. Member is suggesting that a crackdown on internet retail sales fraud would recoup all of that amount, and not all VAT fraud in the United Kingdom is to do with internet retail sales, but it is a big and growing problem.

The European Union requirement on companies—and individuals, I think—to register is covered by the EU electronic commerce directive, which we adopted in 2002. That is going back 13 or 14 years, and given the pace of change it is likely to need revisiting. It certainly needs to be enforced. I am unclear about whether the provisions of the directive are being enforced in the United Kingdom, but that might be because of my misunderstanding of what it entails.

My understanding is that a non-EU person trading in the EU—the wording in legislation is a “non-established taxable person”—is required to register for VAT if making “taxable supplies” under the meaning of the principal VAT directive, regardless of whether trading is above the £82,000 threshold for registration required of a UK or EU company. Apparently, therefore—the Minister will correct me if I am wrong—legal persons from outside the EU are breaking that directive when goods are sold over the internet into the United Kingdom, yet there appears to be insufficient, if any, enforcement.

Mr Juretic proposed various solutions in his excellent report on billion-pound frauds. I am sure that the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs looked at those, and he has mentioned some of them. I am not sure that we need a specialist unit, but many of the solutions that Mr Juretic floated are worthy of discussion in some detail. I will not discuss them all today, but HMRC ought to be looking at them and at similar

[Rob Marris]

things. That gentleman has considerable experience, has the bit between his teeth and has done a huge amount of work.

The National Audit Office, too, has looked at the issue in some depth—in about 2014, because it was covered in a report on HMRC's 2012-13 accounts. I might be putting a gloss on what was said by the NAO, which can speak for itself, but my understanding of the report is that the NAO was not convinced that the steps taken by HMRC on online VAT retail fraud were sufficient. The report made some suggestions.

We need action from the Government. I have a considerable amount of time for the Minister: he is mild-mannered, clever and dogged, and he has had his brief for a long time. He can probably remember, as I do, discussing VAT carousel fraud in Finance Bill Committees about eight years ago, which was the fraud du jour. There was a huge amount of fraud, and Labour, in government, put through measures that were largely supported by the then Opposition party, which now forms the Government. The then Opposition certainly entirely supported the principle of cracking down on VAT fraud, because not only is it an attack on much-needed Government revenue, but it means that there is not a level playing field for businesses such as that of Mr Juretic.

VAT fraud puts people in the UK out of work. It is not a victimless crime that is only about money. It is about jobs, people's lives and how we as a society trade. That is changing, so we need to make changes to trade honestly. Consumers in this country are not getting a fair deal in knowing what they are buying and from whom.

I have personal experience of the situation, with a company called LightInTheBox—not that it was fraudulent. I tried to buy a tablet computer from it. I understand that sometimes such goods come from overseas, even from outside the European Union, so I looked carefully during the transaction, but I was never told that the computer was coming from outside the European Union. I thought, "Great, a standard tablet computer," but it took six weeks to arrive and had come from China. I also had a demand from the Post Office to pay approximately £50 in import duties—understandably, because the goods had come from outside the European Union, addressed to me. I got the money back from LightInTheBox, incidentally—an honourable company, which paid my money back and accepted the computer back.

Though I say it myself, I am an educated person and I am of average skill at using the computer, but I do not believe that I was told, when I made that purchase, that the tablet computer was coming from outside the European Union. That might have affected my purchase, because things take longer to arrive from outside the EU and there is the possibility of customs duties, which are quite properly payable on something imported into the EU. It is easy to get caught out. People who want to act honestly as consumers might quite unwittingly be aiding and abetting fraud. It is not about consumers saying, "Oh, I'll have a bargain. I don't care about VAT", although I accept that some might be like that. Other consumers want to play it straight but are misled by websites.

The Government must take some responsibility, because they have been in office for nearly six years. This fraud undoubtedly existed before, so when my party was in government we could have done something about it, but it has gone up massively since then, commensurate with the increased number of online retail sales. None of us knows for sure how much fraud there is, but we know that it is going on. Its extent is a bit unclear, which is one reason why HMRC seems not to have taken the issue as seriously as it should. Had it done so, we would know a bit more.

There has been a series of parliamentary questions, written and during debates, going back almost two years to February 2014. In what I think was a debate in Westminster Hall—the Minister will know—judging from *Hansard*, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) asked questions. Subsequently, my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) and my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), now a shadow Treasury Minister, asked written questions. In the Lords, Lord Lucas has asked questions. This is an ongoing concern of Members of both Houses, and the Government should move a little more quickly on it.

When I read, as the hon. Member for Daventry did, remarks that the newspapers attributed to Dame Lin Homer in the Public Accounts Committee yesterday that the Revenue had been investigating online trading VAT evasion since the spring of 2015, my heart was not filled with joy. Dame Lin has, to say the least, a mixed track record of success in public service. To be fair to her, other people had indicated that the Government were looking at the matter, including the Minister in the debate here almost two years ago. He said:

"HMRC is working to identify and address the main risks posed by commercial online operating models for routing goods into the UK."—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2014; Vol. 576, c. 409W.]

It was good that HMRC was looking at it two years ago, but what has happened in the intervening period? The Minister will no doubt tell us, but for those of us not in HMRC—I suspect this is the case for the hon. Member for Daventry, though he can speak for himself—it is not entirely clear what has happened since the Minister said the risks were being investigated. That is troubling.

Lord Ashton said, I think last autumn, that this was being considered at a senior level, so the Government are aware of it and Members in both Houses have been pushing the Government, but we hear reports from Mr Juretic—Mr Miloskeski-Reid also referred to this—about insufficient co-operation between HMRC and trading standards. That is taking place against a backdrop where in many parts of England, and I suspect Scotland as well, local authority income is dropping, yet trading standards comes under local authorities and for some of those authorities a strong trading standards department may appear to be a lower priority than, for example—and understandably—social care for the elderly. In that case, what gets the chop? Unless HMRC really seizes this problem, it is likely to get worse.

The Government have made a bit of movement in the draft Finance Bill 2016, which laudably has been published. I laud the Government for the number of consultations they carry out on possible changes to tax-related matters—there are probably dozens outstanding at the moment. The draft Bill has 88 clauses and clause 79 touches on

this matter, though, as I understand it, it does only touch on it, because it deals only with data gathering. It is important to gather data to know who is selling what to whom and who is registered and so on, but while the Government, with all their resources, are probably more correct in their assessment of law than I am, I am not sure whether they have got it right on the law in relation to retailers such as Amazon.

It is easy to focus on Amazon. I am sure that it is not only Amazon that has questions to answer in this regard, but it is an enormous company with enormous sales in the United Kingdom, so some of us—I think the hon. Member for Daventry did to some extent—use it as a bit of shorthand for mass online retailers. That is fair enough, and he may well be right that they are watching us. Despite my reservations about reports of working conditions at Amazon, I do use it for internet purchases. I did not buy the said LightintheBox tablet through Amazon.

I, like I suspect many people, have registered my credit card details with Amazon. I have a username, password and so on with it—in fact, it is the only organisation with which I deal that I ask to remember my credit card details. When my credit card statements come, charges for purchases I have made are taken from my credit card account in the name of Amazon, through its different permutations, because Amazon has different legal entities in the European Union. It does not just say Amazon; it will also have some initials or a qualifier that shows which part of the Amazon empire it came from.

I am not a contract lawyer, but as a lawyer who knows a bit about contract law—I knock about on it—that says to me, as a consumer, that I am buying from Amazon. When I make a purchase, I do not give my credit card details to another company; I give them to Amazon. On the face of it, when I look at my credit card statement, I see the money is going to Amazon. Therefore, I have a contract with Amazon.

It is often but not always the case—Amazon also sells direct—that transparently, as part of the purchase process, that order is fulfilled by another company. I do not have a contract with that other company; I have a contract with Amazon. Amazon presumably has a contract—it certainly has an agreement—with that fulfilling company, which might be Bloggs Lighting Ltd or whatever, but my contract is with Amazon. If Amazon has a contract with me and, one surmises, with Bloggs Lighting, Her Majesty's Government have, on VAT fraud and evasion, considerable leverage with Amazon to say, "You, as a legal entity"—or several legal entities as in Amazon's case—"trading in the European Union are selling to UK consumers and the goods are delivered in the UK." That is because I am buying from Amazon.

That is my understanding of contract law. The Minister may be able to dissuade me and tell me that I have misinterpreted it, but, if that is the case, we should take another look at the law. As I, as a consumer, am buying from Amazon, it should be dealing honestly with me and dealing legally with those companies from which it buys the goods that it sells on to me.

Amazon should therefore be susceptible to legislation in the United Kingdom as to how it conducts its business. That legislation should not simply be the data gathering in clause 79 of the draft Bill, although that would be helpful. The legislation should also be that Amazon

must ensure that those companies from which it buys goods that it then sells on to UK consumers online are VAT registered if their turnover is above the UK threshold or if they fall under the other legal architecture for VAT registration. That is because one imagines that, often, those companies are doing quite a bit of business with Amazon—Bloggs Lighting may sell a lot of lighting stuff to consumers who go on to Amazon.co.uk. Therefore, morally or legally, I do not think Amazon can step back and say, "We are an intermediary." The hon. Member for Daventry may know that, in the school playground in the west midlands, when the teacher says, "You did something," they say, "It wor' me, Miss," which means, "I am not guilty; I did not do it."

Chris Heaton-Harris: Is there not an incentive for Amazon and other e-retail marketplaces to sort this problem out? They earn their money from commission on the total price charged. While the market might have grown a bit, the cut that Amazon would receive from a £10 item would be better than the cut from £8 it might receive for a similar good that might have been sold in the way that I detailed in my speech.

Rob Marris: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman. To take that on one step, if someone were to buy an Apple iPhone through Amazon for, say, £500, which retails from Apple online at £600, and if the reason for the price difference is not a more efficient business model but VAT evasion, Amazon is at least morally complicit in that, because it gets a cut of a £500 sale that it would not have had if the consumer had gone direct to Apple. Therefore, in that example there is a moral risk to Amazon, and, I think, a legal risk, that it is benefiting financially from fraud, because it gets a cut of a sale that would not have been made had the fraud not existed. It needs to look closely at what it is doing.

The Minister said in a written answer on 26 February 2014:

"HMRC (in liaison with Trading Standards and other agencies) is undertaking intelligence driven investigations and projects to address concerns relating to the activities of online companies, including undervaluation of goods at import."

That is very welcome, but it was two years ago that HMRC was undertaking those investigations and projects. I hope the Minister can tell us today that some of those investigations have at least made progress in the past two years. I realise that some of those investigations may have taken place and, in legal or criminal terms, led nowhere—that is the nature of investigations. We might find that there is smoke but no fire, as it were. In other cases, we might see smoke, investigate and find fire. Either way, I regard that as progress. If something looks a bit odd and we investigate it, we will sometimes find there is nothing illegal going on, and we will sometimes find there is something illegal going on. Will the Minister tell us how those investigations have proceeded and how many there have been?

The Minister also said in that written answer:

"Where the online trader is a non-EU company, HMRC has no jurisdiction."—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2014; Vol. 576, c. 409W.]

I understand that, but two things occur to me. First, the 2002 EU electronic commerce directive should be enforced in the United Kingdom. Secondly, if HMRC has no jurisdiction over those non-EU companies, some but

[Rob Marris]

not all of which will be Chinese, HMRC should, as I have stressed, look at the companies over which it does have jurisdiction—for example, Amazon or eBay. Those are two of the major companies engaged in online retail sales in the United Kingdom, and those sales should be subject to UK jurisdiction. I understand all the difficulties of different legal jurisdictions, both within and without the European Union, but we need to get a grasp on this.

Simple data collection, as provided for in clause 79 of the draft Finance Bill 2016, is a step forward but is not sufficient. I hope the Minister will reassure us today that some of the investigations to which he referred two years ago have led somewhere and borne some fruit, and that HMRC will look seriously at the suggestions put forward by Mr Juretic in his report. If the Minister cannot enlighten us today as to which of those he thinks are worthy of a closer look, perhaps he could write to Members. I hope the Government will look closely at what legal powers it could take to address the Amazons of this world and of this jurisdiction.

2.53 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Hanson. It was not that long ago that you and I were debating tax matters in your long and distinguished period on the Labour Front Bench, as my shadow. I note that four of the five shadows I had in the previous Parliament are no longer serving on the Labour Front Bench. I hope the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) will not see that as in any way ominous.

Rob Marris: I see Mr Hanson has had a promotion, so he should be congratulated.

Mr David Hanson (in the Chair): With due respect, I have had a release after 17 and a half years.

Mr Gauke: Yes, that is a very long sentence. I hope you are enjoying your new role, Mr Hanson.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) on securing this debate and setting out the case so well. I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) on his passionate speech. He is correct to say that I have met Mr Juretic and listened carefully to the points he raised.

I will turn to specific points, but first I want to acknowledge the important work that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is doing in collaboration with other agencies, both in the UK and internationally, to tackle tax evasion, which, as the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West pointed out, is what we are talking about today. Tackling tax evasion in all its forms is a priority for HMRC. Last year, HMRC collected and protected a record £26 billion in revenues from compliance activities and secured more than 1,200 prosecutions using intelligence, sophisticated risking systems and smart data.

The phenomenal growth in online sales in recent years, which we have heard about this afternoon, has made many people's day-to-day lives much easier but

presents significant challenges for HMRC. That is because the supply chains are often very complex and involve a number of different entities. Suppliers can be located overseas and their records are not always available alongside the goods. All those factors combined make it much more difficult to spot where tax and duty have been paid.

To make things more complicated, HMRC is looking for frauds taking place in the midst of large volumes of legitimate trade. It is far from our, or HMRC's, intentions to get in the way of legitimate trade, so HMRC is mindful of the need to target its activities proportionately. Nevertheless, this is a significant issue that we are determined to tackle. Building on its expertise in tackling evasion, HMRC has brought together specialists from across the Department and established in spring last year a taskforce to tackle the specific customs and VAT frauds that we have been talking about. That taskforce currently has more than 75 live investigations open into businesses or entities suspected of flouting the rules, and that figure is expected to grow to 150 before the end of the 2015-16 financial year.

Retailers Against VAT Abuse Schemes has highlighted about 500 businesses that it alleges are complicit in these frauds in some way. My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry drew attention to that list, and other hon. Members have referred to it. I assure the House that HMRC has examined the RAVAS list closely. For reasons of taxpayer confidentiality, I am not in a position to know, let alone say, what conclusions HMRC has reached in respect of each of the companies listed by RAVAS. However, it would only be fair for me to say that one cannot assume every company on the list is non-compliant.

At this point, I should touch on VAT registration numbers, which a number of hon. Members raised, including the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). Not all sellers are required to be VAT-registered. Overseas sellers that supply goods, located outside the UK, have no requirement to be registered for UK VAT. If they are compliant, in those circumstances, they would pay import VAT at the border. Of course, that would be a sticking tax, as they would not be entitled to reclaim that VAT. There are complications in this area, and the absence of a VAT number does not, in itself, suggest that a seller is breaking VAT law.

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

The issue is if sellers are claiming to be outside the UK and selling from outside it, but are in fact storing goods in a warehouse in the UK and dispatching them from the UK to a customer here. That changes the circumstances, but I want to be clear that the absence of a VAT number does not necessarily mean that fraudulent activity is occurring.

HMRC is working jointly with other Government agencies, including carrying out joint visits with trading standards and sharing intelligence with UK Border Force, to address risks across the entire supply chain to ensure that all sellers who sell online pay all the taxes that are due. To give hon. Members a flavour of that work, in an operation just before Christmas, HMRC and trading standards seized goods worth half a million pounds. As HMRC's programme of activity continues, and both its operational intelligence and understanding of fraud improve, it expects to make more interceptions and seizures of illicit goods.

I should stress the point about illegitimate and legitimate trade. HMRC has the powers to seize or detain all goods in a warehouse, for example, but it also has to think about the potential impact of its actions, for instance, on the end consumer. If HMRC were seizing goods that subsequently turned out to be there legitimately, I suspect many of our constituents would want to raise concerns.

We recognise the concerns that have been raised by compliant businesses. Clearly, it is very important that non-compliant businesses should not be allowed to establish any unfair advantage over compliant businesses, as that would distort competitiveness. Again, that point was rightly made by a number of hon. Members. Tackling these frauds is just as much about maintaining a level playing field for business as it is about collecting the tax and duty that should be paid.

That operational work is the first strand of HMRC's work to tackle these frauds. The second strand is engagement with the online platforms on which goods are sold.

Rob Marris: Before the Minister moves off the first strand—perhaps he is planning to address this point later—23 months ago he talked about the investigations that were going on. He tells us today that there are 75 live investigations. What he could tell us, which would not breach taxpayer confidentiality, is whether there have been any prosecutions—which would be in the public domain—in the last five years for this sort of fraud.

Mr Gauke: I will have to write to the hon. Gentleman with details on that. I am not in a position to give any numbers this afternoon, but I understand his point.

Turning to online platforms, I can tell hon. Members that a meeting with the top online platforms took place recently, at a very senior level, to explore the role that they can play in preventing such frauds. HMRC is proactively following that up to see how it can work with the platforms to tackle the fraud and better quantify the scale of that. However, having looked at the matter, HMRC's view is that online platforms have no liability for unpaid VAT where the operator merely provides a marketplace for businesses to sell goods.

I know that this point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry, and although I am loth to get too much into a legal argument, he mentioned the Kittel case. It is worth bearing in mind that the Kittel case applied in the context of MTIC—missing trader intra-Community—fraud, or carousel fraud, which the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West and I debated some years ago. Irrespective of that issue, it is worth pointing out that the Kittel case has been used by HMRC in the context of withholding repayments of input tax to members of a supply chain. It is a civil case, not a criminal case, and in HMRC's view, the important difference here is that all members of a supply chain in MTIC fraud have, at some point or other, title of the goods, enabling them to reclaim input tax. That is not the case when an online platform is involved in providing services relating to the sale. Therefore, HMRC does not believe that Kittel applies in these circumstances in the way that my hon. Friend suggests.

It is also worth pointing out that there are many parties involved in a transaction where this type of fraud may occur—for example, fulfilment houses, payment

providers, freight forwarders and agents, and online marketplaces as well as online sellers. HMRC is not limiting anti-fraud work to marketplaces only, although it recognises that they play an important role and is prioritising its engagement with them in the coming weeks.

The third and final strand to tackling this issue is putting together an effective set of policies that can make this sort of fraud harder to perpetuate in the first place. As hon. Members will recognise, unilateral action is not going to solve the problem by itself, as there is an important international dimension to these frauds. They affect the revenues of other EU member states as well as the United Kingdom, and we are in close dialogue with them about how best to combine our efforts to tackle such frauds.

Rob Marris: Welcome to the Chair, Mr Davies. Would the Minister therefore say that in this respect, it would be advantageous to the United Kingdom to remain a member state of the European Union, because of that international dimension and the international action to which he referred?

Mr Gauke: I do not know whether that intervention was for my benefit or for the arrival of our new Chairman—Mr Davies, it is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon.

The point I would make is that whether we are inside or outside the European Union, international co-operation is very much necessary in such cases. As an example of that, the customs aspects of these frauds—it needs to be emphasised that this is a customs as well as a VAT issue—are on the agenda for the meeting of the directors general of all EU customs services on 26 March. There is some evidence that the UK has been particularly targeted for these frauds because of our much greater take-up of online shopping. That will make it all the more important that we work closely with our international counterparts, for the benefit of the UK and more widely. HMRC already works closely with the European Commission and OLAF, the EU's anti-fraud unit.

Of course, there is a lot more to be done, not least as online retailing gets ever more popular worldwide. All taxes are kept under review, and HMRC is considering whether there need to be policy changes or other changes to the rules that apply to online sales. However, for effective longer term solutions, we will need to continue our engagement with other EU member states, the Commission and the OECD, and I would like to assure hon. Members that that dialogue is already under way.

Our goal is simple: one where the customer continues to enjoy the benefits of being able to buy goods conveniently through an online platform, but where unscrupulous businesses cannot undermine, through fraudulent activity, businesses that do the right thing. Although there is still much work to be done, I hope that hon. Members will appreciate the strong and collaborative efforts that HMRC is making to tackle this issue.

3.8 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I welcome you to the debate.

When I bid for time for this debate at the Backbench Business Committee, I was hoping to get 90 minutes sometime at the end of January so that I could secure

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

the support of the former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). I served on that Committee with her for five years, and we had plenty of conversations about online marketplaces, how much tax they pay and how much tax they should pay—she was very interested in the issue.

Given that we had just 24 hours' notice of the debate, I am pleased that we have the Minister, the shadow Minister and the SNP spokesman here. I am also pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) was able to attend and talk about his constituent's experiences.

Obviously, I was pleased to hear about the investigations and goods seizures that are going on, because my constituent would like to be assured that HMRC is not reacting slowly to a situation that is developing extremely quickly. More and more of these companies are being formed, and dormant companies that have already been registered are being activated and used in the way I described.

I am pleased that there have been high-level meetings with the top online marketplaces, and I would be fascinated to find out their reaction to the inquiries that are taking place.

Rob Marris: I do not seek to draw the hon. Gentleman on the timing, but perhaps he could say whether he understands why some Members, certainly on the Opposition Benches, feel a little frustrated—he may or may not express a similar view—about the apparent lack of urgency with which HMRC is dealing with this growing problem.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I have to say that I am with my constituent on this. I am particularly frustrated that it has taken a while for HMRC to publicly gauge the level of activity, although I have no idea what might have happened behind the scenes—having been a member of the Public Accounts Committee, and having had many a private briefing from HMRC over the last five years, I know that some things are best left unseen by the public eye. However, it has been frustrating for retailers who feel they are being unfairly competed against.

As I said, I was pleased to hear about the high-level meetings between the online retailers and officials. However, I was frustrated by the quote from Dame Lin Homer—the Minister repeated it today—suggesting that the Government and the tax authorities perceive no liability on online retailers. Even a tiny hint in a different direction would change behaviour very quickly.

There will be negotiations in the coming weeks, however. There is also the meeting on 26 March about the customs elements of this fraud. Potentially, there will also be opportunities to investigate this matter further in the Finance Bill and to look at the possibilities for giving the Government a helpful nudge so that they are as engaged as the Minister has been.

I thank everybody for their attendance, and I thank you, Mr Davies, for your kind guidance over the 13 minutes you have been here.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered VAT evasion and internet retailers.

3.13 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 14 January 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Government Consultation Principles

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr Oliver Letwin): Today, I am publishing a revised set of Government consultation principles. These principles are intended to produce clear guidance to Government Departments on the conduct of consultations. They have been amended in the light of comments from the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee, and demonstrate the Government's desire to engage more effectively with the public.

We will use more digital methods to involve a wider group of consultees at an earlier stage in the policy forming process. We will make it easier for the public to contribute and feed in their views, and we will try harder to use clear language and plain English in consultation documents.

We will also reduce the risk of "consultation fatigue" by making sure that we consult only on issues that are genuinely undecided.

A copy has been placed in the Library, and can be found online at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consultation-principles-guidance>

[HCWS467]

EDUCATION

Children's Social Care Reform

The Secretary of State for Education (Nicky Morgan): I am today announcing a series of changes that will radically transform the children's social care system.

Social workers change lives. They have the ability not just to improve the circumstances of vulnerable children but to change them, and therefore their futures, entirely. That is why supporting social workers, and giving them the tools they need, is a priority for this Government. We must give every child the best start in life and make sure that every child can fulfil their potential—regardless of the circumstances they were born into. And we must make sure our support for the most vulnerable is at the heart of that commitment.

I am, therefore, announcing that:

With the support of my colleague the Secretary of State for Health, it is our intention to establish a new regulatory body for social work to drive up standards with a relentless focus on raising the quality of social work, education, training and practice in both children's and adult's social work. It will also set standards for training and oversee the rollout of a new assessment and accreditation system for children and family social workers. Over time, it will become the new regulatory

body for social work, in place of the Health and Care Professions Council. It is our intention to bring forward any necessary legislation when parliamentary business allows.

We want to raise the quality of social work and overhaul social worker education and practice to improve the recruitment, retention and development of social workers. We are doing this by providing definitive statements on the knowledge and skills that social workers should have and display at three important levels, approved child and family practitioner; practice supervisor and practice leader and we are rolling out a national, practice-focused, career pathway through the development of an assessment and accreditation system based on the highest levels of skill and knowledge. Schemes like Teach First have helped transform teaching into one of the most prestigious and high status professions in the country, and we must now do the same for social work. And that is why we will be investing a further £100 million into Frontline, and into our specialist course, Step-up.

I am also granting three further councils—Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and Islington—freedoms to innovate, to improve frontline children's social work and to develop new systems of delivering social care and trialling new ways of working with families. These new councils will join the six areas that are already part of the programme, as announced by the Prime Minister in December last year—North Yorkshire, the tri-borough authorities (Westminster, Hammersmith & Fulham, and Kensington & Chelsea), Leeds, Durham and Richmond and Kingston.

In addition, Government funding of up to £20 million will be made available for a new "What Works Centre", with the aim of making sure social workers and others across the country are able to learn from the very best examples of frontline social work. The new centre will run from later in the year.

Supporting social workers, and giving them the tools they need, is a priority for this Government and a personal priority for me as Secretary of State. These reforms are about getting it right for social workers, so that social workers can get it right for our most vulnerable children and families.

Copies of my speech and the paper "Children's social care reform—A vision for change" will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS469]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs and General Affairs Councils

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council on 18 January and I will attend the General Affairs Council on 18 January. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, and the General Affairs Council will be chaired by the Dutch presidency. The meetings will be held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

The expected agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council will include Syria, Iraq and Ukraine. The Jordanian Foreign Minister will attend lunch where discussion will focus on Syria, Iraq, Daesh.

Syria

Ministers will exchange views on the International Syria Support Group meeting in December and the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 2254, as well as the prospects for the talks between the Syrian parties in early 2016 and the situation on the ground.

Iraq

Following the FAC conclusions on Iraq agreed at the December FAC, Ministers will have an opportunity for an in-depth discussion of the political and security situation in Iraq. This will come at an important time, given the recent capture of the town of Ramadi from Daesh. We expect the discussion to focus on what more the EU and member states can do to support long-term security, stability and prosperity in Iraq. We will also use the opportunity to look forward to the review of the EU ISIL/Syria/Iraq strategy to be completed in March.

Jordan

Ministers will be joined for lunch by the Foreign Minister of Jordan, Mr Nasser Judeh. Jordan is a key ally in the fight against Daesh, and is host to over 630,000 refugees from the Syria crisis. At the upcoming Syria donor conference the UK aims to secure increased international support to Jordan's long-term economic resilience and stability. Ministers will discuss measures that the EU can take and the full range of regional issues.

Ukraine

Ministers are expected to exchange views on Ukraine's reform programme and agree a set of priorities that will direct the work of the EU's support group to Ukraine. We also expect Ministers to discuss what further support the EU can give Ukraine for the implementation of its reform programme, including on strategic communications.

General Affairs Council

The General Affairs Council (GAC) on 18 January is expected to focus on the presidency work programme and preparation of the European Council on 18 and 19 February 2016.

Presidency Work programme

The Dutch presidency commenced on 1 January. The Dutch Foreign Minister, Albert Koenders, will set out the presidency's programme and priorities for the current semester. The programme is based on the presidency trio programme, developed jointly with Slovakia and Malta, but will focus on four main themes: jobs and growth; labour mobility; the Eurozone; and a Union of freedom, justice and security.

Preparation of the February European Council

The GAC will prepare the agenda for the 18 and 19 February European Council, which the Prime Minister will attend. The draft February European Council agenda covers: the UK's EU renegotiation, migration, and economic issues.

HOME DEPARTMENT**Immigration Detention: Vulnerable Persons****The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire):**

The Government are committed to an immigration system that works in Britain's national interest, and commands the confidence of the British people. Coming to the United Kingdom to work, study or visit is a privilege, not an unqualified right. Accordingly, the Government expect anyone who comes to the UK to comply with their visa conditions and, if they do not, to return home voluntarily at the first opportunity.

We have put in place a robust legal framework, which prevents the abuse of appeals procedures and encourages timely and voluntary departures by denying access to services, such as bank accounts, rental property, the labour market and driving licences, to those with no right to be here. Where individuals nonetheless fail to comply with immigration law, and refuse to leave, we will take enforcement action to remove them from the UK. Where it is necessary for the purposes of removal, and taking into account any risk that an individual may abscond, this will involve a period of detention—which of course can be avoided if the individual departs voluntarily. The Government are clear that in these circumstances it is in the public interest to detain and remove such individuals, and the vast majority of those in detention are, accordingly, those who have made their way to the United Kingdom unlawfully or breached their conditions of entry, have failed to make their case for asylum, or are foreign criminals.

It is a long-established principle, however, that where an individual is detained pending removal there must be a realistic prospect of removal within a reasonable time. Depriving someone of their liberty will always be subject to careful consideration and scrutiny, and will take account of individual circumstances. It is vital that the system is not only efficient and effective but also treats those within it with dignity and respect, and takes account of the vulnerability of those detained.

It is against this background that in February last year the Home Secretary asked Stephen Shaw to conduct a review of the welfare of vulnerable individuals in detention. His review is being published today (Cm 9186). It makes recommendations for operational improvements, for changes to the policy on detaining vulnerable people, and for changes to the provision of healthcare services in detention. Copies have been laid in the House. The Government are grateful to Mr Shaw for his review, welcome this important contribution to the debate about effective detention, and accept the broad thrust of his recommendations. Consistent with our policies, we will now take forward three key reforms, working across Government and the national health service and with private sector providers.

First, the Government accept Mr Shaw's recommendations to adopt a wider definition of those at risk, including victims of sexual violence, individuals with mental health issues, pregnant women, those with learning difficulties, post-traumatic stress disorder and elderly people, and to recognise the dynamic nature of vulnerabilities. It will introduce a new "adult at risk" concept into decision-making on immigration detention

with a clear presumption that people who are at risk should not be detained, building on the existing legal framework. This will strengthen the approach to those whose care and support needs make it particularly likely that they would suffer disproportionate detriment from being detained, and will therefore be considered generally unsuitable for immigration detention unless there is compelling evidence that other factors which relate to immigration abuse and the integrity of the immigration system, such as matters of criminality, compliance history and the imminence of removal, are of such significance as to outweigh the vulnerability factors. Each case will be considered on its individual facts, supported by a new vulnerable persons team. We will also strengthen our processes for dealing with those cases of torture, health issues and self-harm threats that are first notified after the point of detention, including bespoke training to GPs on reporting concerns about the welfare of individuals in detention and how to identify potential victims of torture.

Second, building on the transfer of healthcare commissioning in immigration removal centres to the NHS, and taking account of the concerns expressed by Mr Shaw about mental healthcare provision in detention, the Government will carry out a more detailed mental health needs assessment in immigration removal centres, using the expertise of the Centre For Mental Health. This will report in March 2016, and NHS commissioners will use that assessment to consider and revisit current provision. In the light of the review the

Government will also publish a joint Department of Health, NHS and Home Office mental health action plan in April 2016.

Third, to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of the detention estate, and in response to Mr Shaw's recommendation that the Home Office should examine its processes for carrying out detention reviews, the Government will implement a new approach to the case management of those detained, replacing the existing detention review process with a clear removal plan for all those in detention. A stronger focus on and momentum towards removal, combined with a more rigorous assessment of who enters detention through a new gate-keeping function, will ensure that the minimum possible time is spent in detention before people leave the country without the potential abuse of the system that arbitrary time limits would create.

The Government expect these reforms, and broader changes in legislation, policy and operational approaches, to lead to a reduction in the number of those detained, and the duration of detention before removal, in turn improving the welfare of those detained. Immigration enforcement's business plan for 2016-17 will say more about the Government's plans for the future shape and size of the detention estate.

More effective detention, complemented by increased voluntary departures and removing without detention, will safeguard the most vulnerable while helping control immigration abuse and reducing costs.

[HCWS470]

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