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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 19 January 2016

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Long-term Economic Plan

1. **Craig Williams** (Cardiff North) (Con): What progress he has made on his long-term economic plan.
[903099]

The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): Britain is in a much stronger economic position than five years ago, with employment up and the deficit down. However, as I set out in my speech to business leaders in Cardiff, we face a dangerous cocktail of economic risks from around the world this year. That situation is reflected in the International Monetary Fund forecasts that were published one hour ago, in which world growth is revised down but the positive forecast for the UK is unchanged. That shows that the best thing that we can do is to continue to fix our public finances, back business and deliver our long-term economic plan.

Craig Williams: The Chancellor was very welcome when he visited Cardiff two weeks ago. He brought a sense of urgency to the Cardiff city deal process with the deadline of the Budget and a clear sense of direction with the compound semiconductor catapult. If we are to maximise the potential of Cardiff and the Welsh economy that our long-term economic plan presents, do we not need tangible partnership plans from the Labour Assembly Government? Is it not time that they came up with them, given that they have had 16 years to do so?

Mr Osborne: It was very good to meet my hon. Friend and business leaders in Cardiff; to back them and the brilliant work that is being done at the university there with the investment in the new semiconductor catapult; and to commit to additional capital investment. I hope that we can agree a Cardiff city deal with the Welsh Government and the authorities in Cardiff before the Budget. He poses the right question, which is if, after 16 years in power, the Labour party in Wales has not delivered a credible economic plan for Wales, is it not time for a change?

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): If the Chancellor keeps shrugging off the threat to the very existence of some of Britain's core strategic industries, such as steel, is there not a danger that when our country really needs those resources and that extra capacity for our national security no less, they might not be there at all?

Mr Osborne: Of course the redundancies that have been announced at Tata Steel and elsewhere in the steel industry are a real matter of regret. We are providing all the support we can to the families who are affected and helping them to get into work. We are backing the steel industry by responding to its requests that we cut energy bill costs—that policy comes into effect today; that we change the rules around procurement so that companies and the Government buy British steel; and that we take action internationally against cheap imports from China. Not one of those things was done when there was a Labour Government, and during that period the number of steel jobs in this country fell by 50%. We will not take lectures from the Labour party, but we will back our steel industry.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): Does the Chancellor think that the stamp duty surcharge that was announced in the autumn statement for the buy-to-let market will inhibit or advance labour mobility?

Mr Osborne: I think that it will help to promote home ownership, because it will mean that there is a more level playing field between an owner-occupier who wants to buy a house, a first-time buying family and a buy-to-let landlord. There is nothing wrong with people investing in property, but there should be a level playing field so that we reverse the decline in home ownership in our country.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): A long-term economic plan means supporting small businesses across the country. On 26 December, 250 businesses in my constituency that employ 2,500 people were inundated by floodwater. Will the Chancellor take this opportunity to commit to a full flood defence scheme in Leeds so that this sort of disaster cannot happen to businesses in my constituency again?

Mr Osborne: I certainly commit to looking personally at what can be done to improve flood defences in Leeds. The Environment Agency and the Government are conducting a review after what was the highest level of rainfall in Yorkshire in modern history. Of course, having committed the additional £2 billion to flood investments, we are able to afford these things. We would not be able to afford any of this sort of thing if we had wrecked the economy like the last Government did.

17. [903116] **Christopher Pincher** (Tamworth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that as part of his long-term economic plan, the Help to Buy ISA will help people in my constituency, where housing is priced at a premium, to own their own homes—a dream that the Labour party wishes to quash?

Mr Osborne: My hon. Friend is right, and the Help to Buy ISA has been a spectacular success. In the few weeks since its launch, 170,000 families have taken it up,

and it is helping people to get on the property ladder and save for that deposit. We are doing everything that we can to support the aspirations of the families of Britain.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The Government's plan requires the doubling of exports by 2020 to £1 trillion—a promise repeated in “Fixing the Foundations”, which was published in this Parliament. Does the Chancellor still hold to the intention and promise to see UK exports rise by £100 billion a year every year for the next five years?

Mr Osborne: We hold to that target, but frankly it will be very challenging to meet. We have been improving exports, but many of our main export markets have been weak, and we would like further economic reform on the continent of Europe. Some of the big emerging markets are struggling at the moment, but a good economic dialogue is taking place today with India, and British exports to India are increasing. Only recently has the United States economy started to grow. There are many challenges, but I do not think we should duck those challenges or ditch the target. Increasing exports is a key priority for the UK.

Stewart Hosie: I agree that we should set ambitious targets, but they must be credible. Given that the British Chambers of Commerce states that the export target will be undershot, and the Office for Budget Responsibility states that it will fail to be met by some £350 billion, is it better to set a realistic and achievable target, rather than risk losing credibility as the Chancellor did when he failed on debt, deficit and borrowing targets in the previous Parliament?

Mr Osborne: It is right to set and to try to meet a stretching target, even if that will be challenging. The hon. Gentleman talks about realistic and credible numbers. If Scotland had listened to the Scottish nationalists, it would be separating from the United Kingdom in two months' time. The Scottish Government based their claim for independence on an oil price of \$115. Scotland would now be heading for economic catastrophe if it had listened to the hon. Gentleman and Scottish National party members. Before they talk about credible and realistic economic policies anywhere else in the United Kingdom, they should get one themselves.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Motor manufacturing is crucial to our long-term economic plan and to exporting. The Land Rover Defender will soon stop production in Solihull. Will the Chancellor praise the workers of Solihull for producing that iconic brand and driving exports for the past 60 years?

Mr Osborne: My hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to workers at the Jaguar Land Rover plant in Solihull. The iconic Defender that they have produced over all those decades has been seen around the world and used in peacetime as well as during war. It is good news for Solihull, the west midlands and the whole country that Jaguar Land Rover will continue to produce brand-new models of great cars. It is one of the real success stories of the British economy. In general, while Conservatives have been in the Treasury and in Downing Street, car production in this country is up by 50%.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Only eight weeks ago the Chancellor promised

“an economic recovery for all, felt in all parts of our nation”—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1358.]

On the day that the International Monetary Fund warned about the global economy and called on Government to increase their investment spending—something that Labour Members have consistently called for—will he now reconsider his economic plan, and particularly his investment plans?

Mr Osborne: The economic plan has seen employment rise and unemployment fall, and it has meant that for the IMF forecasts that the hon. Gentleman mentions, the UK's forecast has not been changed and remains one of the strongest among all advanced economies in the world. Perhaps I may gently suggest that the hon. Gentleman might want to change his own economic policy, since in the last week he has called for the return of flying pickets, and said that he wants to ban companies from paying dividends and spend billions of pounds on nuclear submarines without any nuclear missiles. Today he said that he is going to tour the country with the former Greek Finance Minister, Mr Varoufakis, to educate us all about economics—the one thing they have in common is that they have both lost their marbles.

John McDonnell: If the Chancellor will not reconsider his investment plans, can he at least appreciate how angry the families of steelworkers in south Wales are this morning? They know that when the bankers' bonuses were threatened, he immediately shot across to Brussels with an army of lawyers to defend them and that he will jump into a helicopter for a Tory fundraiser. It has taken him four months to lift a finger to save steelworkers' jobs. Does that not prove that he is actually the bankers' Chancellor?

Mr Osborne: We want a successful financial services industry, because hundreds of thousands of people across the country work in it. We also want a successful manufacturing and steel industry, which is why we have taken action to reduce energy costs—something that had not happened previously and which comes into effect today—and why we are taking action to change procurement rules so that the British Government and others are encouraged to buy British steel. Again, that never happened when the Labour party was in office. We are acting internationally to deal with the dumping of Chinese steel. That is what we are doing. Of course it is an incredibly difficult situation, but as the hon. Gentleman knows, and everyone in this House knows, steel jobs are being lost in every single country in the world at the moment. The question is: what can we do nationally to defend and protect our steel industry? We are doing everything we can. If the hon. Gentleman has constructive suggestions, he should put them to me.

Banking Culture Review

2. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Financial Conduct Authority on its decision to end its review of banking culture. [903100]

13. **Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Financial Conduct Authority on its decision to end its review of banking culture. [903111]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): The Financial Conduct Authority is an independent regulator. No Treasury Minister or official had any discussions with the FCA before it took the decision to discontinue the review.

Dr Huq: Given that the popular image of bankers right now is probably on a par with used car salesmen or MPs even, does the Minister not agree with the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) that to abort the review now, which could have looked at regulating challenger banks as well as historical mis-selling, is a missed opportunity?

Harriett Baldwin: I find it hard to take lectures from the Labour party on regulating the financial sector. In fact, since my right hon. Friend became Chancellor, we have set up the Financial Conduct Authority and moved on from the failed regulatory system under the Labour Government. We made it a criminal offence to manipulate the UK's key benchmark, we brought in the toughest rules on bankers' pay of any financial centre, and we are bringing in a new criminal offence so that senior managers whose reckless decisions bring down banks can face up to seven years in jail.

Jo Stevens: With the terrible impact of bad banking practices highlighted in the Tomlinson report, particularly in commercial lending to small businesses, still unresolved for one of my constituents, does the Minister agree that both the public and small businesses still have significant concerns about the behaviour of many individuals within the banking sector?

Harriett Baldwin: I completely agree with the hon. Lady that we need to see the highest levels of conduct from the banking sector. We also need to continue to take steps in terms of our long-term economic plan to secure access to funding for small businesses. That is why we have taken steps to back peer-to-peer lending and extended funding for lending for another two years. We continue to benefit from record low interest rates thanks to our prudent economic management.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): There has been speculation that the Treasury has influenced the decision by the Financial Conduct Authority. While I think that such speculation is certainly fanciful, it is important to remind the House that the FCA was set up in 2012 as an independent organisation. Does my hon. Friend agree that one way we could underpin the independence of the FCA would be to adopt a similar process to the one we have with the Office for Budget Responsibility, whereby the Treasury Committee can have power of veto over the appointment of the chief executive?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend, who is a very constructive and engaged member of the Treasury Committee, will have the opportunity to ask questions of the acting chief executive and the chair of the FCA

on Wednesday. I agree that it is very useful for such a Committee to have pre-appointment hearings with any executive of the FCA.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The Symphony interbank communications software, which allows for the permanent deletion of emails, advertises itself as being able to save banks billions of pounds in fines. Will the Minister join my campaign, in conjunction with the Business Secretary, to ensure that the FCA retains the encryption codes for the Symphony software system for seven years, as happens in America?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend asks a salient question. The FCA is investigating this matter, and he will be aware that new rules—the markets in financial instruments directive II—will require firms to keep information for a considerable period, but this is the subject of ongoing discussions.

23. [903122] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Minister agree that one of the biggest problems with the banking culture is that banks are too big to fail, and will she consider the issue of diversity in the sector, including, for instance, new lending platforms and market disruptors? In particular, will she consider new primary duties on the FCA to consider the issue of diversity?

Harriett Baldwin: I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will welcome the announcement we are expecting on Wednesday from the Bank of England, the FCA and the Prudential Regulation Authority about their working together to back innovation in the financial sector. A key part of our long-term economic plan is to back competition in the banking sector, which is why I am pleased there were eight new entrants to the banking sector in the last Parliament. In this Parliament, we are aiming for 15.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, “interventions by HM Treasury and other bodies have raised questions...regarding the board's independence”—not my words but those of an FCA-commissioned external report on the FCA board published last week. How will the Chancellor demonstrate that the appointment of the new chief executive will not be yet another example of an overreaching Chancellor trying to get his own way?

Harriett Baldwin: It was good of the hon. Gentleman to turn up for Treasury questions this time—I guess there was not a Stop the War march or a picket line to join today. I can assure him that the Treasury has the power to appoint both the board and the chief executive and to set its remit, but from then on it has operational independence.

Wage Growth/Inflation

3. **James Heapey** (Wells) (Con): What comparative assessment he has made of the trends in the levels of wage growth and inflation. [903101]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show that real average weekly earnings were up 2.4%,

year on year, in the three months to October; wage growth has outstripped inflation for 13 consecutive months—the longest period of real wage growth since before the recession; and the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts wages to grow faster than inflation over each of the next five years.

James Heapey: I welcome the Minister's reply. Does he agree that the key to delivering further wage growth, particularly in rural areas such as Somerset, is improving productivity, infrastructure and the skills base, all of which underpin the Chancellor's long-term economic plan for the south-west?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is quite right. Last year, the hourly pay of the average Somerset employee grew well in excess of CPI inflation, and of course the south-west has a particularly strong employment rate. To keep on driving real wage growth, however, we must have productivity gains, hence the focus on the "Fixing the Foundations" strategy for skills and infrastructure and on making sure we have an attractive tax regime that encourages investment and brings jobs to that region and the country as a whole.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Some 400,000 fewer people earn more than £20,000 than did in 2010, because the Chancellor has been cutting full-time jobs and replacing them with more part-time, low-paid jobs. What is he doing to lift productivity and research and development to raise average and median wages?

Damian Hinds: The lowest earners experienced the fastest growth in median earnings last year, and recent growth in employment has been dominated by full-time workers, contrary to what the hon. Gentleman says. We have a comprehensive plan for driving productivity in the "Fixing the Foundations" strategy, and the national living wage is a dramatic, long-term structural change.

Northern Powerhouse

4. **John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): What progress he has made on the establishment of the northern powerhouse. [903102]

The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): Our long-term plan is to turn around the decades-old economic divide between the north and south by building a northern powerhouse. We said we would create powerful new elected Mayors, and that is happening; we said we would speed up transport connections across the north, and we have committed £13 billion of investment; and for my hon. Friend's Cumbria, there is a new enterprise zone, new air routes and nuclear research. The north is growing under this Government, and, with our plan, we will do everything we can to keep it growing strongly.

John Stevenson: I, like many of my constituents, want Carlisle and Cumbria to be part of the northern powerhouse. This is partly about ensuring the private sector invests and grows and partly about skills and infrastructure, but then there is the proposed Cumbrian deal. Will the Chancellor assure me that everything is being done, from the Government's perspective, to achieve this deal, and will an elected Mayor be part of it?

Mr Osborne: As my hon. Friend knows—he is a real champion not just of Carlisle, but of Cumbria and the Cumbrian economy—we are working with local authority leaders and other elected representatives on whether we can have a new governance arrangement in Cumbria, which might include an elected Mayor. This is a decision for Cumbria, of course, but it has come to us with this proposal, and we are working hard with the people of Cumbria to see whether we can get an arrangement that boosts jobs, boosts investment and makes sure that decisions that affect Cumbria are taken in Cumbria.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Does the northern powerhouse occur in Redcar where the steel industry has been closed because of the Chancellor allowing the Chinese to dump steel? Are they talking about the northern powerhouse at Scunthorpe, where they have lost more than a thousand jobs? Are they talking about it at Port Talbot, where they are going to lose a lot more jobs? The truth is that they do not talk about the northern powerhouse in the coalfields where the Tories have shut the last three pits. They call it the northern poorhouse. That is its real name.

Mr Osborne: The hon. Gentleman seems to forget that the Redcar works first closed under the Labour Government that he supported. It is also the case that during that Government, which he supported from the Government Benches, the number of steel jobs lost in this country was 30,000. We are doing everything we can to preserve the steel jobs that remain. We are working with the steel industry. We have acceded to almost all its requests, and we are looking at the last remaining one, which is changes to business rates—again, something that never happened under a Labour Government. We will report on that at the Budget. We are working to make this the competitive place to do business, and if we adopted the policies of the Opposition, where dividends are not paid to investors and flying pickets are reintroduced, do they really think that a single overseas investor, such as Tata Steel, would be expanding their business in the United Kingdom?

UK GDP: EU Membership

5. **Emma Reynolds** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential effect of leaving the EU on UK GDP. [903103]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): The Government are fighting hard to fix aspects of our EU membership that cause so much frustration in the United Kingdom, so that we get a better deal for our country and secure our future. We are confident that the right agreement can be reached.

Emma Reynolds: Jaguar Land Rover recently announced that it will double investment in the brand-new engine plant on the outskirts of my constituency, creating hundreds and hundreds of additional jobs on top of the 1,400 already announced. Does the Minister agree that unfettered access to the single market drives this sort of investment and that if we were to walk away or sacrifice that access, those jobs and that investment could well be put at risk?

Mr Gauke: I too welcome the new jobs being created in and near the hon. Lady's constituency by Jaguar Land Rover. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor visited that site recently. On our relationship with the European Union, the Government's position is very clear: we want the benefits of access to the single market, but there are aspects of our relationship with the EU that can be improved. That is what we are seeking to do in our renegotiation.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Given that we had a £62 billion trade deficit with the European Union last year, and given that if we left the EU the UK would be the EU's single biggest export market, does the Minister think we could have a free trade agreement with the EU from outside it, without handing over £19 billion a year in membership fees?

Mr Gauke: I am sure that will be one of the issues discussed at length during the referendum debate. The point is that under this Government the British people will have an opportunity to express their views on where our future lies.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Britain has been a significant and, in recent years, a substantial net contributor to the EU budget. For over 40 years, this has had a negative impact on UK economic growth and GDP, the cumulative effect of which has been very large. Would leaving the EU not take that particular brake off UK GDP growth?

Mr Gauke: One point I would make is that thanks to Margaret Thatcher's renegotiation of the rebate and thanks to the current Prime Minister's negotiation of the EU budget resulting in a real-terms cut, we are paying less than we otherwise would have done.

Departmental Pay: Living Wage

6. **Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP):** How many staff in his Department earn less than £7.85 per hour. [903104]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): None.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Minister for that answer, but does she not agree that it is important to pay the real living wage, which is £9.40 an hour in London and £8.25 in the rest of the United Kingdom? It is paid by the Scottish Government and by more than 400 employers in Scotland, so it is fair to all employees, particularly those under 25.

Harriett Baldwin: I am glad the hon. Lady welcomes the fact that, from April this year, all employees in the United Kingdom who are over 25 will receive a significant pay rise. That is thanks to the strength of employment throughout the United Kingdom, which in turn is thanks to our long-term economic plan.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): According to my calculations, someone who earns £7.85 an hour today will benefit from rises in the personal tax allowance and the national living wage, and, by the end of this

Parliament, will be more than £1,500 better off. Does my hon. Friend agree that that proves that this Government are committed to making work pay?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. In fact, it has been stated that not only will 2.5 million people benefit directly from the change in the national living wage in April, but up to 6 million whose salaries are very close to that hourly rate will benefit as well.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): When will the Chancellor, and in particular the Minister, give public sector workers a decent pay rise that reflects some of the jobs that they do for us?

Harriett Baldwin: We believe that every worker in the country will benefit from the change in the national living wage, which is an important part of the long-term economic plan, but, as the hon. Gentleman will know, this year public sector workers received pay rises that were above inflation.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): The Minister has made important comments about the principle of making work pay. Will she give further consideration to extending the married couples' tax allowance, so that more families can keep more of what they earn?

Harriett Baldwin: I will take that as a Budget submission.

Support for Businesses

7. **Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con):** What fiscal steps he is taking to support businesses. [903105]

11. **Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con):** What fiscal steps he is taking to support small business owners. [903109]

The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): The Government are backing businesses by cutting their taxes. We have given Britain the lowest corporate tax rate in the G20, and we are cutting it further. To support small businesses, the employment allowance will rise by 50% in April, and we are doubling small business rate relief. This Government understand that we create jobs and raise money for public services by backing companies, not by punishing them with the kind of anti-business, anti-enterprise nonsense that we hear from the Labour party.

Mr Mak: Manufacturers in my constituency, such as Innova Design, are growing, thanks to the rise in investment allowance tax relief which takes effect this month. Will the Chancellor join me in congratulating Innova Design on its growth and success, and will he also continue to support the British manufacturing sector, an industry that was neglected by Labour for 13 years?

Mr Osborne: Absolutely. I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Innova Design on the work that it is doing. We are investing in transport infrastructure on the south coast, and we are also backing companies—not just there, but around the country—with a permanent annual allowance of £200,000, which is the highest that it has ever been.

Andrew Rosindell: What steps does the Chancellor intend to take to ensure that the quarterly tax returns that are made in 2020 will not harm small businesses in constituencies such as mine by affecting their productivity and their ability to make profits?

Mr Osborne: My hon. Friend is right. Our objective is to make it easier for businesses, and indeed individuals, to complete their tax returns by making use of modern digital technology, and we are introducing a simple and secure personalised digital tax account. We estimate that that will reduce the administrative cost to businesses by £400 million.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): The best way to support manufacturing businesses in the midlands would be to free the region from London's control, because it has been stifled by Whitehall for far too long. If the Chancellor gives us the powers and the funds that we need to strengthen the economy, develop brownfield sites and tackle congestion, we will deliver more jobs, better skills, quicker transport and new homes.

Mr Osborne: We have a deal, because that is exactly what we are doing with the west midlands. We have worked with different political parties: I have met both Labour and Conservative authority leaders and Members of Parliament in the region, and we have collectively agreed to have an elected Mayor and to hand significant powers from this place and the Government to the people of the west midlands. I think that that is one of the most exciting steps that have been taken in the devolution of power in this country.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): What further discussions have taken place with the devolved Administrations about the introduction of fiscal incentives to pump-prime apprenticeships and economic growth?

Mr Osborne: We are in discussions with the Northern Ireland Executive about what we can do to support the economy, and it is great news that we are now moving forward with the additional resources for capital investment there. Of course, one of the things that we would really like to see is the devolution of corporation tax rates, for which we have legislated, and provided that we can reach agreement on the budget implications of that measure, it would provide a massive boost for Northern Irish businesses.

21. [903120] **Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con):** I welcome the Chancellor's reduction in corporation tax, which has helped to create many jobs. Does he agree that some businesses cannot grow, despite that measure, because of local infrastructure constraints such as the one that needs addressing in my constituency at the Chickenhall Lane link road?

Mr Osborne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are investing in transport infrastructure in the Southampton area and along the south coast, as I was just saying to my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr Mak). We understand that all parts of the country can benefit from additional investment in transport infrastructure, and that is why we are increasing the transport budget

even at a time when public budgets are tight. None of these things would be affordable if we crashed the economy.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The introduction of quarterly reporting and tax returns has been described by the Institute of Chartered Accountants as an additional burden for business. Does the Chancellor understand the very real anger among businesses in my constituency and around the country that they are being penalised while many of the largest corporations are allowed to avoid tax altogether?

Mr Osborne: We have increased our action against large-scale corporate tax avoidance and evasion, and the new diverted profits tax is designed to deal with the very real anger that people feel, particularly in the small business community, when they see large businesses not paying tax. We are also dealing with the burdens of tax administration, and we are consulting small businesses. I would just make the point that we would be crazy as a country not to make use of new digital technology and the internet to update and modernise our tax collection system, and we would regret not taking those steps today and letting other countries power ahead in reducing the burdens on business.

Trade Deficit

8. **Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP):** What fiscal steps he is taking to reduce the trade deficit in order to reduce the reliance of the economy on domestic spending. [903106]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Greg Hands): The Government have taken a range of steps to reduce the trade deficit. Since 2010, UK Trade & Investment has more than doubled the number of businesses supported, and UK Export Finance has provided more than £15 billion of support. Earlier this month, I saw some of the results of that support when I met entrepreneurs at ESpark's new hatchery in Edinburgh. Many start-ups and exporters in Scotland greatly appreciate UKTI's assistance. I welcome the Government's announcement this morning of an improved UKTI approach to exporters across the whole of the UK.

Dr Cameron: It is incredible for the Minister to continue with a policy that has failed and that resulted last year in a horrendous £123 billion deficit in the trade of goods. We all want to see reduced dependence on consumer debt, but is it not time for him to admit that the UK Government's policy has failed? I gently suggest revision.

Greg Hands: The trade deficit is actually improving as a share of GDP, and it is projected to continue to do so in the Office for Budget Responsibility's forecast. What would be an absolute disaster is the Scottish National party's policy of full fiscal independence, which would cost Scotland £10 billion a year, added to which the collapse in the oil price would, according to the OBR, result in revenues this year being down by a staggering 94%. That would be a disaster for Scotland.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I welcome the Chancellor's earlier comments about export initiatives to India. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming

the excellent work that is being done by businesses in the north-west and the northern powerhouse to boost exports?

Greg Hands: I join my hon. Friend in very much welcoming that, particularly with reference to exports to China and India, which have been a great success. UKTI is doing what it can to support that, with a doubling of funds in China over the spending review period and providing tailored support for first-time exporters, with an additional £20 million in 2015-16. It is supporting northern powerhouse trade missions on that specific basis, on the terms mentioned by my hon. Friend.

22. [903121] **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): The British Chambers of Commerce is forecasting that the much heralded doubling of UK exports will take not another four years, as the Chancellor had promised, but another 18 years—it will happen in 2034. Does the Chancellor accept that this is clear evidence that his efforts to reduce the UK trade deficit are failing and will continue to fail?

Greg Hands: As I mentioned earlier, the UK has a good future in terms of the trade deficit and improving statistics. UKTI will also be playing an important role here. On the announcements we made today on trade policy, one of the most important things we can do is adopt a whole-of-government approach to improving the approach we take to trade and boosting our exports.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My constituency contains a niche amusement machine manufacturer, Harry Levy Amusement Contractor Ltd, which supplies global export markets. What help and support can my right hon. Friend offer to exporters so that we can really achieve the new, cross-government approach to exports launched today by the Business Secretary and the Trade Minister Lord Maude?

Greg Hands: I have been to my hon. Friend's constituency quite a few times over the past year and a half, but I do not think I have had the particular pleasure of meeting the company he mentions. I am very happy to meet him and that company, or perhaps to meet Lord Maude, if that is more appropriate, to see what could be done to help exporters in South Thanet.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The concrete products industry used to have a surplus on the balance of payments but it now has a deficit of hundreds of millions of pounds. That is due to the imposition of the aggregates levy on products made in the UK but not on imported products, which has put thousands of jobs in jeopardy. Will the Minister consider imposing the same tax on goods produced abroad as is imposed on goods produced here in the UK?

Greg Hands: I am happy to look in detail at the points the hon. Gentleman raises. My understanding is that there have been legal challenges to aspects of the aggregates levy and that has prevented us from addressing some of these issues, but I am happy to engage with him on an ongoing basis to see what could be done better.

Manufacturing Exports

9. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What fiscal steps the Government are taking to support manufacturing exports. [903107]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): Since 2010, we have cut corporation tax from 28% to 20%, which is the joint lowest rate in the G20—we will cut it further to 18% by 2020; we have set the annual investment allowance at its highest ever permanent level, at £200,000; and we have made research and development credits more generous and above the line, available in the early loss-making phase for the first time. In addition, UKTI has announced today enhanced support for exporters.

Catherine West: Is the Minister concerned about recent figures showing that the manufacturing sector is back in recession? What does he intend to do about that?

Damian Hinds: We have to get behind the manufacturing sector. That is at the heart of this Government's approach, of the long-term economic plan and of the productivity plan, through giving enhanced access to leading technologies in the catapult centres; the apprenticeships levy; making sure that we build up our skills base by attracting more teachers into the STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths; and a range of other initiatives.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): With Derby being named as one of the No. 1 places to start a small business, may I ask the Minister what steps are being taken to assist and encourage small businesses to become expanding, exporting businesses?

Damian Hinds: UKTI has an ambition to increase the number of exporting businesses by 100,000. There are a number of aspects to that: moving to more direct support as well as advice; learning from some of the leading export promotion agencies in the world; and, as my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary was saying just now, making sure that we leverage existing Government relationships with firms and sectors through a whole-of-government approach to supporting exports.

19. [903118] **Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The slump in manufacturing exports at the end of last year has to be proof that the UK economy is still too dependent on consumer spending to drive growth, and the Government must stop being so complacent and so self-congratulatory in sessions such as this. With the risk of Brexit this year only making things worse, what are they going to do to expand manufacturing exports?

Damian Hinds: Exports are a challenge; there has been a long-term change in the UK's share of world trade, the majority of it coming before 2010. On the hon. Gentleman's point about investment expenditure and consumption expenditure, business investment has grown by two and a half times that of consumption since 2010.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that supporting engineering and manufacturing is absolutely essential to our economy and productivity, and that we must do all we can to address the skills gap that is threatening local jobs and businesses in my constituency and around the country?

Damian Hinds: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of engineering. The evidence of that was shown in the spending review and the autumn statement, with enhanced support for science as well as the apprenticeship levy, which is an important structural change in the way we invest in our skills base.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Five years ago, the Chancellor said that he would rebalance the economy towards manufacturing, exports and the regions. The director-general of the British Chambers of Commerce recently said:

“None of those things have actually transpired in practice yet.”

Will the Minister tell me why not?

Damian Hinds: We are rebalancing the economy, but it is a long-term and sustained programme—indeed, it is our long-term economic plan. We have talked already today about some of the enhanced support for science, technology, engineering and mathematics and the skills base, the apprenticeship levy, and the catapult centres, which give British business access to the best in leading-edge technologies. Of course there are some things in international trade that we cannot control; for example, there was bad news again today from China. Nor can we control the world exchange rates. However, we are absolutely doing the things that we can when it comes to supporting British exporters.

Seema Malhotra: There we go again—it is everybody’s fault but this Government’s. Here is the truth: the Chancellor promised to boost manufacturing, but instead it is in recession. Manufacturing output is now 6.1% below its pre-crisis peak and falling. The British Chamber of Commerce’s survey of firms found manufacturing close to stagnation, with export sales and orders falling. Instead of helping the sector, the Chancellor closed the Manufacturing Advisory Service in November without so much as a mention. Is it not true that British businesses and families are now paying a heavy price for this Chancellor’s failures?

Damian Hinds: That is not true. The enhancement of manufacturing is absolutely at the heart of this Government’s approach, but we should not forget that services are also a very large part—in fact a bigger part—of the economy. The overall performance of the British economy is such that we had the highest growth rate in the G7 countries in 2014 and the joint highest in 2015. We have rising real wages and more people in jobs than ever before.

Employment Trends

10. **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): What assessment he has made of recent trends in the level of employment.
[903108]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): Employment stands at 31.3 million, which means, as I have just said, that more people are in work than ever before. In the past year, growth has been driven by full-time employees in high and medium-skilled jobs, showing that we are now moving to the next phase of our recovery, with high-quality employment, and a boost in productivity and living standards nationwide.

Lucy Allan: I thank the Minister for his reply. In my constituency, youth unemployment has halved in the past year and it is now lower than for the whole of the west midlands and the country. Does he agree that this excellent news for Telford shows that the economic plan is working?

Damian Hinds: I am delighted with that news from my hon. Friend’s constituency, and I do indeed agree with her. Across the west midlands, youth unemployment has fallen by almost a quarter on the year, with the rate now returning to pre-recession levels. The west midlands saw the fastest growth in full-time average earnings among all the English regions, and there are some 140,000 more people in work since 2010.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): One of the leading employers in Stoke-on-Trent is the ceramic industry, and part of the growth in recent years has been due to the anti-dumping ruling by the EU on subsidised Chinese imports. Shamefully, the British Government opposed that. Will the Minister now commit the Government to supporting the renewal of that anti-dumping ruling when it comes up?

Damian Hinds: The Government do of course raise all issues to do with dumping and unfair trade practices as and when they come up. I will be happy to look in further detail at what the hon. Gentleman says about ceramics in Stoke-on-Trent.

HMRC Regional Centres

12. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What recent representations he has received on proposed changes to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs’ regional centres.
[903110]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): HMRC announced its future location strategy on 12 November. As I have previously stated, delivering that strategy will help HMRC to deliver more for less and reduce its estate costs by £100 million per year by 2025. Both HMRC and I have received a number of representations from interested parties, most recently from my hon. Friends the Members for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) and for Southend West (Sir David Amess).

Sir David Amess: Following my hon. Friend’s meeting with me and my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), will he reflect further on the points made about Southend becoming a regional centre? Whatever changes are made in the future, will he ensure that the hard-working, dedicated and loyal staff of Alexander House are treated well?

Mr Gauke: Of course, my hon. Friend made his representations in a robust and forthright way in our meeting yesterday. I am sure that HMRC will be reflecting on that. Assuming that staff are relocated from Southend to Stratford, they will be compensated for their additional transport costs for up to three years and will benefit from London weighting, given that they will have moved to Stratford.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): How exactly is any of this reorganisation going to do anything about the depressing call handling statistics of HMRC? Will the Minister guarantee an improvement?

Mr Gauke: At the moment, call handling is at a higher level than it has been for many years. It was certainly the case that in spring of last year call handling standards were not at an acceptable level, but HMRC has made significant improvements and I hope it will continue to make progress.

Illegal Money Lending

14. **Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab):** What his plans are for future funding of illegal money lending teams. [903113]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): The Government are exploring options to ensure that the England and Wales illegal money lending teams have the funding they need to ensure that consumers continue to be protected from illegal loan sharks, and are confident of transitional arrangements being agreed.

Nick Smith: Too many of my constituents are victims of loan sharks. The illegal money lending team has helped nearly 24,000 victims across the country, yet the Government have treated the service with disdain. Will the cuts to this vital team and to local employment standards not make the poorest more vulnerable?

Harriett Baldwin: Far from agreeing with the hon. Gentleman, I must say that the Government are finding ways to put the team on a sustainable basis to continue the valuable work it does to protect people from illegal money lending.

Topical Questions

T1. [903090] **Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): The core purpose of the Treasury is to ensure the stability and prosperity of the economy.

Gareth Johnson: High exit fees act as a disincentive for people to take advantage of flexible pensions, so does the Chancellor agree that tackling these high fees is essential to give people freedom over their own pensions?

Mr Osborne: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. The pension freedoms we have introduced have been widely welcomed, but we know that 700,000 people who are eligible face some form of early exit charge.

The Government are not prepared to stand by and see people being either ripped off or blocked from accessing their own money by excessive charges. We have listened to the concerns and the newspaper campaigns that have been run. Today, we are announcing that we will change the law to place a duty on the Financial Conduct Authority to cap excessive early exit charges for pension savers. We are determined that people who have done the right thing and saved responsibly should be able to access their pensions fairly.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Recent statistics show that household debt is now at a record high, but back in 2010 the Chancellor promised to move from an economy built on debt to one that saves. Will he tell us today why the figures contradict his original promise?

Mr Osborne: Household debt as a proportion of household income was 168% in 2008 and today it is 142%, so it has fallen.

T3. [903092] **Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con):** This Chancellor has given more than any before him to the cause of looking after our armed forces veterans in this country, and for that I thank him wholeheartedly. Does he agree that although the charity sector has a key role to play, ultimately veterans' care is a state responsibility and we must ensure that the money coming from Government is used for evidence-based, empirically measured professional treatments for our veterans and their families?

Mr Osborne: My hon. Friend obviously has huge experience in this area, personally and because he represents a constituency that has given much to the defence of our nation. He is right: as well as the LIBOR fines, which we use for specific one-off causes to help military charities, we have the armed forces covenant and the annual commitment to support our veterans. I am always happy to look at either specific projects in which we can invest or ongoing concerns we can deal with.

T2. [903091] **Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP):** The collapse of UK manufacturing has in fact been going on for some 50 years—it has gone from 30% of the economy in the 1970s to less than 10% today, and from more than 20% of all jobs in the 1980s to only 8% today. Given the scale and length of this decline, why have the Government not made manufacturing and exports one of their top priorities?

Mr Osborne: We have backed our manufacturers and exporters. We have cut corporation tax and other taxes that affect those businesses, and we have reformed UK Trade & Investment. As a result, the manufacturing sector accounts for a larger share of our economy than when I became Chancellor, but there is still a huge amount more to do. One thing I would say to the hon. Lady and the Scottish Government is that we want to work more closely with the Scottish Government on overseas trade missions, where we can promote Scottish businesses. We do not always get that co-operation, but we hope it will be forthcoming in the future.

T4. [903093] **Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con):** Although I welcome the Government's move towards digitisation of tax, a number of self-employed

people and small businesses across my constituency, approximately 74% of which employ fewer than four people, have voiced concern about how quarterly tax reporting might have a negative effect on their human and financial resources, depending on their reliance on an accountant. What support will be provided to our small businesses to help them to adapt to the proposed changes?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): First, may I reassure the House that there are no plans for quarterly tax returns, as has been reported? What HMRC is considering is making greater use of digital technology and ensuring that information is provided to HMRC more frequently. My hon. Friend raises an important point about ensuring that businesses are supported as they adapt to new ways of record keeping, and HMRC is determined to do that.

T9. [903098] **Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): The midlands engine has been turbo-charged, with recent figures showing four Staffordshire constituencies in the top seven ranked by the extent of the fall in the claimant count between May 2010 and November 2015, with Cannock Chase ranked fourth. What measures is my right hon. Friend taking to make sure that we maintain the positive momentum?

Mr Osborne: There has been good news in Cannock and across the midlands. Employment is up by 6% in my hon. Friend's constituency. Since entering Parliament, she has been a great champion of the businesses in her area. We are working together to give more power to people in the west midlands to take control of the decisions that affect them, and I welcome her support for that; and we are investing in major transport infrastructure and backing science in the west midlands as well. We are introducing a whole set of measures, but if my hon. Friend has specific ideas to help businesses in Cannock, my door is open.

T5. [903094] **Steven Paterson** (Stirling) (SNP): How on earth will a £42 million cut over the next four years to the UK Trade & Investment budget enable it to become "a world class export and investment promotion agency"?

Mr Osborne: We set out today the strategy to give more direct help to our exporters across the United Kingdom, and Lord Maude presented to the Cabinet the proposals to do that. On getting lectures on public finances from Scottish nationalists, I have to say that we would be heading towards the break-up of our country in two months' time if the people of Scotland had listened to the arguments of the Scottish nationalists, whose calculations were based on an oil price of \$115, which at the time the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) described as "quite a conservative estimate". The oil price is now less than \$30. It would have been an absolute catastrophe for the people of Scotland if they had listened to the figures and economic advice given by the Scottish National party.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What efforts are the Government making to widen access to basic bank accounts?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): I am delighted to tell my constituency neighbour that at the end of last year we announced that all the major banks are now able to offer a basic bank account to customers who require one.

T6. [903095] **Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): Many of my constituents who watch "Coronation Street" will be following the story of Tyrone Dobbs' struggle with debt with keen interest. Unsecured lending reached a record high last year, with more than 3 million people in problem debt. The Government promised a review of what breathing space creditors should give to people who are engaged with a debt charity or agency, so that their debts do not continue to spiral out of control while they are working to resolve them. The review was due by the end of 2015. When do the Government now plan to announce it?

Harriett Baldwin: In answer to earlier questions I referred to the importance that we place on the team that will tackle illegal money lending. We have continued to support funding for debt advice, including through excellent organisations such as Christians Against Poverty, StepChange and Citizens Advice, to help individuals such as those mentioned by the hon. Lady.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): On Friday I visited Barclays bank in Kingston to hear about the fantastic Barclays life skills course, which teaches young people financial literacy, among other things. I can see some candidates for the course here today. Does the Minister agree that by making financial education more accessible, we can ensure that the financial sector itself supports young people and people throughout every stage of their lives?

Harriett Baldwin: I am delighted that my hon. Friend found his visit to Barclays in his constituency to be so helpful. I know that he, too, will welcome the fact that since 2014 financial education has been part of the national curriculum.

T7. [903096] **Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The Conservative leader of Essex county council has told the Prime Minister that the 2% social care precept will cover only half the council's increased costs. He has suggested bringing better care funding forward to 2017 and asked for a fairer redistribution of funds. Even Conservative councils cannot wait till 2019 for the funding that the Chancellor has allocated, so will he act now to avoid a further crisis in social care?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Greg Hands): In advance of the spending review, the Conservative leaders of the Local Government Association came to see me. One of their specific proposals was to introduce the social care precept to help address the shortfall there may otherwise have been. We have also put a lot more money into the better care fund to make sure that local authorities and the NHS working together are able to meet the challenges of social care over the next years.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): One of the key tools that the Chancellor has deployed to boost the economy has been the creation of enterprise zones.

Will he lend his support to the creation of an enterprise zone at Thoresby colliery in the northern part of Nottinghamshire?

Mr Osborne: I know Thoresby colliery and have been to the site with my hon. Friend. We were not able to give the go-ahead to the enterprise zone because the business case did not quite stack up, but I have committed to work with him and the local community to try to get that over the line and get an enterprise zone in place in Thoresby colliery.

T8. [903097] **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): I have just chaired a packed meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on carbon capture and storage with the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change. There was a lot of anger in the room over the Chancellor's decision to axe the funding for the CCS competition projects. What funding will the Chancellor provide when DECC comes up with its new CCS strategy in the autumn?

Mr Osborne: We have set out our capital budget and our energy policy, which will see a doubling of the investment in renewable energy over the next five years.

Mr Speaker: Robert Jenrick—I am calling you, man; don't leave the Chamber.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. You are very kind. My superb hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) had already asked the question, but I will ask it again as that is not unusual in this place. My parents formed their small business in the first enterprise zone created by Margaret Thatcher in Telford in 1984. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has carried on in that great Conservative tradition. Will he afford the same opportunities to get on in life and create jobs to my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood by backing Thoresby colliery as the next and best enterprise zone?

Mr Osborne: My hon. Friend has just demonstrated that he is a very smart thinker on his feet. He is always ready to stand up for the interests of his Newark constituents. As I said to our hon. Friend and his neighbour the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), I would love to get the Thoresby colliery enterprise zone into a condition where we can give it the go-ahead, and I give him and my hon. Friend his neighbour my personal commitment that we will try to do that over the next year or two.

Mr Speaker: Of course, as colleagues know, the fact that a question has been asked does not stop others asking the same question. Repetition is not a novel phenomenon in the House of Commons.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Chancellor ponder the fact that we still have not tackled productivity? May I guide him and ask him and his Department to look at the way in which we further invest in manufacturing skills? Surely he will agree that what we want in this country are high skilled, high paid jobs, which are to be found in manufacturing.

Mr Osborne: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the fact that the UK has had a productivity challenge for many decades, and the financial crisis caused a significant impairment that had an impact as well. Productivity is improving, but the key weakness in the British economy, consistently identified by everyone who looks at it, is the weakness of our skills. I hope that the apprenticeship levy and the expansion of the apprenticeship programme will go some way towards addressing that historical weakness for Britain.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): Credit unions can play a vital role in improving financial inclusion and creating a stronger savings culture. As I know from my work with the all-party credit unions group, they have support in all parts of this House. With the opportunity of the World Council of Credit Unions coming to the UK—to Northern Ireland—later this year, will the Chancellor commit to making sure that we continue to build on the work of the credit union expansion programme and back this vital group?

Harriett Baldwin: My other constituency neighbour is a fine advocate for the excellent credit unions industry. As he will know, we have backed the industry with £38 million of investment through the credit union expansion project, and we will continue to seek ways to back credit unions.

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): Given that manufacturing remains at 6.1% below pre-crisis levels, with worrying trends in the manufacture of plant and machinery and of pharmaceuticals, will the Chancellor accept that his domestic policy agenda has just as much impact on our performance as the global factors that he is so very keen to blame, and that if the march of the makers is now going backwards, he must bear a measure of responsibility and come forward with proposals to halt the decline?

Mr Osborne: As I said, manufacturing makes up a larger sector of the economy than when I became Chancellor, but there is a huge amount more to do to make the UK more competitive, to make our businesses more competitive, and to improve skills for our manufacturers and the like. I have to say, and I suspect the hon. Lady agrees with me, that the idea of banning manufacturers from paying dividends would not be a particularly sensible way forward. Unfortunately, that is now the policy of the Labour party.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Is the Chancellor aware that since he took office in May 2010, the claimant count in my constituency has fallen by 62% and the youth unemployment count has fallen by 67%? Does he agree that reducing corporation tax, increasing the personal allowance and reforming welfare has caused these fantastic figures, and will he confirm that his long-term economic plan will continue?

Mr Osborne: We will absolutely deliver the plan in these more difficult economic conditions. As I say, the IMF has not revised down the UK's growth forecast even though it has today revised down the global economic forecast. In Croydon and south London, we will continue with important transport infrastructure, and, indeed,

do everything we can to back homeowners in my hon. Friend's constituency—a group of people he particularly champions.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, I call Alison McGovern.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): May I return the City Minister to the issue of the cancelled FCA inquiry into banking culture? The Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards chaired by the right hon. Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie) pointed to the “Murder on the Orient Express” excuse where everyone was partly responsible but no one was really to blame. The Minister said before that Ministers had no role in

the cancellation of that inquiry. Will she say, yes or no, whether any civil servants did?

Harriett Baldwin: No.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We must move on—demand always exceeds supply.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Points of order come after urgent questions, so I will await the hon. Lady's inquiry with interest.

Ebola: Sierra Leone

12.38 pm

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the death from Ebola virus disease of a 22-year-old student in Sierra Leone on 12 January 2016.

May I wish you a very happy birthday, Mr Speaker?

The Secretary of State for International Development (**Justine Greening**): Many happy returns to you, Mr Speaker.

The House will be aware that, as my hon. and learned Friend said, a new case of Ebola has been confirmed in Sierra Leone. A 22-year-old female student from the Tonkolili district sadly died on 12 January. This latest case of Ebola in Sierra Leone demonstrates that we need to stay vigilant. Indeed, the news came just as the World Health Organisation formally declared the Ebola outbreak in west Africa over, following Liberia's reaching 42 days without a new case, but it is not unexpected given the context of this unprecedented outbreak.

The new case was identified from a swab taken after death and is currently being investigated. The Government of Sierra Leone have activated their national Ebola response plan, and rapid work is under way to identify and quarantine people who have had contact with the young woman and to establish her movements in the final few days and weeks before her death. Teams in five districts are acting on that information. No other cases have been confirmed to date.

The speed of the process reflects the work that the UK has undertaken with the Government of Sierra Leone to develop their national response plan. As today's International Development Committee's report says, the UK has been at the forefront of the global response to the Ebola outbreak in west Africa and has from the very start led in Sierra Leone, working hand in hand with the Government of Sierra Leone. We took on this deadly disease at source by rapidly deploying the best of British military personnel and NHS and Public Health England staff, building treatment centres in a matter of weeks and mobilising the international response more broadly. We have worked with the Government of Sierra Leone to build up their health systems and strengthen all aspects of society, including civil society, to allow them to be prepared.

We continue to stand by Sierra Leone because, as we have always made clear, there is the potential for further cases. That is precisely why our response now is focused on assisting Sierra Leone in isolating and treating any new cases of Ebola before they spread.

Stephen Phillips: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer and, indeed, for coming to the House urgently today to answer questions on this subject. I am also grateful to her for the leadership she demonstrated during the Ebola outbreak of 2014-15, as I am to the brave military and civilian personnel who travelled to Sierra Leone to help west Africa during that period.

On 7 November 2015, the World Health Organisation declared Sierra Leone free of Ebola following a period of 42 days during which no new cases had been reported. Just last week, as my right hon. Friend has said, the

WHO made a further declaration to the effect that, all reported transmissions having ended, the outbreak of Ebola in west Africa was over.

My right hon. Friend and the whole House will therefore have been dismayed at yesterday's reports of the death from Ebola of a young woman in the northern Tonkolili district last week, particularly given that she appears to have travelled in three other provinces during the infectious stages of the disease.

What steps is my right hon. Friend taking, together with her colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the staff of our high commission in Freetown, to determine the source of this latest outbreak? Is she confident that the outbreak can be contained, given that the burial customs observed do not appear to have followed the procedures necessary to prevent further contamination? Are the quarantine measures adopted by the Government of Sierra Leone sufficient to ensure that widespread transmission of the virus is unlikely?

The assistance provided by the UK during the last outbreak cost the British taxpayer £427 million. My right hon. Friend will remember that I first asked about that outbreak in the House on 18 June 2014, at a stage when the number of cases was in the tens, rather than the thousands. None of us wishes to see a further significant outbreak, but is she working with her officials, the Government of Sierra Leone and the WHO to ensure that we get on top of the problem at a stage when relatively few individuals are likely to have been exposed?

It is fair to say that the worst epidemiological predictions during the previous outbreak did not materialise, but across west Africa more than 11,300 people died of Ebola in 2014-15. Many more died of preventable disease, which an overburdened and fragile health care system was incapable of addressing at the same time as dealing with Ebola.

What funding will my right hon. Friend make available to the Government of Sierra Leone and non-governmental organisations working in the region to deal with this latest outbreak and to establish long-term resilience in healthcare systems for dealing with a disease that may well now be endemic in the region? Has she held discussions with her colleagues in the Ministry of Defence about the potential for assistance to be given to ensure that the disease does not spread further? Does she have confidence that the failings demonstrated by the WHO in the past will not be repeated? To what extent is she confident that there are no further cases of Ebola present in Liberia and Guinea?

Retesting of samples taken from individuals who died in the 10 years prior to the 2014-15 outbreak indicated that Ebola may well have been present in west Africa for more than a decade. To the extent that Ebola is now endemic, what measures will my right hon. Friend and the Government support leading to the development of an effective vaccine for the virus? When does she expect that vaccine to be available?

The previous outbreak of Ebola and its spread across an interconnected world indicated the threat faced by the United Kingdom from the spread of hitherto unheard-of diseases. Direct flights have recently recommenced from Sierra Leone to London, but my right hon. Friend will know that the previous ban on such flights was unnecessary and, indeed, counterproductive. Will she

[Stephen Phillips]

assure the House and the Sierra Leonean diaspora in this country that the mistake of banning direct flights in the past will not be repeated?

Finally, the long-term prognosis for those previously infected with Ebola is not well understood by the medical profession. From cases such as that of Pauline Cafferkey, we now know that the virus can hide in the body for lengthy periods. Is the NHS aware of the risks of Ebola re-emerging in patients who have previously survived the disease? What assistance are the Government giving to non-governmental organisations and Governments in west Africa to ensure the long-term health of those who have survived Ebola and may still be able to pass it on to others? Specifically, what, if any, monitoring project does her Department intend to fund so that the disease is stamped out both for individuals in the region and to secure the biosecurity of the United Kingdom and those of us who live here?

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the Secretary of State responds, let me say to the hon. and learned Gentleman that his erudition, which is never in doubt, has been equalled today only by his length. He is a very sophisticated denizen of the House, and he has treated of a very serious matter. I am aware, and the House will also be conscious, that on top of that he is an illustrious Queen's counsel. Perhaps I can express the hope that he does not charge his clients by the word, for if he does he will be a great deal richer and they, I fear, will be a great deal poorer. From now on, we must try to stick to the time limits allocated for this purpose. I say that in a good spirit, because he has raised a very important issue and done so in an extremely intelligent way. If we operated within the time limits from now on, the House would greatly appreciate it.

Justine Greening: I must say, however, that my hon. and learned Friend achieved amazing value for money in the number of questions asked during the time spoken, for which I commend him.

To respond to the very serious issues that my hon. and learned Friend raises, from the very beginning this has been an unprecedented outbreak. We are seeing that even now, given the length of time that the virus appears to stay in the bodies of survivors after they have fully recovered. That is one reason—as we are still learning, frankly, about the implications of the virus's persistence in survivors—why part of the work we are doing in Sierra Leone is to mitigate the risks of its being passed on. We are doing so through verifying survivor registers so that we know who should be on the list to be tested; offering safe sex counselling; establishing semen testing; ensuring access to free healthcare; and combating survivor stigma. It is critical to working with the people who may be most at risk of passing on a disease that they have themselves have survived. There is now a national semen-testing programme for male survivors aged 15 and above. Indeed, DFID and Public Health England are working with the Government in Sierra Leone to make sure that it works effectively.

We saw the same in Liberia, a country that also passed its 42-day Ebola-free point, but subsequently had other cases. That is precisely why we have been so vigilant. Indeed, it was the processes, systems and testing

that we put in place with the Government in Sierra Leone that have picked up this particular case and enabled us to go through the processes of contact tracing and quarantine. As my hon. and learned Friend pointed out, it is known that this student had travelled extensively, which makes our task all the harder. We are therefore working at district level. One thing we have set up is a mobile field hospital that can rapidly get to a particular district if an outbreak takes place. He asked about the quarantine measures. They are indeed being put in place, and the contact tracing is happening.

My hon. and learned Friend asked about funding in relation to the latest outbreak and about how we are working more broadly to help get to what I call “resilient zero”. Having got past the maximum period of the main outbreak, which was incredibly difficult, we all expected that sporadic cases would continue to appear. We are now in that phase. As he says, getting on top of such cases is the way we will reach “resilient zero”, when we can be more confident that there will not be any future cases. There is funding for the latest outbreak, to cover some of the things I have mentioned and for work in schools to make sure that issues of water and sanitation are understood and that the basic steps that can be taken at community level are put in place to minimise the risk of passing on diseases, including Ebola. The district-level response mechanism that we used so successfully to get over the major outbreak when it was at its peak is still there. The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine estimated that we saved more than 56,000 lives through the work that we put in place with the Government of Sierra Leone to get on top of the outbreak.

My hon. and learned Friend asked about the vaccination process. Prior to the crisis, DFID was involved in the development of early stage vaccines, which can now tackle Ebola. He will know that there are some promising candidates, which give us the prospect of being able more readily to clamp down on future outbreaks.

My hon. and learned Friend spoke about health system strengthening. One of the key messages that came out of the Ebola outbreak was that countries such as Sierra Leone and Liberia that, in the scheme of their histories, were newly emergent from civil war, were less able to cope, simply because their health systems were at an earlier stage of development due to those conflicts. Other countries in the region, such as Nigeria, were better able to clamp down on the outbreak simply because they had stronger health systems, although there is some way for even that country to go.

To reassure the House, it is not a surprise to see these sporadic additional cases, but the people, processes and systems are in place on the ground in Sierra Leone to identify them and respond rapidly.

The final thing that my hon. and learned Friend mentioned was flights. We felt that the decision that we took on direct flights was in the interests of our national security. I think that it was the right decision to take.

Critically, the way in which we got on top of the outbreak in the end was by working with our fantastic Foreign Office as one team to bring the best of British—our military, our doctors and nurses, Public Health England—and working hand in hand in partnership with the Government of Sierra Leone to provide a platform that the rest of the international community could work on to combat the disease. I again put on the record my

huge thanks not only to the many DFID staff I am privileged to lead, but to all the other people across Government and all the public sector workers who in many cases put their lives on the line to help Sierra Leone get to grips with this terrible crisis.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House will join me in paying tribute not just to the British health workers and military who went to help the people of west Africa in the last Ebola outbreak, but to all the local health workers who bore the brunt of the campaign against Ebola and the brunt of the deaths.

The Secretary of State will be aware that the International Development Committee report says that the Government were too reliant on the World Health Organisation, which eventually declared an emergency in August 2014, and should have listened to other groups, such as Médecins sans Frontières, which had been warning about Ebola months earlier. Does she agree with the Committee's Chairman that

"The international community relied on WHO to sound the alarm for an international emergency on the scale of Ebola. The organisation's failure to respond quickly enough is now well documented"?

Does the Secretary of State agree that Ebola cannot be seen in isolation and that we have to look at the general issue of access to healthcare in the region and building a resilient health system?

Justine Greening: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for those questions. As she clearly sets out, the key to success in tackling Ebola was, of course, the response of the Sierra Leonean people and their willingness to run towards tackling a disease which, instinctively, many people would have wanted to run away from. Many Red Cross volunteers from across Africa also went into the region to help tackle it. They very much led the effort. The UK's role was to work hand in hand with them and to ensure that our resources and know-how could be brought to bear to finally get on top of the disease.

Everybody recognises that there are serious lessons to be learned by the international system from the response to the crisis. Indeed, WHO reform is taking place. The Secretary of State for Health and I have talked directly to Margaret Chan about that. It is vital that we learn lessons from the crisis so that we understand how the international system can mobilise far more speedily when a crisis hits. This outbreak spread rapidly, but it started in a part of the world that was one of the least able to respond to it initially.

The UK actioned the Ebola response much earlier than the official declaration of the outbreak by the WHO. As early as June and July, we were supporting MSF, which played a key role alongside many other non-governmental organisations.

There are lessons to be learned. Today's International Development Committee report goes through the initial response and what happened subsequently in a systematic way. It is important that the WHO be reformed. It must not only look at its processes and how it responds, but ensure that the emergency response fund that it is setting up, which the UK helped to fund initially, is adequately resourced so that it has the means to respond, as well as the strategy.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The International Development Committee report, which was issued today, commends the strong leadership of DFID and the UK Government in co-ordinating the response to Ebola in Sierra Leone, but is very critical of the WHO's delay in designating the outbreak as a public health emergency of international concern. Will the Secretary of State give us more of an insight into her discussions with Margaret Chan and confirm that the Department is ensuring that the WHO treats this matter as a priority among its radical reform needs?

Justine Greening: There are various aspects, but one that is particularly key is the regional response of the WHO. It is important to ensure, at that level, that emerging outbreaks be clearly identified in a depoliticised way. They must be identified as outbreaks simply from the facts on the ground, as Governments are sometimes understandably reticent about declaring a health emergency. Those are the key changes that we will steadily see in the WHO over time.

Critically, we need to be able to mobilise people. One aspect of the WHO reform is the setting up of an international register of healthcare responders, much like the one the UK has, which we were able to draw on to tackle Ebola. That will enable us to ensure that we rapidly have the right people in the right places the next time that a crisis hits. Having said all that, this was an unprecedented outbreak. It was the first time that an Ebola outbreak spread across borders. Nevertheless, we clearly need the WHO to reform and to respond far more quickly and effectively in future.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): We echo the dismay at the new case and the tributes that have been paid to those involved in the response.

Bearing in mind the International Development Committee report, what more can the Secretary of State say about the steps DFID is taking to monitor the situation in the wider region? What contact does she currently have with service providers such as MSF on the ground to pick up early warnings? What consideration will she give to the recent report from the US National Academy of Medicine's commission on creating a global health risk framework for the future, which called for WHO reform, including a permanent emergency centre and global investment of £3 billion a year in pandemic response?

Justine Greening: The work that is under way on the ground aims to ensure that the whole framework that we put in place to tackle the major outbreak swings into action again at the local level. That means the isolation of potential Ebola sufferers. It sits alongside ongoing surveillance work, which was how we picked up this case in the first place. We must continue to emphasise the need for safe burials so that this case does not spread more broadly, and work with communities to deliver that.

I mentioned the hospital and treatment centres that provide the isolation units we need to treat Ebola sufferers effectively, and the lab testing. Those things are legacies of the UK's work with Sierra Leone, which means that it is now better placed to deal with this case. I emphasise that as we go through the contact tracing period and the quarantine period for high-risk contact, it is inevitable

[*Justine Greening*]

that further cases may emerge. That is all part of the steady eradication of Ebola, and getting to what is called “resilient zero”. Unfortunately, we do not expect it suddenly to switch off overnight, which is why we were keen to ensure that some of the underlying processes remained, as well as having the right people and surveillance in place to deal with such situations.

The hon. Gentleman asked about WHO reform and the emergency response, and he is right about that. We must ensure that resourcing is funded internationally, to enable the WHO to put into practice the new strategies it is now developing. The UK was one of the initial contributors to a fund that was set up to do that within the WHO, and we are strongly lobbying other countries to join us.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Our thoughts are very much with the people of Sierra Leone. The Secretary of State said last July that the United Kingdom will stay the course until Ebola is defeated. Will she confirm that the UK will stay the course until Sierra Leone, in partnership with its Government, has health systems that are as strong as they need to be to tackle such outbreaks—and indeed all other diseases—in future?

Justine Greening: We will certainly stay the course, and my hon. Friend will be aware that part of our work with Sierra Leone over a number of years has been to strengthen healthcare systems. That has been vital for Sierra Leone and in the context of this outbreak, because there was a point at which people were extremely concerned about the potential of the disease to arrive here in the UK. It is not just in Sierra Leone’s interest that we do this work; it is in our interest to have a WHO that is able to respond effectively to international health emergencies.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) on securing this important urgent question, and I particularly welcome the emphasis on reform of the WHO. One of the central recommendations of the International Development Committee report published today is that the UK and DFID take the lead in reform efforts. Will the Secretary of State say more about the timescale for reform, so that we do not lose that opportunity this year?

Justine Greening: Reform is under way, and comparatively recently I met Margaret Chan, who heads up the WHO, to speak about that. Changes are already being made across the board, and the key thing that remains to be worked on is bottoming out the overall strategy for improving an emergency response from the WHO, and ensuring resourcing. We must work with the countries that are most at risk if a health emergency occurs, so that they are able to deal with it more effectively. This is not about having better systems and resourcing in place; it is about targeting what we know are potentially the greatest holes in an international response.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): The Department, our medical professionals and armed forces can be proud of the assistance they gave to Sierra Leone during the Ebola outbreak of 2014-15. I am a Member of the House with a Sierra Leonean mother, so will the Secretary

of State assure the House, my family and the wider Sierra Leonean diaspora that support for Sierra Leone will continue until local facilities are able to withstand further health difficulties such as this? Will she also assure the House that our future economic and diplomatic relationship with Sierra Leone will not be defined by this darkest period in the history of such a wonderful country?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend makes his points extremely well, and the role of the diaspora and the links that people naturally have with Sierra Leone are critical. I remember meetings that I held with the diaspora in this country to ensure open lines of communication between the work being done by DFID and the Foreign Office, and that done by people on the ground. He speaks about the need and hope that Sierra Leone will bounce back from what it has been through. It was a terrible, terrible outbreak, and I visited three times in a short period. Only on my third visit did I feel that I got to see some of the country and its spirit, because the first two times were so embedded in crisis that it was really a different place.

Before this crisis hit, Sierra Leone was one of the fastest growing economies in the world, and our hope and ambition must be that it will now bounce back. The challenge is to bring the same urgency as we saw in the response to Ebola to the rest of that country’s development. We saw in that response that when we work together and there is a country-owned strategy, and when all different stakeholders pull in the same direction—when there is the political will—we can cover a lot of ground quickly. That has much broader lessons for development progress internationally, and we will try to ensure that that momentum is kept up in Sierra Leone, even though the outbreak is steadily being eradicated.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Further to that welcome point, will the Secretary of State ensure that support for resilience will involve not just support for the infrastructure of a fragile healthcare system that clearly needs such support but support for village development committees in Sierra Leone? They have proved themselves to be an effective and important network of mobilisation, and their capacity will be relevant to other challenges, including those diseases that lost priority during the Ebola crisis.

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman mentions a number of different but related points, and the work that happened at community level proved pivotal in enabling us to tackle Ebola, both by steadily ensuring that victims of Ebola were buried safely and did not pass the virus on, and by improving surveillance. Surveillance is now a key plank of ensuring that no other case of Ebola romps away in the way it did when it took hold in 2014. There is a lot more work to be done, and improving district and community level healthcare is vital. Indeed, the lack of a strong district and community level healthcare system enabled the virus to take hold—I spoke about the legacy of Ebola, and if we were able to put one thing in place, it was good command and control that went from the Ministry of Health and the President right down to the most remote communities. That was put in place to deal with the crisis, but as a structure it can help us to drive improvements in community healthcare, and to build on the back of that framework to improve health more generally in Sierra Leone.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) for asking this urgent question, and I congratulate the Secretary of State on the way she has responded. My constituents in Kettering are hugely proud of the fantastic deployment of armed forces and civilian NHS personnel to tackle this crisis, but I do not think that the full extent of the good news about this country's involvement in the crisis is out there—most people do not know that this country saved 56,000 lives as a result of our intervention. Will she share with the House some more good news about the involvement of this country as the world's leading responder to this huge crisis?

Justine Greening: The number of lives directly saved because of work that the UK was able to do is staggering—we can actually see the epidemic curve bending upwards, and then our steadily working with the Government to wrestle it down over a period of months. It was extremely difficult work that required a huge effort.

As part of our response, we had 1,500 military personnel. We provided six UK treatment centres in a matter of weeks. We trained over 4,000 Sierra Leonean healthcare workers. We deployed 150 NHS volunteers, who worked on supporting over 1,500 treatment and isolation beds. That was more than half of the beds available to treat Sierra Leoneans. As I said, we now have a 36-bed mobile field hospital. One hundred Public Health England staff helped to set up three laboratories. We delivered 28,000 tonnes of aid. We delivered more than 1 million protective equipment suits for people working in the red zone and dealing directly with people who had Ebola. We supported over 140 burial teams. We had RFA Argus, the Royal Navy support ship and Merlin helicopters out there. It was a phenomenal response across government and I am very proud to have been part of it.

I thank my hon. Friend for his question. After a crisis has been responded to, it is easy to move on and lose sight of the important and valuable role we played.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I very much support the Secretary of State's efforts so far and I agree with her comments about the need for economic reconstruction in Sierra Leone. She will have heard the comments of the chief medical officer of Sierra Leone, who is reported as saying that in the case in Magburaka, the patient showed

"no signs or symptoms that fitted the case definition of Ebola".

Given that very disturbing fact, what are the wider public health implications for us in the United Kingdom, and what discussions has she had about this specific issue with Public Health England, the Department of Health and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office?

Justine Greening: We continue to have a substantial team in Sierra Leone working directly on the ground as part of the response to this latest case. That response is, of course, led by the Government of Sierra Leone. The real test of whether we have worked effectively is if, in time, we can step back and see its health system strengthened and able to take care of these sorts of outbreaks. We are investigating this particular case right now. The hon. Gentleman talks about some of the challenges of identification. This is why surveillance is so important. Indeed, it was the following of some procedures on

taking swabs of all deaths that picked up that this was Ebola. At each stage of the response, we have had steadily to work out the most effective route forward. We continue to do that as we confront new challenges, such as the one seen in recent days. The House can be assured that we are working hand in hand and have resources in place. We have fantastic medical experts to help us ground any new strategy in terms of the science and of how we take the facts on the ground and respond to them effectively.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): We should be very proud of the role played by the British military, health workers and volunteers, under the leadership of DFID, in tackling Ebola in Sierra Leone. This latest incident, which sadly led to the death of someone in Freetown, highlights the fact that we must remain vigilant in the face of this terrible disease. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that DFID will continue to press the World Health Organisation and the international community to continue to play a part not just in monitoring but in strengthening and further developing the public health system in Sierra Leone?

Justine Greening: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. We are playing that role already and will continue to do so. Much of it is pushed forward by our Department of Health and its very close working relationship with the WHO. It is vital we fix some of the underlying problems that led to Ebola taking hold in the first place. Essentially, this means strengthening the health system on the ground and having a better international responder system to deal with crises when they inevitably emerge around the world.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Further to the Secretary of State's comments about supporting Sierra Leone, Hull is very proud to have been twinned with Freetown for over 35 years. There have been many reciprocal visits, especially by teachers. In the light of what has happened recently, is the Department considering what more it can do to strengthen such reciprocal visits to ensure that support, especially for education, is given to that country?

Justine Greening: I will take the hon. Lady's ideas and thoughts away and respond to her following the urgent question today. She is right to highlight education. One of the key issues we now face and are working on is getting children, in particular girls who may have been out of school, back into school. We have to ensure they go back to school, and that is not always easy. There are a number of orphans as a result of the Ebola crisis, too. Education matters not just in terms of broader public health but of schooling for children, many of whom were out of school for a year. I will reflect on the point she makes about the important links between her local community and Freetown.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): The Secretary of State's actions have undoubtedly saved thousands of lives. I pay tribute to the efforts of the UK Government. Kids in Kailahun, a small Pendle-based charity, does fantastic work in the Kailahun district of Sierra Leone and did so throughout the Ebola crisis. It describes the in-country response to Ebola orphans as too patchy across the country. What more can the Secretary of

[Andrew Stephenson]

State do to make it easier for small sums of aid funding to be provided directly to charities such as Kids in Kailahun, which can make such a difference on the ground?

Justine Greening: We had a particular fund to enable us to provide funding to some of the smaller charities. As my hon. Friend will probably be aware, at the beginning the main challenge was putting in place the key planks of a successful strategy, which we were able to do. Smaller NGOs played a key role and I pay tribute to the charity he highlights. DFID worked to support orphans, many of whom would have otherwise been in an incredibly vulnerable position throughout the crisis. We continue that work because, as he will be aware, many survivors of Ebola suffer stigma as a result of having had the virus, and some of them are children. Work is under way to try to ensure we reintegrate people into their family. Wherever possible, we help orphans to get back in touch with their extended family.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I warm to the Secretary of State's words about the broad, holistic approach to reconstruction in Sierra Leone. Ebola knows no boundaries, however, and affects the whole of west Africa. That is why reconstruction in that part of west Africa is so important. She paid tribute to our troops and all the efforts they made, but many individuals were involved, too. We all remember the wonderful and moving diary on Radio 4 by the doctor from Huddersfield. The voluntary work of aid agencies, such as Save the Children, Médecins sans Frontières and the International Rescue Committee, where my own daughter works, was tremendous. We have to learn the lessons, however. I used to work for the World Bank. On many occasions, I had deep reservations about the effectiveness of the WHO. This is a time to reflect on whether the WHO is fit for purpose. If it is not, the UK should try to do something about it.

Justine Greening: A number of NGOs, many British-based, played a vital role in helping to respond successfully to Ebola in Sierra Leone and in other affected countries and communities. In particular, Save the Children was pivotal in enabling us to open Kerry Town, the first treatment hospital we were able to put in place, and save lives. For many NGOs, it was a step into the dark to have their volunteers working in such a dangerous environment, with all the training that needed to go alongside that. I pay tribute to the volunteers who went out, not just from our own public sector, as I set out, but from all walks of life. They did an amazing job and saved lives. The hon. Gentleman said that the international response and system needed improving, as we have heard in other questions today, and he is absolutely right. We must learn lessons from this crisis. There were some positive lessons about what it took to confront Ebola, but there were also some negative lessons about how a better job could have been done.

Finally, looking forward to reconstruction and recovery, I represented the UK at a UN conference midway through last year, hosted by the Secretary-General, that was all about mobilising resources and the effort around country-owned plans in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea

so that we can get behind one strategy that helps them get back on their feet. DFID's bilateral programme in Sierra Leone is part of delivering that on the ground.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's responses so far. As touched on several times, the work of our armed forces in Operation Gritrock is not just about saving lives in west Africa but about protecting and saving lives in this country, and demonstrates that maintaining military capability and delivering on our international development objectives are complementary, not exclusive, to each other. Given the re-emergence of Ebola, what discussions has she had with the MOD about the potential for further support, if it proves necessary?

Justine Greening: We hope that the procedures and framework we have left on the ground will be the most effective way of responding to this latest incident, but we can also learn from Liberia's experience—it was Ebola-free and then saw fresh cases. I hope we can use the existing structures to respond. If we have learnt one thing over the past one or two years, it is that our fantastic MOD stands ready to be part of the UK humanitarian response, as we have seen in relation not just to Ebola, but to Typhoon Haiyan and Nepal. It plays a unique role in enabling this country to mobilise as effectively as any in the world and to play its part in helping save lives when disaster hits.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I commend the work of everyone involved in tackling Ebola. Given the key issues highlighted in the Select Committee report, will the Secretary of State outline what lessons have been learnt about engaging cultural leaders and working with cultural norms to provide a cohesive and fully implemented response?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady's constituency is home, of course, to our Scottish DFID headquarters, whose staff played a key role in helping us to shape our response. I would like to say a huge thank you to them.

The issue of social norms and working with communities is vital. We had to work with the cultures already there—we cannot impose on people—and the leadership from the top down, from the President down to district-level community and religious leaders, made a real difference, particularly on safe burials. Only when we got the percentage of safe burials up towards 100% did the number of cases peak and did we stop the onward spread, and only after we got treatment beds in place did we start to improve survival rates. By working with communities, with the assistance of community leaders, we helped people to understand how to stay safe and not catch the virus and how quarantining was in their interest—if difficult—in saving their families. Bringing communities with us and the role of community leaders and mobilisers—often young people going into communities to talk about these issues—were a key plank in helping us turn the corner on Ebola. But it took time.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that had it not been for the commitment, initiated under a Labour Government and delivered under the coalition, to the 0.7% GNI target, it might have been more difficult, at the very least, to deliver on the scale and at the speed with which

the Government responded to Ebola in Sierra Leone, and that it would have restricted their ability to negotiate with the WHO had we not been able to stand up in front of other countries and say, “We have delivered on our 0.7% commitment”?

Justine Greening: There is no doubt that our having finally delivered on the promise we made many years ago to meet the 0.7% commitment gives us huge credibility, but our influence goes beyond that. We consistently help, constructively and positively, to shape the response. Ours is not just a significant but a thoughtful response that helps to shape strategy and ensure that the money, wherever it is from in the world, has the biggest impact on the ground. Whether that is leading on Ebola, our work on women and girls and tackling female genital mutilation, or our work on protracted crises—most recently, in Syria, shaping job creation, employment and education, which refugees need if staying in the region is to be a viable option—the UK’s work goes far beyond simply doing a lot; what we are doing is also smart and helping to ensure that the international community’s response more broadly is also smart.

Points of Order

1.26 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Treasury questions, the Chancellor said that the shadow Chancellor had lost his marbles, which I feel was unparliamentary. This comment comes in the week when the Government have been exposed as leaving mental health services underfunded. I just wanted to put it on the record that this comment goes to the heart of their callous attitude towards vulnerable people.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. I did not make the immediate judgment that the Chancellor’s remark was unparliamentary. I think it was intended in a jocular spirit, although, of course, we all have to weigh our words carefully in this place and think of the possible implications of the language chosen. I stand by the judgment I made, but equally she has taken the opportunity to make her own point and to make a wider point about an important public policy issue in the process. I thank her for putting her comments on the record.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have certified that the Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2015 relate to England only and are subject to double-majority voting. Thousands of English students study at Bangor University and are constituents of mine. Can you advise me on how I might fully represent their views in the Lobbies?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and his characteristic courtesy in notifying me in advance of its thrust. He asks how he can represent the interests of his constituents in relation to the education regulations before the House. This gives me the opportunity to explain the situation. Although I have certified the instrument as relating exclusively to England, the prayer to annul it requires a majority both of all Members and of Members representing English constituencies, so he is perfectly entitled to vote on it. The test that the Standing Order sets is that every provision of the instrument relates exclusively to England and is within devolved legislative competence. I am satisfied that the instrument meets that test. In forming my judgment, I am guided by advice from Speaker’s Counsel and from the Public Bill Office. Our exchange is now on the record and will, I hope, be useful to him in such exchanges or communications as take place.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am not sure whether this will be further to that point of order, but I shall discover whether that is so, courtesy of the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson).

Mr Hanson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I fully accept your interpretation of this matter, Mr Speaker, which is right and proper. My further point of order is about the opportunities available to Members who believe that they have an interest in Wales to make representations to you prior to your certification. As my hon. Friend

[Mr Hanson]

the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) will point out, there are implications concerning the impact of budgets on communities such as ours. For example, I have only just learned in the last few moments, prior to entering the Chamber this morning, of your certification on this particular matter, and I am interested for future reference in what process is in place for us to make those representations. Self-evidently, we Members with Welsh seats believe that we have a constituency interest in this matter.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order, but if my memory serves me correctly, I announced my decision on this matter on 6 January. There has therefore been a period of no fewer than 12 days in which it was open to right hon. and hon. Members to make representations. Moreover, in relation not, I concede, to instruments, but to Bills, the House will be conscious or will start to become conscious that it is my frequent practice to make a provisional certification, which is subject to review during the passage of the piece of legislation, depending on the sequence of events. If, during such periods, Members feel that their point of view has not been heard and that if I heard it I might reach a different judgment, they should take the opportunity to make that known.

The right hon. Gentleman looked rather sceptical when I said that a judgment had been made about this matter several days ago, but I emphasise that there is no intention at all to deny Members the opportunity to make representations. Indeed, it is rather the contrary. I would also very politely point out to the right hon. Gentleman and the House that this procedure is one that the House has decided I should operate. I am seeking to operate it to the best of my ability and extremely fairly. It is not, however, the Speaker's procedure; it is a judgment that the House has made, and I am making the best job of it that I can. [*Interruption.*] The right hon. Gentleman is intimating from a sedentary position that his facial expressions were those not of scepticism, but of gratitude. I am grateful to him for that helpful clarification—as an expectant nation will also be, I am sure.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am particularly grateful that you pointed out that this appalling procedure is not your procedure, but one that, unfortunately, the House authorised you to implement, and one subject to Standing Orders, which you are, of course, acting upon.

I think the difficulty is that the notification and notice are very late for those of us, such as me, who have constituents in Glyndwr University who are directly affected by this measure. In a spirit of being helpful, I would like to point out that the Procedure Committee, of which I am a member, is undertaking an inquiry into this appalling procedure and will be reporting on it. May I suggest that those who are motivated, such as my very good hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who actually attended Glyndwr university and can vote today in a way that other MPs from Wales cannot, should make representations to the Procedure Committee?

Mr Speaker: First, I must emphasise that all Members can vote on this matter today. The hon. Gentleman can vote on it; I do not want him to develop—it would be sad and worrying if he did—a persecution complex. I would not want him to feel that he is excluded. The hon. Gentleman says that he is making his point of order by way of being helpful, and I cannot think I would doubt that for a moment; I do not think he ever intends anything other than to be helpful to me, to the House, to the nation and, of course, to his constituents. He certainly can vote on the matter.

The House will have been struck by the hon. Gentleman's use of his adjective in relation to the procedure. I, of course, did not make any evaluation of the procedure. I simply made the factual point that it is not something introduced by the Speaker; it is something that the House has said the Speaker shall do. I am the servant of the House, and I am doing it to the best of my ability. The hon. Gentleman has made his own assessment of the procedure and he is, of course, as he has pointed out using other words, a distinguished ornament of the Procedure Committee. Members who wish to make representations to that Committee and to its illustrious Chairman, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), should, of course, do so. That opportunity has been helpfully advertised.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On a separate matter, I was astonished on Friday lunchtime to be told by a constituent that the Prime Minister was visiting the wonderful Makkah mosque in my constituency on Monday morning. Having followed that up, I received an e-mail at 4.57 saying that that was the case, but those sending it refused to tell me where the visit was—even though I had already told them that I knew! Only on Monday morning was I finally told where the visit was going to be, given that I was not told in the first place.

Apart from the “Keystone Cops” attitude to national security, given that a sitting Member of Parliament was not told about a visit that constituents did find out about, I ask your advice on parliamentary protocol, Mr Speaker. On this occasion, I did not have the opportunity either to liaise with the wonderful Makkah mosque, which does marvellous work on integration, or to speak to the Prime Minister's Office to give him my thoughts and advice on the work the mosque does before his visit.

Mr Speaker: I rather imagine that the Prime Minister thinks of little else in the course of planning his day than of the merits of receiving, in such terms as the hon. Gentleman thinks fit and at such length as is necessary, the hon. Gentleman's advice. It occurs to me off the top of my head that it would have been open to representatives of the mosque to notify the hon. Gentleman in a timely way.

On the matter of the protocol whereby Members should be notified of visits, I would say that it is best for colleagues to interpret their responsibility in this matter broadly. That is to say—I do not refer to any particular case—that rather than taking a narrow view and thinking that notification would take place at a very late stage, it is better to notify a colleague well in advance of an intention to visit his or her constituency. My own personal view is that where we are dealing with

colleagues who are right hon. and hon. Members, it is a courtesy to give more information rather than less. I hope that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman and to the House. These sorts of matters tend to arise from time to time.

Freedom of Information (Public Interest and Transparency)

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

1.37 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given for me to bring in a Bill to amend the Freedom of Information Act 2000 to remove provisions permitting Ministers to overrule decisions of the Information Commissioner and Information Tribunal; to limit the time allowed for public authorities to respond to requests involving consideration of the public interest; to extend the Freedom of Information Act 2000 to cover private companies, social enterprises and charities contracted to carry out work for public authorities; and the Royal Household; and for connected purposes.

I am no stranger to freedom of information ten-minute rule Bills: this is the third Bill on this subject that I have promoted in Parliament. I am hoping—without any real justification, I confess—that today will be a case of three times lucky. A country's commitment to FOI is a clear indicator of the strength of its democracy. For that reason, I totally reject what one of Tony Blair's former advisers in Downing Street said to the BBC's Martin Rosenbaum, namely that

"FOI was the worst thing the Labour government did".

I also think Tony Blair was far too hard on himself when he said about FOI:

"You idiot. You naive, foolish, irresponsible nincompoop. There is really no description of stupidity, no matter how vivid, that is adequate. I quake at the imbecility of it."

Instead, he should have saved those words to describe his decision, on the flimsiest of evidence, to drag the UK to war in Iraq.

Tony Blair's views on the imbecility, or the alleged imbecility, of FOI legislation are well known, as indeed are those of Jack Straw, who used the ministerial FOI veto twice—once to block Cabinet minutes from the run-up to the Iraq war—and has condemned FOI legislation in the following terms:

"We've ended up with a freedom of information act with more access to documents than any comparable jurisdiction."

Personally, I consider that to be something to celebrate, not denigrate. I welcome the current more enlightened view on the subject in the Labour party, and I hope that, once completed, its review will disregard the views of its dinosaur tendency and back FOI to the hilt.

Just as strong FOI legislation is a good barometer for the health of any democracy, any attempt to dilute FOI legislation represents a threat to it. With the number of MPs falling, hundreds of thousands of voters dropping off the electoral register, Short money being slashed and the Trade Union Bill being rammed through—all of which hurt the Opposition parties much more than the Conservatives—the Opposition parties' ability to challenge the present Government is being severely curtailed. I therefore contend that we are more dependent on FOI and the Freedom of Information Act than ever before when it comes to holding the Government to account.

What, though, are the present Government's views on FOI? In July, they established an independent commission to review the Freedom of Information Act. That "independent" commission includes Jack Straw.

[Tom Brake]

There is no need to submit an FOI request to Lord Burns to demonstrate that there is nothing independent about it. The Justice Secretary claims that the review is necessary because the Government needed to revisit FOI to ensure that officials could speak “candidly” to Ministers in the “interests of good government”. He spoke of a

“worrying tendency in our courts and elsewhere to erode the protections for that safe space”.—[*Official Report*, 23 June 2015; Vol. 597, c. 753.]

Some of those officials, including Sir Gus O’Donnell—as recently as this weekend—and the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Jeremy Heywood, dubbed “Sir Cover-up”, have made their positions known too. Sir Gus suggests that civil servants will not be writing down Brexit plans, but is that because senior mandarins have scared them into thinking that they cannot write things down because they will be exposed through FOI—when there is no such risk—or because it serves the Chancellor’s interests to require them not to? I know from my involvement with the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 that a “chilling” effect can be achieved because someone repeats the fact that a law or measure is “chilling” often enough for people’s actions to be curtailed. In effect, people self-censor, rather than their actions being curtailed because the measure is actually chilling.

Sir Jeremy has spoken of the “chilling” effect of the Freedom of Information Act. In the interests of fairness, I should point out that now Sir Jeremy simply wants to make the FOI rules clearer, without making any substantial changes. If I can paraphrase Vince Cable, in the last few weeks we have witnessed his transformation from “Sir Cover-up” to the “Sir Lancelot du Lac” of FOI. Which incarnation is likely to have the longer shelf-life? I know where my money is.

Many legal experts point out—and the statistics confirm this very convincingly—that information tribunals that hear challenges against disclosure allow policy discussions to be revealed only in very limited circumstances, or when the arguments for disclosure are overwhelmingly in the public interest. It should also be borne in mind that the Justice Committee has already conducted a much wider post-legislative scrutiny, stating that FOI

“has contributed to a culture of greater openness across public authorities, particularly at central Government level”,

and that it

“is a significant enhancement of our democracy”.

I am disappointed by the commission’s limited scope. Its remit does not cover which types of body should be covered by the Act, which is, in my view, a major failing. As we have seen with the activities of companies such as G4S and Serco, Southern and Thameslink, and charities such as Kids Company, a growing proportion of work that was previously undertaken by the public sector, which is subject to FOI, is now undertaken by other organisations, which are not. How many Medway Secure Training Centre scandals could be prevented if FOI applied to private sector companies doing public sector work? We need to act on the Public Accounts Committee’s 2014 recommendation, and include those private contractors in its scope.

The commission should have considered the question of bringing the Royal Household into the scope of the Freedom of Information Act. It is difficult to understand

why it should not be within the scope of the Act, and why FOI requests to it should not be treated like any other—subject, of course, to the public interest test. The Royal Household is surely the most public of our public authorities.

The ministerial veto must be scrapped. In the words of Maurice Frankel of the Campaign for Freedom of Information,

“The veto allows ministers for reasons of political embarrassment to overturn considered decisions of the commissioner or a tribunal. It allows them for bad reasons to overturn good decisions.”

Nor does the commission seek to consult on some of the tricks of the trade that are used to delay FOI responses, such as the absence of any time limits on internal FOI reviews. The News Media Association is pressing for such limits, and I am backing its efforts. A total of 40 days for all stages seems reasonable. Currently, the absence of time limits provides Departments with a convenient delaying mechanism, and they are already adept enough at kicking into the long grass. Andrew Lansley’s diaries from the period in the run-up to the Health and Social Care Act 2012 are a case in point. They are of interest because of what they might reveal about the number of meetings with private health companies. Their release was fought on the grounds that there might be gaps in Andrew Lansley’s diary that would have to be filled by spurious meetings to ensure that he could not be accused of laziness. That was rightly dismissed by the tribunal as “incredible”.

On the other hand, the commission does float the idea of upfront charges for FOI requests. No precise figure is given, but it could be at least £20 to recoup the cost of invoicing. The introduction in Ireland of a €15 fee in 2003 resulted in a 75% collapse in the number of FOI requests from the public, although I am pleased that the Irish Government subsequently scrapped the fee. The introduction of fees will not save money; indeed, I would argue the contrary.

FOI requests often ferret out abuse, inefficiency and waste, which can then be addressed. The most famous example was, of course, our own expenses scandal, but other examples include Network Rail, which spent £7.2 million on car allowances for senior staff last year, bringing its total expenditure on the perks over the past five years to £32 million. Incidentally, bringing Network Rail into the scope of FOI, with effect from March last year, was a welcome step, for which Norman Baker and I pressed when he was a Transport Minister. If a £20 fee were in place, investigating all 43 police forces in England and Wales would cost £860. There are more than 260 NHS trusts, which would push the cost of “FOI-ing” their performance to over £5,000.

I am also disappointed by the phrasing of the commission’s questions, all of which start from the premise that FOI is a constraint rather than a benefit.

Finally, let me bring this matter much closer to home, and mention Parliament. Parliament should always set an example when it comes to transparency, and I therefore support the Press Association’s bid to ensure that the Commons authorities disclose evidence or reports relating to alcohol consumption in Parliament—or, at least, are compelled to defend their decisions not to do so. The PA’s request was rejected on the grounds that such action would breach confidentiality, and would prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs. However, Parliament has a duty to lead on matters of transparency. It should,

in all circumstances—except those involving matters relating to parliamentary privilege, to prevent the courts from trespassing on Parliament’s turf—be treated like any other public authority, and should be subject to the public interest test. That would have enabled the question of whether the release of those documents was in the public interest to be properly assessed.

Our democracy is healthier, more resilient and less vulnerable to ambush with tough and challenging FOI laws in place. The Bill would strengthen FOI to ensure that no one was above the scrutiny of FOI—not Ministers, the private sector, charities, Parliament, or the Royal Household. I urge the House to support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Tom Brake, Mr Graham Allen, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Mr David Davis, Mark Durkan, Tim Farron, Norman Lamb, Caroline Lucas, Greg Mulholland, Liz Saville Roberts, Mr Mark Williams and Mr David Winnick present the Bill.

Tom Brake accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March and to be printed (Bill 119).

Opposition Day

[16TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Student Maintenance Grants

[Relevant document: E-petition, entitled “Prevent the scrapping of the maintenance grant”.]

1.49 pm

Mr Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls upon the Government to abandon its policy on replacing maintenance grants with loans for lower income students.

The Government’s proposal to scrap maintenance grant support for disadvantaged students and replace it with a loan system is not an isolated proposal. It is part of a pattern that can be seen in other areas of government. It mirrors, for example, changes that were debated eight days ago, which removed NHS bursaries for nurses and other staff, and it has been foreshadowed by changes that the Government have made in support and protection for further education over the past three or four years. The truth of the matter is that the Government have ducked and dived to avoid further debate on their direction of travel on the grants issue, and on freezing the payment threshold for five years, which is not specifically part of the regulations although it is referred to in the assessment that comes with them. That is also likely to hit disadvantaged students.

We have called this debate today to hold the Government to account over this major issue. They have refused to bring these changes to the Floor of the House themselves, and preferred instead to sneak them through in delegated legislation, which can be debated and voted on by only a handful of MPs.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is particularly shameful that this proposal did not appear in the Conservative party manifesto? It is being sneaked into the House of Commons and without the knowledge of the people of this country.

Mr Marsden: My hon. Friend makes a striking point. That is only one of a series of delinquencies that I want to move on to.

The Conservatives have shied away from the light of debate, challenge and scrutiny on this issue, preferring instead to use a legislative sleight of hand to ensure that the sweeping changes were made in Committee in the hope that no one would notice. All the way through this process, they have been defensive. They have been less than candid and they have systematically resisted the path of openness. There was little detail to be had when the Chancellor first mooted this change in the summer, and not much more in the autumn statement. It was only when the National Union of Students raised the alarm about the impact of the process and threatened a judicial review over the lack of consultation and the failure to publish the interim equality assessment—which the Government have still not done—that a separate equality impact assessment was slipped out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), the shadow Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, wrote to the Business Secretary

[Mr Marsden]

explaining our concerns and asking for a full debate on this matter. This was reflected in early-day motion 829, which attracted a number of cross-party signatures. However, the Business Secretary's reply largely ignored the issues. The issue of failing to bring the matter to the Floor of the Commons was raised by the shadow Leader of the House in December, and at that time the Leader of the House intimated that there should be a debate on the Floor of the House, but no such debate has taken place. A question from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) was ducked by the Prime Minister last Wednesday. Colleagues raised the issue again in last week's business questions, and I put a series of detailed questions to the Minister in the Delegated Legislation Committee. I and the other members of the Committee would like to see the responses to those questions in due course.

It is perhaps no surprise that *The Independent* led today on the way in which this Government have been using statutory instruments systematically to force through profound and controversial changes to the law without proper debate and scrutiny. Nor is it surprising that my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey told the newspaper:

"This is arbitrary rule that massively decreases the power of the Commons to effectively scrutinise the Government."

The equality impact assessment was slipped out with a relative lack of ceremony at the end of November. As I said last week, this is the document that almost dare not speak its name, not least because the detailed evidence of the negative impact was tucked away in its central pages, to which I will refer later, and was rather belied by the bland conclusions appended to the front of the document. What is driving these panic measures from the Government—the £1.5 billion raid on grants and the threshold fees—is their belated recognition that the whole set of financial assumptions about repayment that underpinned their trebling of fees in 2012 is producing a black hole for them and for future taxpayers.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Did not a Tory Minister stand at the Dispatch Box in 2012 and assure us, on the question of tripling the fees, that increased maintenance grants and the national scholarship programme would protect students from the poorest backgrounds? Now the Government are scrapping both and trying to sneak the measures through. Is this not an absolute betrayal?

Mr Marsden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he obviously has the power of telepathy, because I intend to refer to that later.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): My hon. Friend refers to the impact statement. Does he agree that, in 2016, it is a scandal that the impact statement, which the NUS had to drag out of the Government and which confirms that the measures will disproportionately affect black and minority ethnic students, women and disabled people, does not merit a proper debate and vote in this House?

Mr Marsden: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend, who was a distinguished Schools Minister. His points are absolutely valid, and I shall deal with them

in more detail in due course. These measures are not simply incidental tinkering with existing financial regulations.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): Can my hon. Friend confirm that 45% of the student loan book, amounting to some £5 billion, is suspected to be delinquent in some way or other? These measures would add a further £1.6 billion to that amount. Are not the Government building up a huge unfunded liability in their national accounts?

Mr Marsden: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has great experience in these matters. The Institute for Fiscal Studies and other organisations have commented on that matter.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is wonderful to hear Labour Members talking about unfunded liabilities. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the £1.5 billion cost of this measure, which is the money that will be saved. Is it his party's policy to reverse the measure, and if so, where would it get the money from?

Mr Marsden: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is so looking forward to the arrival of a Labour Government that he is already asking us detailed questions on this matter. I would remind him, however, that today is a day for the Government to be held to account for their failures.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Marsden: I am sorry, but I must try to make some progress. I will take more interventions later.

These measures are typical of the ideology-driven but evidence-lite approach that this Government have too often employed. This is a major reversal of policy only four years after they hailed those maintenance grants for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The statistics from the House of Commons Library tell me that the measures will affect around 500,000 of England's most disadvantaged students. This amounts to a Domesday book listing the numbers of students who will lose their grants under the new rules. Universities across England, old and new, will be affected, as well as other higher education institutions. Further education colleges will also be affected, because they make an increasingly valuable contribution—10% and rising—to higher education, and a disproportionate number of their students will be affected.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) *rose*—

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Marsden: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and then briefly to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi).

Andrew Gwynne: I commend my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to the House of Commons so that we can have a vote on this important issue. He has talked about the impact on universities and colleges. Perhaps he has seen the information released by UCAS

in December that shows that, even today, twice as many young people from advantaged backgrounds as from disadvantaged backgrounds go to university. How does he think removing £3,500-worth of grant a year is going to assist social mobility?

Mr Marsden: The reality is that it will not. I will have more to say about social mobility later.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Marsden: No, I will not give way again, as I have already indicated. A large number of people wish to speak, and I need to give them a chance to do so.

Yasmin Qureshi: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Marsden: Yes, I have already indicated that I would do so.

Yasmin Qureshi: Does my hon. Friend remember that, in the last Parliament, the Government abolished the education maintenance allowance for 16 to 18-year-olds going into further education? They are now abolishing the maintenance grant for poorer people going into higher education, yet they managed to find tax cuts for millionaires in the last Parliament. Does this not show that this Tory Government are really not concerned about the poor and disadvantaged people in this country, whether in relation to housing, to universal credit, to disability or to education? They just don't care.

Mr Marsden: My hon. Friend refers to the abolition of the EMA—

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Marsden: No, I am sorry, I will not give way. I have already said that.

The EMA is not the subject of our debate today, but that point illustrates the problems affecting further education colleges. There can be a cumulative effect for the future of such colleges because these measures can result in people no longer applying to them. That is why the Association of Colleges said in a specific response to these regulations:

“We have real concerns about the proposed change as many of the students may never earn enough to pay back the money and the policy does appear to penalise poorer students.”

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Marsden: I have already indicated that I will not give way at the moment, but I will do so in a little while.

The expansion of higher education opportunities in further education colleges after 1997 was one of the most significant advances made under the Labour Government in this area, and it was a crucial part of beginning to address the lack of balance for higher education in the English regions outside the areas of the traditional clusters of long-established universities. It was part of a joined-up strategy to embed higher education and skills in our local economies and via the regional development agencies at that time. My local Blackpool and The Fylde College gained an excellent new higher

education block in that period, where more than 2,800 students are now in higher education. We know that many further education students come from precisely the non-traditional backgrounds for participation in higher education.

James Morris: The hon. Gentleman is deploying the same argument that was deployed against the introduction of tuition fees, which was carried out by the previous Labour Government and developed by the coalition, but we have actually seen an increase in the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university. His argument, therefore, just does not stack up.

Mr Marsden: Perhaps if the hon. Gentleman listens as I talk further about the way in which these things have changed, he will understand that what was introduced in 2012 and the explanations—I will not call them apologies—that his Government gave for tripling tuition fees were based on a series of quid pro quos, all of which they have now abandoned. The pattern I have talked about is also seen in the number of people doing higher education in the so-called “post-92” universities and receiving the maintenance grant. That is why million+, whose membership contains a significant number of those post-92 universities, has expressed its alarm in the briefing it prepared for today's debate. It said that

“by virtue of nothing more than household income, some students will be saddled with debts far in excess of their fellow students.”

It continued:

“the freezing of the earning repayment threshold for five years will also exacerbate this problem and will hit lower earning graduates the hardest.”

My former colleague Bill Rammell, who was a higher education Minister and is now vice-chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire, made precisely those points in an excellent piece for *Politics Home* today.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Erdington is one of the poorest constituencies in England, but it is rich in talent, and maintenance grants mean a great deal to students who want to get on—42% are dependent on them. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government are both breaking a promise, and dashing the hopes and dreams of a generation of strivers?

Mr Marsden: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Of course, he comes from and speaks for a distinguished part of the west midlands, which is in the process of trying to gain control over areas of activity in their local economies. What the Government are doing for people in Birmingham and elsewhere is confounding their own devolution prospects.

Helen Whately *rose*—

Mr Marsden: No, I will not give way at this stage, but I might a little later.

We know now, thanks to a question I tabled to the Minister for Universities and Science to establish the extent of this issue, how many people will be directly affected by the withdrawal of the maintenance grant in further education. The statistics show that some 33,700 English applicants were awarded maintenance grants for higher education courses at further education colleges.

[Mr Marsden]

Within that 33,700 figure, we have a roll call of the English regions, where it is not just the individuals but the local economies, through the growth of skills there, that have benefited from this expansion of higher education and further education.

Let me cite some of the statistics that the Student Loans Company has produced: in the north-west, Blackburn College has 1,842 students on maintenance grant; in the north-east, Newcastle College Group has 1,669; and in the south-west and Cornwall, Cornwall College has 931. The list goes on, but a crucial subset comprises the numbers in those areas where, as I just mentioned to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), the Government are encouraging combined authorities and local enterprise partnerships to take up their devolution offers and, therefore, potentially to have control of or take a role in higher skills initiatives. Greater Manchester has 410 on maintenance grants at Stockport College and 1,060 on grants across The Manchester College network. In Merseyside, 542 in total are on grants at The City of Liverpool College and the Liverpool Institute for the Performing Arts. In Leeds, 1,604 are on these grants, spread between Leeds City College, Leeds College of Music and Leeds College of Art. London has a huge further education sector, which caters to so many of the groups identified in the equalities assessment, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) said. At a time of pressure already, from area reviews and cuts to ESOL—English for speakers of other languages—this new proposal could be toxic. If the effect of these changes, introduced without consultation, is to blunt those skills and that empowerment, this Government will be cutting off at the knees the very strategies for English devolution, for skills and for social mobility that they claim to be promoting.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Last week, the Prime Minister said that his Government's mission was

“to look each...child in the eye, and say, ‘Your dreams are our dreams. We’ll support you with everything we’ve got.’”

Does my hon. Friend agree that scrapping grants to half a million people, including more than 5,000 young people in Tower Hamlets in my constituency, is a cap on aspiration and that it stinks of hypocrisy?

Mr Marsden: I certainly agree with the point about the potential threat to my hon. Friend's constituents, and it underlines what I said about London.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Marsden: No, I will not give way until I have finished dealing with the intervention. On my hon. Friend's point about hypocrisy, it is not for me to judge, but I would recall that fine old English proverb, “Fine words butter no parsnips.”

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): On social mobility, will the hon. Gentleman welcome the fact that more and more people from disadvantaged backgrounds are accessing higher education? That has increased from 13.6% when the Labour Government were in power to more than 18% this year.

Mr Marsden: Of course I welcome that fact. The point I am trying to establish today, which I hope the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues will accept, as I am actually trying to help them, is that these are fine words about an increase in social mobility and all the rest of it, but things will go in the opposite direction if they do not reconsider this measure.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Marsden: I am sorry but a great number of people wish to speak. I have taken a number of interventions already and I really must make progress.

Mr Speaker: Order. Just so that the House is aware, on present trends there will be only about an hour in total for Back-Bench speeches and 18 people are wanting to speak. I am underlining the potency of the point that the hon. Gentleman has just made from the Front Bench.

Mr Marsden: Thank you, Mr Speaker. There is a nudge factor here; it is a nudge away from progress, from that regional growth and from those opportunities for groups and individuals who traditionally have been debt averse. Asking people on higher education courses at further education colleges to take on up to £50,000-worth of debt in areas such as the north-east, where in some parts that sum could equate to the price of a small house or flat, concerns colleges such as New College Durham. Its principal, John Widdowson, has said that “nudge can work both ways—especially for people who’ve signed up for foundation courses and are considering going for honours—the more complex you make the funding process the more it can seem a barrier.”

Those sorts of concerns were recently echoed by the Office for Fair Access. But it is the individual life chances that may be blighted or disrupted by these changes that should weigh heavily on all of us, which is why the NUS and its student bodies have been so passionate in campaigning against this change. For me, all those individual cases in FE are summed up by the email I received only yesterday from a student in Blackpool, who said that she would like to thank me

“for defending the students who will be affected by the loss of grants. I am from Blackpool and in my second year of my degree with UCLan, and a married mature student with two children.”

She said that she had been plagued by illness as a child, which is why she was having to study in her late 30s, and stated:

“The complete U-turn by the Government who said education should not just be for the privileged and should not exclude the poor has now done exactly that.”

The changes will also affect significant numbers of students in the traditional university sector, including 14,000 at Manchester Metropolitan University, 8,000-plus at the University of Manchester, nearly 11,000 at Nottingham Trent and 3,738 at King's College London. As I have said, it is a potential list of lost opportunities.

We can only speculate on what impact the regulations will have on future cohorts of students. The National Education Opportunities Network and the University and College Union are currently undertaking research with more than 2,000 final year A-level and level 3 students to look at how costs influence the higher education choices that those students make. The interim findings from that research show that more than half

the students who are deciding not to go into HE are taking that decision because of the lack of direct financial maintenance grant support that they had envisaged for the year ahead.

The equality assessment states:

“At an aggregate level there is no evidence that the 2012 reforms, which saw a significant increase in HE fees and associated student debt levels, has had a significant impact in deterring the participation of young students from low income backgrounds.”

That is now debateable, because the safety net of maintenance grants, which was introduced in 2012 with that tripling of fees, is now being removed. That is why, in her letter praying against the regulations, the shadow Secretary of State wrote:

“Labour is concerned this change won’t improve Government finances in the long term.”

That echoes the view of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which said:

“The replacement of maintenance grants by loans from 2016–17 will raise debt for the poorest students, but do little to improve government finances in the long run.”

The IFS states that, in the short term, Government borrowing will drop by around £2 billion a year, because current spending on grants counts towards current borrowing, while current spending on loans does not. In the long run, savings could well be less than that. The amount of money lent to students will rise by about £2.3 billion for each cohort, but the IFS says that only around a quarter of those additional loans are likely to be repaid. In the long run, therefore, the net effect is a reduction in Government borrowing by around £270 million per cohort, and a 3% decline in the Government’s estimated contribution to higher education. In a fair and balanced way, the IFS said:

“Students from households with pre-tax incomes of up to £25,000 (those currently eligible for a full maintenance grant) will have a little more ‘cash in pocket’...But they will also graduate with around £12,500 more debt, on average, from a three-year course. This means that students from the poorest backgrounds are now likely to leave university owing substantially more to the government than their better-off peers.”

It also states:

“The poorest 40% of students going to university in England will now graduate with debts of up to £53,000 from a three-year course, rather than up to £40,500. This will result from the replacement of maintenance grants”.

As I have already said, when the Government tripled tuition fees in 2012, they tried to sweeten the pill, by talking up the centrality of the maintenance grant to ensure that the most disadvantaged could still access higher education. They promised three things: a national scholarship programme; the maintenance grants for the disadvantaged programme; and the earnings-related threshold that would be uprated with inflation. The then Minister of State for Universities and Science, David Willetts, said:

“The increase in maintenance grant for students from households with the lowest incomes, the National Scholarship Programme, and additional fair access requirements...should ensure that the reforms do not affect individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds disproportionately.”

That is what the Minister’s predecessor in the Conservative-led Government said in 2011–12, but the regulations that the Government passed in Committee last week will disadvantage the same groups of students that the Government promised to protect two years ago. David Willetts previously lauded the measures as a *quid pro quo* for the trebling of tuition fees, saying:

“Our proposals are progressive, because they help to encourage people from poorer backgrounds to go to university, because of the higher education maintenance grant, and because of the higher repayment threshold.”—[*Official Report*, 3 November 2010; Vol. 517, c. 940.]

Now all three elements of those promises have been broken by this Government. The Minister’s colleague, now Lord Willetts, must be revolving in his ermine at the way in which his promises have been so lightly regarded by the Government.

The Government and their predecessors set great store by the principle of “nudge”—actions that persuade people to change their behaviour for the better. Let me remind the Minister that it is possible to nudge people away from desirable outcomes rather than towards them. A new Department for Business Innovation and Skills study shows that more than half the applicants said that they had been put off university by the costs. That is backed up by the Sutton Trust, which said:

“Shifting grants to loans may move them off the balance sheet, but it could also put off many low and middle income students and tip the balance against their going to university. Since grants were reintroduced, there have been significant improvements”—

and we welcome that, but those will be—

put at risk by today’s Budget plans.”

Research from the National Union of Students, which was published last week by Populus, shows that parents are concerned that the Government’s plans to scrap the maintenance grant will discourage their children from applying to university. Two fifths of those with a combined income of £25,000 or less believe that to be the case. The range of the groups affected by the changes is daunting. The assessment concedes that black and minority ethnic students in particular will be disproportionately worse off. On older learners, it says:

“Mature students will be disproportionately impacted by the policy proposals to remove the full maintenance grant and replace with additional loan as well as the freezing of targeted grants.”

The Government have also conceded that disabled people will be disproportionately affected by the decision not to protect the real-terms value of disabled students allowances. The assessment spells out the potential for discrimination because of religious beliefs, stating that there is evidence to suggest that there are groups of Muslim students whose religion prohibits them from taking out an interest-bearing loan. Finally, the impact assessment also states that female students will be particularly affected by the freezing of childcare grants, parents’ learning allowances and employment and support allowances, given their significant over-representation in these populations.

Further to that, the scrapping of 24+ loans in further education is particularly relevant to the case before us today, because it is indicative of what has happened in previous circumstances when the Government have gone down this road. As the Minister knows, the Government released figures in October 2015 that showed clear evidence of the deterrent impact on learners that I and others warned about when these loans were introduced as replacements for grants in January 2013. The figures showed that in 2014–15 only £149 million of the £397 million allocated for the process had been taken up. It is no wonder that people in the FE community have lamented the lost opportunity of £250 million that could have helped some of our most disadvantaged learners. The very group of people who benefited from the concessions given in 2013 by the Minister’s predecessor, the right

[Mr Marsden]

hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes)—that those who went on access to HE courses would have the outstanding amount written off in their access course loan—face another knock back. The damning details from the Government's own impact assessment should surely give Ministers pause for thought, given that they threaten to affect the most debt-averse groups.

Worryingly, it appears that the Government have yet to produce an up-to-date estimate of the impact that the shift from grants to loans will have on the resource accounting and budgeting charge, which calculates the cost to the Government of the higher education funding system, based on how much students are ultimately expected to repay. Having heard the evidence that we have presented so far and the comments from around the Chamber, will the Government tell us why, if they were so confident about these policies, they did not bring them to the Floor of the House? More to the point, why did they not consult independent experts and various representative organisations? Why did they not commission research from any of the reputable independent policy bodies?

Last month, along with a number of other MPs, I sat in the corridor of this place listening to hundreds of students who had come to lobby us. Their message was consistent: scrapping maintenance grants will leave people struggling to go to university. People in the Chamber today have talked about consequences and people will talk about their own experiences. I was a tutor for the Open University for 20 years and I know that many of the students whom I taught had been put off higher education at an earlier age by the costs. Such things do not alter just because we are now in the digital world of the 21st century, and the impact of the changes, particularly on mature students, cannot be divorced from the precarious position of so many of those who study part time in HE.

Statistics published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency have shown that the number of first-year part-time students in 2014-15 is down 6% on previous years. The number of part-time higher education students since the Conservatives came into office has fallen by nearly 40%. No wonder the NUS is exasperated about that, and it relates it to the trebling of student fees since 2012 for England and English students in HE in Wales and Scotland. No wonder also that the president of Universities UK and the vice-chancellor of the University of Kent, Dame Julia Goodfellow, said that the decline in part-time numbers was a serious concern. I acknowledge, as they do, that the introduction of maintenance loans to some part-time students from 2018-19 announced by the Government is welcome, but in the meantime the nudge factors are very strong against such study. No wonder the Open University has also expressed its alarm, commenting on the Minister's higher education Green Paper that flexible learning provision is also at the heart of Government policy development. Are not those concerns precisely why we need a proper discussion and are they not reasons why we need a commitment to bring a Bill to this House? I invite the Minister to give that in his response.

There is a lack of balance, as well as a nudging towards negative outcomes, and the issue will not go away. It is not surprising that connections have been

made between the specific ways the Government have tried to dodge scrutiny in this matter. No wonder the Minister appeared relatively ill at ease in Committee, but to tell the truth perhaps the blame lies elsewhere. The article in *The Independent* reminds us that it was the Chancellor who tried to use a statutory instrument to smuggle through his tax credit changes, and we all know what happened to them. The Chancellor is proud of promoting himself as the Government's master builder—all his rhetoric is shot through with the image. He preens as he boasts of the march of the makers and of how the Government, on his watch, is fixing the roof while the sun is shining, but the truth is that the Chancellor is a man with whom we always need to read the small print. He has consistently missed many of his debt and other targets, and as far as building a secure future for Britain's learners is concerned, he is Mr Dodgy, whose actions are unlikely to get a certificate from the Federation of Master Builders. While the sun is shining, he has dislodged slates on the way down and has disguised cuts to adult skills as efficiencies, as his Newspeak officials call them.

He is pushing those students off the ladder of social mobility. It is time for him to get real in the real world, where the elasticity of demand eventually snaps and where stretching the envelope can finally break it. The direction of travel is threatening to deliver not a northern powerhouse but a northern poorhouse, undermining his regional strategy. We want no part of the narrative of failure, nor should this House, and that is why this afternoon we are calling again for Ministers to think again, to support the motion, and to annul the misguided regulation that this Government tried to hide away.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the Minister for Universities and Science, from whom the House will want to hear and who will need to treat of these matters in proper detail, may I gently express the hope that the combined effect of the intellectual powerhouses on the two Front Benches and their enthusiasm for communication will not succeed in crowding out Back Benchers? We have also to hear from other distinguished intellects later in summing up the debate, and I hope that the product of their grey cells will be meaty but not too big.

2.24 pm

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): I welcome the opportunity to explain, I hope briefly, why it would be a mistake to vote for the Opposition motions that attempt to annul the statutory instrument agreed by the Delegated Legislation Committee last Thursday. The instrument delivers the Government's policy of offering increased financial support for living costs for new students in the 2016-17 academic year in the form of loans rather than grants. The policy is part of the Government's plan to ensure that our world-class higher education sector remains sustainably financed and open to more students from all backgrounds. The Government are extending the benefits of higher education to more people than ever before. We have lifted the artificial cap on student numbers, allowing record numbers to secure places last year.

A higher education sector that is not properly and sustainably funded cannot deliver the life-changing education that students expect.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Joseph Johnson: I will when I finish my introductory remarks.

In the context of fiscal restraint, ensuring that we have a sustainable model for our higher education system is crucial. In this respect, the measure builds on successive reforms since 2010 which have delivered a higher education system that safeguards social mobility and delivers for students and taxpayers. Indeed, the OECD has commended the reforms in aggregate for the sensible balance they strike between the interests of taxpayers and students. Its director of higher education has said that England is “one of the very few countries that has figured out a sustainable approach to higher education financing.”

Very recently, on a trip to London, he added that England “has made a wise choice. It works for individuals, it works for government.”

Mr Hanson: If that is all so well and good, why was it not in the hon. Gentleman’s manifesto?

Joseph Johnson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making that point. If he reads page 35 of the Conservative party manifesto, he will see a clear commitment to continuing the funding reforms that I have just described and ensuring a fair balance between the interests of taxpayers and students. There are also many other references in the Conservative manifesto to the need to achieve budget deficit savings.

Let me start by beginning to address the questions about the scrutiny of the regulations that were raised by the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden). The regulations were not sneaked in, as he suggested. In fact, the policy was first announced in principle in the 2015 summer Budget, nearly six months ago. It was in fact included in the Chancellor’s summer Budget speech, one of the most closely scrutinised events in the parliamentary calendar. The decision finally to proceed was made as part of the spending review in November 2015 and the instrument was laid before the House on 2 December. A comprehensive 80-page equality analysis was published the next day, in line with an earlier commitment I made voluntarily to the House. I shall say more about that later.

The regulations were made under powers granted to the Secretary of State by the previous Labour Government, under the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998. Rather than using some obscure and arcane procedure, as hon. Members have suggested, we are following the very parliamentary processes that the previous Labour Government created for this purpose. Labour asked for a debate on the regulations on 9 December and the Government tabled a motion that appeared on the Order Paper on 5 January, referring the regulations to a Delegated Legislation Committee. Labour did not object, and the regulations went to such a Committee on 14 January. To put it simply, the processes were put in place by Labour when they were last in government and they did not object on 5 January, when they had the chance. I now welcome the opportunity to debate the issue further in this Opposition day debate and I note that the other place will also have a chance to consider the instrument following the tabling of a motion by the noble Lord Stevenson of Balmacara on 13 January.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I have been contacted by a large number of people, including students from Walbottle Campus, Gosforth Academy and Newcastle and Northumbria Universities. They would like to know from the Minister when they will have the opportunity to feed into the public consultation on this issue.

Joseph Johnson: The House debated the matter in the Delegated Legislation Committee. There was a thorough 80-page equality analysis. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills maintains an ongoing and regular dialogue with all stakeholders on matters relating to higher education.

We welcome the scrutiny, because this Government are rightly proud of our record on higher education. Since 2010 we have delivered a bold reform of higher education, putting in place a funding model that has ensured that our universities are properly funded and properly able to deliver world-class, life-changing education. At a time of significant fiscal consolidation, total income for the higher education sector has risen in real terms; it has increased from £24 billion in 2012-13 to £26 billion in 2013-14 and is forecast to rise to £31 billion by 2017-18.

Let us not forget the difficult fiscal context in which this has been achieved. Against the background of a record budget deficit, providing universities with that level of financial security could only be achieved by asking students to meet a greater part of the cost of their education, paid not upfront but out of their future earnings. That recognises the principle that if someone benefits from higher education and secures higher lifetime earnings than taxpayers who do not go to university, they should contribute to the cost of their education.

Rushanara Ali: The Minister is aware that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are already less likely to go to university; those from more advantaged backgrounds are two and a half times more likely to do so. This change will make that much worse. Will the Minister please face up to the facts and do something to respond to this question? If his Government are serious about social mobility, these cuts would not be made and he should be honest about that.

Joseph Johnson: This Government are committed to social mobility and we are delighted that we now have more students from disadvantaged backgrounds going into higher education than ever before, at a record level of 18.5%. Those from a disadvantaged background are now 36% more likely to go to university than when we took office in 2010. The Prime Minister has committed to doubling the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in our universities from 2009 levels by 2020, and we are going to be doing everything in our power to ensure that happens.

It is this sustainable model of funding that has allowed more people to benefit from higher education, which in turn promotes social mobility. Removing the cap on student numbers has allowed more people to benefit from higher education than ever before. We are now in a position in which almost 50% of young people are likely to undertake some form of higher education during their lifetime. This would simply not have been possible in an unsustainably funded higher education system.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Brighton and Hove City Council has set up a fairness commission to make sure that it delivers fairness and social mobility in its public policy making. With 3,700 students out of 10,000 at Sussex University and 6,700 out of 16,000 at Brighton University on maintenance grants, has not their job just got an awful lot more difficult because of the Government's policy?

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Gentleman can tell his constituents that university and going into higher education remain transformational experiences, especially for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. They are likely on average to go on to earn £100,000 more over their lifetimes as a result. Owing to the instrument that we are debating today, they will have access to more financial support while they are at university than ever before.

Let us acknowledge the success of these reforms. As a consequence, we today have a higher education system with record numbers going to university, record numbers of disadvantaged students, the highest ever rates of black and minority ethnic participation, and more women in higher education than ever before. The principles underpinning these reforms flow from a clear manifesto commitment to

“control spending, eliminate the deficit, and start to run a surplus.” I have already referred to the other commitments in the manifesto, on page 35, relating specifically to higher education funding.

Those Opposition Members who oppose our policy and want to reintroduce more direct taxpayer support must think about whether they would also have to reintroduce the student number controls we abolished and prevent thousands of young people from attending university.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab)
rose—

Joseph Johnson: Does the hon. Gentleman wish to reintroduce student number controls?

Neil Coyle: The point I want to make is that applications to the most selective universities from students from the lowest income households has fallen since 2010, from 16.2% in 2010 to 15.3% in 2014. What impact, in terms of the number dropping further, will this policy have?

Joseph Johnson: We want people from disadvantaged backgrounds to go to the very best universities in this country in as high a proportion as possible. We want to see that increase, which is why we asked in our guidance letters to the director of the Office for Fair Access that he pay particular attention to institutions that are not pulling their weight in getting people in from disadvantaged backgrounds. We will continue that in our next letter to the director of the OFA.

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): On paying for university, does the Minister agree that it is difficult for me to explain to residents in my constituency on low or moderately low incomes who have not had the benefit of a university education that the alternative is for them to pay more in their taxes for people who will have the opportunity to earn considerably more in their lifetimes?

Joseph Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and that is precisely the point: it is unfair on people who do not go to university to pay for the educations of those who in their lifetimes will go on to earn considerably more. On average, men who go to university will earn £170,000 more in their working lifetimes than someone with two A-levels who does not go to university, and women who go to university will earn £250,000 more over their working lifetimes. It is entirely fair that we ensure that they contribute towards the cost of their higher education.

Let me turn now to specific changes to student finance for the coming academic year. We should first note that the instrument delivers more money for students from some of the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Evidence suggests students are primarily concerned about the level of maintenance support they receive while studying. They understand that student loans are not like commercial debt, in that they are progressive and only repaid in line with future incomes.

As a result of these regulations, an eligible student whose family income is £25,000 or less and who is living away from home and studying outside London will qualify for up to 10.3% more living-costs support in 2016-17 than they would under current arrangements, which is an additional £766 of support. Those who vote for the motion to annul this instrument will be denying poorer students this extra cash.

Studies show that graduates will, on average, earn £100,000 more than non-graduates over their lifetime. BIS research suggests that this premium could be as high as £250,000 for female graduates compared with those who hold two A-levels or fewer. This is our progressive A-level system and our progressive repayment system in action, and those who do not benefit from increased earnings as a result of undertaking higher education will not pay any more as a result of this policy.

The system we have put in place ensures that higher education is open to everyone with the potential to benefit from it, irrespective of background. Opposition scaremongering only risks deterring students from attending university. While the data available so far on this application cycle are provisional, early data from UCAS indicate applications in 2016-17 are broadly in line with last year. The BIS-funded student finance tour sends out recent graduates to schools to bust the myths about student finance. Let us not undo the good work they do in undertaking this tour; they are passionate advocates of the benefits of university, and speculating and scaremongering about the effects of this instrument will undermine their good work.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): More than 45,000 students from England each year choose to study elsewhere in the UK, including at Glasgow University in my constituency. How does scrapping maintenance grants incentivise them to travel further from their home to get the benefit of education at universities outside England?

Joseph Johnson: We are making a record amount of financial support available to those students—more than has been provided by any previous Government. That will enable them to travel further away from home than they have in the past.

Let me turn to the significant savings achieved by these changes. The switch from maintenance grants to loans will, in a steady state, save around £2.5 billion per year from the fiscal deficit—not the £1.5 billion mentioned. We acknowledge that a proportion of the loans will not be repaid. This is a conscious decision to invest in the skills base of our country, and protect those who go on to lower-paying graduate jobs. We forecast that the long-term annual economic savings will be around £800 million per year.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson: The Minister said earlier that this is a deficit-reducing policy and we take that, and of course I entirely agree with all the points that have been made on the grounds of social mobility and denial of educational opportunity that this policy implies, but is not the point the Minister really has to answer that 45% of his loan books at the moment have been declared delinquent for one reason or another? How much of this so-called saving does he think he is going to get back? Is he not really just pretending he is making this saving, while in fact building up unfunded liabilities?

Joseph Johnson: There is an immediate grant saving of £2.5 billion, which comes directly off the budget deficit. As I just mentioned, there is of course the prospect down the line of some loans not being repaid, as a result of a conscious decision by the Government to invest in the skills base of the country and to allow people to pursue incomes that do not enable them to pay off the full value of the loan. The economic value of the savings, as I just said, is £800 million a year in a steady state.

I challenge the Opposition to explain how they would fund their alternatives. I note that the Labour party has in the past year put forward competing higher education funding policies, although they share one significant feature: their huge cost to the taxpayer. Labour's leader, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), said in July that fees should be removed completely, with grants retained in full. The policy was costed by Labour itself at £10 billion. Such policies move us backward. They are unsustainable and, at a conservative estimate, would add more than £40 billion to the deficit over a five-year Parliament. We should be clear about what the results would be: more reckless borrowing, more taxes on hard-working people, and the reintroduction, inevitably, of student number controls. We have lifted student number controls and we will not allow the Labour party to reimpose a cap on young people's aspirations.

I will deal with the risks associated with this policy as set out in the equality analysis, but let me first quickly respond to the false accusation that we refused to publish the assessment until prompted to do so by the National Union of Students. That is simply not true. Every year, when the Education (Student Support) Regulations 2011 are amended, an equality analysis covering the changes is published on gov.uk. This is standard practice. On 14 September, in a written response to a parliamentary question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), I said:

"The Government expects to lay amendments to the Education (Student Support) Regulations 2011 later this year and publish an Equality Analysis when the Regulations are laid. The Equality Analysis will include an assessment of potential impacts of the changes."

Only on 22 September 2015, more than a week after that answer was given, did the NUS give notice that it would seek legally to challenge our policy. There has been no evasiveness in the presentation of the policy or its potential impacts.

I will deal now with some of the issues identified in the equality analysis and how they will be mitigated. Let it be remembered that similar issues were identified as a result of the 2012 reforms, but did not crystallise. Indeed, we now have a world-class higher education system, with record numbers of disadvantaged students in higher education, the highest rates of BME participation in higher education and more women in higher education than ever before. Our impact assessment explains that the risks will be mitigated by at least three factors, including the 10.3% increase in the maximum loan for living costs, the repayment protection for low-earning students and the high average returns on higher education.

More funding is also being provided through access agreements: in 2016-17, £745 million is expected to be spent by universities through access agreements, up from £404 million in 2009-10. That is money that makes a real difference to disadvantaged students, and we will of course monitor the progress of the policy through the data available from the Higher Education Statistics Authority and the Student Loans Company.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): At the University of York, 40% of students get a maintenance grant. What assessment has been made of the impact on universities of not attracting students because they simply cannot afford to attend?

Joseph Johnson: As I have already said, we are making a record amount of financial support available to students, and students from the poorest backgrounds will benefit from a 10.3% increase in financial support. They will have more cash in their pockets than ever before.

I hope that I have been able to clarify some of the misconceptions about our policy, the steps we are taking to increase living costs support and the process surrounding it. I will finish by directing Labour Members' attention to the interview with Ed Balls in *Times Higher Education* this week, which should be of interest to them. He said that the

"blot on Labour's copybook"

was that

"we clearly didn't find a sustainable way forward for the financing of higher education".

He went on to say:

"If they"—

the electorate—

"think you've got the answers for the future, they'll support you".

We have a plan for the future. In a time of fiscal restraint, we are taking action to ensure that university finances are sustainable, so that more people than ever before can benefit from higher education.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the Scottish National party Front-Bench spokesperson, I remind Members that there are 18 people who want to catch my eye and the winding-up speeches will start in just over an hour, so we will have a time

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

limit of three or four minutes by the time we reach the Back-Bench speeches. If everyone is as concise as possible, we will hopefully be able to get everyone in.

2.44 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Education has been a priority in Scotland for more than 300 years. The established Church in Scotland decided in the mid-16th century to set up a school in every parish to enable children to read the Bible and access its teachings. By the early 18th century, Scottish children led the world in literacy and fuelled the Scottish enlightenment.

That is important because it highlights the differences in how education is viewed across these isles. The focus in Scotland remains the student; there is not only a commitment to the young person's education but an acknowledgement that that same young person will develop skills through their university career that make them an asset to the country.

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

Carol Monaghan: No, because I have been urged to be brief.

By contrast, we see from this Tory Government an ideological attack on the most disadvantaged students. While still at school, talented pupils in England have had their education maintenance allowance scrapped, forcing some youngsters to leave before they have reached their potential. In England and Wales, fees of £9,000 a year are being imposed on students, and now grants for the poorest are to be scrapped, with the Chancellor describing them as "unaffordable". In using such language, does the Chancellor consider those young people to be an asset?

In my previous profession as a secondary school teacher, I often came across extremely able pupils from difficult backgrounds. It was important early in their school career to plant a seed of possible career aspirations, because even with academic success getting them to university was not a certainty. A lot of work had to be done both with the young people and with their parents to encourage that progression.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Lady speaks with eloquence and knowledge from her great experience in secondary education and I very much welcome her contribution, but I challenge her description of the differences between Scottish and English education. In England, we have seen a greater ability of children from all backgrounds to achieve access to tertiary education. In Scotland, that is increasingly not the case. Does she not agree that one of the Scottish National party's achievements of the past five years has been a fall, not a rise, in social mobility in tertiary education?

Carol Monaghan: Once again, we hear that myth here in this House. There is work to be done on the numbers of young people going directly from school to university; none of us would deny that. However, in Scotland young people have many more pathways to access university. If we look at children coming through further education

colleges, we see that the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is significantly higher in Scotland than in the rest of the UK.

May I return to those young people and their parents? Eventually the chat turns to logistics and how they will be able to afford higher education. We have to go into the detail. Parents are usually full of pride—often the child is the first in the family even to think about going to university. Explaining that in Scotland tuition is free makes a huge difference, but the parents still have to weigh things up. They have been expecting a new breadwinner, contributing to the household. They have been expecting their daughter or son's Saturday job to become their full-time career. Instead, the financial burden on the family stretches on.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): My constituent Nathan Haley is an English student studying in Wales. He already faces debts of £36,000 in tuition fees and expects that to rise to £65,000 if the proposal goes through. Does the hon. Lady think that will encourage him to pursue a career path into teaching?

Carol Monaghan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The barrier becomes insurmountable for such young people. I was one of five who all managed to go to university and got grants throughout that time. For my family it would have been impossible for us to access a university education.

Being able to say to worried parents, "Yes, there is some support available. Yes, you will be able to apply for financial help" makes a massive difference to the decisions the family will make. When there is less family support, the financial support offered by a grant becomes a lifeline. Students can of course apply for loans to support them through their course, and many do, but we have to understand that loans are not viewed the same by children from different backgrounds. For families living under the constant threat of debt, for whom life is a continual battle to survive between meagre wage packets, the decision to take out a loan, incurring further debt, is extremely difficult, and often it is one that they just cannot take.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I could not agree more with the hon. Lady on that point. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that the debt of the poorest 40% of students will increase by £12,500 to £53,500. I do not know where Government Members are coming from, but from my point of view, as someone who came from a working-class background, that would have put me off going to university and it will put off many thousands of other students. The policy is not about social mobility. There is no social justice in it. It is about social cleansing and keeping such students out of university, and it is wrong.

Carol Monaghan: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman.

There has been some success in widening access, which must be applauded, but there is a danger that the excellent work that has been done will be brutally undone if these grants are scrapped. Last week in a different context I heard a Member on the Government Benches refer to grants as "free money". Let me be clear: grants are not free money. Grants are paid back.

The grant that I received when I was a student was paid back by more than 20 years as a physics teacher. The bursaries provided to student nurses are paid back when they provide vital care in our NHS. The grants paid to students across these isles will be paid back when they take their place as educated contributors to our workforce and to our nations.

In Scotland education has been a key national priority for over 300 years and the Scottish Government's commitment to our young people is clear. The UK Government have to ask themselves whether they value education and the benefits to society that it brings. Do they value the skills gained by our young people, or is this simply another attack on the most vulnerable?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am putting a time limit of four minutes on Back-Bench contributions. If we keep to four minutes, we might get through everybody who wishes to speak.

2.53 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): The problem with today's debate is simple: no alternative is offered to the measure that has been laid before the House. For all the huffing and puffing from the Opposition, their idea of social mobility is, "We'll just give lots of money and let lots of people go. We'll worry about paying it back later, even though the economy will crash like it did before." Social mobility went down 13% over 13 years of Labour government.

The game was given away last week at Prime Minister's questions when the Leader of the Opposition made it clear that he thought it was a bad policy for this Government to try to improve social housing and get rid of some of the sink estates. The policy of the Labour party now seems to be, "Where you're born is where you should stay because we will look after you by printing money." It is nonsense.

I worked in the higher education sector for many years. I once asked what would happen if we did not increase tuition fees. The answer was that we would limit the numbers of people who could go to university. That is abysmal. The hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) says he was from a working-class background. Guess what? So were lots of Members on the Government Benches. The Opposition are trying to bring class warfare into the argument, which is nonsense.

James Cartlidge: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just about the number of students? If we had not increased the funding, the quality of the degree that each student receives would have suffered.

Alec Shelbrooke: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. That is why such efforts have been made to address the A-level and exam system. As someone who was outward-facing in my career at the University of Leeds, I was shocked to go to countries in Europe such as Germany and be told of worries about the standard of UK degrees because of the A-levels that were done to get on those courses. As a prime example, we had to lay on two extra modules of basic maths in year 1 of our engineering degree because we had students who could not cope with the mathematics used in engineering, although they had good grades at A-level.

That is part of a bigger picture, and the point of today's debate—opportunity for everybody to go to university. It is all very well to say that grants should not be cut without proposing an alternative way of raising the money, but the system would become unaffordable as a consequence, limiting the numbers of people going to university. I went to a comprehensive school. My parents were teachers. I became a professional engineer and then a Conservative MP. My sister qualified two months ago as a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. No money was spent sending us to private school. We went out and got our own part-time jobs to fund our way to university. I took on a private job at WH Smith when I was still at school.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend is telling the House in clear terms an explicit Conservative story of hard work, opportunity and meritocracy, in sharp contradistinction to the narrative from the Opposition, who were too busy thinking about their reshuffle to pray against the order and are far too busy plotting and planning to keep people in their places, rather than busting the glass ceilings.

Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. This is what today's Opposition debate is about. It is not about how we best move this country forward. That is why, under 13 years of Labour government, social mobility decreased. The statistics and the facts cannot be argued with. The fact that there has been a 36% increase in those from the poorest backgrounds going to university, the fact that we raised the income at which a student loan had to be paid back to £21,000, the fact that we reduced the amount to be paid back each day, the fact that people do not start paying interest on it until they leave university, the fact that it is time limited so that it is written off after a specified time—all these are key aspects of making sure that we get people to university and reap the best of their potential.

Rebecca Harris: Does my hon. Friend agree that the way to encourage more social mobility and get more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds into university is, first, to improve their chances in education, and then to show them what they can achieve and raise their expectations and their confidence, not to frighten them with fears of debt for the future?

Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend is right. We have heard time and again from Labour, "You cannot afford to go to university. You are going to have huge debts. You are from a poor background—don't go because you'll be worried about debt. Don't increase your life chances." It is a disgrace of modern politics that the Opposition peddle such rubbish.

We have a generation who believe they can go on to "The X Factor", win it and become rich. Why did we not see that in relation to the possibilities in academic education and professional careers? It was because we had a Labour Government who wanted to keep people where they were, and who said, "You may be lucky enough to pull yourself up out of that situation, but, if not, don't worry—we'll keep borrowing money. We'll still rack up huge debts that hard-working people will have to pay for so that you can stay where you are." That is not what we on the Government Benches believe.

[Alec Shelbrooke]

We believe in an “X Factor” generation of people who go out, pull themselves up, get the education they are capable of getting, and become the people who drive this country. The idea we have heard in this debate—“Here is the working class on the Labour Benches and there is the upper class on the Conservative Benches”—is so outdated and misguided that it is laughable.

That has been the problem with the Opposition since the start of this Parliament: they have been laughable. It is laughable that they bring forward a motion saying, “We don’t agree with the legislative process that we laid down back in 1998.” We say, “You didn’t do anything about this when the time was right”—when it was laid before the House.

This is Labour Members trying to start the old class wars once again, because that is all they have to fall back on now. They have no coherent economic policy and no coherent plan for higher education. They have heard the words of the former shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, yet they give no response.

Conservative Members specifically questioned the shadow Minister about Labour’s alternative. The response was, “It’s an Opposition day debate and we don’t have to answer that.” It is not a debate: it is a bunch of people stamping on the floor and not suggesting anything sensible. A debate is an exchange of policies whereby we come up with something that might take us in a better direction. Simply standing there and saying, “We don’t like it,” is pathetic. It is the politics of the sixth form, but frankly that is what we have come to expect from this ridiculous Opposition.

3.1 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I begin by thanking my hon. Friends the Members for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) and for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden) for the fact that this debate is taking place. The Government would have been more than happy for these sweeping changes to higher education to pass through Parliament unnoticed, hidden away in delegated legislation—worst of all, a negative SI—with no public scrutiny. I am therefore pleased that at least we are able to call the Minister to account. However, it is extremely disappointing that he showed no contrition whatever for introducing policies that are likely to limit the aspirations of many young people in this country, or at the very least make it more difficult for them to achieve them.

Simon Hoare *rose*—

Dr Blackman-Woods: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman because we are very short of time.

We know that these changes will affect many students. The House of Commons Library states that in 2014-15, 395,000 students received a full grant, with 135,000 getting a partial grant. That amounts to over half a million students. Currently, students who go into higher education from families with an annual income of £25,000 or less are eligible for the full grant of £3,387, and students from households with an annual income of between £25,000 and £42,620 are eligible for a partial grant. However, in the summer Budget of July, plans were announced to remove the student maintenance grant, arguing that the grants had become “unaffordable”.

This, in itself, is an assertion that needs to be deconstructed. Politics is about priorities, and this Government have chosen not to prioritise the needs of students from low-income families and, astoundingly, to make them a target for cuts.

The Government have talked endlessly about the importance of hard work and rewarding those who want to achieve, yet now they are undoubtedly making it more difficult for a number of our young people to have the opportunity to access higher education. The move to £9,000 fees in 2012 has meant that students and graduates now contribute 75% towards the overall costs of their higher education. The replacement of grants with loans will further increase the contribution of individuals compared with that of Government. Yet no conversation has taken place with students, their parents or across the country as to what the balance should be.

These changes will lead to a substantial increase in debt for poor students. Assuming that students take out the maximum loans to which they are entitled, the IFS estimates that average debt from a three-year course will rise from about £40,500 under the old system to £53,000 under the new system. This is not just a fear of debt—it is an actual increase in debt. We also know from the impact statement that these changes will particularly affect women, older students and students from ethnic minorities—reason enough to stop these policies in their tracks.

I stand here as someone who is passionate about supporting students from all backgrounds who can to get to university in accessing higher education. These changes are likely to make that more difficult for them. As a country, we need to ensure that our young people have the skills to enable them to compete in a global labour market, and I am concerned that these changes will prevent them from doing so.

3.5 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and, in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), whose speech combined expertise and passion.

I am going to follow in the footsteps of the Leader of the Opposition and his new style of reading out emails from constituents. I am well aware that students are concerned about this measure. I have had an email from Jack Lay, who lives in Glemsford in my constituency and is vice-president of the Kent student union. He is worried about

“making sure young people from South Suffolk are able to access higher education”

and fears that

“if grants are removed young people from poorer backgrounds will accrue more debt from no fault of their own.”

My answer to Jack and to all hon. Members concerned about this is that it will not hinder access to higher education for those from poorer backgrounds, and for five key reasons. First, we are increasing the cash that they will have in their hand to sustain university life and deal with the day-to-day costs they will face. Secondly, we have increased the level at which they will repay their student debt from £15,000 under the previous Government to £21,000—if they do not earn that, they do not repay. Thirdly, the statistics show that this is not having the impact that Opposition Members are warning about.

As we have heard, there has been a 35% increase in the access rate of people from disadvantaged backgrounds to university. The figure has risen from 13.6% in 2009-10 to 18.5% last year—an incredible increase. If the Opposition's alarmism were based on fact, that would not be happening.

The fourth key reason is that, under this policy, the beneficiary pays. That is a key principle.

Alec Shelbrooke: Is this debate not taking place basically because it sticks in the gullet of Labour Members that we have increased social mobility? Does not that echo the words of the Prime Minister, who said, "If you want a lecture on poverty, talk to the Labour party; if you want action on poverty, speak to the Conservative party"?

James Cartlidge: That is absolutely right.

The principle that the beneficiary pays is about not getting the poorer working-class people who have chosen not to go to university to pay for the education of others who will go on to earn significantly more than them. That is a fair principle, and that is why this is about fairness.

The key reason why I support the measure is that it is about the quality of the education. What really matters to the student from a disadvantaged background is that they achieve an excellent degree that enables them to earn a good salary and get on in life. That is the single most important thing. If universities are well funded, students will have more chance of a good-quality degree. I also believe profoundly that when people pay for something—when they contribute—they take it more seriously and therefore get more out of it. *[Interruption.]* SNP Members are laughing. I am delighted to see so many of them, because only two or three of them were here yesterday when we were discussing the crisis in North sea oil. I was quite surprised about that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell talked about his experience. Before I came to this House, I ran a small business as a mortgage broker. For many years, we were very fortunate to have an exclusive arrangement with Britannia building society for a range of graduate mortgages called Graduate Network. Having seen thousands upon thousands of applications from graduates—many of whom, I am pleased to say, went on to buy a home—I never failed to be astonished that the more debt they had, the higher their earnings were. That was often because they had undertaken professional studies. Those who had had professional studies loans from the banks and gone on, for example, to do law and study at the Bar had the highest earnings.

Of course we do not want people to have ridiculously high debts. That is why, as my hon. Friend said, the debts would be cancelled after 30 years if not repaid. However, we have to get our heads around the key point that what really matters is the quality of the education that our students have.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that extending the system of finance so that more part-time and postgraduate students can receive funding is helping social mobility and providing greater opportunities for people who would otherwise not be able to have access to higher or postgraduate education?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The Minister is introducing for the first time masters loans, and that is incredibly important. In my experience, those who had borrowed eye-watering sums to do professional studies and courses that led to the biggest salaries, such as a masters of business administration, often had very high earnings indeed. That is a reality of life. It is about the quality of degree someone gets.

I am pleased to see that the time remaining to me has frozen at three minutes and 13 seconds, but I will wrap up because lots of hon. Members want to get in. On the broader economic issue, the number of graduate jobs has increased by 7.5%. The most important contribution the Government can make to higher education is to have a strong economy offering lots of opportunities for our graduates to ensure that they can earn salaries and therefore repay the cost of the education that they have benefited from.

3.10 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Minister prays in aid and relies on the increase in university participation and the record number of students going to university; I did his job once and I remember standing at the Dispatch Box and saying the very same thing. However, today's debate is not about widening participation or student numbers. It is about the cohort of students whose parents are from poor or working-class backgrounds, including dinner ladies, people who run minicabs, security guards, receptionists, people on zero-hours contracts and others who are unemployed. This debate is about their children, who aspire to go to university, and the state of our nation in relation to that cohort. That is why it is outrageous that, as a former Minister with responsibility for universities, I am allowed just four minutes to make a contribution to this debate.

When we made changes to maintenance grants back in 2009, we increased the amount we gave to students whose parents earned less than £25,000, and we increased partial grants for students whose parents were on incomes of between just over £18,500 and £57,000. It is that settlement, on the back of increased tuition fees, that we are debating today. Frankly, it is an outrage that this scrutiny has had to be dragged out of the Minister because of the work of the National Union of Students and Labour Front Benchers. It should have been a point of debate.

The issue is not about widening participation, but about fair access. There has been a 50% increase in the number of students choosing to stay at home rather than go to universities to which they would love to go. What does that mean? It is likely that the university attended by students who stay at home in a deprived constituency is a modern university, even though those students may have got the three As they needed to do medicine at a more teaching and research-intensive university. That is what this debate is about and that is how it will affect students. The Minister's own impact assessment says that there will be a disproportionate effect on students from a black and minority ethnic background. Does he think that matters?

The Minister cannot in one breath rightly make statements about unconscious bias and the need for name-blind admissions, but then change the context for those students from poorer backgrounds in a way that disproportionately affects them. The situation is the

[Mr David Lammy]

same for disabled students, and there will also be a great impact on mature students. That is why this debate was required and why I am surprised that the Government are making the changes in this way.

A few years ago there was consensus in the House that the state, the universities and the student would make a contribution to their education, but this settlement withdraws the state even further from where it was after the 2010 Parliament and lands the debt entirely on the student. The Minister says there is no alternative, but the alternative was to go to the universities themselves, whose funding per student has gone up from £22,000 to £28,000. There were alternatives available to the Government, who have made this decision despite the fact that the Minister's own figures show that 45% of students will not be able to repay their loans.

This does not hang together. It will have a disproportionate effect on poorer students. I have to say that, despite the fact that the Minister is not a bad guy, this is a mistake he will regret.

3.15 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I speak as a member of the Delegated Legislation Committee that discussed this issue last week. I draw Members' attention to the remarks I made at the time and I welcome the fact that this debate is being held in this Chamber.

I want to refer to my own situation. I feel strongly that it is right for Conservative Members to dispel the myth coming from the Opposition that students from a background similar to mine will not be able to go to university as a result of the changes. I say that as someone who took out loans to get through my professional training.

To further illustrate my argument, I went to a secondary modern school and failed my 12-plus. I was advised by my teachers not to waste my time doing A-levels, but I am glad that I ignored that advice. I went to a sixth-form college and was then fortunate enough to study at university. Although my parents' background was by no means one where money was readily available to us, I just missed out on a maintenance grant, so I understood straightaway how important it was to work during my time at university in order to fund myself and, therefore, to study hard. As a result, I worked through Christmas, Easter and the summer, and during term time at Durham.

When studying for the Bar in London, I had to take out loans and work outside my course to cover not just my maintenance but my fees. I therefore took out tens of thousands of pounds in debt, with no earnings threshold for repayment. That was incredibly daunting, but it made me determined to succeed in order to be able to pay those loans back.

Working around my studies was hard, but it gave me invaluable experience of the world of work. Most students do that as a matter of course now, so it is incredible to be told that working outside a degree makes it impossible to do a degree. That certainly was not the case for me.

Twenty years on, I regard the loans I took out to have been the best investment I have ever made in myself. I visit schools in my constituency and tell students to chase their dreams and not be put off going to university because they may not be able to afford it. It is the most

incredible investment an individual can make for themselves, including in the form of a loan, which can, of course, be paid back.

Although Labour Members' comments are well meaning, I find it patronising in the extreme to be told that the loans system will put off students in a similar situation to mine and stop young people chasing their dreams, and that it is not possible to work and study at the same time. Those who have aspiration and self-belief will make it a target to repay loans, and then they will use their degree to enjoy the successful careers afforded to them by university.

In an ideal situation, this country could afford to fund university students for their maintenance, but successive Governments have moved towards a model whereby we allow everyone who wants to go to university to go to university. Record numbers of students are studying at university, including record numbers from disadvantaged backgrounds. Students from backgrounds similar to mine are now going to university.

Dr Blackman-Woods *rose*—

Huw Merriman: I will not give way, because of the time. Most students understand that we are moving towards a loans system. They are comfortable with that concept and do not want bleeding hearts. What they want is a job at the end of their university degree. By balancing the books, we are making it more likely that they will have a job, security and success, and that they will be able to pay their loans back and to enjoy the fruits of their labour.

It is important that this House sends a message that university is available to all, no matter their background, and that is something that has carried me through so far.

3.19 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I have the privilege to represent more students than any other Member of the House. I am pleased to have the chance to raise their concerns, and more importantly, the concerns of those who hope to take their place in the future but will, I fear, be deterred from doing so by the Government's proposals. Such a decision is one of huge significance for 500,000 students.

It is a major reversal of Government policy, and it is being taken without any mandate. The Minister for Universities and Science tried to bluster his way out of that by referring to page 35 of the Conservative manifesto. I challenge his colleague, the Minister for Skills, to read out the precise section of the manifesto that gives the Government the mandate to remove maintenance grants from the poorest students. I will happily give way now if the Minister for Universities and Science wishes to read it out.

Joseph Johnson: Keep going.

Paul Blomfield: I urge Conservative Members to think carefully about the policy. [Interruption.] Their party—it is a shame none of them is listening—has consistently supported maintenance grants. In November 2009, the then Conservative shadow Minister told the House that it “is students from the poorest backgrounds who are most desperate when they cannot get their maintenance grant”.—[Official Report, 3 November 2009; Vol. 498, c. 737.]

When we debated the Government's changes to student funding in November 2010, a Conservative Minister said:

"Our proposals...help to encourage people from poorer backgrounds...because of the higher education maintenance grant... That crucial commitment...is one of the reasons we commend these proposals to the House."—[*Official Report*, 3 November 2010; Vol. 517, c. 940.]

Reflecting on their approach, in September 2012 a Conservative Minister said:

"The maintenance grant and support for bursaries are going up. That is why we...have record rates of application to university".—[*Official Report*, 11 September 2012; Vol. 550, c. 216.]

In opposition and in government, Conservative shadow Ministers and Ministers have rightly made the case for maintenance grants year after year.

That was, however, suddenly thrown into reverse by the Chancellor in the July Budget, without any proper consideration of its impact. Such a consideration is important because we are talking about the poorest students. We still have not seen the original assessment behind the July decision, but even the massaged assessment that the Government were prepared to publish in November, four months after the decision was made, is extremely worrying.

Conservative Members should pay heed to it, because it is the Government's own assessment. On participation by low-income households, it warns of the evidence from past reforms on which the Government are relying that

"there are limits to its direct applicability".

On gender, it expects a "decrease in female participation". On age, it says that there is a

"risk for the participation of older students".

On ethnicity, it says that there is a

"risk to the participation of students from ethnic minority backgrounds".

On religion, it talks about

"a decline in the participation of some Muslim students".

That is the real impact on real people.

That impact has been confirmed by those affected. A survey of students in receipt of maintenance grants found that 35% said that, because of their circumstances, they would not have gone to university without a grant. A new survey by Populus says that 40% of parents from low-income households believe their children will be discouraged from going to university without a grant. Evidence from the Institute of Education shows that for every £1,000 increase in the grant, there is a 4% increase in participation from lower-income families. No doubt the reverse is true, so with the level of cuts being made, there will be a significant decrease on the basis of that assessment.

The irony is that the Government have set ambitious objectives for widening participation. The problem is that this policy will prevent that. I urge Conservative Members to vote with us to annul it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am sorry to say that, before I call the next speaker, I must drop the limit down to three minutes.

3.23 pm

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): There can be absolutely no doubt about the Government's commitment to building a highly educated, highly skilled society. That is part of our challenge—the challenge of the 21st century—to improve productivity. It was set out in the report "Fixing the foundations", by my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Business Secretary, and it is essential to our competitiveness in the world.

I remember the discussions 20 years ago, when I was an undergraduate, about how, with the introduction of tuition fees, admissions from all sections of society would tumble. That did not happen, and the change we are discussing will not happen either, as is borne out by the figures. Record numbers of students were admitted to university last year, and record numbers of disadvantaged students secured places last year: up from 13.6% in 2010 to a record high of 18.5% in 2015. The arguments made by Labour Members are simply not borne out by the statistics.

My hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) set this out, but I repeat that the system needs changing. The needs of people from my constituency who leave the excellent Runshaw College—I invite the Minister to visit it—with A-levels and who start to pay tax straightaway need to be balanced with the needs of those who go to university. We must face the fact that university graduates benefit from such an investment—to the tune of £170,000 for men over a lifetime and of £250,000 for women over a lifetime.

We should consider very carefully the fact that we need more and more people to have a tertiary education. We must absolutely face the fact that as many people leave university in China with doctorates as leave university in the UK with degrees. It is therefore absolutely essential to increase the number of people going to university. We should bear in mind the words of the Robbins report, which stated that university education

"should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment".

If the next motion is passed, I fear that there will be a cap on university numbers, which is not what we want. By limiting student numbers, it would be a cap on aspiration, and it would be bad for social mobility and bad for our economy. I ask Labour Members what they are offering—are they offering cuts or taxes elsewhere, or are they offering caps? I listened very carefully to them, but once again, answers came there none.

3.26 pm

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): This is a very timely debate. I am pleased that the Opposition will divide the House on an important issue.

I was struck by two remarkable statements by Conservative Members. The first was made by the Minister, who said that the policy was an important deficit-reduction exercise or measure. The other was made by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who said that all the students he knows are very comfortable with the present level of borrowing with which they will leave university. I do not know where he meets such students, but I have not met anybody who feels anything other than that they are, at the moment, at the utter limit of what is bearable.

[Mr Geoffrey Robinson]

The Government want to promote a shareholding democracy, to increase social mobility and all the other things they praise, but they do not realise that no one—ordinary people graduating in the normal course of events from the bulk of our universities—will ever be able to afford a mortgage in the foreseeable future when carrying £53,000 of debt. The Minister has done nothing to contradict the figures produced by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which has the unhappy knack of being right about such things.

We would like to hear the Government's argument, because it seems to me to be a very strange sort of accounting. A student loan book of £5 billion is currently sitting on the balance sheet. We know that 45% of it should be written off, although it will not of course be written off. We know that loans are defective for one reason or another—the interest is not paid, or there is no likelihood of the interest being repaid, let alone the capital—but no action is taken to write them off. Similarly, the loan book will now be increased by £2 billion a year. I think the Minister said £2.5 billion, but the figure I have is nearer £2 billion. We will increase the loan book by that amount and we will effectively write off 45%, because we know that that will not be repaid, but this is somehow still a great deficit-reduction exercise. It is nothing more than a great exercise in voodoo accounting, probably promoted by the Treasury for some reason or other. The Department just seems to accept it, and the Minister for Universities and Science accepts it when he knows full well that there is no real case for it.

I endorse everything that has been said by my hon. Friends. This measure is bad for social mobility, bad for access and bad for fairness. It will leave students with an enormous burden of debt—£53,000. How can anybody think that that is a sensible proposition to put to youngsters today? We need not do it and the Government will not get the money back anyway. It beggars belief. I urge the Government to think again and am very pleased that we will divide the House on this matter.

3.29 pm

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I recently visited Ormiston Forge Academy, which is an improving school in my constituency, and took part in an aspiration day. What struck me when I talked to the year 8 pupils was that the barriers to their thinking about going on to higher education were only partly to do with money. Primarily, they were to do with their background, whether their parents had been to university and whether their friends aspired to go to university. That was an important part of the conversation that I had with them.

The arguments that we hear from the Opposition about loans are like a recycled debate from a few years ago. Young people and students are becoming much more attuned to and understand the progressive nature of the loans system that we have introduced. Low-income graduates will not have to pay back the loans until they get over a certain income threshold.

As the Minister rightly pointed out, putting our higher education system on a sustainable footing was a choice that the Government made. They chose to design a progressive loans system to enable students of whatever

background to aspire to go to university. As hon. Members have pointed out, the system that has been designed by the Government introduces maintenance loans for part-time students for the first time, which will have a considerable positive impact on social mobility. It also introduces maintenance loans for MAs and other post-graduate courses, which will provide different ways of accessing higher education.

Hearing the arguments from the Opposition feels a bit like groundhog day. As my hon. Friends have pointed out, no alternatives have been posited.

Simon Hoare: I think that the answer to this will be yes, but I wonder whether my hon. Friend shares my irritation with this debate because all of us in this House should be committed to improving social inclusion. He is stating very clearly the narrative that we deploy to explain these policies. The narrative from the Opposition, in my judgment, is tailored specifically to preclude people from applying to go on to further education. Is it not time that we all explained to students precisely what my hon. Friend is saying?

James Morris: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. When I spoke to the students, it struck me that we needed to educate them about the realities of going into higher education, whether by providing better information about courses that they might be able to take or explaining what it means to take out a student loan. As he says, there is a lot of propaganda about being saddled with debt. There needs to be more education about what it means in practice.

Rebecca Harris: Does my hon. Friend agree that young people these days are getting much more savvy about the types of courses they want to take, whether courses will lead to a productive career and whether universities have good engagement, employability guidance and that kind of thing?

James Morris: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. Among the core benefits of the reforms that were introduced in the last Parliament and that are being developed now is that they encourage universities to raise the quality of higher education courses, make students much more discriminating about what they want to get out of higher education, and provide a greater understanding, as the Minister pointed out, of what economists rather dryly call the returns of higher education, which are tangible. We are seeing huge new opportunities in the graduate employment market. More graduates are getting high-quality jobs and more people are taking the opportunities that are out there.

The system that has been devised is progressive. The evidence is that the loans system has not had the detrimental impact on access that Opposition Members warned about three or four years ago. This is another one of those groundhog day, recycled scare stories. It simply is not happening. More people from disadvantaged backgrounds are going to university.

It would be very much a backwards step to accept the Opposition motion because it provides no credible alternative to the Government's plan and runs away from the difficult choices that the Government have made to put our higher education system on a sustainable footing. I urge the House to reject it.

3.33 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I am privileged to represent a university constituency. Cardiff Central has one of the highest proportions, although not quite the highest proportion, of students of any constituency in the UK. Tens of thousands of students live and study in Cardiff Central. Many of them are from Wales, but many are from England. They, unlike their Welsh peers, will be badly affected by the proposal to scrap student maintenance grants.

The Labour Government in Wales believe in aspiration and in protecting students from crippling levels of debt, and they put their money where their mouth is. Today in my constituency, Welsh students are sitting next to English students in the same lecture on the same course at the same university and living in the same accommodation, but thanks to Conservative Members, and to the Liberal Democrats—oh, sorry, they are not there anymore—a Welsh student is paying a third of the annual tuition fees paid by an English student.

It is not just with tuition fees that the Labour Government in Wales have supported students. The coalition Government abolished the education maintenance allowance, and the Welsh Labour Government kept it. The Labour Government in Wales are not abolishing student maintenance grants either, or NHS bursaries for nurses and midwives studying in Wales. Unlike the Conservative party, we believe in investing in future generations.

The Government claim that scrapping grants will not prevent access to university for the most disadvantaged students, but how do they know? They have not even asked them. There has been no consultation with students, parents or higher education. What have Conservative Members got against young people? They have trebled tuition fees and abolished the EMA. They will not allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote, and they are happy lecturing everyone on balancing the books and reducing debt, while at the same time their policies inflict crippling levels of debt on students. We can add to that the Chancellor's plans to end housing benefit for anyone under 21.

Last week I heard speeches in Committee, and again today, about how various Conservative MPs have worked their way through university, and if they managed it, why should today's students not do that? However, they already do, and now the Government will not even let them earn the increased national minimum wage, because they have excluded anyone under 25 from that. The impact of this policy will prevent young people from going to university, from learning, from gaining independence, and from equipping themselves with the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in the job market.

Rebecca Harris: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jo Stevens: No, I will not. Those young people will be prevented from fulfilling their true potential. I will conclude by mentioning Kate Delaney, vice-president of Welfare at Cardiff University. She had her EMA abolished. It paid for her bus fare to get to sixth-form college. She qualified for a maintenance grant, and she would not have been able to go to university without it. She told me that that maintenance grant gave her a voice, and also the ability to represent 30,000 students at Cardiff University, and Conservative Members are taking that away.

3.37 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I received a full maintenance grant when I was at university, and its impact was not just money in my bank account, but the feeling of confidence and freedom that I could choose the degree that I wanted at my first choice of university—that important point has not really been covered by the debate. When I graduated, I did not have £53,000 of debt, which is what the poorest 40% of students will graduate with. I remind Conservative Members that we are talking about the poorest students from the poorest backgrounds in our country. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) said, these are the sons and daughters of dinner ladies, bus drivers, and care workers on zero-hours contracts, and we should not forget the reality and background of those students. Let me say to the Minister, and to other hon. Members—particularly those who are chuntering from a sedentary position—that this is not scaremongering. This is a serious debate—

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The debate was five years ago.

Emma Reynolds: There he goes again. This is a serious debate about the impact of the proposals on our poorest constituents. That debate should be taken seriously by the Minister and by Conservative Members. This is not just about participation; this is about fair access and about which university someone chooses to go to, if they have that first choice. Some of my constituents in Wolverhampton might not choose to apply to Oxford, Cambridge or even perhaps the University of Sussex, because it is too far away and will be too expensive. This is about the choices that the poorest children must now make, given the level of indebtedness that they will face.

Huw Merriman: The hon. Lady talks about the sons and daughters of those in poorer professions, such as dinner ladies and so on. Why can those people not take out loans, make a great success of themselves and pay them back? Why are they different? They should not be different because they are special people.

Emma Reynolds: The people we represent have the same ambitions and aspirations, and Government Members should not cast aspersions on what Labour Members think about that. They will be graduating with £53,000 of student debt. I hope they still will go to university. I hope that will not affect participation. However, I fear it will and I fear it will affect the choices they make. We will all be poorer for it, because the talent will not come through.

I say to the hon. Gentleman that this is part of a wider pattern under this Government: the problem of intergenerational inequality is worsening. I came into politics precisely because I want to live in a country where the background and income of someone's parents should not determine how well they do in life and whether they fulfil their potential, but inequality is increasing. The Intergenerational Foundation calls this younger generation the packhorse generation, because the Government are burdening them with more and more debt. Yet they face more insecurity in the workplace and higher housing costs. Some have given up hope of ever owning their own home, because we are not building

[*Emma Reynolds*]

enough homes. To be fair, that is true of preceding Governments, too. The packhorse generation is taking on huge levels of debt and faces a much more insecure future. That is why I hope the Government will think again. Intergenerational unfairness and intergenerational inequality are growing problems.

Rebecca Harris: I understand there is an increasing burden on the current generation largely because of the enormous, overweening burden of debt the Government inherited. Does the hon. Lady agree that the young people of this generation who are not going to university would otherwise be expected to pay for those who have the benefit of doing so?

Emma Reynolds: We had that debate in the previous Parliament and in Parliaments before that. We are talking about the very, very poorest students. Their parents do not have a penny to give to them in support and they will graduate with a huge level of debt.

I say this again to the Government: since the election of the Tory majority Government and the previous coalition Government, the younger generation have been hit with the removal of the education maintenance allowance, the trebling of tuition fees and now, for the poorest students, the removal of grants. The Government need to think really carefully about intergenerational inequality and the social contract between young people and the state. If the state no longer supports the aspirations and opportunities of the poorest students, the social contract will break down and we will all be poorer for it.

3.42 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Much of what I want to say has already been covered by Labour Members, but taking an overview it strikes me that we are going back to the 1980s. This Government, like all Conservative Governments, have picked up where they left off. There is an agenda here. They are using the deficit as an excuse, not a reason, to take the country backwards.

Much has been made of the 3 million apprenticeships the Government talk about creating, but not much has been said about cuts to further education. Some further education colleges may close, so those 3 million apprenticeships will be under threat because students will not be able to get the facilities they want.

I want to pick the Minister up on the point about his manifesto. He said this was part of the manifesto. We will give him the benefit of the doubt, but it did not say there would be cuts to university grants and it did not say there would be cuts to bursaries. That was the point the Minister seemed to skate over in his speech.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Casting our minds back to over 10 years ago, the Labour Government capped fees at £3,000 and reintroduced maintenance grants. The third element was bursaries from universities. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should look very carefully at this direction of travel and ask the Minister to make it clear that bursaries are not the next target?

Mr Cunningham: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. On the subject of bursaries, we had a debate last week about nurses. We have a shortage of nurses in the NHS, yet we are not doing much to encourage young people to enter the nursing profession. We are in danger of creating what was called the Thatcher generation—the lost generation—of the '80s, because young people always seem to be at the butt end of the Government's policies.

The regulations will affect the west midlands economy, whether the Government accept it or not. They have talked about the west midlands powerhouse, but that relies on highly skilled labour. They have boasted about Jaguar Land Rover being one of their successes, but it was the Labour Government who encouraged Tata to invest in Jaguar Land Rover. The latter is now short of highly skilled labour. The impact of the Government's measures will result in a lost generation and, in the longer term, affect the British economy. We are going back to the rationing of education, which we put right when we entered office in 1997.

I have the privilege, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson), to represent two of the finest universities in this country, if not the world; they are world-renowned. That can have an impact locally and around the country in encouraging students to study different disciplines. However, the measure before us will have a major impact on higher education and affect Coventry's economy, the west midland's economy and the national economy.

3.46 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It says it all about the Government policy that we are debating that so few of their Back Benchers have turned up to read the poor script they have been given by the Whips, and it says everything about how they conduct themselves that instead of having a proper debate on the Floor of the House, with a full vote involving all Members, they sought to have a debate down the corridor and up the stairs, hoping that nobody would notice, in a Committee that nobody has ever heard of.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman made a similar point during his Adjournment debate a few weeks ago on student nurses and bursaries. Is he as concerned as me, first, that the Government are increasingly using this device to sneak through their most controversial legislative proposals without debate and, secondly, that it is contrary to the comments by the Leader of the House on 10 December 2015, on this very issue, when he indicated we would have a debate on the Floor of the House?

Wes Streeting: I agree wholeheartedly. In their cowardice the Government are treating with disdain the House and the students we are all sent here to represent. In spite of what the Minister says, there is absolutely no mention in the manifesto of cutting student grants. In fact, we would find Lord Lucan before we found any reference to cutting student grants, so they cannot hide behind a democratic mandate. As a student union president and president of the National Union of Students, I used to have arguments with previous Labour Governments—

Mr Lammy: Never.

Wes Streeting: That included arguments with my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). But even with landslide majorities there was always a full debate and a vote in the House, whether they were abolishing student grants or, more wisely, reintroducing grants following the introduction of top-up fees.

This afternoon, these proposals will impact on 500,000 students from the poorest backgrounds. In my local university, the University of East London, that equates to about £30 million of financial support for students—gone. At my alma mater, the University of Cambridge, the figure is more like £9 million. If there is one thing we know about the higher education sector, it is that not only opportunity but financial support is unevenly distributed. It is completely unfair that students from the poorest backgrounds will now face a postcode lottery when it comes to determining how much non-repayable support they receive.

The very existence of student grants was won as a result of hard-fought negotiations. Student leaders argued that, if we were going to ask people to make a greater contribution, it was only fair that the poorest students received a non-repayable contribution. How must Conservative Members and the few remaining Liberal Democrats feel about the fact that when, under the coalition Government, the then higher education Minister justified the trebling of fees, they were told, “Don’t worry. We’ve got the national scholarship programme, student grants and the £21,000 threshold going up by inflation.” What has happened since? The national scholarship programme has been abandoned; the threshold frozen at £21,000; and now we see the abolition of student grants. We cannot trust a word that these people say, particularly when it comes to fair access to higher education and support for the most disadvantaged. It is an absolute disgrace.

I am proud of what the last Labour Government did to widen access and opportunity to people from working-class backgrounds. I was one of the beneficiaries, from the excellence in cities work that was done in schools right through to the opportunities provided through expanded places.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is doubtless equally proud of the fact that the Labour Government said that they would not introduce tuition fees, and then did; and said that they would not introduce top-up fees, and then did. Does he accept that he and others who said five years ago that the introduction of increased fees would lead to a reduction in those from poorer backgrounds going to university were wrong? They were wrong then, and we believe that they are wrong today.

Wes Streeting: I remember the debate here in 2003, and I think it was to the credit of the Government of the day that the introduction of higher fees did not come in until after a general election, when at least the voters could make their judgment on whether they wanted to re-elect a Labour Government, which they duly did.

So much has been said about participation numbers this afternoon. I am certainly not going to make prophecies of doom about participation, but we should bear in mind a few facts. First, there is the issue of equity. How

can it possibly be justified that students from the poorest backgrounds graduate with the largest amount of debt? How can it possibly be fair that under these repayment mechanisms, the wealthiest graduates who go on to the most successful jobs will end up paying less over the course of their working career than people from middle and lower incomes? That cannot possibly be justified as fair. We should take seriously the evidence from the Institute for Fiscal Studies published in 2014 showing that a £1,000 increase in the maintenance grant led to a 3.95% increase in participation. Removing the grant does not necessarily mean that participation will plummet, but I think there is a risk that it could suffer.

There is a huge amount of complacency from this Government about the impact of higher tuition fees on applications to part-time routes and for mature students. It does not have to be that way; other choices are possible. We should look at what the Labour Government in Wales have done. They have not chosen to abolish student grants; they have kept those grants in place.

If the Tories want to talk about hard choices, how are they going to look the poorest students from the poorest backgrounds in the eye and explain why this Government continue to alleviate the tax burden on the wealthiest, while making the poorest pay the cost of their higher education? A 75% contribution to the cost of higher education is, by anyone’s estimation, too much, and there is not a single item in the Conservative manifesto that Government Members can point to in order to justify this outrageous attack on the poorest students.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Five Members are seeking to catch my eye. If no interventions are taken, we should be able to get everybody in, but if interventions are taken, I am afraid that people will have to be dropped off the list.

3.52 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank Labour Members for securing this debate. We in the SNP believe in the principle of free education, and we stand in solidarity with students in England against the principle of scrapping grants. I did have a lot more to say in the debate, but I shall be as brief as I can.

Other Members have referred to their own circumstances, and I shall do so, too. I moved from home in 2000 to go to the University of Aberdeen. I graduated in 2004, having taken out a student loan. I started paying it back to a significant extent only on coming to this place in May. I pay back £400 a month. That is my obligation, so I pay it. If, however, I had left university with a debt of £53,000, and assuming I could start to pay it back right away at £400 a month, it would take me 11 years to do so—11 years in a very well paid job. The expectation that some people may not pay their loan debt back at all makes a mockery of the whole process. If a loan is not expected to be paid back, what is the point of giving people loans in the first place? It seems ludicrous. We are bringing up a generation that expects to be in debt, and society should guard against that.

In Scotland, we will try our hardest to make sure that education remains free and that grants are available, but this Government are putting our budget under increasing pressure by their actions. We do not know—they have

[Alison Thewliss]

not told us—what the impact of these decisions taken today will be on the Scottish budget. This has been designated as EVEL, but it clearly has an impact on students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland who are studying at Scottish universities. What will the impact on those institutions be? What consultation has the Minister had with universities in my constituency, such as the University of Strathclyde, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, the Glasgow School of Art and Glasgow Caledonian University? He is not even paying attention; he is chewing his pen.

What conversations has the Minister had with my colleagues in Scotland about this measure? What impact will it have on members of larger families, and what impact will it have on Muslim students? The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) has raised that issue before. Some Muslim students cannot take out loans, and other students may not wish to do so either, for different reasons. My hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) mentioned cuts in the disabled students allowance. What impact will the added loan burden have on them?

Conservative Members have asked, “What about people who do not go to university? How do they benefit?” They benefit from the common good. Glasgow Caledonian University is a university for the common good. People in Scotland know that university graduates will become the doctors who treat them in hospitals, and the lawyers who represent them. They will become the well-qualified people who pay us back through taxation to help the common good of our country.

3.56 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate, because I have been urged to do so by many students in my constituency. This is a matter of great interest to the general public, and the Government’s behaviour has been noticed by them, even if the Government themselves are still in denial.

The fact remains that the Chancellor’s replacement of maintenance grants with loans may dissuade many students from modest backgrounds from going to university, while none the less resulting in large sums never being paid back to the Treasury because graduates will go into what the Prime Minister described last week as “menial labour jobs”. That point has not been addressed, although a number of Members have raised it.

Even with maintenance grants, which support students from the poorest backgrounds through university, the system remains stacked against working-class students. According to the education charity The Sutton Trust, students from wealthy backgrounds are 10 times more likely to secure a place at university than those from poorer backgrounds.

The Government have consulted about freezing the current student loan repayment threshold at £21,000 for five years. Martin Lewis, of moneysavingexpert.com, has pointed out that only 5% of the responses to the consultation were in favour of the proposal, while 84% were against it. He has written to the Prime Minister to ask why the Government have pressed ahead regardless with increasing the amount that our students must pay

for their current student loans. In 2011, Martin Lewis was appointed head of the Independent Taskforce on Student Finance Information. Ministers told him unambiguously that, from April 2017, the £21,000 repayment threshold would start to rise annually with average earnings. The decision to backtrack on that is hugely damaging. It means that many lower and middle-earning graduates will repay thousands more over the life of their loans.

Martin Lewis says that this issue is just as much moral as legal. The retrospective change destroys trust in the student finance system, and perhaps even more widely in the political system as a whole. The Government seem remarkably relaxed about the fact that our poorest students will graduate with £53,000 worth of debt before they have even started work. What guarantee will the Government give that they will not move the goalposts for repayment of this loan as well?

There is a huge body of evidence to support student maintenance grants. I do not have time to go into all of them, but they are opposed by the University and College Union, which says:

“Maintenance grants are crucial for engaging students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are already daunted by crippling high tuition fee debt. Increasing the debt burden...will act as a disincentive to participation”.

3.59 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I, too, represent one of the constituencies containing the largest number of students in the country. In 2011 there were just over 19,000 in the three fantastic universities, Leeds University, Leeds Beckett University and Leeds Trinity University. However, I have just three minutes in which to speak, which I believe equates to 0.0095 of a second per student in what is a hugely important debate. Given the importance of these measures, the fact that the Government have proceeded with them through secondary legislation without a full and proper debate is an absolute disgrace.

Why has there been no public consultation on these major changes? They were announced last summer, but there has been no consultation with the higher education sector in the six months since. There has been no consultation with the universities or with the student unions. It is also a matter of huge concern that the Government conducted an equality impact assessment only after the National Union of Students instigated legal proceedings. If that does not suggest that the Government know they are doing something unacceptable and have something to hide, I do not know what does.

The equality impact assessment explicitly states that the changes present a risk to the participation of students from poorer backgrounds, mature students, BME students, disabled students and Muslim students. So, having been forced to accept that all those groups will be affected, has the Minister done anything to deal with it or to suggest ways of mitigating the impacts? I am afraid that the answer is no.

I do not have time to go through all the facts, some of which have been put forward today, but these changes will clearly have a detrimental and unfair impact on students from poorer backgrounds—the students we clearly want to encourage to go to university. At the same time, the Government are also freezing the repayment threshold at £21,000. The House of Commons Library states that this will have

“a proportionately larger impact on repayments by graduates with lower lifetime earnings”.

Martin Lewis has already been mentioned. He was tasked with selling the new system to the public, but he is now looking into a judicial review of the freezing of the repayment threshold. You could scarcely make this up. Whether the Government wish to accept it or not, the evidence shows that these measures will hit students on lower incomes and discourage people from going to university. The Government must today announce a proper debate with a proper vote on this matter in the House. We will settle for nothing less.

4.1 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I went to Aberdeen University in 1977. I was the first member of my extended family to go to university, and I was able to do so because the tuition was free and I got a full maintenance grant. If it had not been for the Wilson Governments of the 1960s, I would not have had the opportunities I have had in my life. I can understand people from privileged backgrounds protecting privilege, but what really sticks in my throat is that those who have climbed that ladder of opportunity themselves are now determined to kick it away from other students. That is a disgrace.

We should be in no doubt that these decisions will have layers of consequences. On an individual level, they will result in lives less fulfilled and opportunities forgone. On a community level, people will see this pathway out of poverty being barricaded before their eyes. Most of all, the effects will be felt on a national level. How many surgeons, architects, doctors and writers will not emerge because of the denial of this opportunity?

Let us make no mistake: this is an attack on the poor. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who is no longer in his place, asked whether poor people could not simply take out loans. Well of course they can, and, by the way, they are more used to doing so than many Conservative Members are. But the real question is this: is it fair that people from the poorest backgrounds should have to take on more debt to get the same opportunities as their counterparts in well-off families? That is iniquitous, and we should not tolerate it.

The Government seem to be labouring under the misapprehension that students are all rich, and that they benefit from their education so much that it is okay to charge them whatever they want to. That is not the case. A small minority do extremely well and become rich—

James Cartlidge: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I have been told not to take an intervention.

A small minority do become rich, and if the Government want them to pay, they should introduce a progressive taxation system whereby people pay more when they start to earn those high wages. Instead, of course, they are cutting taxes for the highest earners in our communities. Nowhere is this thrown into sharper relief than in the situation of nurses and midwives. The abolition of grants for nurses and midwives will not only penalise the people who want to contribute to our national health service but undermine our NHS itself. Not for the first time, I am so pleased that in Scotland we have a Scottish Government who stand between the young people in that country and the mal intent of this Government here. We will not abolish grants for nurses

or midwives. We will maintain maintenance grants. Most of all, we will keep tuition free and we will make sure that people are not saddled with the debts they are saddled with in this country. If ever there was a case for a measure not applying and not being certified, it is this, because I have more than 2,000 constituents directly affected and it is unfair that my vote will be disregarded.

4.5 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Until my election in May, I had spent all my adult life in universities, from being the recipient of a full grant, with my fees entirely paid, in 1990 at Cambridge University to teaching at Kingston University until my election. I have also taught at a red-brick university. I contend that at all these categories of university—all seats of learning in this country—the student bodies will be poorer as a result of the abolition of grants, both socio-culturally and financially. The kind of students we are talking about in respect of this measure are not the “Brideshead Revisited” ones, they are not Neil from “The Young Ones” and they are not even Student Grant from *Viz*; they are people such as my constituents at the University of West London. They are people such as Josh Goddard, its student union president, who has been here since 1 o’clock today and who has told me that he is the first person in his family to go to university and he would not have done it without a maintenance grant. He said that he represents the students of the present but he also wants the students of the future all to have the chance to go to university. As well as the NUS, the Sutton Trust has condemned these changes, as they narrow the talent pool of who will be able to participate in higher education in the future.

I think of the students I taught at Kingston University—this was before the changes—who seemed often to be coming in between the burger-flipping shifts. The Conservative party puts great store by being the party of fiscal responsibility, but how does it reconcile that with saddling young people with £53,000 of debt? We have heard about the words of Martin Lewis, who was tasked with leading the taskforce in 2011. He is normally a financial man, and he is not a politician. He says:

“The regulator would not allow any commercial lender to make a change to its terms this way.”

It is surely bad governance. We are dealing with a case of double standards here. These people signed up to one experience and even after they have signed their loan agreements they are seeing the goalposts moved.

The Minister has a lot of explaining to do. Where was this on page 35 of the Conservative manifesto? None of us has seen it in the small print. What will the transitional arrangements be? What happened to the review promised in 2014 for Muslim students who want sharia-compliant student finance, given that this measure is coming in now? As we know, this has been done with no proper debate. It is only because Labour Members have forced this debate today that we are discussing it at all. The Government want to shunt it through using their new favourite toy, the statutory instrument. If their sums are wrong, the books should not be balanced on the backs of students. We have seen that the NHS bursary for nurses has gone and the education maintenance allowance has been removed. If the Government have a shortfall, it should not be students who are taking on that burden.

4.8 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): We have had a lively and extremely interesting debate, with contributions from 17 Back-Bench speakers, by my calculation. I will not mention them, because time is short as a result of the interest in the debate.

I have some sympathy for the Minister for Universities and Science, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), because we all know that the decision to scrap maintenance grants for the less well-off students in favour of loans was really made by the Chancellor and not by him. I know that he and the Chancellor are old friends—this goes back to the days when they were penniless students together, having to scrape by on their student grants and meagre Bullingdon club dinners—but I find it hard to believe that he went to his old friend the Chancellor and said, “Having been appointed as Universities Minister, I have suddenly decided that we were wrong to have maintenance grants for the less well-off students and it would be a great idea for the worse-off students to have the most debt after they have been to university.”

I might be wrong about the Minister, but he does not strike me—he has not until today—as the kind of person who would think it right to change the system so that, as the British Medical Association points out in its briefing for this debate, medical students from the poorest backgrounds could graduate with £100,000 of debt. Nor does he strike me as the kind of person who thinks that it is all right to go back on promises made by Tory Ministers when the new system was introduced. It was David Willetts after all who said that the tuition fees increase was progressive precisely because of the higher education maintenance grant. That was the argument made. The Minister does not strike me as the kind of politician who would cynically pursue policies that penalise younger people who are less likely to vote Tory, or even to vote at all, than others.

Despite what was said today about page 35 of the Tory party manifesto, I do not think that the Minister for Universities and Science would think it was really okay to carry out this kind of major change of policy direction without explicitly putting it into the party's manifesto, so that the public, including young people, could see what they were voting for or against. Is he really the kind of politician who, having done all this, would then slink away from debating such a major change openly and properly on the Floor of the House in Government time? I may be wrong, but I never thought that he was that kind of politician, or that he was that cynical.

Simon Hoare *rose*—

Kevin Brennan: However, I think we know someone who is that cynical. I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Simon Hoare: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was referring to me. Will he flick back through his archives and find where, in the 1997 manifesto, the Labour party had the introduction of student loans in the first place, because I cannot remember seeing it?

Kevin Brennan: The hon. Gentleman told us in his speech how hard he has worked. Given that he is from Cardiff and that he has such an accent, I can absolutely

acknowledge that he is a very hard-working individual. He will know that a general election was fought following that decision being taken and before they were introduced.

We all know that the Chancellor prefers governing from the shadows, and this shameless betrayal of previous promises and the shabby manner in which this has been handled in Parliament bear all the hallmarks of the current Chancellor of the Exchequer. Being young in Britain should be a time of opportunity—a time when opportunity knocks. Instead, we have the Chancellor introducing an opportunity tax. His proposals are an assault on aspiration, on opportunity and on those who want to get on in life. That is why we oppose them and also why the Welsh Government, under Labour First Minister, Carwyn Jones, is keeping maintenance grants. By the way, those who say that these proposals affect only England should think again—I say this to Welsh Conservative MPs as well: of the 30,000 students studying at Cardiff University, nearly 9,000 are from England.

Graham Stuart: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure that the shadow Minister would not wish to mislead the House, but he has just said that tuition fees were introduced not after the 1997 election, but after the following general election. That is not true. They were introduced in 1998. Having said that they would not introduce them, the Government started the process 12 weeks later.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The hon. Gentleman is making a point of debate, not a point of order for the Chair. We have very little time.

Kevin Brennan: I would have been happy for the hon. Gentleman to intervene. Actually, I was asked about student loans, not tuition fees.

Students in constituencies such as Cardiff North are registered to vote in Wales, but, subject to the decisions that will be taken after this debate, local Welsh MPs can have their votes nullified under the constitutional monstrosity that is the English votes for English laws procedure, which the Government have foisted on this House.

Who will be affected by these measures today? This is what the IFS says:

“The poorest 40% of students going to university in England will now graduate with debts of up to £53,000 from a three-year course, rather than up to £40,500. This will result from the replacement of maintenance grants”.

Of course, as I just pointed out, it is about not just students going to university in England but students who are attending university and who are registered to vote in Wales, a thought that will not be lost on students in Cardiff North during next May's Assembly elections.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I would be very encouraged if the hon. Gentleman would also note that as universities in Northern Ireland have had the number of students they can take capped, hundreds and hundreds of very able students from Northern Ireland take up places in English universities, and are happy to do so. It is an absolute disgrace that this measure should be deemed exclusively English because it affects my constituents and many parents and students from Northern Ireland.

Kevin Brennan: I am happy to acknowledge that.

It is not as if this policy will save that much for the public finances in the long run, despite the claims made by the Government. The IFS says that the replacement of maintenance grants by loans from 2016-17 will raise debt for the poorer students but do little to improve the Government's finances in the long run. The truth is that the Chancellor is fixing the figures, not the roof.

I am pretty sure that I would never have gone to university had no maintenance grant been available, let alone have been the first from my family and from my comprehensive school to go to university and to go to Oxford. There are many others in this place for whom something similar is also true. The Government must accept that that is still the case for many thousands of young people. Indeed, that is why, as David Willetts said, maintenance grants were part of the structure when fees were tripled to £9,000 per annum under the previous Tory-led Government.

The decision is mean in spirit and underhand in execution. It will be tragic in its consequences for many young people, and I urge the House to reject it by supporting our motion.

4.16 pm

The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles): A middle-aged man like me needs to approach the subject of student finance with a degree of humility, for I was one of the lucky few who did not have to pay tuition fees and although I did not qualify for anything more than the minimum grant, many of my contemporaries did. The key fact about university when I was growing up was that it was just that: the exclusive preserve of the lucky few. Universities were bastions of privilege and the nation was poorer for it, as were millions of people whose lives would have been enriched in every sense by a university course.

It was Tony Blair, of course—remember him?—who first recognised that many more people could benefit from university education and started us down the road of reforming student finance so that we could widen participation. It was Gordon Brown—remember him?—who asked the noble Lord Browne to suggest further reforms of student finance. And it was Vince Cable and the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) who bravely impaled themselves and their party on an irresponsible campaign pledge and introduced the system of tuition fees we have today.

At every stage in this journey towards a student finance system that allows anyone with the necessary grades to be offered a university place, we have heard the same howls of outrage and the same predictions of disaster from the same sources. "Participation will plummet," they intone, "The poorest will be put off," and just as predictably at each and every stage these shroud wavers and doom mongers have been proven wrong, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) reminded us. Why have they been proven wrong? Because, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) pointed out, individual students observe the benefits that flow to university graduates, look at the repayment terms for student loans and calculate, quite correctly, that they will have to repay their student loans only if they themselves are benefiting from higher wages.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said that the loans he took out were the best investment he has ever made, and my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) talked about the returns on higher education, which in terms of lifetime earnings, interestingly, are even higher for women than for men. The truth is that student loans are not like ordinary commercial loans and it is frankly a disgrace that Opposition Members are willing to mislead would-be students by pretending that they are.

A commercial loan is often secured against specific assets, which can be seized if the individual cannot make the repayments. With a student loan, no bailiff is going to knock on a door and take a television if a low income means people cannot afford to repay it. A commercial loan will charge a rate of interest from the very first day and the poorer the person is, the higher the interest rate is likely to be. With a student loan, the interest rate is held at a lower rate until the student starts earning over £25,000 a year, and the amount they have to repay in any year is limited to 9% of their income over £21,000. A commercial loan and all the accumulated interest will still be hanging around someone's neck in 40 years' time if they have not managed to pay it off. The balance of a student loan is written off after 30 years.

There are two ways to fund university students. We can limit access, undermine the quality of university teaching and get the general population, most of whom have not benefited from a university education, to foot the bill; we could call that the SNP approach. The alternative is to offer anyone who has the capacity to benefit from a university course the opportunity to do so, and to put in place a system of subsidised student finance which asks those who do go on to benefit to contribute while protecting those who do not from the need to repay the loans. That is the Conservative approach; it was also the approach of the Liberal Democrats when they were a party of government and of the Labour Government under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

One thing is clear at the end of this debate: a party's attitude towards student finance is a leading indicator of its fitness to govern. In opposition, a party will take the irresponsible route in an attempt to curry favour with the National Union of Shroud-wavers—sorry, I mean Students. In government, it will suddenly discover the merits of a sustainable system of student finance that is fair to students and taxpayers alike.

If we are ever to see another Labour Government—and on the basis of the party's current performance, that may be a very long time in coming—I confidently predict that they will quietly drop their opposition to the system of student finance put in place by Governments of all parties over 20 years, and that is why—

Martin John Docherty (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister has called into disrepute a national organisation voted by, and elected for, the students of this country. Should he not withdraw his comments immediately? It is a disgrace to his position.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The Minister's language was perhaps not exactly what I would have chosen myself as a matter of taste, but it is

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

not for me to tell the Minister exactly which words to use. He was not strictly outwith the rules of the House, but I am sure he will now very positively return to more tasteful and moderate language.

Nick Boles: Madam Deputy Speaker, I feel that that reproof was perhaps a little more stinging than I deserved, but I will, of course, do exactly as you require.

If I may briefly reprise, a party's attitude towards student finance is a leading indicator of its fitness to govern. If we are ever to see another Labour Government, I confidently predict that they will drop their opposition to the system of student finance put in place by Labour Governments, coalition Governments and this Conservative Government, and that is why I urge the House to reject the motion.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 292, Noes 306.

Division No. 165]

[4.24 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Coffey, Ann	Flint, rh Caroline	Lucas, Ian C.
Abrahams, Debbie	Cooper, rh Yvette	Flynn, Paul	MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Fovargue, Yvonne	Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Alexander, Heidi	Cowan, Ronnie	Gardiner, Barry	Madders, Justin
Ali, Rushanara	Cox, Jo	Gethins, Stephen	Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Allen, Mr Graham	Coyle, Neil	Gibson, Patricia	Mahmood, Shabana
Anderson, Mr David	Crausby, Mr David	Glass, Pat	Malhotra, Seema
Ashworth, Jonathan	Crawley, Angela	Glendon, Mary	Mann, John
Austin, Ian	Creagh, Mary	Godsiff, Mr Roger	Marris, Rob
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Creasy, Stella	Goodman, Helen	Marsden, Mr Gordon
Barron, rh Kevin	Cruddas, Jon	Grady, Patrick	Maskell, Rachael
Beckett, rh Margaret	Cryer, John	Grant, Peter	Matheson, Christian
Benn, rh Hilary	Cummins, Judith	Gray, Neil	Mc Nally, John
Berger, Luciana	Cunningham, Alex	Green, Kate	McCabe, Steve
Betts, Mr Clive	Cunningham, Mr Jim	Greenwood, Lilian	McCaug, Callum
Black, Mhairi	Dakin, Nic	Greenwood, Margaret	McCarthy, Kerry
Blackford, Ian	Danczuk, Simon	Griffith, Nia	McDonagh, Siobhain
Blackman, Kirsty	David, Wayne	Gwynne, Andrew	McDonald, Andy
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	De Piero, Gloria	Haigh, Louise	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Blenkinsop, Tom	Docherty, Martin John	Hamilton, Fabian	McDonald, Stuart C.
Blomfield, Paul	Dodds, rh Mr Nigel	Hanson, rh Mr David	McDonnell, John
Boswell, Philip	Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.	Harman, rh Ms Harriet	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Donaldson, Stuart Blair	Harpham, Harry	McGarry, Natalie
Brake, rh Tom	Doughty, Stephen	Harris, Carolyn	McGinn, Conor
Brennan, Kevin	Dowd, Jim	Hayes, Helen	McGovern, Alison
Brock, Deidre	Dowd, Peter	Hayman, Sue	McInnes, Liz
Brown, Alan	Dromey, Jack	Healey, rh John	McKinnell, Catherine
Brown, Lyn	Dugher, Michael	Hendrick, Mr Mark	McLaughlin, Anne
Bryant, Chris	Durkan, Mark	Hendry, Drew	McMahon, Jim
Buck, Ms Karen	Eagle, Ms Angela	Hepburn, Mr Stephen	Meale, Sir Alan
Burden, Richard	Eagle, Maria	Hermon, Lady	Mearns, Ian
Burgon, Richard	Edwards, Jonathan	Hillier, Meg	Miliband, rh Edward
Burnham, rh Andy	Efford, Clive	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret	Monaghan, Carol
Byrne, rh Liam	Elliott, Julie	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Monaghan, Dr Paul
Cadbury, Ruth	Elliott, Tom	Hoey, Kate	Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Ellman, Mrs Louise	Hollern, Kate	Morden, Jessica
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Esterson, Bill	Hopkins, Kelvin	Morris, Grahame M.
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Evans, Chris	Hosie, Stewart	Mulholland, Greg
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Farrelly, Paul	Howarth, rh Mr George	Mullin, Roger
Champion, Sarah	Farron, Tim	Hunt, Tristram	Murray, Ian
Chapman, Douglas	Fellows, Marion	Huq, Dr Rupa	Nandy, Lisa
Chapman, Jenny	Ferrier, Margaret	Hussain, Imran	Newlands, Gavin
Clegg, rh Mr Nick	Field, rh Frank	Jarvis, Dan	Nicolson, John
Coaker, Vernon	Fitzpatrick, Jim	Johnson, rh Alan	O'Hara, Brendan
	Flello, Robert	Johnson, Diana	Onn, Melanie
	Fletcher, Colleen	Jones, Gerald	Onwurah, Chi
		Jones, Graham	Osamor, Kate
		Jones, Helen	Oswald, Kirsten
		Jones, Mr Kevan	Owen, Albert
		Jones, Susan Elan	Paterson, Steven
		Kane, Mike	Pearce, Teresa
		Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald	Pennycook, Matthew
		Keeley, Barbara	Perkins, Toby
		Kendall, Liz	Phillips, Jess
		Kerevan, George	Pound, Stephen
		Kerr, Calum	Powell, Lucy
		Khan, rh Sadiq	Pugh, John
		Kinahan, Danny	Qureshi, Yasmin
		Kinnock, Stephen	Rayner, Angela
		Kyle, Peter	Reed, Mr Jamie
		Lamb, rh Norman	Reed, Mr Steve
		Lammy, rh Mr David	Rees, Christina
		Law, Chris	Reeves, Rachel
		Leslie, Chris	Reynolds, Emma
		Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Reynolds, Jonathan
		Lewis, Clive	Rimmer, Marie
		Lewis, Mr Ivan	Ritchie, Ms Margaret
		Lewis, rh Dr Julian	Robertson, rh Angus
		Long Bailey, Rebecca	Robinson, Gavin
		Lucas, Caroline	Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
			Rotheram, Steve
			Ryan, rh Joan

Salmond, rh Alex
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simpson, David
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmer, Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thompson, Owen

Thomson, Michelle
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Watson, Mr Tom
 Weir, Mike
 West, Catherine
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Corri
 Wilson, Phil
 Wilson, Sammy
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Holly Lynch and
 Vicky Foxcroft**

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Barwell, Gavin
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Berry, James
 Bingham, Andrew
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Borwick, Victoria
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brazier, Mr Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona

Buckland, Robert
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Sir Simon
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, Alun
 Carmichael, Neil
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishty, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colville, Oliver
 Costa, Alberto
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Byron
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver

Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evennett, rh Mr David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matthew
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Hopkins, Kris
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howell, John
 Howlett, Ben
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Boris
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kaczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Latham, Pauline
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lumley, Karen
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Karl
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Morrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy

Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Perry, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain

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

Tellers for the Noes:
 Sarah Newton and
 Simon Kirby

Question accordingly negated.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): We come now to the motion praying against the Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations (S.I. 2015, No. 1951), which will be taken without debate. I remind the House that because, as Mr Speaker has certified, this instrument relates exclusively to England and is within devolved legislative competence, it is subject to double majority. If a Division is called, all Members of the House are able to vote in the Division. Under Standing Order No. 83Q, the prayer to annul the SI will be agreed only if, of those voting, both a majority of all Members and a majority of Members representing constituencies in England vote in support of the motion. At the end the Tellers will report the results, first, for all Members and, secondly, for those representing constituencies in England. I think that is clear. *[Interruption.]* The instruction is clear. Members do not really have to do any thinking except to decide whether to vote Aye or No, and then everyone can pass through the Lobbies.

EDUCATION (STUDENT SUPPORT) (AMENDMENT) REGULATIONS 2015

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

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.—(Mr Marsden.)

The House divided: Ayes 292, Noes 303.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England: Ayes 203, Noes 291.

Division No. 166]

[4.40 pm

AYES

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

Hanson, rh Mr David
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harpham, Harry
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Mr Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hermon, Lady
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Hunt, Tristram
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Alan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kerevan, George
 Kerr, Calum
 Khan, rh Sadiq
 Kinahan, Danny
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Law, Chris
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Mr Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCaig, Callum
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCartney, Jason
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.

McDonnell, John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGarry, Natalie
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMahan, Jim
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Monaghan, Dr Paul
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morris, Grahame M.
 Mulholland, Greg
 Mullin, Roger
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Albert
 Paterson, Steven
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Pugh, John
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Marie
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Robertson, rh Angus
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Salmond, rh Alex
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simpson, David
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John

Starmer, Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Michelle
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie

Watson, Mr Tom
 Weir, Mike
 West, Catherine
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Corri
 Wilson, Phil
 Wilson, Sammy
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, Dr Dame Rosie
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mark Tami and
Jessica Morden

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Barwell, Gavin
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Berry, James
 Bingham, Andrew
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Borwick, Victoria
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brazier, Mr Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Sir Simon
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, Alun
 Carmichael, Neil
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Choqe, Mr Christopher

Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colville, Oliver
 Costa, Alberto
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Byron
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evennett, rh Mr David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard

Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matthew
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Hopkins, Kris
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howell, John
 Howlett, Ben
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Boris
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Latham, Pauline
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lumley, Karen
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Karl
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Perry, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber

Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael

Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
 Sarah Newton and
 Simon Kirby

Question accordingly negated.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will recall the debates that were held in the House on this double majority measure, when the Leader of the House made several totally unavailing attempts to explain it to Members. The Government said that nothing could pass against the will of the House and that the procedure was about ensuring that nothing was imposed on English Members against their will.

We have just had an illustration of a vote that could have enacted an order against the will of the House. The majority was only 11; if the majority had been won in the other direction and the House had voted as a whole to annul the order, and English Members had voted against it, the matter would still have stood. Students would still have been deprived of their vital maintenance grant, against the will of the House and contrary to what the Leader of the House and others on the Tory Benches told us. That will be of no satisfaction to English students who are suffering under this Government in the knowledge that they have been knowingly deprived of their maintenance grant. Will the Chair reflect on that procedure? It is totally contrary and illustrates the complete swamp into which these people have led the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I understand the point the right hon. Gentleman is making. Indeed, he has made the same point in different ways at various times. However, this is the first time we have had a double majority vote and this is different procedure. The right hon. Gentleman will of course appreciate that the procedure we have undertaken this afternoon was

approved by the whole House and put into Standing Orders just a few months ago. Therefore, the procedure under which we have operated this afternoon has been approved by the whole House—possibly not by the right hon. Gentleman, but by a majority of the whole House.

The right hon. Gentleman very reasonably asks me—this is what I can deal with from the Chair—whether this matter will be reviewed. I am happy to tell him that of course it will be. Mr Speaker has made it clear that he will be keeping the new arrangements under review. I also understand that the Procedure Committee will be keeping the arrangements under review. I am sure the point the right hon. Gentleman has just so eloquently made will be taken into consideration by both Mr Speaker and the Procedure Committee as they consider the matter.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is the first time in 15 years that I have attempted to vote in the Lobby and been denied the right to do so. My name was not on the tablet used. This is a denial of the rights of my constituents to be represented in a vote in the House of Commons. I seek assurance from you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that my vote will be recorded in the Government Lobby and that this kind of error will never be allowed to happen again.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I can well understand the hon. Gentleman's understandable consternation. I am absolutely certain that his constituency is in England, because it is right next to mine. He has a perfectly good reason to complain. It is quite wrong that his name did not appear and I am certain that that will be rectified. I am assured that although his name did not appear on the list and his vote was not recorded in the way all the others votes were, his vote has been recorded both by the Tellers and the Clerks this afternoon. He need have no fear that his opinion has been overlooked, nor should it ever be.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. If it is any consolation to the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), my name was not on the list either. However, I have been assured by the Teller that the vote was recorded.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am particularly concerned for the hon. Gentleman, because he is very new to this House. Indeed, I hope he will be making his maiden speech later this afternoon. We are all looking forward to that. Of course his name ought to have been there. We will do everything to make sure it is there in future.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you could help me with this. This is very serious. The fact that one of our Members—one of the most

English of all English Members—has been denied the opportunity to vote in the first double majority vote in this House is something that has to be properly investigated. Can you suggest, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether it is now worth having a recount, given that hon. Members have obviously been left out of this very important first vote?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the vote of the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) has most definitely been counted. There is no need for a recount.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As part of the review of the House's adoption of this appalling procedure, which excludes the votes of MPs like me who represent Northern Ireland constituencies—because certification has indicated a matter is exclusively English, despite its undoubtedly affecting my constituents—may I invite Ministers to Northern Ireland, with the promise of a warm welcome, to meet students affected by this vote or those affected by last week's vote on the Housing and Planning Bill and explain to them why the rights of their representatives have not been honoured equally with those of other MPs?

Madam Deputy Speaker: As I said to the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), the whole House decided on these new Standing Orders, but of course the hon. Lady's vote has been registered and counted and her constituents will know how she has voted. It has not been counted twice, but it has, very definitely, been counted once. She has, however, made her point properly.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. First, may I assure the House that "Fabricant" was indeed on the tablet and that my vote was recorded? May I also take this opportunity to praise the Clerks, the Parliamentary Digital Service and you, ma'am, for taking us through, relatively smoothly, this innovative and creative bit of legislating, despite the travails of my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell)?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The Clerks, the Officers of the House and those working behind the scenes have worked hard to put this new procedure into operation. This is the first time we have had a double majority vote. It has not gone perfectly smoothly, but we all learn from our mistakes, and I am quite certain it will go more smoothly in the future. I assure the House, especially hon. Members with concerns, that both Mr Speaker and the Procedure Committee are keeping a careful eye on these matters, as, I think, is the Leader of the House, and everything that hon. Members have said will be taken into consideration.

Cost of Public Transport

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has not selected the amendment.

5.8 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House believes that the rising cost of public transport is adding to the financial pressures facing many households; notes that over 2,400 local authority-supported bus routes have been cut or downgraded since 2010; regrets that bus fares have risen by 26 per cent on average and regulated rail fares have risen by up to 38 per cent since 2010; further regrets delays to rail infrastructure projects including the electrification of the Great Western Main Line, the North TransPennine route and the Midland Main Line; notes with regret the decision by the Scottish Government to award the ScotRail franchise to a private operator, rather than exploring alternative options; calls on the Government to bring forward a buses bill as announced in the Queen's Speech to enable the regulation of local bus networks; and further calls on the Government to rule out the privatisation of Network Rail and instead extend to franchised services the model of rail public ownership that delivered record passenger satisfaction scores on the East Coast Main Line.

I start by wishing the Secretary of State a happy new year, although that will not have been the sentiment that came to most commuters' minds when they returned to work a fortnight ago. I am afraid it will have been cold comfort to be told by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), on the day that fares rose again, that the Government's plan for passengers was to improve journeys for everyone. The chief executive of Transport Focus gave a more accurate assessment:

"In some parts of the country, given rail performance has been so dire, passengers will be amazed there are any fare rises at all."

Hon. Members who attended the Southern Railway summit in this place yesterday, and most travellers, would not be able to reconcile the Minister's statement with their own experience of increasingly overcrowded and unreliable carriages.

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that Members on both sides of the House are fed up with excuse after excuse and broken promise after broken promise from Southern rail, and that what we now want to see is action taken against this operator?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is exactly right. I know that he and my other hon. Friends are holding Southern rail to account for its poor punctuality and poor passenger satisfaction. That underlines the need for reform of the railways.

Let us look at the facts. In 2010, the Conservative party said that it would

"relieve the pressure off both the fare-payer and the taxpayer".

But what happened? Regulated fares rose by 25%. As a consequence, commuters from Birmingham to London are paying more than £10,000 for a season ticket for the first time. Worse still, Ministers bowed to lobbying from the train operating companies and restored "flex"—their right to vary prices by up to 5%, meaning that some season tickets have gone up by 38% since 2010, and a new Northern evening peak restriction hiked prices by up to an eye-watering 162%.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure my hon. Friend will be aware that senior citizens, who might have business in London working for charities, are finding it very difficult to afford to come here unless it is outside peak times, and they are often unable to arrange meetings at times that would suit the off-peak periods. Does she understand that and have a view on it?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is quite right that it is indeed a concern that people who need to travel at peak times find it almost impossible to find an affordable ticket.

Bus fares have continued to rise, too—up by 26% on average, which is more than three times faster than wages. Some areas have seen much higher rises still. In the north-east, bus fares have consistently risen by 3% above inflation, and it is the non-metropolitan areas that have seen some of the steepest bus fare increases, including in the constituencies of many Conservative Members, with fares increasing by 27% on average.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The problem with buses is not just bus fares; it is the fact that in rural areas, such as in Saughall or Guilden Sutton in my constituency, the privatised bus companies are simply withdrawing services because their profit margins are not big enough.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point. In many cases, it is hard-pressed local authorities that are trying to fill the gap, but of course with cuts it is increasingly difficult to do so.

The Secretary of State may remember when Ministers said at the start of the last Parliament that their cuts to bus funding would not impact on fares or service levels. Perhaps it was before the Secretary of State's time. Almost six years on, however, the impact of the reductions to bus subsidy and local authority budgets is clear: more than 2,400 supported bus services have been altered, downgraded or withdrawn altogether. Supported, socially necessary bus services accounted for 24% of overall mileage in 2010. Last year, that had shrunk to 17%. The overall mileage of socially necessary services is down by 10% in the last year alone, and the number of transport authorities funding a young person's concessionary travel scheme has fallen by 24%.

Bus services are used by every section of society, and we need a growing bus industry that can provide new routes to areas that are not currently served and provide people with as many options as possible for travel. We know that buses are particularly important to disabled people, older passengers, those on low incomes, young people and jobseekers. I am proud of the support that Labour introduced, including the concessionary bus pass, which provides a lifeline for pensioners and has kept many networks viable. Six years ago, the Prime Minister said that he would keep Labour's free bus pass. Indeed, a year ago the Transport Secretary told this House that

"we have kept, and will keep, concessionary bus fares for older people."—[*Official Report*, 22 January 2015; Vol. 591, c. 357.]

But what is the point of a free bus pass when there are no bus services left?

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): Before I entered the House, I sat on the board as a non-executive director of Cardiff Bus. Is the hon. Lady aware that we had to get together as Welsh bus companies and threaten legal action against the Labour Welsh Government on the concessionary fare funding because it was a breach of contract?

Lilian Greenwood: You do not want to talk about your own Government's record on concessionary fares. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady does not mean "you", does she? She means "he".

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman does not want to talk about the point at issue. He does not want to talk about what has happened to bus services here in England.

Anyone who searches the speeches and the statements of Conservative Ministers for references to fare rises on buses or cuts in routes will spend their time in vain.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Lilian Greenwood: I will make some progress, and then I will give way.

Bus passengers account for two thirds of public transport journeys, but the Transport Secretary mentioned them only once, in passing, in his speech at the Conservative party conference a few months ago. No doubt he will say that funds have been provided for local authorities to bid for support, and of course investment in cleaner, more efficient buses is welcome, but taxpayers will not realise value for money without reform. Fares have outstripped inflation and wage growth, and savings from the falling cost of fuel are not being passed on to passengers. Throughout the country, bus services are trapped in a vicious cycle in which fare rises dampen down demand and routes are then cut, triggering another round of cost increases.

There was a time when Ministers insisted that "there have not been the cuts that the Opposition are so keen to talk up."—[*Official Report*, 19 April 2012; Vol. 543, c. 485.]

However, when Transport Focus, the official watchdog, surveyed people who had been affected by the cuts, one person responded:

"I have one daughter who is disabled. They have cut her bus on a Sunday and in the evenings, so I can't go and see her on a Sunday now."

Another said that they

"Can't see elderly parents in the evening and care for them as much when they probably need it the most. Can't afford a taxi because not working at the moment and relied on the bus."

One respondent simply said:

"I can't see dad"

in a nursing home

"on a Sunday because there is no bus."

Conservative Members may say that the Government cannot be held accountable for the operation of a deregulated market, and it is true that London was the only part of Britain that was excluded from the provisions of the Transport Act 1985, but the fact is that, across the country, buses continue to receive very high levels of

public support. Of the industry's costs, 41% are met by subsidy, and the Competition Commission found that genuine competition between bus companies, beyond occasional and disruptive bus wars, was rare. In too many areas the market does not provide comprehensive networks, forcing councils to fund additional services where they can still afford to do so, and placing an additional cost of more than £300 million a year on our hard-pressed local authorities. Nexus, the north-east transport authority, has only been able to maintain local services by drawing on its reserves, while also pursuing reforms that would allow it to deliver better services at a lower cost to taxpayers.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Not everything that the hon. Lady is saying is incorrect, and obviously the position with bus services is very difficult, but it is a question of choices. The hon. Lady should consider what has been done by North Lincolnshire's Conservative-controlled council. When we took control, it was able to reinstate the No. 37 bus, which had been cut by the previous Labour authority, and extend its services to Wroot and to Crowle. Labour-run Goole Town Council decided to cut the workers' bus services so that it could pay for a bonfire once a year. So it is about choices. When local authorities are innovative, they can do what we have done in North Lincolnshire, and expand services.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman should think about the powers that local authorities have to enable them to make effective choices on behalf of passengers, and that is what I intend to talk about.

While fares continue to rise and routes are cut, some of the biggest bus operators report profit margins of 13% or more on their operations outside London. What was the response of Conservative Ministers? For four years they ignored the calls for reform from Labour Members. I am proud of the fact that Labour has consistently championed the case for bus tendering, but Ministers rigged funding awards to exclude local authorities that pursued regulation, and, shamefully, they remained silent when councillors were subjected to appalling abuse and called "unreconstructed Stalinists" just because they were trying to deliver better services.

While the Treasury's decision to accept the case for bus tendering is welcome in principle, as is the Transport Secretary's Damascene conversion, we must question the sincerity of that commitment, and the test will come in the forthcoming buses Bill. Will the Bill make those powers available to all areas that want them, not just to authorities that have reached a devolution agreement? Will it contain measures to protect rural bus services, which are particularly important to those communities, and which have been hit by some of the highest fare rises in the country? Will it protect transport authorities from crippling compensation claims?

The Nexus quality contract scheme boards said that the authorities should have set aside up to £226 million to compensate existing operators for the potential loss of business. If those payments were replicated in Greater Manchester, the Sheffield city region and the north-east, a key northern powerhouse commitment would never get on the road—not to mention the effects on Cornwall and other areas that have sought bus-tendering powers.

[Lilian Greenwood]

The bus market is costing too much and is not delivering for passengers, and we have seen the same trend on our railways. Commuters' fares have gone up by a quarter since 2010, with season tickets costing up to £2,000 more. Ministers restored the loophole known as flex, which gave the train companies the right to vary prices by up to 5% a year, meaning that the cost of some season tickets has risen by up to 38%, and evening fares in the north have been hiked by up to 162% at the direct insistence of the Department for Transport.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): Will the hon. Lady remind the House how many years flex was not available for when the last Labour Government were in office? Am I correct in thinking that it was just one year—the year of the election?

Lilian Greenwood: The Labour party scrapped flex permanently, and it was the Secretary of State's Department that chose to reinstate it, as well he knows. It was only as a result of concerted pressure by Labour Members that this Government dropped it over the past two years.

As I was saying, evening fares in the north have been hiked by up to 162% at the Secretary of State's direct insistence. The Department's own McNulty review has warned that our fragmented railways have a ticketing system that

“is complex, often appears illogical and is hard for the uninitiated (and even the initiated) to understand.”

There is also an efficiency gap of up to 40% compared with the best performing European operators, which is wasting money that should be used to address the rising cost of travel and to fund investment.

At the last election we were promised part-time season tickets, and a pilot by Southern Railway found that they could save some commuters 50% of the cost of their travel. However, the smart ticketing programme that underpins the system is 78% over budget and delayed by three years, and there are rumours that it could be cancelled. Will the Secretary of State tell us today whether the south-east flexible ticketing programme is being dropped?

Ministers might claim that services are getting better for everyone, but I urge them to mind the gap between their rhetoric and reality. We all remember the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), saying that rail passengers had to realise that they were paying

“fair fares for a comfortable commute”.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): In the Corbyn land of rhetoric, the hon. Lady seems to have forgotten that fares went up by 11% in the last year of the Labour Government alone. It is this Government who have frozen regulated fares for three years. Will she acknowledge that fact and make sure that she puts the truth on the record?

Lilian Greenwood: If the hon. Gentleman looks at our record, he will see that rail fares increased only by the level of inflation or were actually cut in six of the 13 years that Labour was in power. Fares rose in some years, and that helped to fund investment. Under Labour,

there was more investment in rail in real terms than under any previous Government. Under this Government, that link has been broken.

The Transport Secretary said that only commuters were paying regulated fares, and that unregulated fares could be “quite cheap”. Those comments are a world away from the frustrations endured by passengers every day on Southern and Thameslink, some of which were described in the House today by my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna). They reflect an increasingly overcrowded and unreliable network.

In 2009, the Conservative party's rail policy review stated:

“Fare rises come with tacit Government approval and are often the direct result of the franchise process”.

Will the Secretary of State therefore explain why he intends above-inflation rises to resume after 2020, as his Department's recent consultation on the East Anglian franchise makes clear? Passengers were always told that higher fares were necessary to pay for improvements, but under this Government that link has been broken. The electrification of key lines was first paused and then shambolically “unpaused” one week before the Conservative party conference, and those projects are now delayed by years.

That goes to the heart of public trust in the railways. Ministers and Conservative Back Benchers went into the last election on a manifesto that said that key improvements would be delivered in this Parliament, but information about the true state of those programmes was kept concealed within the Department. The Transport Secretary has said that he was not informed about the state of the electrification programme until after May, but why did he not pose searching questions within the Department in October 2014, when my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), challenged him to say

“which electrification projects will be delayed or cancelled”—[*Official Report*, 23 October 2014; Vol. 586, c. 1030.]

due to cost overruns on the great western main line?

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I have one curious question for the hon. Lady: how is this all going to be paid for? Is it going to be borrowed or are we going to put prices up?

Lilian Greenwood: I shall deal with that very question later on in my speech, so the hon. Gentleman should listen attentively.

Why did the Transport Secretary not raise the alarm in the last Parliament when the estimated cost of electrifying the midland main line rose from £250 million to £540 million, and then to £1.3 billion? Why did he not do so when the cost estimates for great western electrification rose from £548 million to £930 million, and then to £1.7 billion? Of course, the estimate has now risen further still, to £2.8 billion. Why did he not act when the Transport Committee warned in January 2015:

“Key rail enhancement projects...have been announced by Ministers without Network Rail having a clear estimate of what the projects will cost, leading to uncertainty about whether the projects will be delivered on time, or at all”?

Will the Transport Secretary confirm that he commissioned a report on the state of the electrification programme, which was given to him in September 2014?

This report has never been published, and a Freedom of Information Act request for a copy has been personally refused by a Minister in his Department. What did that report say, and what has he got to hide?

The truth is that the Department was clearly warned by Network Rail about the impending northern power cut. The company's board discussed last March

“the decisions required jointly with the DFT”

regarding

“enhancement deferrals from June”.

Network Rail's chief executive has confirmed to me:

“In mid-March 2015, Network Rail informed DfT that decisions may need to be made in the coming months about the deferral of certain schemes.”

If the Secretary of State really was not aware of what his own Department and Network Rail were doing, there is only one possible explanation: he made it clear that he did not want to know. He failed to take responsibility, and passengers are now paying the price.

We were told that 850 miles of track would be electrified before 2019, but now the Department is refusing to say how many miles of track will be electrified in this Parliament. Is it half the original target? Is it a quarter? Will the Transport Secretary confirm that by 2019 this Government would do well to realise the plans for electrification set out by a Labour Secretary of State, the noble Lord Adonis, a decade earlier?

Let me return to the cost of tickets.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con) *rose*—

Lilian Greenwood: I am not going to give way at the moment, because I want to make some progress. The Government claim they will not increase regulated fares above inflation, and we will hold them to that promise, but may I remind the Transport Secretary of his comments from two years ago, when he said that Labour's fares freeze

“would cost £1.8 billion over the lifetime of the next parliament and be paid for by more borrowing and higher taxes.”

Given that the black hole in Network Rail's finances will be plugged by £1.8 billion-worth of asset sales and £700 million of additional borrowing, has not this Government's ostrich-like approach to the railways resulted in what the Transport Secretary's own party might call more spending, more borrowing, and more debt?

We need investment in our rail network, both in HS2 and in the existing railways. I am proud of the fact that we saw record investment between 1997 and 2010. Our Government invested more in the railways, in real terms, than any previous Government, addressing the chronic maintenance backlog, replacing thousands of unsafe, slam-door Mark 1 coaches and ending the appalling safety crisis created by the disaster that was Railtrack. I am concerned that the Government's programme has come to resemble not the much heralded “biggest investment since the Victorian era” that we have heard so much about, but the ill-prepared 1950s modernisation plan that did so much damage to support for the railways.

As we come to make the case for additional investment, we need Ministers to own up to the challenges that the programme continues to face, but again and again, the message is the same: they did not know; they were

not responsible; and they were not there. We could ask what exactly Ministers were doing instead of keeping improvements on track, because they were not keeping an eye on the franchising programme, which collapsed in 2012 costing taxpayers more than £50 million, or on the allocation of trains in the north, as the Secretary of State approved the transfer of new rolling stock from TransPennine to the south, triggering a capacity crisis that cost taxpayers another £20 million to resolve. It seems that their focus was solely on privatising East Coast, a successful public sector rail operator, which delivered record passenger satisfaction and punctuality scores—

Stephen Hammond *rose*—

Lilian Greenwood: No, I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman.

East Coast cut its fares in real terms in 2014 and reinvested all its profits in the service. As reported last week, it was delivering the best-ever service on the line in the weeks before it was sold. Instead of extending that successful model of public ownership to the other franchise services, the route was prioritised to be sold off. Worse, we now learn that Directly Operated Railways, East Coast's parent company, has effectively been mothballed and its functions outsourced to companies with no experience of operating passenger services.

We are left in the absurd position of divesting our in-house railway expertise at precisely the moment that several franchises and contracting competitions appear to be in doubt. Now, on top of the damage already done, the Government are seriously considering privatising Network Rail. They have already tested the theory to destruction with Railtrack. A sell-off of Network Rail will put profit before passengers and risk dragging us back to the worst excesses of privatisation. I say to the Transport Secretary: do not go down this road. We know how it ends and we on the Labour Benches will oppose it all the way.

May I say how disappointing it was that the Scottish National party in government not only issued a conventional franchise for ScotRail, but passed up the opportunity to invite a public sector bidder for the contract? The franchise was awarded a full month after Gordon Brown, the former right hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, made it clear that, on the forthcoming Smith agreement, enforced rail privatisation will be no more and the right to include a public sector option is currently before Parliament in the Scotland Bill. Labour urged the Scottish Government at the time to postpone the competition, but that call was rejected.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for so kindly giving way. I am pleased that she is addressing this part of the motion. I feel that the request is particularly ironic given that she talked about the powers that local government in England should have. The Scottish Parliament, and indeed the Scottish Government, do not have such powers. What she and her party are encouraging is the Scottish Government to break the law. Will she explain why that is the case?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the hon. Lady answers the intervention, may I say that she has been very courteous in taking a lot of

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

interventions—and it is indeed good to have a lively debate—but this debate has less than an hour and a half to run? The hon. Lady has spoken for some 25 minutes, and I am sure that she will be aware that there are many other people who wish to speak.

Lilian Greenwood: I will move towards finishing my speech, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is a pity that the hon. Gentleman did not refer to the fact that the Labour Government fully devolved the ScotRail franchise, or that it was Labour that secured the change to the Railways Act 1993 through the Smith commission. The invitation to tender for the ScotRail franchise, issued by the SNP Government, said:

“Transport Scotland reserves the right to alter the timetable or the process, or to terminate this process at its sole discretion.”

There we have it. It was entirely in the Scottish Government’s power to wait until the 1993 Act could be amended, but they chose not to do so. There is nothing in the 1993 Act or in the ScotRail invitation to tender that prevented them from delaying the competition until section 25 of that Act was amended. It is regrettable to see the inaccurate amendment tabled by SNP Members.

It falls to Labour to set out the case for reforming our transport services and addressing the rising cost of public transport. It is what Labour is doing in local government, winning concessions from Whitehall. It is what my right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan) will do as Labour’s Mayor of London by putting bus and rail passengers first. We must play our part in Parliament too, and I urge Members to support the motion today.

5.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): I welcome the debate and I know that the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) cares very much about the subject. She has worked with us on the Bill for HS2, which is making good progress, and I thank the Opposition for their support on that vital project.

I also thank everyone in all parts of the transport industry who has been out this winter responding to the floods. It has not been easy, but good progress is being made. I was in Cumbria for the second time last week to see it at first hand. Over the Christmas period, Network Rail also successfully carried out its biggest ever works as part of the railway upgrade plan that is so essential to the future of the British rail industry. I pay tribute to the thousands of staff who gave up their Christmas to improve our railways.

Today, the hon. Lady asks about transport costs, and I am pleased she does. After all, the Opposition should know all about them, because when they were in office rail fares soared. In their last full year, regulated fares increased by up to 11% and between 2004 and 2010 they went up by about 4% a year—a total increase of some 26.4%. We have kept increases down. They have dropped steadily over the past five years and we have frozen increases at inflation for the whole of this Parliament, a promise made in our manifesto and kept in government, saving more than a quarter of a million season ticket holders an average of £425 over the next five years.

The Opposition should also know about the cost of driving. Fuel prices are down by almost 16% in real terms since 2010 and we abolished a number of the increases that were going to take place under the Labour Government.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Despite all the howling we have just heard from Opposition Members about oil prices, was it not the Opposition who wanted to freeze energy prices?

Mr McLoughlin: I am going to say a bit more about their record in government; I am not sure that I want to say too much about their record in opposition.

Mr Umunna *rose*—

Mr Jim Cunningham *rose*—

Christian Matheson *rose*—

Mr McLoughlin: Three Members are trying to get me to give way, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I am mindful of the short time for this debate, and I am very sorry about that. I will take an intervention from the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna), but then I will make progress.

Mr Umunna: Does the Secretary of State think that the cost of £964 for a season ticket from Streatham Common to London Victoria is good value for money in the light of the recent service that my constituents have been subjected to by Southern Railway? Will he give serious consideration to the breakup of the Govia Thameslink Railway franchise, which is clearly too big and too complex?

Mr McLoughlin: I will want to say something about the works on the rail network. The amount of work that is taking place will lead to some disruption but eventually will lead to a much better service for the hon. Gentleman’s constituents. The huge investment in London Bridge, for example, will cause disruption while it is taking place. I wish that that was not necessary, but people will get a much better service than they had before those improvements.

Mr Jim Cunningham *rose*—

Mr McLoughlin: I want to make some progress.

Fuel prices are down by nearly 16% since 2010. The cost of driving licences has been reduced, the cost of the theory test is being cut and we have taken action to bring down the cost of car insurance as well.

There is another thing that the Opposition do not like talking about—the cost to our country of lost investment when they were in office, and the cost to jobs, businesses and growth. Britain slipped from 7th to 33rd in the World Economic Forum’s infrastructure league table when they were in government. They cancelled more than 100 major road improvement projects and did not invest when they had the chance. They electrified just 10 miles of railways, less than one mile a year. I was going to say that it was a snail’s pace electrification, but I have checked, and that would be unfair to snails. They go faster than the previous Labour Government went on electrification. No Conservative Member will take

lectures from the Opposition about electrification. They did not invest, and they made the task of rectifying their mistakes much more of a challenge. The real benefit cannot be felt until all this vital but disruptive work is completed. No wonder Labour has been so reluctant to debate transport in this House. The shadow Secretary of State's immediate predecessor did not even have a debate on transport. In fact there have been only three debates on transport since 2010. That is obviously because the Opposition are so embarrassed by their own record, and so impressed by our record.

The shadow Secretary of State has served on the Opposition Front Bench on transport since 2011. She is the fourth shadow Secretary of State I have faced across the Dispatch Box, and in that time there have been about as many changes in opposition transport policy as there have been shadow Secretaries of State.

Christian Matheson *rose*—

Mr Jim Cunningham *rose*—

Mr McLoughlin: I have got a choice; I will give way to Coventry.

Mr Cunningham: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way; I notice he has been avoiding me for the last five minutes. Will he have a look at the use of senior citizens cards, particularly in respect of certain rail companies? As I said in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), some people badly need them; they do charity work and they need to come to London, but not at the times when senior citizens cards can be used. Will he have a look at that, and the different franchises and different uses?

Mr McLoughlin: I know the hon. Gentleman will want to support me wholeheartedly on creating more capacity. One way we are going to do that is by building HS2, which in the past he has not been quite so supportive of. It is very important that we look at these things, however, and of course I will look at the points he makes.

Christian Matheson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr McLoughlin: I really do need to make progress.

The shadow Secretary of State used to be in favour of rail franchising, but now she seems to be against it, although it is interesting to note that her party's candidate for Mayor of London is apparently so keen on it that he wants Transport for London to bid for contracts in the private sector. In 2014, the shadow Secretary of State got one of our great private companies, Stagecoach, to sponsor her Christmas cards. I did not get one in 2015. Maybe this time it was sponsored by the RMT instead, because these days Labour has only one policy on transport: turn all the signals bright red—a policy that is going nowhere from a party that is getting nowhere.

Now of course the Labour party wants to impose yet another cost on hard-working people: the cost of strikes. We heard not a single word from the hon. Lady in her speech about the planned strikes next week on the underground—a party that will not even stand up for

Londoners when the unions carry out a selfish and irresponsible strike. Well, this Government clearly stand on the side of Londoners and those who work in London. Will the hon. Lady condemn the planned strike on the underground? I will give way to her if she will. Will she condemn it? Silence. She is probably under orders from the shadow Chancellor to join the picket line, or does she agree with the Labour peer Lord Mendelsohn? My hon. Friends may not have heard this: Labour peer Lord Mendelsohn said strikes would be "economically efficient" because some travellers would discover better ways into work. That is Labour's new policy: a strike that aims to stop Londoners getting new and better services.

Transport is central to Britain's economy, and because we are dealing with the decline and deficit the Labour party left behind, we can afford to invest for growth. That means more jobs, more homes, and more businesses using our transport system, and more people too. Last year it carried more people than ever in its history: there were 1.65 billion journeys on the railway network, 316 billion vehicle miles on our roads, and over 1.3 billion journeys on the tube. This year, it will break that record again. That is why we are widening roads, building railways, opening up opportunities: a massive programme is under way now that means building Crossrail, completing Thameslink, electrifying the northern hub, starting HS2, record investment in local roads, setting up an independent National Infrastructure Commission under Lord Adonis, and getting on with the £15 billion road investment strategy, including the A358 and A27 that Labour pledged in its manifesto to cancel. There is £38.5 billion of investment in our railways, and 30% more on enhancements than Labour spent previously.

Oliver Colvile: May I remind my right hon. Friend that, during the election, the Labour party said it would cancel the A359 work? I did not hear how this would all be paid for, which I was told clearly to listen out for.

Mr McLoughlin: Indeed, the Opposition said they would take those roads out of the roads investment strategy.

Through our careful custodianship of the economy, we can afford to invest in the future. That is why some 4,000 new rail carriages for the national network are now on order, with most being built in Britain.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South talked about the need to help people up and down the country with transport costs, and I agree with her. That is why we are investing. In Nottingham, we have spent £150 million widening the A453, speeded up trains and rebuilt the station at a cost of more than £100 million, and extended the tram with a contribution of more than £370 million. That is more in six years for the people of Nottingham than in the previous 13 years of Labour government.

I welcome the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) to the Opposition Front Bench. I hope he lasts longer in the job than his predecessor, which will let him see the benefits of our investment in his constituency, including new intercity express programme trains, direct services from London on Virgin Trains East Coast, the removal of Pacer trains from the network and an upgrade to the A19 close by. I could go on. Other members of the Front-Bench team will benefit, too, with a £1.5 billion investment for the A14 and new Thameslink trains

[Mr McLoughlin]

serving Cambridge, while Birmingham already has the upgrade to New Street station, services on Sunday from Longbridge and the M5 smart motorway programme.

That is the choice: under Labour, the cost of travel goes up and the cost of lost investment goes up too; under us, rail fares are capped, fuel prices go down and investment goes in.

Andrew Percy: My right hon. Friend knows that we in the Humber got the fluffy end of the lollipop under the last Government. The Humber bridge toll has been halved and we have got rail electrification and a number of road projects. On the subject of the cost of bus passes, will he acknowledge the incredible work done by Conservative North Lincolnshire Council, which reversed the 500% increase in the price of post-16 bus passes, cutting the cost from £180 under the Labour party to £30 under the Conservatives?

Mr McLoughlin: My hon. Friend clearly shows that Conservative councils choose priorities to help local people and make sure the investment goes straight to the frontline. I congratulate the council in his area on doing that.

Alec Shelbrooke: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr McLoughlin: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I am mindful of the time. I know other hon. Members wish to speak, and I understand that there is to be a very important maiden speech.

On the east coast line, Virgin is bringing 23 new services a day from London, with more than 70 extra stops at stations. The hon. Member for Nottingham South is against that. There are plans for new direct services to Huddersfield, Sunderland, Middlesbrough, Dewsbury and Thornaby, and more trains to London from Bradford, Edinburgh, Harrogate, Leeds, Lincoln, Newcastle, Shipley, Stirling and York. That is our plan to build for the future and support our great cities, too. Under this Government, that means city deals, new mayors, growth, a northern powerhouse and a transformation of the railways in the north.

In 2004, when Labour was in charge, it let the franchise for Northern rail on a zero-growth basis. That meant no investment, while fares were allowed to rise. It was a disgrace. Perhaps the hon. Lady would like to apologise for the consequences. The cost was no new trains and massive overcrowding, with people expected to travel on worn-out Pacers. Just before Christmas, the Government let new franchises for Northern and TransPennine that will result in a £1.2 billion boost to rail services, 500 new carriages, 40,000 extra spaces for passengers and free wi-fi on trains and in stations. No wonder local Labour politicians in the north were lining up to praise the move. Liam Robinson, chairman of Merseytravel, said it was a “big step forward” and would “drive up standards”. Labour councillors including Peter Box, Richard Leese, Keith Wakefield and Nick Forbes praised the impact of devolution to Rail North. The RMT commented too, describing it as a “bitter blow”. Who does the hon. Lady agree with? Would she have signed that franchise contract—yes or no? Would the Opposition have walked away, leaving the north with nothing, just like

they did last time? We bring the private and public sectors together in partnership, backing better services and growth.

The hon. Lady mentions buses. I am not clear what she wants. Does she want to nationalise them too? We are going to legislate so that cities can help shape their bus networks, working with the private sector. While her party was in office, bus use outside of London fell by 8%. In 2010 only 25% of buses outside London could take smart cards; now 89% can. Compared with 2010, buses are safer, with more CCTV, and they are busier and more accessible. The Government are supporting the vital work done by community transport organisations with a scheme to help them buy new minibuses. We have taken tough decisions on the economy, but protected concessionary travel across the country.

On road travel, we have reformed Highways England and set out the first-ever long-term investment programme. We are investing in local roads, with a record £6 billion of funding to tackle the menace of potholes, and a further £475 million for the larger road schemes that some towns so desperately need. On cycling, which the Opposition did not even mention in today’s motion, we have increased spending from the £2 a head that we inherited in 2010 to £6 a head today, and we will go further still.

That is the investment we need to help cut the cost of transport. We are getting on with Crossrail, which is on course to open two years from now. We are getting on with HS2, with construction starting in less than two years from now. A new National Infrastructure Commission has been established. Record investment is taking place and rail fare increases have been frozen in line with inflation. Transport is transforming our country, whereas Labour wants to go back to an age when train use fell, fares went up and investment was cut. This Government are optimistic about rail, roads, buses, cycling, and more importantly the British people. We are going to be trusting. We are going to see investment at a record level, which will be good for our cities and for our country right across the transport network. I urge the House to reject the motion.

5.51 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I echo the sentiments of the Secretary of State regarding the staff who worked in the floods and the inclement weather over the Christmas and new year period on all networks to keep us moving and to help passengers as they travelled.

A debate on public transport is welcome. People need effective, regular and affordable public transport. In a debate such as this, they would expect the issue to be moved forward, although I am not sure they would have had that impression from the opening exchanges. Public transport is close to my heart and that of many of my hon. Friends. My constituency, in common with many of theirs, is mostly a rural community. Scotland has diverse public transport needs. Some places in Scotland and in other nations of the UK have no public transport—people can only use their cars, so it is not just the cost of public transport that matters to them, but the cost to the public of transport.

The motion could have benefited from the inclusion of other forms of transport that people need—and, indeed, rely on—in Scotland. For example, we do not see aviation as anything other than public transport.

That is what it is. Marine transport is very important to us, and ferries are public transport too. As the Secretary of State said, the motion could have included public cycling schemes and public costs in relation to roads—tolls, for example. The need for major UK infrastructure projects to give proper consideration to Scotland could be debated. The debate could have been more inclusive and served a common purpose. It could have been more positive, seeking to benefit people.

Many local bus services in Scotland receive subsidies to ensure that uncommercial services can continue to operate as a public service. Figures from the House of Commons Library show that from 1995 to 2015, Scottish bus fares went from being 10% higher than those in England to being lower. Since 2007, bus fares in Scotland have risen by 5% less than in England. Since 2010, bus fares in Scotland have risen by 4.6%; in England over the same period, they have risen by 7.0%. The Scottish Government have invested a quarter of a million pounds every year through the bus service operators grant and concessionary travel scheme. That has helped 1.3 million older and disabled people to live more connected, healthier lives.

In aviation, there are direct flights to over 32 countries, and we have the successful ongoing work to improve long-haul connections to Scotland and connectivity through world hubs. We plan to use changes to air passenger duty to improve the situation for the travelling public by reducing their costs, and to help businesses, including in tourism and food and drink, by growing key sectors of our economy and giving better choice to our people. This is all for the people of Scotland. We are working to achieve guaranteed levels of access between Scotland and London. The Scottish Government acquired Glasgow Prestwick airport to safeguard 3,200 jobs and to secure vital infrastructure as an asset that contributes more than £61 million annually to the Scottish economy.

We have invested in roads to ensure that Scotland has a modern transport infrastructure for the 21st century. The SNP Scottish Government have a clear policy against the use of road pricing and tolls, now and at any time in future, and we have abolished all road tolls on bridges in Scotland. We are delivering the £1.4 billion new Forth crossing at Queensferry, which is on track to be completed by the end of 2016—again, with no tolls for the public.

In marine transport, Ministers in the Scottish Government have invested more than £145 million in piers and harbours, with £8.6 million going to Stornoway harbour to accommodate the new Ullapool-Stornoway vessel, MV Loch Seaforth. Since 2007, we have invested almost £1 billion in ferry services, including the road equivalent tariff and six new ferries. That is investment of over £100 million. We have introduced into the network of services operated by CalMac a third hybrid—MV *Catriona*, which was launched at Ferguson marine shipyard in Port Glasgow in December 2015. On 16 October 2015, Ferguson Marine Engineering Ltd was awarded contracts worth £97 million to build two £100 million ferries with a delivery date in 2017-18. The First Minister of Scotland confirmed just yesterday that Dundee's central waterfront infrastructure would be the latest Scottish Government project to be delivered on budget and ahead of schedule. This includes a re-rationalised road layout and is part of the £1 billion, 8 km Dundee waterfront project, which will create 7,000 new jobs.

Let me come to the interesting one: rail franchising. On this important issue—the public outside this Chamber will not understand this—Labour Members have chosen to attack the Scottish Government, not the UK Government whom they are supposed to be opposing. Every time they take a wee excursion up the branch line, they end up embarrassing themselves and the branch office in Scotland. Frankly, they are embarrassing everyone. The purpose of opposition, surely, is to build alliances to hold the Government to account. What a missed opportunity! The SNP is the effective Opposition in this Chamber. The Government realise that, which is why they are going at us day after day, every day—they spend more time on us now. Labour Members have deliberately inserted a line in this motion—a complete falsehood, by the way—that makes it impossible for us to support them in the Lobby tonight. Imagine that! People are looking on, and they see this shambles for what it is. They are switched on like never before, and they are continuing to lose respect for Labour, given stunts like these.

Let me tell the House about the Scottish Government and rail policy. The UK Government oversee a perverse system that forbids publicly owned UK bodies to bid on rail franchises while having overseas nationalised services such as Deutsche Bahn or France's SNCF running franchises in the UK. We believe that public sector organisations should be able to bid to operate rail services, as allowed in EU law but currently prevented by UK legislation. That is a lesson for Labour Members. That approach would enable us to ensure the delivery of all rail services in Scotland and to deliver maximum economic and social benefit for our people.

Labour has used this motion to attack the SNP Government for awarding the ScotRail franchise from 2015 to 2025 to Abellio. Labour knows very well that the Railways Act 1993, enacted by John Major's Government, specifically forbids UK publicly owned companies from bidding. It is a matter of rhetoric versus record.

Mr McLoughlin: The 1993 Act was indeed taken through by John Major, but will the hon. Gentleman also confirm that in 13 years the Labour party never changed the regulations?

Drew Hendry: The Labour party has put me in the position of having to agree with a member of the Cabinet. Imagine that—what an absolute shambles!

The Labour party spent 13 years in government without ever changing the situation, even though it heavily amended the 1993 Act with the Transport Act 2000 and the Railways Act 2005. Even though it had the power, it did absolutely nothing to repeal the 1993 Act.

This is not the first time we have heard such nonsense from the Labour party. Its leader is not so new to his position now, but not long after taking the leadership he told Marr:

“Listen I've been in Scotland a lot of times during the leadership campaign...I'm going to be in Scotland a great deal as leader of the party.”

We shall see whether that happens. He went on to say:

“Yes the SNP have a headline of being opposed to austerity—fine. The SNP are also privatising CalMac, also were behind the privatisation of ScotRail”.

[Drew Hendry]

What a pile of nonsense! Like successive Scottish Executives before them, the Scottish Government were simply following the tendering process that they are required to follow in EU law.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend recall that, once upon a time, the Labour party was in power in Scotland as well as down here? At no point did it make any effort to allow the Scottish Parliament to take the railways into some kind of public ownership.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Labour made no effort in government either here or in Scotland to do anything about that and, as I have said, it knows very well that the 1993 Act forbids the Scottish Government to do it.

As I have said, there was a fabrication by the Labour leader. He said that the SNP was behind the privatisation of ScotRail. Did he mean the 1993 Act introduced by John Major? There was not even a Scottish Parliament at that time, but let us not let the truth or the law get in the way of anything.

The Labour leader says that his party supports rail renationalisation, but where was that support when every single amendment that the SNP tabled to the Scotland Bill was voted down in this House? Clause 54 of the Bill will allow for the Scottish Government to consider bids from public operators. That was included in the SNP-Scottish Government submission to the Smith commission, but we tried to go further. We tabled a new clause to devolve rail services in Scotland, giving Scottish Ministers full powers and the flexibility to decide who would run such services. Like every other SNP amendment to the Scotland Bill, it was voted down by English MPs.

That new clause would also have disapplied the provisions of the 1993 Act and allowed for direct awards to be made for the operation of rail passenger services to the fullest extent permissible under the law. It would have allowed us to adjust the current ticketing system, which over-subsidises profits while having—to put it mildly—an arcane and unintuitive fare system.

An anytime single ticket from London to Edinburgh costs £140.50, while one from London to Newcastle—100 miles south of Edinburgh—costs £138, £2.50 less. A similar ticket from London to Aberdeen, which is 100 miles north of Edinburgh, costs £157.50. That means that one journey of 100 miles costs £2.50, while another costs £9. It just does not make sense. Frequently, it is cheaper to split a ticket than to buy a direct one. A single from King's Cross to Edinburgh costs £95, while often, but not always, a King's Cross to York ticket and a York to Edinburgh ticket cost £66 in total. We could have done something to sort that out.

Let me just say that the Scottish Government and the SNP will take no lessons from the Labour leader when it comes to investing in Scotland. With such a lack of understanding, even of the basics, it is no wonder that, according to a recent Survation poll, his approval rating in Scotland is minus 17%, while that of the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, is plus 27%.

As we have already established, the issue of public ownership is out of the hands of the Scottish Government, so I want to finish by talking for a moment about the rail franchise in Scotland. The Scottish Government welcomed Abellio to the ScotRail franchise because it has moved its UK headquarters to Glasgow—creating 50 new jobs, in addition to securing another 150 jobs from First. As a result of the new deal, passengers and staff will enjoy a range of benefits: advance fares from £5 for journeys between Scottish cities; a commitment to earnings of at least the living wage—the living wage in Scotland, by the way—for all staff and contractors; at least 100 apprenticeships; a guarantee of no compulsory redundancies; protection for rail staff pensions and travel rights; free wi-fi on trains; a new approach to cycling, with more than 3,500 parking spaces, and bike hire at a number of stations, which should be compared with Southern; 80 new trains due to arrive at start of December 2017; and 23% more carriages across the network.

The Scottish Government's record on rail consists of a commitment to a £5 billion programme of investing in Scotland's railways over the five years to 2019, including £170 million on the Aberdeen to Inverness rail upgrade and £300 million to open the Airdrie-Bathgate rail link in 2010, which will provide a passenger service between north Lanarkshire and west Lothian for the first time in 54 years. Since privatisation, rail fares have been regulated by the Government to limit the size of increases on key tickets, but they have increased in real terms since the early years of this century. In January 2013, fares across all operators were 23% higher than they were in January 1995, with an average annual increase of 1.2%.

I will finish on this point. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hooray!"] It is nice to be appreciated. This is the story of a Government who invest in public transport for their people. The Scottish Government's budget has been cut by £12.5% since 2010—£1 in every £8 has gone—for unnecessary ideological austerity. Despite that, the SNP Scottish Government are still investing in infrastructure. Having already invested £15 billion in transport since 2007, they are committed to the largest transport investment programme that Scotland has ever seen, despite these relentless Westminster budget cuts.

6.8 pm

Karen Lumley (Redditch) (Con): I want to make a short speech and I will be very brief, because I know that the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) is waiting to make his maiden speech. All of us remember that feeling, so it is important that he gets to say his bit.

I would obviously have liked to talk about the fantastic Birmingham International airport, but I will save that for another debate. Instead, I will talk about some of the great rail links from Redditch to the west midlands area. My constituents can live in the lovely town of Redditch, while being able to travel to Birmingham to work. In 2014, a passing loop became operational in Alvechurch, meaning that there are now three trains an hour between Redditch and Birmingham. That makes it as easy to get there as to get to the midlands. On top of that is the £750 million refurbishment of Birmingham New Street International, including a brand-new John Lewis store, which is absolutely fantastic. Some £13 million has been awarded to the west midlands to run schemes

until December 2017. The schemes cover upgrading ticket vending machines on the Redditch line, which includes making them contactless; fitting CCTV equipment to all trains on the line to ensure passenger safety; and equipping staff with technology to enable them to give customers up-to-date, live running information.

Transport needs joined-up thinking across the midlands. I welcome the devolution deal that was signed in November, which will power the midlands engine. The west midlands was the first region outside the north to sign a devolution deal with an elected mayor. The new authority, which includes Redditch, will take an overview of transport in the region, including the HS2 growth strategy.

Before I finish, I will say a bit about HS2. I am, and always have been, a huge fan of the project. The HS2 headquarters is moving to my region and huge investment is being put into the project. The project is often talked about as if it is all about speed, but it is about having the capacity on our railways to ensure that the transport network is fit for purpose. We talk a lot in this House about rebalancing the economy, and I believe that HS2 can help us do it.

There are two sides to every story. I want to put it on the record that Redditch and my region are benefiting from extra investment in the transport system after years of under-investment, and they will continue to do so for many years to come under this Government.

6.10 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this debate.

First, I should pay tribute to Michael Meacher, not simply because it is customary to do so, but because Michael was a dear friend to the people of Chadderton, Oldham and Royton. He will be missed and remembered locally, and by Members of this House, for decades to come.

I thank the voters of Oldham West and Royton for putting their trust in me as their representative here. I will work hard to make sure that I live up to that trust, along with my colleagues. From a Labour party point of view, we have shown what we can achieve when we pull together as a family. The result was very impressive for the Labour family.

As I stand here today, I reflect on the remarkable story—I would say that, wouldn't I?—of a young boy from Miles Platting in Manchester who is now standing here in the House of Commons. The street where I grew up as a child no longer exists, but the values of hard work and courage instilled in me by my parents remain.

The borough of Oldham and its seven towns, with their culture, community and comradeship, have played a defining part in the history of our country. Oldham's values of hard work, grit and integrity speak to the heart of British values—values that are exemplified in all of Oldham's great and diverse communities today.

Chadderton secured its historical place through aviation, among other things. It made the world-famous Lancaster bomber. In its heyday, the Greengate site employed 20,000 people. When its doors closed in 2012, the 1,500 staff who remained moved out. That was a very sad day for the people of the town.

Our engineering and manufacturing base included the world-famous Ferranti, which was famous for making the components for the world's first computer, and Platt Brothers, which was once famous for being the largest engineering plant in Europe. Both are now gone.

Royton has a little in common with this place. You may remember the rhyme, Mr Deputy Speaker, "Remember, remember the 26th of November"—26 November 1884, that is, when the gunpowder plot unfolded in Royton town hall, blowing off the windows and doors. Interestingly, it was led by a gangmaster who was campaigning against measures in the Factory Acts that banned children under 10 years old from working in the mills.

Many people here will know Oldham as an industrial giant, and it was. It was the king of cotton. In its heyday, the town spun more than 17 million spindles, which was more than the whole of the United States and 80% of the total number in the UK. For too many people, the Oldham of yesterday was built on exploitation, with very little regard for quality of life or fairness. People came from countries right around the world to make a better life for themselves, but do you know what the truth is? People struggled. They struggled in desperate poverty, while a lot of the money left town.

The exploitation did not stop in Oldham. Feeding the 17 million spindles required a lot of cotton, which was picked in the fields of the American south. As the machines raged on in 1860, it took 200,000 black slaves to pick enough cotton to feed the mills. So there was exploitation at home, exploitation abroad, and with the money taking leave from the town.

Today, hard-fought battles for better living standards, a welfare state that is there when people need it, and decent homes, are being eroded. People are seeing vital services—in some cases their lifeline—being taken away. For too many people, work does not pay and they cannot make ends meet.

People might think that I am painting Oldham as having been beaten, but mark my words: we are far from beaten. We have courage and determination. If our past successes were built on the industrial revolution, our future will be secured through solid hard work—an industrious revolution. Our town is going from strength to strength. We are rebuilding, attracting investment and creating new jobs. We can be proud of what we have achieved in recent years, but too often it feels as if we are doing it alone, and it should not be that way. Devolution must be more than a love affair with the big cities; it must deliver and provide a decent settlement for towns and districts. I want Oldham to flourish and to be the place we know it can be—a place where my sons, Jack and Harry, and the other 57,000 young people will be proud to call home.

With new powers devolved to Greater Manchester, the challenge is not simply one of good administration, but also of strong political leadership. We have shown that we can get things done. The continued expansion of the Metrolink tram system will certainly accelerate economic growth. We must also push for the future and for cross-borough expansion, and I will use this opportunity to lay down a marker for the Ashton loop line from Ashton town centre to Oldham Mumps, and for a Middleton spur from Oldham Westwood through Middleton and on to the Bury line, connecting the north-east conurbation of Greater Manchester. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State will realise that until Friday I was the

[Jim McMahan]

council member responsible for transport in Greater Manchester, although given his interest in the northern powerhouse, our paths never crossed. [Laughter.] Perhaps he will be charitable in return, given that this is my maiden speech.

As we rightly fight to end the north-south divide in the UK, we know that infrastructure investment can help address Greater Manchester's own north-south divide. Such investment would benefit not just Oldham, but Rochdale, Tameside and—importantly—the north of the city of Manchester. As we rightly point out the imbalance in the UK, we cannot ignore domestic matters closer to home in Greater Manchester. For every 10 jobs that were created in south Manchester in the last decade, only one was created in the north of the conurbation. We cannot carry on like that if devolution is to be a success.

I believe in devolution and will continue to fight for power to be moved away from Whitehall to empower communities—to be honest, devolution as it stands today does not empower those communities. As the former leader of Oldham Council, I worked with others to rally support for devolution to Greater Manchester, and I worked hard to ensure a clear vision for Oldham. It was important to sign up to the deal with the Chancellor, because it is far better to have devolution on terms that we do not necessarily agree with, than to have no devolution at all. It would also be wrong not to challenge where we know that things do not work, and not to push harder when needed.

Without a clear national framework for devolution, it is for the Chancellor to pick and choose who he deals with and what is on offer. The hallmark of devolution so far has been a Treasury power grab from other ministries. The Chancellor had the opportunity to devolve real financial freedoms, but he chose not to. He is quick to give away the power of his fellow Ministers—I am sure Conservative Members will be concerned about that—but evidence suggests that he is not that keen on giving away his own power. Without genuinely reforming central Government and addressing fair funding, the northern powerhouse as a brand is meaningless.

People in Oldham see that the magistrates court and the county court are closing. We do not have a single police custody cell open for a town of nearly 250,000 people. People see youth centres closing, libraries closing, day care centres closing, thousands of staff displaced or sacked, and our positive endeavours for regeneration blocked by central Government. And we are meant to be at the heart of the northern powerhouse!

The political challenge of our time is not how we divide to rule, but how we unite and forge a future where every man, woman and child sees that they have a stake in that future; where there is more to life—there has to be more to life—than just getting by and making ends meet. Oldham MP Winston Churchill once said:

“no one can come into close contact with the working folk of Lancashire without wishing them well”.

I agree with that; it is true. But well-wishers alone are simply not enough. The dark satanic mills that marked the skyline in Churchill's time have by and large now gone and we are a long way from realising our own Jerusalem. Friends, let us not cease from mental fight, nor shall our swords sleep in our hands, till we have built Jerusalem in Oldham's green and pleasant land.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We have a lot of speakers: we have 10 to get in. I am not going to put a time limit in place, as I think we can help each other. If Members have up to two minutes each, we will get everybody in.

6.20 pm

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): May I say what a pleasure it was to listen to the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahan)? It was an excellent maiden speech. As everyone in the Chamber knows, it is usually a nightmare to make your first speech in this Chamber. The way in which the hon. Gentleman delivered his speech, without showing a single nerve, justifies the reputation that outsiders from the south like me heard about in the run-up to the by-election: that he was a highly effective leader of his local council in Oldham. He is not a loss to Oldham and he is certainly a gain to the House of Commons. We look forward to his future contributions to our debates.

I read the motion very carefully and I listened to the shadow Secretary of State with great interest and growing amazement. I noticed that she was able to make her speech while keeping a straight face. It was quite incredible. Here is a motion which, if we look at the parts relating to the railways, is basically, in nice cuddly words, suggesting that we renationalise them. Many of my hon. Friends, and certainly the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton, are too young to remember the days of British Rail, but the way that history has been rewritten to suggest that everything was wonderful under that monolithic organisation is extraordinary. It was late, expensive, the sandwiches curled up at the ends, and it did not provide a fit-for-purpose rail system for this country.

I am not going to rehearse, owing to the shortness of time, what has happened since rail privatisation. What I will say is that because of the private sector and the Government, there has been massive investment in our rail network. Because I am more generous than the Labour Front-Bench spokesmen, I accept that the previous Labour Government began the process of reinvesting in our railways to make them fit for purpose. I would ask, however, that they be equally generous in accepting that we are spending billions and billions of pounds, from a variety of sources, to invest in building on that improvement, to make sure that we have a proper rail service. In control period 5, £38 billion is being spent.

More has to be done, of course, but we are investing in the future and in passengers to ensure that we have a proper railway. Anyone who suggests going back to a nationalised rail service is living in cloud cuckoo land and is driven by dogma, not reality.

6.24 pm

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): May I say what a pleasure it is to follow our new Labour colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahan)?

I will be as quick as I can. My main contention is that the cost of travelling on the train to and from my constituency on Govia Thameslink Railway, which runs Thameslink, Southern and Gatwick Express services through London and the south-east, is a complete and

utter rip off, given the dreadful service commuters have been receiving over the past few weeks and months. I stand not to make party political points; I and commuters just want answers.

I pay tribute to Transport Focus, Martin Abrams and everyone at the Campaign for Better Transport who have been highlighting the hell experienced by commuters. According to Transport Focus's most recent passenger satisfaction survey, GTR scored worst for overall satisfaction. According to Which? it is third from bottom out of 21 services. According to Network Rail's public performance measure for this franchise, the percentage of GTR trains that arrive at the terminating station on time is rock bottom. And Network Rail is not without blame. According to the most recent statistics—for December and January—55% of delays are attributed to Network Rail.

Members on both sides of the House who have had meetings with executives of the companies have received excuse after excuse and broken promise after broken promise, but we have seen no change whatsoever. Instead, we are given excuses about big transformation works at London Bridge causing problems, industrial relations issues, historical under-investment in infrastructure and the complexities of running a big franchise. That is all well and good, but other transport operators face exactly the same challenges and provide a better service. This company has failed to recruit drivers and failed properly to maintain its rolling stock. People deserve answers, so instead of the same old excuses, I want a proper deadline set for GTR to provide a decent service to constituents; I would like suburban and London transport rail services transferred to TfL in the medium term; and I would like to see Crossrail 2 come to my constituency. Once we get decent services, perhaps Ministers can argue that almost £1,000 for a season ticket from my constituency to London Victoria is justified.

6.27 pm

Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): I want to talk about the midland main line, the situation of which has been well charted, and the important reason why this project will go ahead, notwithstanding what is in the motion. The reason it will go ahead is that Derby is a centre of excellence for the rail industry and rail innovation: more than 200 companies around Derby operate solely within the rail industry. We are the best placed area in the whole country when it comes to opportunities for training, innovation, for a college—for whatever it might be. I think the Government ought to listen more carefully in terms of the opportunities for people growing up in Derbyshire who understand rail and have it in their DNA. We must get the best products, whether for Crossrail 2, Crossrail 3, HS2 or HS3, going up to Scotland, which we all want to see. I think that these are fantastic opportunities.

I will not take up any more time, other than to congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) on his excellent maiden speech. It was a pleasure to hear so much history, but he has got a bit of doing to do in the future as well.

6.29 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I promise to be snappy, but first may I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon)

on his fantastic maiden speech? It was a pleasure to be in the Chamber for it. His experience, his background, his love for his constituency and home—it all shone through in his speech. I know he will make a huge contribution to this place.

With a constituency on the border with England, one never misses an opportunity to talk about rail, yes, but about the Severn bridge tolls too, which are the subject of many questions to Transport Ministers and of many debates here. I know that this will continue until we know the Government's plans for tolling in the future when the bridge is returned to public ownership. About 12,000 people in Newport and Monmouthshire commute to work over the bridges every day. As ably highlighted by our Front-Bench team in today's debate, the cost of commuting has increased substantially.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not only those living in her constituency who are affected, because every person who travels over the bridge into God's own country is exploited by the exorbitant tolls, which act as a deterrent to trade and tourism?

Jessica Morden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank her for adding weight to the campaign to lower the Severn bridge tolls, which is much appreciated.

My constituents are basically trapped: they must either pay rising rail fares or the Severn bridge tolls. Commuters, as well articulated by our Front-Bench team, face ever-rising rail fares. Since 2010, season tickets for commuters have risen by 25%. Newport to London commuters face having to pay £2,000 a year more than in 2010, and the cost of travelling from Newport to Bristol Temple Meads has gone up by 27%—a £500 increase. Demand for these services is growing fast, yet we see no improvement in services. Trains are heavily overcrowded, and there are frequently not enough carriages, especially for those getting on at the Severn Tunnel junction in my constituency. I get that feedback every week: carriages are overflowing and constituents are often left on the platform when there is insufficient capacity to take them.

There is an alternative—crossing the Severn bridges, and this is probably the local issue that is raised with me most frequently. Since 2011, the bridge tolls have gone up by 20% for cars. This matters for my Newport East constituents, when those in full-time work have seen only a 2.4% increase in their wages. The fundamental point is that the money taken by the Severn River Crossing is protected from inflationary pressures, while my constituents' wages are not.

Tolls on the Severn bridges are the most expensive in the UK. The *Western Mail* said a few years ago that they were the most expensive per mile in the world. I very much look forward to seeing Transport Ministers tackling that issue for my constituents. We need to know very soon what the Government's plans are, as they affect the rail services or the Severn bridge tolls, as we reach the bridges' return to public ownership in 2018.

6.32 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) on his excellent speech. I am

[Alec Shelbrooke]

sure he will be joining the Opposition Front-Bench team a lot sooner than is customary—he certainly made an excellent speech.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) pretty much laid out exactly what I intended to say about investment in the railways. I can tell my right hon. Friend that I am just about old enough to remember British Rail. I remember the fact that if people were wearing a light-coloured suit or trousers, they would be dirty when they got up. I remember lice coming off the back of the chairs, and I remember carriages literally covered in excrement and never cleaned.

That was the state of the railways when they were in public hands. It was not invested in, and there can be no doubt that over these last 20 years, the standard of the railways, of the rolling-stock and of the whole thing has moved forward. We simply do not hear on the comedy circuit the British rail catering jokes that we used to hear 20 years ago, because it has improved and become a thing of the past.

On the issue of investment, when we talk about what is happening with the railways—there is still a lot of work to do, and I know that my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench are looking carefully at what happens with ticketing—we should bear in mind that we need to create more track and more rail. My city of Leeds, for example, shows that an integrated tram-train system that can use the heavy rail and operate in the city centre is vital. That will never be built by Government through public ownership. It can be built only by attracting investment from the private sector to run, operate and get it going, so that people can make cheaper journeys into the city centre than they have to make now. It can be more reliable and once there cannot be moved. I just wanted to make that brief point that investment in the railways is vital and simply cannot be delivered via public ownership, as was proved time and again under British Rail.

6.34 pm

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): It was a delight to hear the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon). He made an insightful contribution not only to the debate in the Chamber, but to the debate in and around Greater Manchester.

Let me make three very quick points. First, I am extremely concerned about the fact that rail fares have rocketed by a staggering 25% since 2010. Many of my constituents rely on rail travel, not least to commute in and out of Manchester and, indeed, Greater Manchester. Secondly, I am concerned about the Government's use of the retail prices index to calculate rises in regulated fares. Perhaps the Minister will tell us whether he thinks that that is fair.

Thirdly, perhaps the Minister will explain to me and to my constituents why they pay 20% more in fares than Bolton constituents pay for a similar journey. A peak return fare from Bolton to Manchester Victoria will set Bolton constituents back £6.40, but my constituents pay £7.70 for the similar journey from Rochdale to Manchester Victoria. Why is that? Richard Greenwood, chairman of the Support the Oldham Rochdale Manchester rail lines group, has said that the fares in my constituency are "artificially high". That level of fares applies almost

nowhere else in the country, and I see no fit reason for it to apply to Rochdale either. Perhaps the Minister will share his thoughts.

6.36 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), and I wish him well for the securing of his Metrolink extensions. A wish that I expressed in my maiden speech came true, and I hope that he has similarly good fortune.

In the brief time that is available to me, I want to inject a degree of realism into the debate about rail fares. Let me say first that whoever owns the railways, there is a balance to be struck between what the passenger contributes and what is funded from general taxation. If, as the motion suggests, Labour Members want the passenger contribution to decrease, they must either say which taxes will be increased to pay for that, or spell out which part of current spending on the railways will be cut.

The vast majority of the income from the fares that are currently paid—more than three quarters—is spent on staff salaries, and I cannot imagine that Labour Members would want those to be cut. Some of the income is spent on maintaining and improving the track—we have the safest railways in Europe, and I cannot imagine that Labour Members want to compromise that—and some is spent on investment in new rolling stock, new stations, new lines and electrification. The profit margin is tiny: 3% of every pound that is spent. That funds innovation and development in the railways, which has doubled in the last 20 years. That is the reality of the railways today.

I had hoped that we could have a more sensible debate about the new technology and innovations on the railways, but time did not permit it. The philosophical debate about renationalising the railways has obliterated the time in which we could have talked about that issue, but it is what we should be talking about.

Finally, I want to knock on the head the myth that Britain has the highest rail fares in Europe. That is simply not the case. I invite Members to look at a wonderful website, *The Man in Seat Sixty-One*. The man in question compares the cost of rail journeys across Europe, and Members will find that in 85% of cases, United Kingdom rail fares are either the same as or cheaper than those on the continent.

6.38 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), and welcome him to the House. I also congratulate him on the thumping that he gave UKIP at the by-election, which was pleasing for all SNP Members. I regret, however, the rather infantile manner in which his party has approached the debate.

I would never trust the Tories with the railways, but, frankly, I would not trust Labour Members with a train set, given the way in which they have conducted themselves this evening. The mistake that they have made in their motion is a schoolboy howler. They have accused the Scottish Government of not using a power which that Government do not have, and which, moreover, every single Labour Member—with the exception of the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton—voted explicitly,

along with the Conservatives, to prevent Scotland from having during the debate on Scotland Bill. They almost give brass necks a bad name.

In all seriousness, there are two things that my constituents would want me to mention tonight. The first is smart ticketing. It is about time that people travelling by rail or bus, or both, were able to experience their journey right from the point of payment in a way that befits the century they are travelling in. People want to be able to use apps on their smartphones to make life easier, rather than hanging around queueing for a piece of paper to allow them to travel.

My second point, which I have made many times in this Chamber, relates to HS2. We want to see Scotland connected to London and to the great cities of the north, irrespective of our constitutional opinion, because London is our closest world financial capital. We want Scotland and London to benefit from greater connectivity. We want the United Kingdom to up its game so that we can have a high-speed network that serves the whole of the British Isles and not just a small part of them. We need to catch up with France, Spain and China and we need to take the high-speed debate seriously. Like the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), I regret that we have not had enough time for a serious debate on these issues. I can only hope that we will have such an opportunity soon.

6.40 pm

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I should also like to congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) on a most memorable maiden speech.

Like it or not, this Government have launched the largest modernisation of the railways since Victorian times. An integrated and reliable rail service with stations fit for the 21st century is crucial to economic growth. The electrification of the Great Western line is mentioned in the motion and it has continually been spoken about in a damaging manner by Opposition Members. The Prime Minister has committed to the electrification of the line to Swansea, as have the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Transport. Indeed, the project was confirmed by the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns), only last week in this Chamber.

Under this Conservative Government, the Great Western line will be electrified all the way to Swansea. Under 13 years of Labour rule, how much of that line in Wales was electrified? Not a single mile. For all the bravado from Labour Members, they have absolutely no record in government to support their assertions. That stands in stark contrast to this Government's record and their commitment to Wales and to my constituency.

The record of the Welsh Labour Government in Cardiff speaks for itself. The integrated transport system in Wales is poor, in the sense that it simply does not exist as a fully integrated transport system. We need look no further than the bus system in Wales to see the issues that many people there face, particularly those in rural communities. When Sustrans gave evidence at the Welsh Assembly Enterprise and Business Committee in October 2015, it said of the bus sector:

“The current state of the sector is evidently not successful, as shown by the decline in bus usage compared to other areas of the United Kingdom.”

Wales lags behind the rest of the UK on nearly every economic measure, and three rounds of EU structural funds have resulted in almost nothing in the way of major transport infrastructure projects that could really benefit the Welsh economy. However, I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for initiating the electrification of the line to Swansea.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The next two speakers may have one minute each.

6.43 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): One minute will be just enough to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon). I would like to thank him for a brilliant maiden speech and to welcome him to the exclusive group of by-election MPs. I also fully support any projects relating to the Middleton spur.

Ministers say that passengers need to realise that they are paying “fair fares for a comfortable commute”, but none of us has to look far in our own constituencies to find examples of run-down, overcrowded, overpriced and infrequent services. In my constituency, there is only one bus from Heywood to our major city, Manchester, where many of my constituents work and study. At peak times, the bus is overcrowded and the 12-mile journey can take up to 1 hour and 40 minutes.

Passengers were always told that higher fares would pay for improvements, but the link between fare rises and investment has been broken. Just recently, the Department for Transport made it clear that it wanted a significant expansion of driver-only operation on our trains, with no guard on board to assist passengers. That is a really retrograde step for passenger safety. I shall not take up any more time, but I would like to ask the Government and the Department to reconsider their decision on driver-only operation.

6.44 pm

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Transport is essential in providing people with access to work, learning, healthcare, food shops and leisure activities, especially in rural constituencies such as mine. But the reality is that the elderly, the young and the unemployed, who rely on public transport, struggle to reach hospitals, schools, jobcentres and the like. Because of cost and accessibility, most rural households are dependent on cars, and because alternatives are limited or non-existent, rural drivers are left doing more driving, spending more on fuel and paying higher fuel costs. Rising motoring costs will undermine the sustainability of rural communities and lead to increased social exclusion, with resulting decline in rural shops and services being accelerated.

Cost has a great impact on public transport, but there is a fundamental difference between mobility and accessibility. Some rural areas are already suffering from population decline, poverty and deprivation, and people there are less likely to be able to afford a car and rely on public transport. Limited public transport results in an increase in isolation and further decline—in my constituency, some villages no longer exist.

[Corri Wilson]

We have already discussed the Labour party being in power for 13 years and not addressing the issue mentioned in its motion today, but a change in the legislation would enable us in Scotland to ensure the delivery of a rail service with the maximum social and economic benefits that addresses our specific needs. Instead of attacking the Scottish Government for something they have absolutely no control over, perhaps Members on both sides of this House should be applauding them for what they have achieved, despite constant Westminster cuts. Better still, they should devolve these powers to Scotland and let us get on with it.

6.46 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): As we debate the cost of travel, thousands of our fellow citizens, in all our constituencies, are in buses, on trains or on roads, in cars or on bikes. The quality of our transport system makes a difference to each of their lives every day, which is why this debate matters. That was brought home to me on the first day of this year, when I was sitting on a train on the way to Ipswich to join Labour campaigners protesting about the ever-rising cost of rail fares. Across the aisle from me, a young woman who worked in a supermarket near Ipswich station was telling her friend, glumly, about the shock she got when she purchased her ticket that morning. It had cost an extra 60p, so it would be an extra three quid a week—£3 out of not much left over. There will have been similar stories on trains and buses up and down the country. For millions of our constituents, every penny counts, and in today's debate we have not heard enough about the problems on buses, in particular.

Let me start by welcoming the first contribution made in this place by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon). Members have expressed their appreciation before for his revered predecessor, who has quite a successor. Like many colleagues, I enjoyed campaigning in my hon. Friend's constituency in the autumn and noted that before coming to Parliament he had already made a powerful impact on the national scene through his inspirational work leading the local council. His powerful contribution today pointed out some of the very real contradictions and weaknesses in the Government's devolution policies.

Despite the lack of time, we heard other excellent contributions today, including those from my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna), who outlined the very poor services from which his constituents are suffering at the moment, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who talked about the challenges facing her constituents. What they all confirmed was what we already knew, which is that rail and bus fares have shot up since the Conservative party came to power. We all trade figures on these things, but the key one is the comparison between fares and wages: what it really costs people. The truth is that fares have risen three times faster than wages, and that is why it hurts.

There are, however, some who do not feel the pain. The Secretary of State clearly seems impervious to it. Several months ago, he said:

“More transport, better transport...Under our Conservative majority government it's happening.”

Has he really forgotten about the broken election pledges to electrify key routes in the midlands and the north just weeks after the ballot boxes had closed? Or do the Government say that this was just paused? Is it not interesting how Governments introduce new words into the political lexicon. The word “paused” sounds so innocuous but it could ultimately be this Government's epitaph: a country on pause.

We now have a rail investment programme delayed by years; more than two thirds of councils cutting local bus services; and more than 2,400 local authority-supported bus routes cut or downgraded. We could go on a national tour of bus shelters where there are no buses—perhaps they are paused, too.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Will he comment on the introduction of a fare increase by stealth? People expect rail fares to go up once a year on the first day back in January, but we must not forget that, a year ago in September, this Government introduced an evening peak on Northern Rail, which hit part-time workers and students in particular and caused chaos in railway stations across the north.

Daniel Zeichner: Indeed, and my hon. Friend makes a very strong point.

When it comes to buses in particular, we know that the Conservative party always talks about local decisions. The truth is that, by slashing funding to local councils, the Government are passing the buck. It is no good Government Members complaining about problems with their services, as famously the Prime Minister did, when they just troop through the Lobby imposing cuts on local councils. They really must take some responsibility.

We on Labour's Benches strongly believe in the principle of local communities having a say over their public transport, and we have long been committed to that, but what the Government are offering for bus services is a sham. They are giving localities power with one hand while taking funding away with the other. With a 37% reduction in central Government funding to English local authorities over the course of the previous Parliament, and a further reduction of 24% to come, local authorities have been left with little choice but to cut to the bone.

For Labour, the devolution agenda seems to be little more than a front for public transport funding cuts and fare increases. As Labour Members have observed before, this is not so much a northern powerhouse, as a northern power cut. Whatever the Government spin on being in for a penny, in for a pound, it is clear that the link between fare rises and investment has been broken.

When the Government's bus service operators grant, which is effectively used to subsidise bus services, was cut by 20% after 2010, the Department for Transport warned that small towns, and particularly rural areas, would be worst affected. It certainly got that right—they were.

What needs to be done? The answer is this: not carry on as we are. It has been fascinating to watch the delicate U-turn being carried out in the DfT as it grasps that the Treasury has finally cottoned on to the fact that we are being taken for a ride by many of the bus operators. It is an irony, is it not, that the Government are now looking to pursue Labour's policy of bus

reregulation? In the past, they were totally opposed to such deregulation. In fact, in the previous Parliament, they directly punished those areas that attempted to pursue bus tendering.

At the election, we promised the biggest shake-up of the bus industry in years. How astonished the operators must have been to find that, after the election, it is now a Conservative Government who are looking to learn from the positive experience in London and apply it across the country. Some of us are just a bit sceptical about this conversion, but we eagerly await the forthcoming bus legislation, and hope to see within it genuine power for local people and local authorities to have real leverage over their local services. The case for reform is incontrovertible and urgent because the status quo just is not working. Private bus operators have abandoned bus routes and services that they found to be commercially unprofitable, leaving the most vulnerable in our society stranded.

We want to give communities genuine power to plan fares and timetables, and to reflect local needs. Although some bus operators have strongly resisted moves towards greater co-ordination, these powers are already in use in London and they are the norm in Europe. If it is good enough for London then it is good enough for the north-east, Greater Manchester, Sheffield, Cornwall, and any other area that wants them. The alternative of continuing to watch bus services uncontrollably deteriorate is no alternative at all. At the election, the Prime Minister made many promises that have not stood up to scrutiny. He promised older people that the free bus pass, introduced by Labour, would be maintained, but, as so often with this Prime Minister, it is important to read the small print. He kept the bus pass, but said nothing about keeping the bus. The number of concessionary passes has gone up, but the number of concessionary bus journeys has gone down. How useful is a bus pass without a bus? We need a better way.

6.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): This is only the third Opposition day debate on transport since 2010. This Government are always keen to debate transport issues in the House, so let us hope that, like London buses, two will come along very soon.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) talked about the importance of aviation. We understand how important that is for remote communities, which is why, for example, we are supporting connections between London and Dundee and London and Newquay. He accused the Government of spending more time opposing the SNP than Labour, so I will move on to the next speaker.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Karen Lumley) explained how Government investment is delivering for her region and, in particular, the benefits for the Birmingham area from HS2 and the capacity it will deliver.

The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), in an excellent maiden speech, paid tribute to his predecessor. He has a track record of delivering locally, which I am sure had a lot to do with his by-election success. He talked about the courage and determination of Oldham folk, a quality shared on

both sides of the Pennines, and I am sure that that his sons Jack and Harry will be very proud of their dad today.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) gave us a reality check about the bad old days of British Rail. If Opposition Members were paying attention, they might want to remove their rose-tinted spectacles. The hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) spoke for hard-pressed commuters and I bet that if he was leading his party today he would not be contemplating nationalising the railways.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler) welcomed HS2 and investment in the midland mainline. The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) highlighted the cost to communities of the Severn crossing. There was a reference in an intervention during her speech to God's own country, but I thought for a minute it was to God's own county.

My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) talked about Leeds, which, as we know, is the biggest European city to have no integrated transport system of its own.

The hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) talked about how we should link fare rises to inflation, but I point out that that means inflation plus zero, which the previous Government failed to do. Whichever measure we use, it is important to note that fares will rise more slowly under this Government than wages.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), to whom I pay tribute for his work on the Transport Committee, asked a big question that the Opposition need to address, which is how they will pay for all their promises. They could not make that argument in 2015 and I suspect that they will fail again in 2020. He talked about the cost of fares, and the point is often made that fares in Europe are higher than fares here in Britain. I checked out what it would cost my children to return from university for Easter. My daughter, who lives in London, can travel one way from King's Cross to York for as little as £20 if she decides to depart at 7.08 in the morning, but as she is a student I suspect she will want to travel later. To arrive for lunchtime, she can pay £38 but she gets a discount of one third as she has a student railcard, so she can come to York for £25.10 on the east coast main line, run by Virgin. My son, who is travelling down from Newcastle, can do so for £6.90 or £9.40.

I am not sure whether, just before the election in 2010, the outgoing Chief Secretary to the Treasury was following a tradition or setting a precedent when he left the now-infamous note saying:

"I'm afraid there is no money".

How refreshingly honest. I thought I would follow suit and on my last day in the Department for Transport, as I packed up my personal effects before leaving to fight the election last year, having paid particular attention to the opinion polls, I concluded that a return to Great Minster House was unlikely, but hoped that my replacement would be cheered by a message. Here it is, in my hand. It reads: "There is money for infrastructure thanks to our long-term economic plan." I am sure that that is one reason why we have had so few Opposition day debates on transport over the past five and a half years. Ours is a record of delivery compared with 13 years of disappointment under Labour.

[Mr Robert Goodwill]

The Secretary of State pointed out that electrification under Labour was carried out at less than a snail's pace, less than 1 mile a year—or, to put it another way, Hornby delivered more electrified rail network in the time Labour was in government. The investment mentioned in my note is being delivered, with 4,000 new carriages, £38.5 billion to improve our railways, £15 billion for a proper multi-annual road investment strategy and £6 billion to address the pothole backlog we inherited. There is also, of course, high-speed rail to free up existing rail capacity for passengers and freight, shrinking the size of our country, running to Manchester and Scotland from day one. Indeed, HS2 will run to Glasgow from day one; Scottish crews will be manning trains in Glasgow from day one.

When I go to Brussels, I realise that it is our franchising model that countries such as Italy and Spain want to emulate, and British train companies are winning franchises in Germany. They can see how the competitive franchise system is delivering better services, new rolling stock, smart ticketing and more user-friendly refunds for delays.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

The House divided: Ayes 213, Noes 305.

Division No. 167]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Coyle, Neil
Abrahams, Debbie	Crausby, Mr David
Alexander, Heidi	Creagh, Mary
Ali, Rushanara	Creasy, Stella
Anderson, Mr David	Cruddas, Jon
Ashworth, Jonathan	Cryer, John
Austin, Ian	Cummins, Judith
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Cunningham, Alex
Barron, rh Kevin	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Beckett, rh Margaret	Dakin, Nic
Benn, rh Hilary	Danczuk, Simon
Berger, Luciana	David, Wayne
Betts, Mr Clive	De Piero, Gloria
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Doughty, Stephen
Blenkinsop, Tom	Dowd, Jim
Blomfield, Paul	Dowd, Peter
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Dromey, Jack
Brennan, Kevin	Dugher, Michael
Brown, Lyn	Durkan, Mark
Bryant, Chris	Eagle, Ms Angela
Buck, Ms Karen	Eagle, Maria
Burden, Richard	Edwards, Jonathan
Burgon, Richard	Elliott, Julie
Byrne, rh Liam	Ellman, Mrs Louise
Cadbury, Ruth	Esterson, Bill
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Evans, Chris
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Farrelly, Paul
Chapman, Jenny	Field, rh Frank
Coaker, Vernon	Fitzpatrick, Jim
Coffey, Ann	Fleelo, Robert
Cooper, rh Yvette	Fletcher, Colleen
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Flint, rh Caroline
Cox, Jo	Flynn, Paul

Fovargue, Yvonne	McGovern, Alison
Gardiner, Barry	McInnes, Liz
Glass, Pat	McKinnell, Catherine
Glendon, Mary	McMahon, Jim
Godsiff, Mr Roger	Meale, Sir Alan
Goodman, Helen	Mearns, Ian
Green, Kate	Miliband, rh Edward
Greenwood, Lillian	Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Greenwood, Margaret	Morden, Jessica
Griffith, Nia	Morris, Grahame M.
Gwynne, Andrew	Murray, Ian
Haigh, Louise	Onn, Melanie
Hamilton, Fabian	Onwurah, Chi
Hanson, rh Mr David	Osamor, Kate
Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Owen, Albert
Harpham, Harry	Pearce, Teresa
Harris, Carolyn	Pennycook, Matthew
Hayes, Helen	Perkins, Toby
Hayman, Sue	Phillips, Jess
Healey, rh John	Pound, Stephen
Hendrick, Mr Mark	Powell, Lucy
Hepburn, Mr Stephen	Qureshi, Yasmin
Hermon, Lady	Rayner, Angela
Hillier, Meg	Reed, Mr Jamie
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret	Reed, Mr Steve
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Rees, Christina
Hoey, Kate	Reeves, Rachel
Hollern, Kate	Reynolds, Emma
Hopkins, Kelvin	Reynolds, Jonathan
Howarth, rh Mr George	Rimmer, Marie
Hunt, Tristram	Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Huq, Dr Rupa	Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Hussain, Imran	Rotheram, Steve
Jarvis, Dan	Ryan, rh Joan
Johnson, rh Alan	Saville Roberts, Liz
Johnson, Diana	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Jones, Gerald	Sheerman, Mr Barry
Jones, Graham	Sherriff, Paula
Jones, Helen	Shuker, Mr Gavin
Jones, Mr Kevan	Siddiq, Tulip
Jones, Susan Elan	Skinner, Mr Dennis
Kane, Mike	Slaughter, Andy
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald	Smeeth, Ruth
Keeley, Barbara	Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Kendall, Liz	Smith, Angela
Kinnock, Stephen	Smith, Cat
Kyle, Peter	Smith, Jeff
Lammy, rh Mr David	Smith, Nick
Leslie, Chris	Smith, Owen
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Smyth, Karin
Lewis, Clive	Spellar, rh Mr John
Lewis, Mr Ivan	Starmer, Keir
Long Bailey, Rebecca	Stevens, Jo
Lucas, Caroline	Streeting, Wes
Lucas, Ian C.	Stringer, Graham
Mactaggart, rh Fiona	Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Madders, Justin	Tami, Mark
Mahmood, Mr Khalid	Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Mahmood, Shabana	Thornberry, Emily
Malhotra, Seema	Timms, rh Stephen
Mann, John	Trickett, Jon
Marris, Rob	Turley, Anna
Marsden, Mr Gordon	Turner, Karl
Maskell, Rachael	Twigg, Stephen
Matheson, Christian	Umunna, Mr Chuka
McCabe, Steve	Vaz, rh Keith
McCarthy, Kerry	Vaz, Valerie
McDonagh, Siobhain	Watson, Mr Tom
McDonald, Andy	West, Catherine
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair	Wilson, Phil
McFadden, rh Mr Pat	Winnick, Mr David
McGinn, Conor	Winterton, rh Dame Rosie

Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Holly Lynch and
Vicky Foxcroft

NOES

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

Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Elliott, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick

Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James

Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Neill, Robert
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig

Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather

White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wilson, Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
 Simon Kirby and
 Sarah Newton

Question accordingly negated.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (COMMITTEES)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 3 and 4 together.

Ordered,

That the Measure passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, entitled Safeguarding and Clergy Discipline Measure (HC 722), be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.

That the Measure passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, entitled Diocesan Stipends Fund (Amendment) Measure (HC 723), be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—(*Charlie Elphicke*.)

Post-SSI Support Package: Redcar

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Charlie Elphicke*.)

7.14 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): As has been well documented in this House and in the national media, my constituency has been through one of the toughest times in its existence. I could debate all day with the Minister about what more I believe the Government could have done to save the Redcar coke ovens and blast furnace. I also have many outstanding questions on the future of the site and who will be paying for it. But I want to make the people who have borne the brunt of the tragedy the topic of this debate.

Some 2,200 men and women lost their jobs directly when SSI went into liquidation. Twenty-six supply chain businesses were also affected, with a further 954 redundancies. As is the case after such a calamitous economic shock, numbers continue to increase as local businesses, shops, childminders, decorators, hairdressers and many others are affected by the money being taken out of the local economy. Each of these is a tragedy. Each of these is a life that needs to be picked up, a mortgage that needs to be paid, a Christmas that had to be got through. Redcar and Cleveland Mind has had a 91% increase in mental health referrals in the past year, and we know that January and February are hard at the best of times. I therefore thought it important to stop at this point and to take stock of where we are and what is happening.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the collapse of SSI has had massive ramifications right across Teesside, so any response that the Government may give, including Lord Heseltine's review, has to deliver immediate and targeted support to ensure that all our constituents who are so affected have the employment opportunities that they, and our communities, deserve?

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The scale of this has been absolutely devastating, not just for those who were directly employed, but, as I said, in the knock-on repercussions for our community.

This debate is about trying to learn lessons from the support package that has been put in place—lessons at local level and, indeed, national level. It aims to look at how the £50 million support package from the Government is being applied, what is working and what is not, and what lessons can be learned, particularly as we see other steelmaking areas in the country now facing the same tragedy as us.

Out of the tragedy has come some positive learning. The steel taskforce has been an important creation to enable multi-agency co-operation from the start. Weekly meetings have allowed local partners from the Department for Work and Pensions, the local authority, BIS, the unions, the local enterprise partnership, the local media, elected politicians and others to clarify communications processes and to get to the root of the issues and concerns. I believe that every region should consider putting together a committee of this kind that could be called on in the event of a catastrophe similar to that which we saw last year. Indeed, areas with similar high

levels of unemployment may want to consider organising such partnerships as a standard procedure to tackle the challenges they face in employment and skills.

It has also been encouraging that national and local agencies have worked together in a way that departmental silos and local versus national boundaries all too often prevent. The National Careers Service has provided guidance and advice. The Skills Funding Agency has acted to remove barriers and increase the flexible use of its funding for SSI workers. Jobcentre Plus has worked closely alongside the DWP and BIS, allowing rapid response processes to be put in place and creating an efficient system for passing on referrals. FE Plus, a group of colleges in Teesside, has forged a close working relationship with private training providers, allowing referrals to be passed from public sector providers to private sector education providers with specialist provision.

This experience has highlighted the complex and bureaucratic nature of skills funding and provision, but it has also clearly indicated that after an initial period of shock, enabling agencies to work together at regional level has allowed many of the usual barriers to be overcome, helped particularly by the benefit of a clear decision-making body in the form of the taskforce.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on the sterling work she is doing for people across Teesside and elsewhere. My surgeries have been full of people who are contracted employees and who are not getting the same level of support as direct employees. Does she agree that barriers need to be broken down so that they can get help similar to that for direct employees?

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. I have met a number of contractors, many of whom have service of over 30 years in the steel industry, having worked in catering and on the site itself. They have all provided as much value to the steel industry as others, and they deserve equal treatment. I will go on to talk about one of the successful experiences that we have had. Again, I hope that lessons can be learned to make sure that there is not a two-tier system for contractors and the full-time employed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We sometimes overlook one important issue. This is not just about jobs; it is about the financial, emotional and physical impact on families as they wonder how they are going to pay their bills and mortgages. Does the hon. Lady think that the Government should provide help for people to get through this hard time and make sure that they can cope at a time of stress?

Anna Turley: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We pushed for the Government funding to go towards crisis loans and crisis management, and the taskforce has been excellent at putting in place support for mortgage payments and transport issues and for ensuring that people can pay their bills. I want to make sure that that is replicated when addressing the problems in Port Talbot and elsewhere and that they learn from our experience in Redcar. That is not to diminish, however, the devastating consequences of what has happened. There were huge challenges over Christmas. Many people

got through Christmas and provided for their families, but, looking ahead, we have to press on and give them the long-term help and support they need to get back into work. The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point.

One of the most important factors in the response has been the flexibility of the funding available through the support package. It ensured that people were not limited in the courses to which they had access, as would usually be the case, and that specialist and professional training ordinarily paid for by employers was now funded by Government for these priority workers. That flexibility was coupled with the relaxation of certain rules, such as the Jobcentre Plus 16-hour limit for training or education, and the fact that applicants were not restricted to just one course or to those that were relevant only to previous employment or experience, which was an issue at the beginning of the process. Such barriers would have got in the way of accessing opportunities. The DWP and BIS should look at that at a national level in order to widen access and opportunity to all.

Jobcentre Plus organised rapid response sessions just three days after liquidation, and it saw more than 2,000 people in the course of just a few weeks. It then worked with the National Careers Service to organise the subsequent individual one-to-one skills sessions, which have helped to inform training needs.

There has also been an unprecedented level of contact between colleges in my area and employers, with further education providers in my constituency contacting more than 2,500 separate companies directly. That has ensured that employers were made aware of the funding and training that local colleges had available to fill vacancies that the businesses were advertising. There have been three jobs fairs, one which took place just two weeks after the announcement, and we understand that they have filled about 200 vacancies, although the Minister may have some more up-to-date statistics.

There are also plans to engage more large-scale companies locally, particularly those that may be six months to a year away from starting up, to ensure that we shift the focus from immediate recruitment to creating bespoke training packages so that people can get the skills they need down the line, when those companies come on board and invest in our area. I want to take this opportunity to thank the countless local businesses that have got on board quickly and been extremely helpful and forthcoming in the support they have provided to those workers and apprentices affected.

Despite positive collaboration and partnership at local level, however, the success of a venture such as this can only truly be measured by the experience of those who are on the receiving end of the support. I want to set out some of the challenges we have faced so that the lessons can be taken up by Government. At an early taskforce meeting, it transpired that no agency or individual had a full and comprehensive list of all those who had been affected by the closure of SSI. The taskforce had to re-collect information on names, addresses, skill sets and qualifications. We need to ensure that data sharing is seen as an early priority in the unfortunate event of another area being affected. We also need accurate and longitudinal information on who has accessed help and support, who is in work and where that work is located geographically.

[Anna Turley]

There were also well-documented problems with accessing the central Government money announced by Ministers. It took hard work from the chair of the local taskforce to convince risk-averse Whitehall mandarins that support for apprentices and the use of the funding to incentivise recruitment did not constitute state aid. I hope that BIS has learned to be more ambitious in the way it supports enterprise than this episode has demonstrated.

Unfortunately, there have also been widespread delays in accessing training, as some of the agencies involved struggled to deal with the massively increased demand. Further education funding has been reduced by 14% in the past five years. Although the £3 million available to local Teesside colleges for courses is excellent, the challenges in upscaling rapidly to cope with the levels of demand have led to delays for those accessing courses.

For example, a constituent of mine with 31 years' experience in the steelworks applied for training no less than three months ago. Since then, he has been passed from agency to agency and is now on the verge of missing the deadline for the next wave of training courses in February. I have received many similar concerns about delays to accessing training. I have even had cases where ex-SSI workers have been forced to attend existing college courses with 16 to 18-year-old students, which is disruptive for all parties involved. Others are on courses between the hours of 9 am and 5 pm, but have been told that they must attend the jobcentre during those hours. Of course, the organisation and administrative challenges that come with dealing with thousands of requests after years of cutbacks is huge, but the human impact of such delays is tragic.

Unfortunately, despite the good work done by many jobcentre staff, numerous constituents have contacted me to raise the dehumanising treatment they have received in jobcentres. Many of these workers have never been out of work, and for many of them, as for so many in my constituency, the experience of being on the dole is horrendous. For example, we were assured originally that ex-SSI employees who claimed jobseeker's allowance would be afforded a 13-week period of grace, which is a mechanism available to all job coaches to allow individuals with extensive experience in a particular field to have some time to focus on applying for jobs in that sector. However, my constituents—I stress, not exclusively those affected by SSI—have been threatened with sanctions if they do not apply for work in bars or retail as early as two weeks into their claim. Many right hon. and hon. Members have spoken about widespread problems in Jobcentre Plus. The issues about sanctions must be addressed. Sanctions should not be used as a mechanism to force claimants to apply for jobs that are not relevant in this instance; such jobs should be a last resort.

Another challenge we face is the confusions on pensions. Ex-SSI employees were left shellshocked to find that the money leaving their monthly pay packets had not in fact ended up in a pension fund. I am now pleased to say that the continued dialogue between the official receiver and the Community trade union has resulted in all the contributions—both employee and employer contributions—being received by Scottish Widows, and they are now being applied to employees' pension accounts on a month-by-month basis. The continued weekly dialogue between the official receiver and the

Community trade union has ensured that there is continued communication and that problems on the site are worked through. I want to commend the Community union for all it has done to support its members at this difficult time.

One of the other challenges we face is dealing with the fact that a number of other companies on Teesside have made workers redundant, including Boulby Potash and Air Products, since the SSI announcement. As a result, an initiative to help people find work following the closure of SSI is being rolled out across the Tees valley. This resource hub brings together a number of agencies to provide advice and support to anyone who has been made redundant or who is out of work. Advice will be available on a wide range of topics, including CV writing, new career opportunities, interview techniques, trade union representation and money management. That is exactly the kind of learning that I want tonight's debate to share more widely.

Another achievement has been the Insolvency Service's decision to grant employee status to agency workers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) mentioned. We fought to ensure that the 29 workers from Jo Hand Recruitment were in full receipt of their statutory redundancy pay, holiday pay and notice pay. I just wonder how many more of these injustices are happening around the country outside the SSI spotlight.

In conclusion, we are only three months in and we still have a mountain to climb. Many people have not had the help and support they require. Our challenge is to find them and to ensure that they get the support they need to rebuild their lives. Ultimately, the challenge of bringing jobs and economic regeneration to our area is a long-term one, but given the kind of resilience and determination that has been shown in Teesside during the past few months, the challenges are not insurmountable. With the right help and flexibility from Departments and with the devolution of power and funding to local stakeholders, I see no reason why we cannot overcome this tragedy and build a bright future for our town. We know our challenges, and we are showing we can find solutions. I sincerely hope the Government will support us.

7.28 pm

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): I congratulate the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on securing this debate, and on placing on public record—this does not have anything to do with party politics—that undoubtedly, throughout this wholly unfortunate and sorry episode, she has always fought hard for her constituents, which she will of course continue to do. Obviously, we do not agree politically at all, but we do agree on the huge resilience and the remarkable achievements we can already see, notwithstanding the terrible closure of SSI. We are agreed about the remarkable people she represents and all that has been achieved, although there is of course an awful lot more to do.

The hon. Lady makes a very good point. In such difficult times, with the closure of a very important industry that employs a lot of people in an area where not many people live—in other words, the industry has a huge impact on the local community—or with a large number of redundancies, as we saw yesterday with the

Tata decision about Port Talbot, we must learn the lessons from our being there to support them financially and by setting up bodies to administer the money. She has quite properly highlighted several problems and difficulties. She makes the good point, although it sounds perverse, that we should always be aware that the worst could happen and that it is good to make contingency plans for the worst-case scenario.

When I went to Redcar just before it closed, a good structure was already in place. There was a good local enterprise partnership, and there were good relationships between the local council, under the outstanding leadership of its chief executive, Amanda Skelton, and local businesses, with the involvement of Paul Booth, the excellent chair of the LEP. Sadly, the community had been through it all before and this was not new territory. Because the community had experienced the mothballing by Tata, it had been through a similar experience and was prepared for the worst. There was a lot of realism and reasonableness, notably from the union leaders. I pay tribute to them, as did the hon. Lady. When the dreadful moment came, they could put things together very quickly. I remember the first meeting of the taskforce, when the spirit of togetherness was obvious. They knew what they were doing; they just needed to get on with dealing with the money.

Alex Cunningham: The Minister clearly recognises the tremendous job that has been done on Teesside by so many people, including the local authorities. She will also be aware that yesterday's announcement affects my neighbouring constituency of Hartlepool, where 100 jobs will be lost. Has she given any consideration to what will happen to those workers, particularly in relation to the excellent package that is available for SSI workers?

Anna Soubry: I am not aware of anything in particular in respect of the redundancies in Hartlepool, but if the hon. Gentleman and those in the neighbouring community want to put forward a case, I am always willing to listen.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): First, this situation is unlike the mothballing scenario in 2010, when I was a union officer on site, because there was not a single hard redundancy in the 22-month period. Now, there is a liquidation scenario and we have seen many hard redundancies. Secondly, I have written to the Minister about extending the remit of the taskforce to encompass the whole Tees conurbation and to help other workers who lose their jobs, such as those at Caparo, Tata and Boulby in my constituency. Thirdly, this will happen again and again. We have seen it in Port Talbot, Trostre, Llanwern, Dalzell and Clydebridge. We need a national network of taskforces to see how steelworkers and other workers are being treated in different areas of the country. This cannot be dealt with in a devolved, fragmented way. It is a sectoral issue that encompasses the whole of the UK.

Anna Soubry: I do not have time to deal with all those points because I want to respond to the specific points that were made by the hon. Member for Redcar, but there are lessons to be learned. It behoves any community, in the event of serious job losses, to act quickly and pull it all together. Many communities do so and that was critical in Redcar.

I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Redcar and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop), and other hon. Members, for the way in which they have worked with the taskforce. I have paid tribute to Amanda Skelton and Paul Booth for the way in which they formed the taskforce almost before the dreadful news came on that Friday. As the hon. Gentleman said, at least 2,000 people were immediately put into redundancy, with all the consequences that that has for the supply chain, and many hundreds of them had not been paid for a considerable period. One reason why the taskforce was successful was that there were already good relationships between business, the council, Members of Parliament and all the other people one would expect to be there.

As a Government, we quickly put forward a financial package. In effect, there was £60 million. There was a headline figure of £80 million, but just under £30 million of that was used for redundancies, so the money that could be put into helping people get back into work was in the region of £50 million. I want to put it on the record that there was a £2.4 million safety net fund and that £1.7 million was eventually made available for apprentices. It took a bit of a fight, but we got there. There was £3 million for retraining courses, £2.6 million for a flexible support fund, £750,000 for business start-ups, a jobs and skills fund of £16.5 million, and £16 million of support for firms in the supply chain and the wider Tees valley area. There were also redundancy payments.

The hon. Lady is right to say that there is often a big problem in Whitehall. We said to those people, "We trust you to work out where the money needs to go." However, the situation was, frankly, maddening and infuriating, and I only found out about it after she sent me a text. I do things differently, Mr Deputy Speaker. I give people my mobile phone number and say, "You contact me. You text me", and they do! In a way it should not be like that, but it is good—we can exchange numbers later in private, Mr Deputy Speaker. The reason I do that is because of the situation that we found at Redcar. We had a group of people in the taskforce whom we trusted, and I pay tribute to all of them. They are not paid to do that, and they have worked incredibly hard. Amanda Skelton is paid to be the chief executive of the council, but she has worked like an absolute trooper and well beyond the hours for which she is paid—astonishing!

We trusted those people to put together a package and to have the funds, but we then had to go through the most bizarre set of hoops and all the rest of it, because they had to show that the package was value for money. As I put it to my otherwise excellent civil servants, this is a chief executive of a unitary authority who, on a daily basis, deals with large amounts of money and a huge budget. She is more than capable of looking at value for money, because unfortunately she has had to make lots of cuts, to reorganise and so on. In other words, I cannot think of many people who are more qualified to decide where the money should go, and who also have the responsibility to safeguard what is taxpayers' money, but instead a system had to be followed—and Governments, of whichever colour, are blighted by too many systems and processes. We say that we will trust people, but too often we do not. However, we cut through that system—the instruction I always give is, "Get on with it. Trust these people and give them the money so that they can get on with it."

[Anna Soubry]

There is no better example of the determination of those people involved in the taskforce—and beyond in the community—to do the right thing by all those who were made redundant at Redcar than what happened with the apprentices. There were 51 apprentices at SSI, and those jobs finished on that Friday. Some of those youngsters were on three-year apprenticeships, and it had all gone. This is a lot of money to ordinary folk, but we were talking about £1.7 million. It was astonishing. People such as Paul Booth went out there and found a place for every single one of those 51 apprentices within a week. That speaks volumes about their abilities, and about the reaction from the community and businesses. We then had to get the money—bit of a nightmare—but we got it, and all 51 apprentices can continue their apprenticeships.

Anna Turley: The right hon. Lady is right about the apprentices, but there were a few weeks between them losing their jobs and being reappointed. One apprentice came to my surgery and told me that he had been to Jobcentre Plus. Despite having done two and a half years of his engineering apprenticeship, he was told that he should get a job in a bar. It comes back to the point I made earlier: there are issues with the DWP's systems, and that is one of the main points that I wanted to raise.

Anna Soubry: Again, that is a good point extremely well made. Such things are not acceptable. Of course I pay full credit to Jobcentre Plus. I know that Ministers stand here and say, "The taskforce has gone whizzing in." From my experience in Nottinghamshire, when Thoresby colliery closed down, the taskforce went in and it all sounded great, marvellous and wonderful. In a way, it was great and marvellous. A lot of people put a lot of effort in. What matters, however, is the advice that somebody then receives.

There was another problem that the hon. Lady will remember: people being told that they could not sign up to HGV courses. The workforce in our steelworks is almost exclusively highly skilled. It is absolutely obvious that somebody who has been working in a place like SSI at Redcar may well want to change, enhance or add to their skills by training to be an HGV driver. What did we discover? That they could not have any money to do that. The stuff of madness! After a text from the hon. Lady, we got that one sorted out.

We then had some problems in making sure that the money was delivered to the colleges. When, unfortunately, 800 jobs were going in Scunthorpe, we put £9 million in because we had learnt from the experience in Redcar. That was replicated when Labour Members came to see me about the situation in Rotherham. They made a very good argument for a package of support. One of the things the Skills Minister and I did—by way of text, if I may say so again, Mr Deputy Speaker; it got the job done—was to release the money literally within 24 hours.

No disrespect to our great civil servants, but we cut all the corners and cut out all the nonsense. The Minister gave a direction and said, "Get that skills money sorted out, so they can have it in Rotherham," and we did the same in Scunthorpe. That was because of the lessons we learned from our experience in Redcar. However, the hon. Lady is right that there is more we can learn.

I think there is some good news. Over 400 former SSI workers have not yet made any benefit claim to date. We do not know why. I am hoping it is because they have got jobs, not because they have dropped out of the system.

The hon. Lady is also right about data. We always have to have people's permission before we can share data. Nearly 700 former SSI supply chain workers are no longer claiming benefit. We hope that the majority are either in full-time work or in training. Some 166 people were employed as a direct result of the first jobs fair, which was held, as she said, very quickly in October. Nearly 900 people attended the second jobs and skills fair at the end of November at the Riverside Stadium, where more than 700 immediate vacancies were on offer.

I want to pay tribute to the noble Lord Heseltine. I know he can often be a controversial figure, but he is an astonishing person. He has the ability to bring all the people and all the organisations together. He has vision and drive. It was my idea, if there is anybody to blame—although I do not think anybody should be blamed, because he has been absolutely the right person for this. He has gone up there, and he has a vision and is knitting things together. I hope that in a short period of time we will be in a position to announce more about the future of the works at SSI and what we can do there.

I want to put it on record that 2,000 rapid response sessions have now been delivered, 2,969 people have received advice and help from the support hub, and 5,200 calls were made to the Jobcentre Plus helpline.

Anna Turley: Tonight has been about the people, but the site is extremely important too. I hope Lord Heseltine will not make any announcements without discussing with local people what they would like to see from that site, which is so important to the local economy and for local jobs.

Anna Soubry: Absolutely. One of the great joys of Lord Heseltine is that he is able to work with people. He brings people together. As I say, he has the right connections and the right vision.

It is great to have had this debate. There are lessons to be learned. We have already learned some of them. However, the ideal position to be in is never to have to set up a taskforce or to give out these sums of money in the first place. We do not want to see the redundancies that we saw in Redcar.

7.44 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 19 January 2016

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

Access to Justice: Vulnerable People

9.30 am

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to justice for vulnerable people.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak on what is an increasingly critical issue: access to justice, particularly for those who for whatever reason would otherwise be left without legal redress. The Opposition recognise the fundamental importance of legal aid in ensuring that everyone has access to justice. It is a significant time for legal aid, and today marks the inaugural meeting of the Bach commission, led by my colleague Lord Willy Bach and my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner). The commission has brought together experts from across the legal profession and will explore establishing access to justice as a fundamental public entitlement.

Since 2010 the Government have cut legal aid to the bone. The consensus that once existed around legal aid has been sidelined. Although we recognise the need to make savings, the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee and the Justice Committee have all criticised the Government's failure to understand the knock-on costs and wider consequences of their reforms. The Labour party recognises the importance of legal aid in making sure the state does not infringe the liberty of its citizens, and we understand its crucial role as a tool for legal redress in family disputes. Those who traditionally benefit from legal aid—the poor and most vulnerable—have been marginalised by the policies of this Government. They have seen the erosion of their rights at work, in schools, and in their housing and welfare needs. In 2010, as Labour left office, almost 500,000 cases received advice or assistance for social welfare issues. The year after the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 came into force, it was less than 53,000.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend has constituents in his surgeries every single week desperate for legal help, who previously would have benefited from the legal aid regime, but who now cannot find legal help or representation anywhere and cannot afford to pay for it.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend makes a crucial point. This is about the kind of society we want to live in. There is no doubt that a key indicator of that is the way in which we deal with access to justice. My constituents, like hers, are deeply concerned about the distortion of our justice system, which we are discussing here today.

The figures that I have cited show a massive drop in access to justice, and that has had a huge impact on people across England and Wales: parents unable to see their children; employees unfairly dismissed or discriminated

against; tenants mistreated by abusive landlords; and women unable to leave abusive partners. Those are exactly the kind of people the Government claim to stand up for, but the reality is different. Consider family proceedings, for instance. In the first quarter of 2015, 76% of private family law cases had at least one party who was not represented. That means our constituents no longer receive the support and advice that is required for them to have effective redress in the courts.

The problem is most acute in the civil and family courts, which are dealing with an unprecedented rise in the number of litigants in person. Previously, litigants in person were most often there by choice, choosing to self-represent, but it is now the case that litigants in person are there because they cannot get legal aid. The personal support unit, which provides help to people facing civil court hearings, has seen a rise of 900% in clients helped. The deck is firmly stacked against the most vulnerable. What was once a relatively level playing field has been seriously distorted, with litigants in person now effectively battling uphill, often challenging decisions passed down by the Government.

The checks and balances that were previously in place for citizens to hold the Government to account have been seriously limited. Across the legal spectrum, we have seen the removal of vast swathes of legal aid, the closing down of law centres, and the removal of good quality legal advice from those who need it most. If that was not enough, the safeguard of judicial review has also been severely curtailed. We have seen the warm words from the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, who decried a two-nation justice system, but unfortunately we all know his rhetoric is not being backed up by action. The Justice Secretary has carried on from where his predecessor left off: sidelining legal aid; the sector cut to the bone; court closures denying access to local justice; and massive increases in fees, excluding many from the system.

One particular section of the population in desperate need are the victims of domestic violence. During the passage of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, the Government made a point of saying that it was not their intention to make legal aid available to all victims of domestic violence. The Government have been too narrow in the safeguards put in place for ensuring that victims of domestic violence can receive legal aid. The Justice Committee expressed concern in its report about the evidence requirements for victims of domestic violence, and a recent survey from Rights of Women revealed that 39% of respondents did not have the evidence required to qualify for legal aid. Another survey found that almost half of respondents did not take any action in relation to their family law problem because they were unable to apply for legal aid, and a further 25% opted to represent themselves in court. Those figures reflect the findings of the all-party group on domestic and sexual violence, which found that more than 60% of respondents did not commence action and that one in six had to pay more than £50 to get the required evidence to prove domestic violence. Victims of domestic violence should not be forced to choose between staying with their abuser and having to face them in court. Although the Opposition do not believe that that was the Government's intention in the legal aid reforms, it none the less persists and must be addressed.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): My hon. Friend is raising important points about domestic violence and the barriers to accessing legal aid that particularly women face, but women face a double barrier when it comes to sex discrimination in the workplace. The new employment tribunal fees mean we have seen a huge drop in the number of women seeking justice.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She makes an absolutely critical point about women in the workplace. This plays into the broader theme of today's discussion, which is about how we ensure we include all elements of society so that we can build an economy and a society that are cohesive and dynamic. The issues are not only about rights and equalities in the narrow sense; they are about how those rights and equalities play into the creation of an inclusive and dynamic economy where all people are able to bring their talents to the table, and women are a critical element of that. Without redress to justice, they will not have the checks and balances in place that they need to defend their rights, as should every other member of society.

A clear theme is coming through in the interventions from my hon. Friends. The overall theme is whether the Government have properly considered the impact of their legislation and policies on some of the most vulnerable groups in society, such as the homeless; those threatened with eviction and facing serious housing disrepair; those in need of community care services; parents and children involved in child abduction cases; and those with mental health and mental capacity issues. This test only further entrenches the gap between those who can and those who cannot access justice. The law is there to protect all citizens, and a robust justice system should make sure that justice can be afforded to all, not only those who can afford it.

Jo Stevens: Last week the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Thomas, issued his annual report in which he raised concerns about the lack of access to justice, and Lord Justice Briggs said:

“To any rational observer who values access to civil justice, this is a truly shocking state of affairs.”

If we have the most senior judiciary in our country worrying about lack of access to justice, does my hon. Friend not agree that the Government must take heed and start to change their policies in this arena?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I agree entirely with every word of it, and with the sentiment. Members clearly have a deep and active interest in this issue, but we could never claim to be experts at the same level as the judiciary whom she just cited. We must defer to those views. If the most eminent experts in the world are telling us that the system is seriously flawed and the new legislation is deeply damaging, surely we must take heed of their interventions.

Nothing we see from the Government addresses what is increasingly being recognised as a two-nation justice system—and this from the party that claims to be a one-nation party. How we treat the most vulnerable is a key barometer of the kind of society we are and aspire

to be, particularly when it relates to that most fundamental of rights: equality before the law. The increase in court fees, alongside reduced access to legal aid, restricts access to justice. Unless the Government change course, they will fail on the first duty of any Government: the just maintenance of law and order.

9.41 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I did not expect to be called to speak so early, Mr Bailey.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I did not expect to call you so early!

Jim Shannon: It is a pleasure to be able to participate, and I thank the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for setting the scene so well. Members present, including me, have a particular interest in this matter, which I shall discuss from a Northern Ireland perspective. Some things in Northern Ireland are not right and are not going well, and this is an opportunity to tell the House about them. Perhaps the Minister, having listened to my comments, can respond. In telling the stories from Northern Ireland, I want to show where we need to focus.

Legal aid is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, so the responsibility lies very clearly with the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Legal Services Agency Northern Ireland administers the statutory legal aid system, and although it is a devolved matter, that does not mean I cannot share views about Northern Ireland, and that is what I shall do. As the Member for Strangford, speaking on behalf of the constituents who have contacted me about this issue, it is important that we have those views on the record in the mother of Parliaments and at the same time stand up for fellow countrymen and women in England and Wales who may be affected by the changes to legal aid since 2012.

Over the previous parliamentary term, I had a number of discussions with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner). He has been vociferous about legal aid on the Floor of the House. There has been no mention of it without him being there to speak about it. I look forward to the Minister's response as well. He is a compassionate Minister who knows the issues and what we are about here, so I would like to hear his thoughts.

Despite being devolved, legal aid has proved to be an issue in Northern Ireland. More than 600 defendants have been left without a lawyer as the dispute over legal aid continues to prove an obstacle to the efficiency of the courts. I have been in contact with the Minister responsible for policing and justice in Northern Ireland, David Ford, as well as with solicitors and barristers who have expressed their views to me, so I am aware of the issues that we have back home and where the problems are. In his introduction, the hon. Member for Aberavon spoke specifically about vulnerable people, and I will as well, because they are the people we are here to represent.

Across Northern Ireland, hundreds of Crown court cases are stuck in the early stages of the legal process as lawyers continue to refuse to take on new criminal cases in protest against cuts to their pay. It is a critical issue, and there is a balance to be struck. I understand that

the Government are under financial pressures, as we are in the Northern Ireland Assembly as well. The financial constraints might start here, but they go out to all the regional Administrations, particularly the Northern Ireland Assembly. The stand-off about pay has caused mayhem in the court system, with a growing backlog of cases as the dispute intensifies. Lawyers have taken industrial action in response to the cuts, withdrawing professional services in criminal cases as part of the protest.

The latest figures were released just last week and show that there are currently 817 cases outstanding in Northern Ireland. Of those, 545 are directly affected by the legal aid dispute. The magnitude of what is happening there is mirrored elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The issues are financial, and perhaps there are more complexities; nevertheless, the breakdown of the figures includes some worrying cases. The outstanding cases include seven murder suspects, four accused of attempted murder, 60 accused of sex crimes, 76 accused of drug offences and 39 accused of fraud. Without stakeholder agreement and a reasonable solution here on the mainland, we could see a similar, if not worse, situation arise.

I say this with great respect because I am not someone who attacks political parties—that is not my form, Mr Bailey, and I never do it—but the Alliance party leads the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland, and its unreasonable approach has seen law firms operating at a loss as a result of changes to the legal aid system. Top solicitors in the Province have warned that law firms quite simply cannot continue to operate at such a loss without bankruptcy, and that with so many cases backlogged the situation can only get worse. Local solicitors in my town, Newtownards, and elsewhere in my constituency have confirmed that.

Disputes over legal aid not only threaten the efficiency of the justice system but can lead to the erosion of the right to a free and fair trial for all. I have heard the shadow Minister say that on numerous occasions in the Chamber; I have not seen his speech, but he will probably say the same thing shortly in Westminster Hall. Some of the most vulnerable people in our society would depend on legal aid should they ever require legal assistance. We are talking about people who are unable to access justice because of their vulnerability. There are many more people out there who may need to call upon legal aid but will be unable to. As a House and as Members of Parliament, we have a duty need to ensure that such people are protected from changes to the legal aid framework.

To reduce costs, we must focus on those over-represented in the legal aid client base. Change is necessary to address that over-representation, but we must be careful of the unintended consequences. I do not think that the Government deliberately intended what we have seen, but there are unintended consequences, and we have already seen in Northern Ireland just how out of control the situation can get in a short space of time. The Government need to engage with pro-bono organisations, solicitors' groups and other relevant bodies to ensure a comprehensive strategy to address over-representation in the legal aid client base while protecting the vulnerable people who might find themselves in genuine need of legal aid assistance.

The exceptional funding route for those who are disadvantaged is clearly not working. Not only does the Ministry of Justice fail to recognise that there are

vulnerable people in our society who need this sort of funding, regardless of what the European Court of Human Rights, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission or the European Union says; it fails to provide, let alone implement, a strategy to ensure that no vulnerable person in our society is in such a position in the first place. We are elected by our constituents as Members of Parliament to speak out on their behalf about the issues that arise. That is what I do in this House, as do other right hon. and hon. Members. When vulnerable people are squeezed, pushed and coerced and find no one to turn to, we have to step up and do our best for them.

We have today an overdue opportunity to discuss legal aid, an issue that I am sure will not go away. That is why it is important that the Minister will respond and important to hear what the shadow Minister and other Members will say. It was also important to hear the opening speech by the hon. Member for Aberavon and the interventions by other Members. I hope that Members will take note of the experiences I have shared from Northern Ireland, and that they share my sense of urgency about this issue on behalf of my constituents. Everyone in a civilised country such as ours should have a free and fair trial and should be legally represented. The Ministry of Justice needs to go forth and resolve the issue in a sustainable, long-term and proper fashion.

9.49 am

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on raising this subject for debate. I did not intend to make a speech today, but in the absence of other colleagues I thought I would have a go.

Not one Member of this House regards access to justice as something that should be restricted to the rich, and nobody thinks that ensuring that people have access to fair trials and that the criminal and civil justice systems work are not serious issues. When the coalition Government came to power in 2010, it had already been flagged by the previous Government that changes to legal aid were in train. The hon. Gentleman did not set out which of the Government's changes to legal aid the Opposition agree with. I presume they agree with some of them; perhaps the shadow Minister can tell us which.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way so early. I think he is about to tell us that the previous Labour Government would also have made cuts to various Departments and that the Ministry of Justice would have taken a hit, but the reality is that the coalition Government and this majority Conservative Government have made a shocking mess of the justice system. The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 cut hugely the number of vulnerable people who have access to the courts. The hon. Gentleman should not lecture the Chamber about the fact that the previous Labour would have cut. We accept that we would, but this issue is not about just cutting. The Government have been completely and utterly incompetent.

David Mowat: I thank the shadow Minister for his lengthy intervention, during which, I note, he did not answer the question I asked him. He will get a chance later to tell us which of the coalition Government's

[David Mowat]

changes to legal aid the Opposition support. Presumably they support some of them or would have done something else altogether.

Access to justice matters, and all of us have constituents who are affected by it. We heard that the Bar has been threatening to go on strike over some of the changes. I want to talk about the structure of how we do law in this country, because perhaps something is wrong with it. There were 2,500 practising barristers in 1980 and 15,000 in 2010, and there are 16,000 now. The Bar has grown hugely as legal aid costs have grown. I am not saying that is wrong—a very large number of talented people work at the Bar—but it is not indicative of a profession under major stress.

I do not want to make a cheap point about earnings at the Bar, but I will say this. A significant minority of practitioners earn from criminal legal aid sums significantly in excess of how much the Prime Minister is paid.

Karl Turner *rose*—

David Mowat: One moment, and I will certainly give way.

That is not to say that salaries at the Bar are too high in general, but it is an issue. No other public sector employees—I accept that the Bar is independent, but perhaps that is one of the issues—earn money of that kind. Think of how much surgeons in the national health service earn.

Karl Turner Come on!

David Mowat: I will certainly give way, and perhaps this time the shadow Minister will answer the question.

Karl Turner The hon. Gentleman is about to begin the fat cat lawyer argument, but the reality is completely different. The reality is this. A criminal solicitor, for example—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. May I remind you, Mr Turner, that interventions should be short? We are not too constrained by time, and you will have a generous amount of time to make it up.

Karl Turner I am obliged, Mr Bailey, but I wonder whether you would just let me make the point. A criminal solicitor, for example, of about five years' experience earns about £28,000. A criminal barrister with the same experience earns about £30,000, but is self-employed. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could visit his local chambers and make that argument to members of the Bar and criminal solicitors.

David Mowat: I thank the shadow Minister again for his intervention. I make the point again, because I chose my words carefully, that a minority of barristers earn from criminal legal aid—that is, the public purse—sums in excess of what the Prime Minister is paid.

Karl Turner Silks.

David Mowat: That is not the case with professions such as medicine—for surgeons and so on.

Jo Stevens: Part of the problem is that huge swathes of people are graduating and going into the law—both the solicitors' profession and the Bar. The problem is

that the work is not there for them now because of the Government's cuts to legal aid, so it is very difficult to get a practice up and running. If we do not have solicitors and barristers, we will not have a judiciary in the future.

David Mowat: The hon. Lady's point is spot on. Barristers have told me that too many people are going into the profession, given the work that is available, despite the fact that their numbers are several times higher than a few years ago. The consequence is that too many of them are effectively working part time and are not able to do as many cases as they ought to be doing, given their productivity, so their earnings are lower, as the shadow Minister said.

Jo Stevens: The point I am making is that some of the work of representing vulnerable people that was previously available is not available to the Bar and the solicitors' profession because legal aid has gone.

David Mowat: We will come to the amount of money we spend on legal aid, although I note that I have certainly got this debate going, so I guess we should at least be grateful for that—as I said, I did not intend to speak today.

A point has been made about the fact that we spend a large amount of money on legal aid compared with other countries such as Germany and France, which, as far as I am aware, do not have legal systems that are not fit for purpose. They have non-adversarial legal systems, which are different from ours, so they may be different in other areas. Despite the fact that we spend many billions of pounds on our legal system, that our spending on legal aid per capita is much higher than other countries—even those with adversarial systems, such as New Zealand—and that people work in good faith at the Bar, the judiciary, the Crown Prosecution Service and elsewhere, there is a structural issue with our legal system, and we need to look at it. Perhaps we should look at whether the Bar should be independent and at whether more barristers should be employed. Perhaps the shadow Minister will come forward with that proposal. It is not reasonable to say that the Government have no role in curtailing the amount of expenditure on that area, although we must be fair to all who are involved.

The hon. Member for Aberavon briefly mentioned judicial review, at which a number of the changes were aimed. The number of judicial reviews has increased by a factor of something like four in the past eight years. Such numbers are very significant, and it is reasonable that the Government look at them. I am not in the Government, and I do not know whether they have got it right in all cases. That is why I was so keen to get an answer from the shadow Minister to my question about which of the changes to legal aid he agrees with. I am sure we will hear from him about that.

It is wrong to say that Government Members are not as concerned about access to justice and vulnerable people as Opposition Members, but questions need to be asked about the structure of the legal system and about how things work at the moment. The rate of increase that we saw before 2010 would have been untenable if it had continued at that level, as the then Labour Government recognised.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): We come now to the Opposition spokespersons' responses. Ordinarily, they would be confined to 10 minutes. However, we are not inordinately time constrained at the moment, so I am going to be a bit flexible. Given the heat that this debate has generated so far, could the Opposition spokespersons be sensible in the way they use their time and give the Minister plenty of time to reply? Equally, if the Minister could give Mr Stephen Kinnock an opportunity to sum up, that would be appreciated.

9.59 am

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship as we debate a crucial topic, Mr Bailey. What can be more fundamental than ensuring access to justice? For that reason, I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this debate. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat) on his brave and spontaneous speech, which certainly got the debate going.

Different jurisdictions across the UK and across the world are each on their own journey as they continually grapple with access to justice, constantly updating procedural rules, introducing new technologies and reforming legal aid. Every jurisdiction can learn lessons from each of the others, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) suggested, but I agree with the hon. Member for Aberavon that the UK Government should be doing more learning than teaching. It is clear that access to justice has suffered under the Conservative Government, and the former coalition partnership, as yet another austerity sacrifice.

Turning to the motion, in one sense the words "for vulnerable people" could be seen as superfluous, because if people's access to justice is denied or made difficult, they become vulnerable people as a result. Thankfully, there is access to justice for most, but that is not good enough. If we believe in the rule of law, everyone should be able to vindicate their rights and have access to justice. Under this Government, access has become harder and harder for too many people. Understandably, and unsurprisingly, the main focus of the debate was legal aid, but we had good arguments about other aspects of proceedings, which gave food for thought as to how every jurisdiction can improve access to justice.

Turning to the main point of contention, I agree that the huge cuts in funding and eligibility for legal aid brought about by the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 are little short of a disgrace. The hon. Member for Aberavon highlighted some of the frightening statistics about the dramatic fall in the number of legal aid-funded cases, particularly for victims of domestic violence. As mentioned by the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), all the arguments were well summed up by the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales when he said:

"Our system of justice has become unaffordable to most. In consequence there has been a considerable increase of litigants in person for whom our current court system is not really designed."

Many of the issues were aired in another recent Westminster Hall debate on access to justice in Wales, and I want to tackle a couple of the arguments that Ministers have previously used to continue their attempted defence of legal aid cuts. They have said that it is better

to encourage mediation than provide legal aid and an attempt at mediation should be encouraged or even required—by all means—but without pulling the rug from under people's feet if it does not work. Legal aid spend should fall as a result of successful mediation, but not because people who have been forced into mediation have to sell themselves short and accept settlements even when mediation has failed. Ministers also claimed, and will probably claim again—the hon. Member for Warrington South started to make arguments along these lines—that the legal aid system in England and Wales

"remains one of the most generous in the world."—[*Official Report*, 15 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 528WH.]

That is the same old chestnut that the Justice Secretary used when pushing the cuts through, but it is like comparing apples and oranges and the argument does not stack up.

Professor Alan Paterson of the University of Strathclyde, chair of the International Legal Aid Group, pointed out that systems here cannot be compared with those on the continent, which are inquisitorial systems, a point which was accepted by the hon. Member for Warrington South. Such systems generally require less input from legal representatives, but significantly more resources are spent on prosecution services and the courts. Once expenditure on those other parts of the equation is factored in, England and Wales comes about a third of the way down the European league table. Professor Paterson made a specific comparison with Holland: back in 2011, England and Wales spent more than twice as much per capita on legal aid as Holland, but with a total per capita spend of around €90 on legal aid, courts and prosecutions combined, Holland spends a greater overall per capita sum on justice than England and Wales, where the total was around €80 euros. Of course, even if England and Wales has a higher per capita legal aid spend, it absolutely does not follow that that is because it has more generous eligibility rules. The hon. Member for Warrington South mentioned New Zealand, but the Law Society of England and Wales pointed out that the differential was not significantly caused by any increased generosity. Indeed, New Zealand was more generous in that regard. More relevant were higher crime rates, higher divorce rates, and higher expenditure per case.

Briefly, I have some similar points about the position in Scotland. Professor Paterson, in his Hamlyn lectures at the University of Cambridge in 2010, pointed out that the Scottish Legal Aid Board spent around £29 per capita compared with £38 in England and Wales, and yet the system in Scotland was more generous in terms of scope, including personal injury claims and representation at employment tribunals. It was also considerably more generous in terms of coverage, with a significantly higher proportion of the population financially eligible for legal aid. The system in Scotland remains uncapped and demand-led. Why, therefore, was the per capita spend in England and Wales higher? One significant factor was the high number of high-cost fraud cases prosecuted south of the border compared with in Scotland. In reality, the Government were taking away from the least well-off in order to fund the prosecution of high-value fraudsters. That argument does not appeal to me. According to Professor Paterson, court procedures in Scotland, both civil and criminal, have received holistic reform to

[*Stuart C. McDonald*]

reduce legal aid spend. That is a better approach than wholesale legal aid cuts, which cause so much social damage.

The hon. Member for Aberavon also highlighted last year's Select Committee on Justice report, which noted that the Ministry of Justice's four objectives for the reforms were to discourage unnecessary and adversarial litigation at public expense, to target legal aid at those who need it most, to make significant savings in the cost of the scheme and to deliver better overall value for money for the taxpayer. However, the Committee concluded that,

"while it had made significant savings in the cost of the scheme, the Ministry had harmed access to justice for some litigants and had not achieved the other three out of four of its stated objectives for the reforms."

The hon. Gentleman also pointed out that the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have made similar criticisms. We are left wondering whether anyone actually thinks that the reforms have been a success.

The Justice Committee also made some excellent points regarding the claimed savings and delivering value for money. It said:

"The Ministry's efforts to target legal aid at those who most need it have suffered from the weakness that they have often been aimed at the point after a crisis has already developed, such as in housing repossession cases, rather than being preventive."

From my own experience as a solicitor, I would say that public money spent providing help to those who need it to fill in complex immigration application forms offers better value than pursuing tribunal appeals or judicial reviews after that person has got the form wrong. That is the approach taken by the Scottish Government in its 2011 strategy "A sustainable future for legal aid", the themes of which are the right help at the right time, delivering justice efficiently and maximising value. That all points to a preventive approach that avoids problems escalating to the point at which they can cause lasting damage and disruption to people in our communities and increased cost to the public purse.

However, as other hon. Members pointed out, legal aid alone does not secure access to justice. The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) pointed out that the fees that have been introduced for employment tribunals are making the vindication of important employment rights more difficult. Criminal court charges were introduced in the previous Parliament, encouraging innocent people to plead guilty. I warmly welcome the change of heart that seems to have been signalled by the current Justice Secretary. We could indeed spend days considering the simplification of procedures, the use of plain English, special safeguards for children, protections for those who are *doli incapax*, *pro bono* work, the provision of law centres and even the use of technology, which I am sure the Minister will mention.

Finally, as parliamentarians, we need to take care how we respond to Bills that are passing through Parliament. The Immigration Bill currently making its way through the House of Lords will make people leave their families and jobs and conduct appeals against Home Office decisions from abroad. I do not regard that as access to justice. The Bill would also cut back on appeal rights against refusal of asylum support, leaving vulnerable, destitute people without any legal recourse.

Perhaps most disgracefully of all, the Bill will introduce procedures that will allow families with children to be summarily evicted without so much as a court order, never mind a court hearing. Any Government pursuing that sort of agenda cannot claim to be prioritising access to justice. As the new chair of the Bar Council said:

"Justice is not a luxury, and everyone should be able to defend their rights through the legal system."

The Government need to listen and change course.

10.9 am

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is always a privilege to serve under your chairship, Mr Bailey.

To declare my interests, my wife is employed as a criminal duty solicitor and part-time judge and, before my election to the House, I was a member of Wilberforce barristers' chambers in Hull. I was a junior member of the Bar and certainly not earning "fat cat" moneys, as the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat) might want to believe.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important and timely debate. It could not have come at a better time, because the commission chaired by Lord Willy Bach is as we speak hearing evidence from experts in the professions on how we deal with this problem of access to justice and legal aid.

The Bach commission was established by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), the leader of the Labour party. It is fair to say that the Leader of the Opposition understands legal aid. He, unlike any other leader of a political party that I can remember, actually gets it, as no one else has done. He understands it, he cares about it and, as a result, he has established the Bach commission to look at access to justice and legal aid. He is also doing that in a non-party political way.

Members of the commission have been appointed by Willy Bach not because of their politics or any sort of association with or affiliation to any political party, but, on the contrary, because of their expertise and their knowledge not only of legal aid and access to justice, but of other things. For example, one member, a particularly huge asset to the commission, is Tanni Grey-Thompson, who is also providing expertise in relation to disability. So the commission is non-partisan and we hope that it will come to a view on how we provide access to justice for the most vulnerable people in our society.

It has to be said that the Government have made a real mess of access to justice and legal aid. Since 2010, advice-and-assistance matter starts in social welfare have gone from 471,000 down to 53,000, a drop of 91%. So more than 400,000 people are now not provided with the opportunity to receive legal advice and are not given the chance to access the courts. They are often left paddling their own canoe, faced with extremely complex issues of procedure and law, and left to do all that on their own.

In reality, no money is saved, because the courts are delayed. Judges are complaining constantly, privately in the main, but complaining none the less that cases are delayed while litigants in person are left fending for themselves, trying to navigate through complex areas of procedure and law. There is no real saving.

Following the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, exceptional case funding was supposed to help people who are denied access to lawyers. I think this is right—I will be corrected by the Minister if I am wrong—but last year, for example, only 394 applications were granted under the scheme, rather than the 3,700 or so estimated. Clearly, the system is not working.

The Government might be about to reintroduce the residence test. They got excited about that and were pleased that the judicial review was successful, in that the Government won, but the lord justices who heard the case for review were not considering the practical effects of the residence test. They were simply deciding whether the residence test was legal or “Wednesbury unreasonable”; they were not considering whether the test itself was practical or could be implemented successfully. To reintroduce the residence test would be a huge mistake. I have not heard from a lawyer who has been able to explain how it would work. I have asked the Minister, too, how it would work. Will he explain exactly how he intends the residence test to work in practice?

As for criminal legal aid, the Government are now attempting to implement a system that will see the number of duty contract providers reduced from some 1,650 to 526. There has been a cut of about 17.5%. The Government say that the number of providers needs to be reduced and consolidated, in order to allow them a profit on their work. The system, however, cannot work. It will not work and the Minister knows that it will not work. It is undergoing litigation, but the reality is that the Government have made a terrible mess of the duty criminal contracts since 2010. It was needless, in truth, but the entire thing is in a terrible mess now, to the point of a whistleblower coming forward. The whistleblower was employed through the Legal Aid Agency to help with the procurement exercise and was able to explain how chaotic the entire system was.

Last night I received an email from a criminal law solicitor, Mr Andrew Gurney of Gurney Harden Solicitors in Ashford. I will not read the entire content of the email, but that firm of solicitors was successful in its application for six contracts. Mr Gurney makes the point:

“We were involved in 6 successful bids and our early estimates put our costs at £30,000”—

so he knows. He knows that the system is impossible to implement. His firm has spent £30,000 in applying for contracts that everyone knows will probably not happen, because everyone knows that it is impossible to implement the system.

The system is not fit for purpose, and the Government have been warned about it. The Justice Secretary privately accepts that the idea of removing more than 1,000 firms of solicitors and leaving some areas without access to duty solicitors is unmanageable. So even Ministers privately believe that access to justice for the most vulnerable people will be denied as a result of the Government’s plans to implement a system that is absolutely chaotic. It is time that the Government listened to people who know better than them.

That brings me to the point made by the hon. Member for Warrington South. We need consensus. We need to put politics aside. It is all right for me to come here and attack the Government—I enjoy that—but the reality is

that will not get us anywhere. We need to sit down and accept that people need access to law. As my right hon. Friend the leader of the Labour party has said, that ought to be considered a basic human right. If the state is taking on an individual, surely the most basic thing required of a civilised society is to allow that individual access to people who have experience and expertise in the area of law that they are trying to navigate.

Jo Stevens: It is somewhat ironic that, later on this morning, the Minister for Human Rights will be appearing before the EU Justice Sub-Committee because the Government have not implemented a European directive adopted by other member states in 2013 that gives criminal suspects a right to access legal advice following arrest.

Karl Turner: I could not have put it better myself. My hon. Friend makes an important point.

It is time that we grew up. The Bach commission, with its cross-party members—I suspect some appointments are political and some non-political—chosen for their expertise only, not for their politics, will hopefully come to a view that can save money while providing access to the courts, lawyers and justice. As I have said, we need to do that in a non-partisan, non-political way. I sometimes find that difficult to manage, but it is crucial that we grow up.

Before I finish my remarks, I will mention the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith). I think we have seen a drop of 80% in employment tribunals. The hon. Member for Warrington South talked about people in the law profession earning more than the Prime Minister, but we now have employment judges sitting idly in tribunals throughout England and Wales with no work to do because of the fee that needs to be paid for a tribunal to be heard.

Women want to raise serious issues. I think of a case that I advised on pro bono and referred the woman to a solicitor: she had told her employer that she would take maternity leave at some point in the not-too-distant future and he said, “Well, that’s not very convenient. I’m afraid you’ll have to find something else to do for a living.” I think she needed to find £1,300 to get her case to a tribunal, but she could not possibly afford that. I managed to find a solicitor who was prepared to act for her pro bono, but she still did not have the money—it would have taken her several months to save that up.

Sadly, the reality is that employers react to those cases only once the money is paid in. Before that, they do nothing—they are using that as a tactic. Therefore, while terrible employers such as that would have to settle if the case were taken to tribunal—they would not get anywhere near success, because they had clearly been discriminatory—because the woman concerned could not get the £1,300 together, she was at the stage of saying, “Fair enough, I give in.” The statute bar in employment cases means that people have to get their act together within three months and she could never have managed to save that money up in that period.

I do not know whether I am making this point well or not, but it is not about saving money because we have employment judges with no work to do. It is purely ideological. There is no reason for it—it does not save a penny.

Jo Stevens: Does my hon. Friend agree that another consequence is that while there are lots of good employers, bad employers, because of the tribunal fees, can get away with unlawful practices and they have no incentive to change their behaviour to become good employers?

Karl Turner: Absolutely. I know the Minister well, I think, and he does not want a situation to arise where employers get away with treating their staff badly. I do not think he wants that for a second, but that is an unintended consequence of the Government's policy and it needs to change. It comes to something when the Lord Chief Justice comes out of his comfort zone as a senior member of the judiciary and criticises Government policy. It is appalling.

I will finish on this note. The hon. Member for Warrington South—

David Mowat *rose*—

Karl Turner: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

David Mowat: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned me four times in his remarks, but he has yet to answer the question I put about which changes to the legal aid system the Opposition support. I want to ask him about his interesting comments on residency, because the Opposition reject the proposed changes to be used, at least in part, to prevent prosecutions against British soldiers in Iraq, which among other things led to Al-Sweady. Does he propose any changes to that mechanism, or is he sanguine about the fact that we are the only country in the world that pays people to sue our soldiers? I am genuinely interested in that.

Karl Turner: With respect, I am not prepared to go into the hon. Gentleman's *Daily Mail*-reading fraternity line. Frankly, that is outrageous. One thing I think the Bach commission will establish is consensus of opinion, so I will not make Opposition policy about the residence test on the hoof, but it is disgraceful that women who have been trafficked will probably be refused access to law as a result of the Government's proposed changes.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara) *indicated dissent.*

Karl Turner: I think the Minister may be saying that that is not correct.

Mr Vara: There are exceptions.

Karl Turner: Of course there are exceptions, but we have seen how exceptions have failed. The Government must be careful. I finish on the point made by the hon. Member for Warrington South—

David Mowat: Mr Bailey, may I come back on that? As it happens, I do not read the *Daily Mail*, but clearly the hon. Gentleman does.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. I point out, Mr Mowat, that it is the privilege of the Member speaking to accept your intervention, not me.

Karl Turner *indicated assent.*

David Mowat: I thank the hon. Gentleman. We have talked about how the country is on a slippery slope on access to justice, but can he name any other country whose criminal justice system pays people through criminal legal aid to sue its own Army?

Karl Turner: The hon. Gentleman is desperate to get me on to that. He mentioned fat-cat lawyers who earn more than the Prime Minister, so he was probably referring to the Prime Minister's brother who is an eminent member of the Bar and Queen's counsel barrister reported to have earned £1 million. What he does not mention is that some of that £1 million was probably paid privately—it is very unlikely that he earned £1 million from criminal legal aid. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the issue, and I was reluctant to comment on it, but I am afraid he tempted me too much.

David Mowat *rose*—

Karl Turner: I am not going to take a further intervention from the hon. Gentleman, because, frankly, he has nothing to offer that would benefit the debate.

Again, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon on securing this important and timely debate. We now need a consensus. We need the Government to listen. In my respectful opinion, the new Justice Secretary has had the sense to change policies of his predecessor's that were wrong, and there are things that he can put in place to mitigate what has been an unmitigated disaster in the justice system. I invite the Minister to respond to the comments that have been made by hon. Members in all parts of the Chamber.

10.30 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Bailey? I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on having secured the debate. I also thank the other hon. Members who have contributed. This important subject is capable of arousing many passions, and I am pleased that the debate, although lively at times, has been conducted in a measured tone. I very much hope that will continue.

Let me be clear at the outset: the Government share the passion for a justice system that works for everyone. I have spoken previously about our commitment to one nation justice, which is fundamental to the rule of law. At the heart of one nation justice is equality. We are committed to making sure that our justice system delivers faster and fairer justice for all citizens, not just some. We are committed to a justice system that safeguards and protects the vulnerable and that works better for victims and witnesses. It must be recognised that legal aid is only one part of the balanced provision of access to justice, but it is nevertheless an important part, and I accept that there is a responsibility on the Government to ensure that it is available for those in the greatest need.

When the programme to reform legal aid commenced in 2010, the scale of the financial challenge facing the Government was unprecedented. The coalition had to find significant savings, which meant making difficult choices. Despite that, we have made sure that legal aid remains available for the highest priority cases, such as

those where people's life or liberty is at stake, where people face the loss of their home, as in cases of domestic violence, or where people's children might be taken into care. It is also available in relation to the treatment and detention of people experiencing mental health problems and in cases concerning the best interests of people who lack mental capacity.

Tackling domestic violence remains a Government priority. For that reason, we have retained legal aid for the purpose of obtaining urgent protection via an injunction. In addition, in private family law cases—those concerning child arrangements and financial matters—funding may be available for those who will be materially disadvantaged by facing their abuser in court.

I hope hon. Members will accept that it is reasonable to ensure that the correct cases attract funding. However, we have listened and responded to specific concerns. That is why, during the passage of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, we made changes to make evidence easier to obtain. In April 2014, we expanded the list of evidence accepted in applications for legal aid in private family cases. We also extended the definition of health professionals to include psychologists. We made further changes in July 2015, including by adding new offences to the list of domestic violence and child abuse offences. Further regulatory changes ensure that, once a particular form of legal aid has been granted, no further evidence needs to be submitted for someone to receive legal representation for their case. We will, of course, continue to keep the evidence requirements under review.

Mention has been made of exceptional case funding, and funding has been provided where it is required by law under European Union legislation or European convention on human rights regulations.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Minister explains how legal aid is still available in some of the most urgent situations—for example, when someone's house is at risk of repossession. However, does that not raise the question, why wait until we get to that stage? Why not provide legal aid earlier, so that people do not get into that mess in the first place?

Mr Vara: It is important that the hon. Gentleman recognises that there must be some limit, and I will come in due course to how much money is spent. However, his criticism is ironic, given that he admitted in his speech that there is less expenditure per capita in Scotland than in England and Wales.

Stuart C. McDonald *rose*—

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman did explain the reasons for that, but I have to say that the facts speak for themselves. He should not try to explain away the fact that there is less expenditure per capita in Scotland than in England and Wales—it is easy to be disingenuous in explaining things away. As I will explain later, the fact is that the legal aid budget for England and Wales is one of the largest in the world.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Minister misses the two key points I made in my speech about per capita spend. First, it is not fair just to compare legal aid spending per capita; we have to look at justice spending overall.

Secondly—this is a matter of fact, not explaining things away—the higher per capita spend in England and Wales is a result of things such as the larger number of expensive fraud cases prosecuted south of the border. The proportion of people eligible for civil legal aid in Scotland is about 75%—well in excess of that in England and Wales. The Minister must also bear it in mind that the financial eligibility rules are more generous and the number of legal cases covered is far broader. He should try to learn lessons from the Scottish jurisdiction, so that savings can be made not by removing all sorts of cases and people from the scope of legal aid, but by achieving efficiencies in the system and other changes.

Mr Vara: I would simply say that the hon. Gentleman should look at some of the cases in England and Wales. He will find that some of the fraud cases in this jurisdiction are pretty complex. However, I am grateful to him for saying that it is important that we look at matters from an overall perspective. With the best will in the world, some of those who have spoken already have not done so—they have seen legal aid in a narrow confine, rather than from the overall perspective the hon. Gentleman speaks of.

Even after the reforms we have put in place, we still have a very generous legal aid system, compared with other countries. Last year we spent more than £1.6 billion on legal aid, which is about a quarter of the Ministry of Justice's departmental expenditure. As I said, that is one of the most generous legal aid budgets in the world.

Jo Stevens: Is it not the case, though, that the Ministry of Justice budget has been cut? Therefore, to boast that the Government are spending that proportion, when the overall amount of money has been reduced, is not really a boast at all.

Mr Vara: May I gently tell the hon. Lady that, were it not for the economic mess that the Labour Government left this country in—*[Interruption.]* Labour Members may well shrug their shoulders, but the reality is that, were it not for the mess they left and their economic mismanagement, we would not have had to take the tough decisions that we are having to take. I will return later to the views the Labour shadow justice team has expressed on the record about whether the cuts should have been made.

During the previous Parliament the coalition Government proposed a civil legal aid residence test, which has been referred to. The Government continue to believe that individuals should have a strong connection to the UK to benefit from our civil legal aid scheme, and intend to implement the residence test following recent success in the courts. I should add that during the previous Parliament the Government were particularly careful to listen to, and take into account, concerns that were raised about the residence test. As a result a number of modifications and exceptions were proposed, including in cases involving particularly vulnerable individuals. We believe that the proposed residence test, with specific exceptions for vulnerable groups, is both fair and appropriate. It has to be right that when British taxpayers' money is being used for legal aid, the recipient of the legal aid should have a strong connection to our country.

Karl Turner: Will the Minister kindly explain how the residence test will work in practice?

Mr Vara: Clearly, we have said that someone has to be here for a minimum of 12 months. We will ensure that when an application is made that criterion is fulfilled. If the person is in one of the exceptional categories, the criterion will not apply.

Karl Turner: Let us say that a solicitor is taking instructions from a client. What evidence will be needed to prove habitual residence in the United Kingdom?

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman is an experienced barrister and an experienced politician. He will appreciate that the function of this House is to put policy into implementation, by ensuring that it becomes law. The practical process will need to be thought out—[HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”]—as is the case with every other measure introduced by the present and previous Governments, and during the 13 years when the hon. Gentleman’s party was in government, and even before that. That is something that will be dealt with and resolved.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for whom I have huge respect and regard, spoke passionately; but he will of course be aware that the matter is a devolved one. I wish him well in his dealings with David Ford, with whom I too have had dealings. To the extent that it will help, I will certainly tell him the next time I see him that the hon. Gentleman was speaking passionately and would like him to give a sympathetic ear when he raises the issue. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) will appreciate that, again, the issue is a devolved one; but he has put his views on record—including in our little dialogue during my speech.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat) for bringing a realistic perspective to the debate, and for pointing out the reality of the situation. He repeatedly asked the shadow Justice Minister which of the cuts that we have made his party would reverse. I am not surprised that no reply was forthcoming, because in an interview with *The Guardian* on 30 January 2015, the former shadow Lord Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan), said:

“I don’t have a magic wand to wave. I can’t commit to reverse the £600m cuts to legal aid made by the Tories and Lib Dems. We will still have to take tough decisions on reducing the deficit.”

However, it was not only the former shadow Justice Secretary who took that view. The person in his team dealing specifically with legal aid, the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), was interviewed by John Hyde of *The Law Society Gazette* on 24 September 2014:

“‘We’re not going to get in a Tardis and go back to before,’ he said. ‘We are in a world where resources are tight and it would not be right to pretend otherwise.’”

The article goes on:

“Slaughter conceded that the Labour party would have been forced to make cuts to family law funding and promote mediation as a cheaper option. He added that a Labour government would seek to promote and improve mediation services on offer.”

He is quoted as saying:

“‘We are going to be honest about the tightness of resources—we can’t tackle everything immediately and other elements’

of public spending
“will have a higher place in the queue.”

Jo Stevens: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I will give way, but perhaps the hon. Lady might like to say something about those comments from the Labour shadow Justice team.

Jo Stevens: I want to ask the Minister: does he support the principle of mediation?

Mr Vara: I absolutely do support the principle of mediation.

Jo Stevens: There we go.

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady seeks to justify the fact that her party says it will not make cuts reversals of £600 million by saying, “There you are.” Of course we support mediation. In fact we have said that in family cases where there are divorces, rather than the two separating parties engaging solicitors and then barristers, and then going to court—all paid for by the taxpayer—it is far better for them to sit around a table, trying to have a constructive dialogue with mediation. That way of reaching a solution is preferable.

Given that the shadow team has said it would not make any cuts, perhaps its members could reflect on whether the next time one of them speaks they might be supportive of our proposals, rather than simply saying, “Don’t reduce.”

Karl Turner: Will the Minister concede at least that the leader of the Labour party has set up the Bach commission, to look at the issue of access to justice? It would be constructive for Ministers at least to acknowledge that. It is true that my colleagues said previously that they could not just wave a magic wand—of course not; but some of the cuts were badly made and chaotic. Areas—swathes—were taken out of the scope of legal aid, with the consequence that the most vulnerable people suffered; and the reality was that that did not really save money.

Mr Vara: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the comments I just made—that his party’s shadow team said it would not reverse any of the cuts. That kind of contradicts what he says; but as far as Willy Bach is concerned—and he is a man for whom I have much respect—I wish him well with his commission. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) will be aware that we have said there will be a review of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 three to five years from its implementation. That will be a thorough review in relation to the way forward.

I want to mention some other points made in the debate. The hon. Member for Aberavon referred to some research conducted by Rights of Women, showing that 38% or 39% of women do not have the evidence needed to apply for legal aid. That research was based on responses from 61 people, which I hope even the hon. Gentleman will agree is a small sample—much smaller than researchers would ordinarily use to generalise across the wider population.

There is much debate about the amount of work available and the number of lawyers around to do it. The Law Society has itself accepted that there are far

too many people chasing too little criminal work. We must recognise that the legal profession needs to take a wider look—not just at legal aid—at how things are going. In a relatively short time the structure of the legal profession has changed. There was a time when there were simply solicitors, barristers and legal executives; but now barristers in particular face competition from solicitors who have higher rights of audience than previously. There are more people wanting to qualify as barristers, as well. Alternative business structures are coming on the scene. That means that more and more people are chasing the same amount of work.

Jo Stevens: The point is not that there is not sufficient work for barristers to do, but that there is no legal aid available to enable people who need legal advice to go to a lawyer and get help. We have more people going to prison than for many years, and more people going into the criminal justice system. There is plenty of work; it is just that those people cannot afford anyone to represent them.

Mr Vara: Perhaps the hon. Lady missed the point when I said that we have one of the largest legal aid budgets in the world, at £1.6 billion. I would say that that is capable of buying a substantial amount of legal aid assistance and advocacy for people. I go back to the comment from the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East about the importance of looking at matters in the round, from a broader perspective.

Much has been said about employment tribunal fees and the fact that people are not using employment tribunals any more. There should be some recognition of the ACAS early conciliation process, which did not exist before but has dealt with some 83,000 cases in the 12 months since it was introduced. There should also be some recognition of the fact that the economy is improving, and that more jobs are being created out there. It is always the case, looking back at the trend of such things, that there is less demand for employment tribunals when the economy is improving. People should not overlook the fact that more than 80,000 cases have been dealt with by ACAS's early conciliation process. Furthermore, looking at matters in the round, let us not forget that this Government are committed to spending some £700 million on reforming the courts system, which means there will be a better way of accessing justice than exists at the moment.

Coming back to the words in the title of this debate, we very much hope that the reforms will particularly assist vulnerable people, including victims, witnesses and others. The reforms will mean, for example, that those people do not have to attend a court to give evidence, but can instead go to a convenient location close to them and give evidence by video conferencing. We will also make more use of modern technology in a broader perspective. We already have prisoners giving evidence from prisons, which avoids getting caught up in traffic jams and all the additional security costs that taking them to court would entail.

Stephen Kinnoch: Given the changes that are being introduced and the impact they will have in real time, does the Minister not agree that waiting for three to five years before doing a review of LASPO is simply evidence of being asleep at the wheel? A review of LASPO needs to be brought forward in a far shorter timeframe.

Mr Vara: It is important to recognise that LASPO made a huge change to the whole structure of the legal aid system. It is important that we ensure the changes have sufficient time to bed in, in order to make a proper assessment of whether they have worked. As it happens, the three to five year period is more or less approaching us, and we will do the review in 2016 to 2018, but it is important that we allow such fundamental changes to take place.

Jo Stevens: Can the Minister tell us whether the review of LASPO will be in 2016 or is likely to be at the end of the period?

Mr Vara: I am afraid I cannot tell the hon. Lady when the review will be. Clearly, we are giving much thought to that. We want to get it right and to ensure that the changes we have made already have the effect we wanted. If necessary, we will make changes. As I say, the timing of the review is yet to be decided, but we are committed to doing it and will do so.

I am mindful that the hon. Member for Aberavon must have an opportunity to wind up, so I will simply conclude by saying that I hope hon. Members will appreciate this Government's commitment to a one nation justice system that safeguards and protects the vulnerable, supported by a strong and sustainable legal aid system to provide advice and support for the highest priority cases. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Aberavon for securing the debate and to all other Members who have spoken.

10.54 am

Stephen Kinnoch: It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Bailey. I thank all hon. Members present today for some truly engaging and insightful contributions to this vital debate. We have heard a range of comments about the comparison between our system and others and the professed commitment to a one nation justice system, as well as a passionate exchange of views about the real role of a legal and justice system.

A conclusion from my point of view is that there seems to be very little traction in comparing other systems to ours; it is like comparing apples and pears. Another conclusion I draw is that change and reform are absolutely fine. Nobody thinks our system should be static and stuck in the mud, but if we are going to change, we do not change simply by slashing and burning. We change by having a proper plan B and a sustainable system to put in as a replacement, rather than simply salami-slicing across the current system. It seems we are creating a truly two nation justice system, and if that happens, it will be a tragedy.

We have seen some evidence of listening from the Government. The screeching U-turn that the Justice Secretary performed on the scrapping of criminal court charges is evidence of such listening, and Opposition Members certainly welcome that. Rather than diving down into the weeds, I will conclude by saying that a justice system needs to pass four key tests. First, it must uphold the belief that someone is innocent until proven guilty. Secondly, everyone should have access to justice, regardless of their means. Thirdly, it is essential that we have confidence that the true perpetrators of crime have

[Stephen Kinnock]

been found guilty and are not walking the streets. Fourthly, the system must deliver value for money for the taxpayer.

I am afraid that on all four of those tests, the Government are failing. We hope they will listen carefully to the proposals we have made today about the changes that are required. I also hope that we can, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) said, try to put politics aside and work together to create a more equitable, efficient and fair justice system.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered access to justice for vulnerable people.

Historical Cabinet Papers

10.58 am

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the annual release of Cabinet papers to the National Archives.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am delighted that this important debate has been called today, as it gets to the heart of this Government's record on transparency and accountability.

The relationship between those we elect to govern us and ordinary people does not have to be built upon unbroken, uninterrupted trust. In fact, a healthy scepticism that challenges, scrutinises and protests is the hallmark of a democracy in good health. In order to do that, however, the scales needs to be as evenly weighted as possible between the people and the Government and between the institutions of the state and those who use them.

We have seen in communities up and down the land the consequences of secrecy, cover-ups and a breakdown in trust—put simply, the consequences of too much power in the hands of too few. In Liverpool, an entire community was shouting alone for justice for nearly two decades against institutions and a police force that felt that it was not for scousers to be questioning its version of events—a version of events that has been proven to be falsified, in order to protect the police at the expense of the truth.

Or take what happened on 18 June 1984 at Orgreave and the charges of police brutality, perverting the course of justice and misconduct in a public office—among the most serious offences that can be found in a country that upholds the rule of law, and yet they have still not been properly investigated to this very day. When secrecy in Government institutions prevails, the health of our democracy and the rights of our citizens pay the price. I am sorry to say that this Government's record on transparency and accountability has been anything but exemplary.

Plans to water down the Freedom of Information Act 2000 have been cloaked in the grizzled words of Ministers, who talk darkly about journalists unacceptably abusing the Act to generate stories—something that many of us call journalism. Last year alone, such journalism uncovered remarkable details of hundreds of dangerous criminals on the run, how many times our data have been breached online, what police knew about child sexual exploitation, and details of Conservative party donors making millions in housing benefit. Those were not fanciful, frivolous requests, but stories very definitely in the public interest.

What about being held to account? We have seen the Trade Union Bill and the gagging Act. There is the strangling of the finances of political opponents, in contravention of decades-old convention. The Human Rights Act is seen as nothing but an irritant. There is the NHS weekly bulletin, which was due to begin publication late last year, but which no longer includes figures on four-hour waits. There are the new rules revealing that hospitals had effectively been banned from declaring major incidents—all that from a Prime Minister, who said airily just before entering high office, let “sunshine” be “the best disinfectant”. However, there is some cleaning up to do, because, put simply, this is a

Prime Minister and a Government who do not like being challenged. This is a Prime Minister and a Government who do not like scrutiny.

It was with depressing familiarity, therefore, that we learned over the Christmas recess that the Government had stopped the long-standing practice of releasing a comprehensive historical account of discussions and decisions made by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet under the 30-year rule—or, now, the 20-year rule—at the turn of the year. Instead, there was only a frankly pitiful selection of files cherry-picked from the Prime Minister's office. For the first time in 50 years, a Government have not released official files in full. Although long-standing convention has seen some 500 files released simultaneously from the Cabinet Office and the Prime Minister's office at the turn of the year, this year just 58 files were released.

The Government try to reassure us that further files will be forthcoming throughout the year but as yet there is no timetable for release or any indication of whether that will be comprehensive. Will the Government choose to release them on Budget day, for instance, or perhaps on the day before the summer recess, so as to avoid scrutiny? These may seem like hypothetical musings, but Ministers already have a track record of doing that. On the day of the Christmas recess, the Government released 36 ministerial statements and 424 Government documents in one day. That was surely done in the hope that hard-pressed lobby journalists would miss—in the thousands of pages of data—revelations from the Department for Work and Pensions that three quarters of those affected by the hated bedroom tax have had to cut back on food, or that there has been a 45% increase in homeless families living in temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation.

I would like to press the Minister on a timetable for the release of all public records and on whether that release will be comprehensive, as required under the Public Records Act 1958. It would also be helpful to the House if he could explain the contents of a somewhat cryptic answer that the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh). He stated:

“Cabinet papers for the period 1986-1989 have already been transferred to the National Archives.”

The answer does not clearly indicate whether all those Cabinet papers have been released to the National Archives. As the Minister knows that would include, in line with precedent, some 500 files released from both the Prime Minister's office and the Cabinet Office. Can he assure the House that all those files have been comprehensively released to the National Archives? If they have, and given that, as the Minister knows, it is procedure for the National Archives to release all files transferred to it as soon as possible, on what basis was it decided that some files would be released and others not? Was that decision taken by the National Archives, which does a fantastic job, or was it taken, as we expect, by Ministers?

On that point, how many applications have the Government submitted to the National Archives to retain documents for any reason under section 3 of the Public Records Act? Given that the use of these instruments of retention by the Government are not always publicly available, will the Minister at least confirm how many documents the Government have submitted instruments of retention for?

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate, given that Ministers have so far failed to come and give a statement to the House on why the Cabinet Office papers have been delayed. Does he agree that it is particularly important that the Government are open and transparent about the documents they retain and release because, as of December 2015, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport now has the responsibility to approve the retention of documents on advice from the Advisory Council on National Records and Archives? Therefore, two advisers to the then Thatcher Government—the right hon. Members for West Dorset (Mr Letwin) and for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale)—are now responsible for both the release and the potential retention of information relating to matters pertaining to that Government.

Richard Burgon: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She is exactly right: these questions matter because the period covered was one of profound political sensitivity and because Ministers responsible for the release of these files were in the thick of it at that time as advisers to senior politicians.

In 2014—the last time there was a comprehensive release of Cabinet papers—we learned that the former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, had lied to the public about the extent of the pit closure plan, her attempt to influence police tactics, and the involvement of MI5 in spying on officials of the National Union of Mineworkers. That information demonstrated the extent to which the Government can use the institutions of the state against ordinary people. It is good for our democracy that the information was released, and it helps the ongoing fight for justice in the coalfield communities. This year, however, with such a small selection of files released, issues of political importance such as the discussions on the poll tax and the black Monday stock market crash have remained secret. Those were decisions that senior Ministers in the current Government were directly involved in.

Thanks to previous releases covering 1985-86, we know that the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin) advised the then Thatcher Government to use Scotland as a testing bed for the hated poll tax, but there the information, sadly, dries up. We do not know how this young adviser, in the teeth of powerful Cabinet opposition, managed to force through one of the most politically catastrophic and socially toxic policies in post-war history. Not only is that of historical interest, but it gives us an insight into the ideology and motives of the Prime Minister's senior policy chief. We see a clear progression from the right hon. Gentleman's policy formulation in the 1980s to policy implementation under the current Government.

Louise Haigh: On that point, is my hon. Friend aware that in the 1980s the right hon. Member for West Dorset authored an extreme pamphlet for a think-tank that offered suggestions on exactly how to privatise the NHS? Two of those suggestions have now been implemented by this Conservative Government. Does that not prove the direct link between policy formulation under that Government and the policy being implemented by this one, and further emphasise the need for transparency?

Richard Burgon: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is right, and I am glad she has drawn the House's attention to the extremist past and, I would say, the extremist present of some of those in such an ideological Government. The pamphlet she is referring to is "Britain's biggest enterprise", in which the right hon. Member for West Dorset called for a health insurance scheme and charging across the NHS. Thankfully, those shameful views have not been taken up by the current Government—yet. His views on increasing the use of joint ventures between the NHS and the private sector very definitely have been implemented.

This goes to the heart of the matter. If previous Cabinet releases have detailed damaging revelations about senior members of this Government and their ideology and motives—motives that have been carried into the current Government—why has this year's release been so dramatically curtailed? What detail is in those approximately 450 files that have not yet been released? Did the right hon. Member for West Dorset, who is now a Minister in the Cabinet Office—the Department with responsibility for the release of these files—have any say in that?

Apparently, the Government have managed to find a way to water down the accountability of two Conservative Administrations in one go. The Government promised to be the most transparent in the world, but we increasingly find that their rhetoric does not match the reality. The Information Commissioner, Christopher Graham, the man charged with upholding the public's right to information, boldly warned that the Government should not return to the dark ages of private Government. The Government should heed that warning. We all should.

11.11 am

The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Rob Wilson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) on securing this debate. I start by saying, as he did, that this Government are committed to being the most transparent ever and take their commitment under the Public Records Act seriously.

A key plank of our commitment to transparency is our work on releasing files after 20 years, rather than 30 years as was previously the case. I acknowledge openly that this is a really big, major challenge for the Government, which unfortunately we fell short of in December 2015. I hope it will be helpful to the hon. Gentleman and others here today if I respond to their points by setting out first how the Cabinet Office is working to meet its obligations under the Public Records Act, which sets out how and when Government records should be transferred to the National Archives, and explaining why some may sometimes need to be retained.

The Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 shortened the period before which files are released from 30 years to 20 years. This means that for a transitional period, two years of files are being reviewed each year, a doubling of the information in scope. In this process, each file undergoes a series of detailed checks to protect, for example, national security and sensitive personal data. This in no way lessens our commitment to transparency but takes time to do properly. This is a significant challenge for all involved. For Departments,

it is a doubling of the workload, and the same considerations need to be made before papers are sent to the National Archives.

The National Archives are meeting these challenges head-on, which means extra papers coming through to them with high public demand as the subjects covered are relatively recent. By 2023, this process of reviewing two years of records in one year will be complete.

In December, we transferred a number of 1987 and 1988 files and this formed part of a press event arranged by the National Archives. We will be transferring more shortly, with the aim of completing the transfer of our 1987 and 1988 files as soon as possible. Files up to 1990 will be released throughout the year.

Louise Haigh: I am a little confused. The Paymaster General wrote to me a couple of weeks ago saying the delay in the release of Cabinet papers was due to a change in policy by releasing some earlier in 2015, some in December 2015 and some at an unspecified date later this year. Now the Minister is saying that it was due to lack of resources or an increased challenge. Will he confirm whether it is due to a specific change in policy that will occur next year, or lack of resources?

Mr Wilson: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. If she will bear with me, all will become clear because I will set out in painstaking detail the process by which we are handling the matter.

The Cabinet Office was due to transfer all information from 1987 and 1988 by the end of 2015 but, as is clear, we did not manage to do so. Both 1987 and 1988 were eventful years, as we have heard from the hon. Gentleman, and this impacted on the Department's ability to get these files reviewed as quickly as we wanted. Each file is painstakingly checked before transfer, which is not about withholding secrets and covering up inconvenient facts, as the hon. Gentleman alleged. Let me inform hon. Members about the sort of information that must be checked.

Files emanating from No. 10 will cover the whole range of issues that the Government deal with, from benefits to defence spending, overseas trade, support for community groups and a whole host of other things. They will include things like personal information relating to individuals involved, even home addresses, and everything to do with relationships with other countries and national security. On every appearance of such information a careful consultation process takes place, which may result in documents being redacted or retained.

The transfers that have already taken place mean that nearly 70,000 Cabinet Office files or volumes are held by the National Archives, an amazing repository holding over 1,000 years of iconic national documents, which the public can access free. Its online catalogue is the single point of access to 32 million descriptions of records. In 2014-15, there were approaching a quarter of a billion downloads from its collection.

When files reach the National Archives, a number of processes are involved to make information available to as many people as possible—for example, through digitisation. This means an inevitable time lag between the Cabinet Office transferring files to the National Archives and their appearance in the collection. This is why the Cabinet papers for 1987 and 1988 have not yet appeared in the public catalogue although they have

been transferred to the National Archives. Another factor is that files are not always transferred in the year that one might expect as they are not assessed for transfer until the date of the last paper on the file. This explains why papers sometimes appear in the National Archives later than expected.

We are aware of the changing landscape of records management. The National Archives, as trusted experts in information and records management, will help to ensure that in an age when more and more of the Government's records are born-digital, we open more records to the public as soon as possible. To that end, our intention is now to release files more frequently throughout the year, rather than in a single annual event. This means that, from later this year, we will start to release records from 1989 and 1990 in advance of the traditional release at the end of December. Cabinet Office officials are working closely with the National Archives to strengthen the entire process of how and when Cabinet Office files are released to the public.

Throughout 2016, there will be a number of releases from the Cabinet Office to the National Archives, catching up on the 1987 and 1988 records and then working through the 1989 and 1990 papers. I believe this is consistent with our overall transparency objectives, and that the regular releases will be a more effective way to work, particularly in the context of a doubling of the amount of information in scope.

The hon. Member for Leeds East asked several questions about the Cabinet minutes for 1987 and 1988, and papers from the Prime Minister's Office for the same period. The Cabinet Office has transferred the Cabinet papers and minutes for the period 1987-88 to the National Archives. Some of the Prime Minister's papers are already with the National Archives, including those made available at the press event in December. Our aim is for the remainder of those that can be transferred to be with the National Archives as soon as possible.

The hon. Gentleman asked about freedom of information, and he mentioned Hillsborough in his opening comments. No Government have done more than this one to shine a light on the truth, after 13 years of a Labour Government who failed to do what was necessary to open up the facts of Hillsborough to the public in the Merseyside area who were demanding access to them. He said that the Government were pushing for a review of freedom of information. Actually, I think the first person to push for such a review was Tony Blair, who mentioned in his autobiography that he was keen to change freedom of information.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the series of statements that appeared at the end of the last Session. I have to remind him that it was a Labour special adviser who, when the party was in government, described a particular day as

"a good day to bury bad news".

I hope he remembers that phrase; it certainly did not come from the Conservative Government. I know that there is a new Mulder and Scully "X-Files" series out, and I do wonder about the conspiracy theories that sometimes run riot around this place, because in this case, there are no conspiracy theories to be had.

Louise Haigh: The Minister has mentioned conspiracy theories. One of our main conspiracy theories is about the advisers that have been involved in both Conservative

Governments, whom the Minister has not mentioned. He mentioned a consultation process. I wonder whether the right hon. Member for West Dorset is involved in that consultation process, and whether he has any say over the documents that are retained or released.

Mr Wilson: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. The consultation process is one that officials handle. As far as I am aware—I think I am as aware as I can be on these matters—I do not believe that my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin) has vetoed any of the files that I think the hon. Lady is referring to in her question. But if there is more information that we can provide her with, obviously I would be very happy to write to her to update her.

I will move on to some comments about freedom of information. Freedom of information remains at the heart of transparency and accountability, and it goes hand in hand with the Public Records Act. The Government fully support freedom of information, but after more than a decade of the process in operation, we think it is time that it was reviewed to make sure that it is working effectively for hard-working taxpayers while allowing free and frank advice to be given to decision makers. That is why we have appointed an independent panel to look at the issue and assess how the practical processes of freedom of information can be improved. The commission will publish a report, as the hon. Gentleman knows, as soon as possible after its oral evidence sessions have been conducted. It would not be appropriate for me to pre-empt its work by getting into discussions today about the relative merits of the different parts of the Act.

I will end by making a few comments on the broader question of transparency. The Government take great pride in the fact that the UK leads the world in transparency and open government. I am not the only one who says so. The World Wide Web Foundation's open data barometer and Open Knowledge's global open data index ranked the UK No. 1. Over the past five years we have opened up more than 20,000 Government datasets to the public. We publish an unprecedented amount of data about everything from procurement to the gifts received by Ministers, and we continually strive to go even further.

Releasing open data makes the Government more accountable to citizens, helps to improve the efficiency of public services and drives social and economic growth. We have made expenditure data covering more than £188 billion of Government spending available for public scrutiny, and through our renewed Government data programme and our leading role in the international Open Government Partnership we will continue to be one of the most open and transparent Governments in the world. Those are not insignificant achievements, and we want to go even further. In our next Open Government Partnership national action plan, which is due to be published in the summer, we will develop an offer on transparency—including freedom of information—that strengthens the Government's commitment to open government overall.

In conclusion, this Government are the most transparent Government ever, and we are a world leader in the quantity of information available from a range of sources. I acknowledge that, in common with other Departments, the performance of the Cabinet Office in transferring papers from 1987 and 1988 has not been perfect, as I

[Mr Rob Wilson]

said at the outset. I am, however, confident that more of that historical information will be available to the public shortly, including the Cabinet Office papers that have already been transferred to the National Archives and will be available very soon. The aim is to complete the transfer of the 1987-88 papers as soon as possible. In future, we will move to release files more frequently throughout the year rather than in a single annual event. That means that before the end of the year, there will be 1989 and 1990 papers in the National Archives.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Cancer Drugs

[MR GARY STREETER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the removal of drugs from the Cancer Drugs Fund list.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I secured this debate to raise the case of a constituent and to allow other Members to discuss the effects that removing drugs from the Cancer Drugs Fund will have and, I suspect, the current consultation on the fund. The latest delisting of some drugs from the fund has happened since the last debate on cancer drugs, and I am sure that many Members have heard from constituents who have been affected.

In November, I was contacted by a constituent, Tina Spencer-Keyse, about her husband Graham, who in 2010, at 51, was diagnosed with myeloma, which is a rarer cancer caused by abnormal cells in the bone marrow, where all blood cells are made. Myeloma is a relapsing and remitting cancer, meaning that there are periods when the myeloma causes symptoms and complications and needs to be treated, followed by periods of remission or plateau, when the myeloma does not cause symptoms and does not require treatment. Because myeloma is relapsing and remitting, it is crucial that clinicians are always one step ahead of the disease and that there is a treatment option for the patient to receive when it returns, especially when other treatment options have already been used.

Until August 2015, Tina and Graham had hoped to use one further drug treatment available for myeloma. Pomalidomide, also known as Imnovid, is used to treat relapsed multiple myeloma patients who have received prior treatment regimens but for whom the disease has continued to grow and spread. Imagine how devastated the Spencer-Keyse family were to find out then that the drug had been removed from the list of drugs available through the fund. Following the delisting, there are no other licensed treatments available for myeloma patients in England. Patients have no other options once the drug they are currently taking fails. They have nowhere else to go. Imagine the frustration, and probably anger, that they and thousands of others feel when a drug that was available just months before is no longer available to them but is still being used by other patients who were prescribed it before the delisting. The situation is such that a doctor might see one patient in the morning and be able to continue prescribing a treatment yet see another patient with the same disease afterwards and not be able to do so, even when they know it could help.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. Another example of a drug that has been delisted, causing similar frustration, is Abraxane, which is used in the treatment of advanced pancreatic cancer and was removed from the Cancer Drugs Fund in November. First, does she share my concern that although the delisting applies only to England, it causes worries across the rest of the UK as to whether the drug will

become unavailable there, too? Secondly, although of course a consistent set of rules must be applied, one of the issues with pancreatic cancer is that 80% of patients are diagnosed when the cancer has already spread. Although Abraxane may only give a few weeks more life, those weeks may double life expectancy.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. Interventions must be brief.

Pauline Latham: I accept what the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) says. I have also campaigned for Abraxane to continue because, very sadly, a former Member of this House died from pancreatic cancer in the last Parliament. He had very few weeks to live once he was diagnosed, so it is a particularly unpleasant disease.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): On Abraxane, does my hon. Friend agree that if a cancer is fast-acting and the gap between diagnosis and death can be as little as six months, getting an extra month or two means that a person can settle their affairs and get peace of mind? That is very important time.

Pauline Latham: It is incredibly important time. Any extra few weeks in such a situation is so valuable to those patients.

In answer to a written question submitted by my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) on 10 December 2015, the Minister said:

“NHS England has advised that a draft treatment pathway for patients with multiple myeloma, which takes into account the... impact of treatments removed from the Cancer Drugs Fund (CDF), is currently being finalised.”

I hope he is able to update us today on when those proposals might be published. My constituent and his family would like to know what options, if any, he has.

It is not only drugs for rarer cancers that have been hit. Drugs to treat breast cancer, bowel cancer, prostate cancer, leukaemia and other blood cancers, some gynaecological cancers and cancers that affect the central nervous system have all been removed, which probably amounts to thousands of patients who are now unable to receive treatment. That is absolutely devastating for patients and their families, as the chance to prolong life for a few more months or years has been diminished.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate and on the passion she is showing in putting her case. What does she think about NHS England’s proposal that the Cancer Drugs Fund should become a managed access fund that pays for promising new drugs for a set period before the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence decides whether the drugs should be routinely available on the NHS? Does she think that is a good idea or not a good idea?

Pauline Latham: I will come on to that later. If my hon. Friend does not mind waiting a few moments, he will hear what I have to say.

Delisted drugs are still potentially available on an individual basis via an individual funding request. Is the Minister able to say how many of those requests have been successful as a proportion of all requests, and

for which drugs? I know he is working extremely hard on this matter, about which he cares passionately, and I thank him for that.

Although there has been recent progress, the UK still lags behind most other developed nations on use of and access to cancer drugs. In fact, we do not do as well on outcomes for cancer as many other nations. Nationally, cancer is still the largest killer, accounting for 29% of all registered deaths in 2014, the last year for which Office for National Statistics figures are available. Tracking the history of the Cancer Drugs Fund, a fund for which I have repeatedly supported investment, we can see that it has been on a rocky road to get to where we are now. Drugs have been removed, and the general consensus is that the fund has become unsustainable.

For the first three years, the fund underspent its budget—the opposite problem from the one we have now. In fact, between October 2010 and March 2013, the 10 strategic health authorities that administered the fund underspent by £128 million, or 28% of the fund’s total budget. That is a lot of money that could have been spent treating cancer patients. There was significant geographic disparity in the use of the fund. In the east midlands, which covers my Mid Derbyshire constituency, the number of patients supported by the fund per 1,000 new cancer cases in 2012-13 was just 27. That was the lowest figure in the country and represented a failure of the East Midlands strategic health authority, which was then in control of administering the fund, to promote its use to clinicians and patients. Several of my constituents died prematurely because they were refused funds for the drugs they needed when the fund was always underspent, despite pleading from me on behalf of people who were spending their own money on those drugs.

Since NHS England and Public Health England took control of the fund, the change has been dramatic. Having one central authority administering the fund removes the geographic differences whereby treatment authorities were promoting the fund and treatments at different levels. The effect is such that patient numbers skyrocketed. As last year’s high quality National Audit Office report on the Cancer Drugs Fund notes, the number of patients approved for funding increased by about 30% each year from 2011 to 2015, which should be viewed as a success for patients. Thanks to the fund, 84,000 patients have been able to access treatments that they would otherwise have been denied. The success is such that, in 2014-15, almost one in five patients started a new cancer drug through the Cancer Drugs Fund. What was meant to be a temporary measure is now a mainstay of cancer treatment in England.

Obviously, such growth comes with a price; the cost of funding the scheme spiralled out of control. Following the Government’s decision to extend the fund to March 2016, NHS England increased the annual budget from £200 million to £280 million for 2014-15 and 2015-16. In January 2015, it increased the budget for 2015-16 again, to £340 million, meaning that the fund now has an expected lifetime budget of £1.27 billion.

Was taking drugs off the list a solution to the fund’s problems? It was certainly the easiest way to regain control of costs, but it hit patients hardest rather than solving the problems with NICE’s approval processes, which was the underlying reason for the fund’s creation. The rapid response to regain control of the budget also means that no new treatments were added to the Cancer

[*Pauline Latham*]

Drugs Fund from January 2015. The decision to keep drugs on the fund's list or remove them was based on their clinical effectiveness and cost, but from the start the fund did not keep records of treatment outcomes. Surely it is hard to obtain a full understanding of drugs' full efficacy if a full analysis is not available by which to judge them. The failure to collect data on patient outcomes until July 2015 is truly disgraceful and undermines any proper evaluation of the fund's success.

I am particularly attracted to the question asked by the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) during a Public Accounts Committee oral evidence session on the Cancer Drugs Fund last year. She asked why the Department of Health did not

"knock the heads of the SHAs together to ensure that there was some sort of common collection of data",

instead of just recommending it. Fortunately, NHS England and Public Health England have resolved the problem—today, every new Cancer Drugs Fund patient is automatically identified on the systemic anti-cancer therapy database—but five years to fix a problem is far too long, and a failing of the fund.

Although data outcomes are now mandated, the rate of return has been far from perfect. In 2014-15, many records lacked important data. Most shockingly, 93% of patient records submitted did not have an outcome summary. Will the Minister inform us whether there will be penalties for trusts that consistently fail to produce the required data on cancer treatments?

The lack of data collection also undermines efforts to establish whether the price paid for drugs is equal to their outcomes. As the chief executive of the NHS admitted himself, the NHS has not been good enough at negotiating a price for drugs. Many drugs have been delisted because they were deemed too expensive. The drug Imnovid, which would benefit my constituent Graham, costs the NHS £115,000 a year, compared with £90,000 in Spain.

The failure to negotiate the best price was demonstrated by the fact that when threatened with removal from the list, some manufacturers were able to offer a lower price for their drugs. I understand that Imnovid was already offered at a discounted price, but I cannot blame drug manufacturers for not immediately offering the lowest price that they can afford. They need profits to use on research and development and to show value for their investments. Will the lack of positive outcomes from the price negotiations be addressed in the new CDF proposals? Also, can the Minister provide information on the number of negotiations between NHS England and drug manufacturers that have been positively resolved, and which drugs they relate to?

The new Cancer Drugs Fund proposals aim to distribute more evenly the financial risk of placing a drug in the fund, but the Rarer Cancers Foundation strongly suggests that the NHS has not been flexible in negotiating with pharmaceutical companies on value propositions for treatments in the fund. Can the Minister confirm whether NHS England rejected multi-treatment cost reductions from drug companies because they would have fallen outside NHS England's standard operating procedure? Likewise, from evidence given to the Public Accounts Committee, it is clear that some companies have offered

financial schemes stating that if the medicine does not work as expected, its cost will be returned to the NHS, but have been turned down in favour of straight discount schemes. Together, such schemes would offer a win for the taxpayer and would have allowed more drugs to be made available for the fund.

My final comments concern the proposed reforms of the appraisal process for drugs on the fund, which under current plans will be put solely in the hands of NICE. The proposal is that the CDF should become a managed access fund for new cancer drugs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) mentioned, with clear entry and exit criteria. It would be used to enable access to drugs that appear promising but for which NICE indicates that there is insufficient evidence to support a recommendation for routine commissioning. At the end of the period, the drug would go through a short NICE appraisal, using the additional evidence.

For those looking for treatment for rarer cancers, such as myeloma, there are a number of questions about the new proposals that need to be addressed to ensure access to new treatments. As I understand it, under the new proposals, only a limited number of patients will have treatment funded through the CDF, and the industry is expected to fund additional patients. The consultation sets out NHS England's proposal to limit funding for each drug on the CDF to the number of patients required to be treated in order to gain further evidence for use in NICE appraisal. The consultation is not clear what data NICE might require to be gathered during the CDF funding phase or the indicative size of patient populations. It is therefore difficult to assess whether the proposals would result in more or fewer patients getting access to treatment than the current arrangements.

What consideration is there of drugs for rarer cancers, which will have smaller patient pools creating only a small amount of data? Does the appraisal process have flexibility for such drugs? It is not clear whether pharmaceutical companies will be willing to fund patients for the 24 months required to allow data to mature if they think the likelihood of NICE approval at the end remains small. That could result in patients losing out once again on innovative treatments, or a situation in which drugs are put on the fund list and taken off in 24-month cycles, leading to uncertainty for patients about which drugs they have access to, just like the uncertainty caused by the current delisting.

I would like reassurances from the Minister that patients seeking treatment after the number of patients required to be treated in order to gain further evidence has been reached will not be denied treatment given to others in their situation. Does he believe that the changes to the NICE process outlined in the consultation are sufficient to ensure that more cancer treatments will receive positive NICE recommendations? Patients should be at the centre of any new decisions about the fund. Finally, I ask the Minister how the views of patients will be given greater weight in the new CDF arrangements.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): I have been listening carefully to my hon. Friend. Does she agree that the crux of the matter is that the NICE evaluation criteria for those sorts of drug have not been adequate? The whole genesis of the Cancer Drugs Fund is in a

failure of NICE. We need to get the NICE criteria right; then we would not need a drugs fund in the current format.

Pauline Latham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. NICE has not done what it should have done. I hope that the Minister will be able to rectify that failure in the system.

Resolving data collection issues, negotiating value for the taxpayer and making the NICE assessment process flexible for innovative new drugs and drugs designed to treat only a small number of patients are vital for the fund to work successfully when it re-launches in April. Will the Minister please look again at the delisted drugs and give hope to people such as Graham that they can spend longer with their loved ones? Failing to do so will not help those whom the fund is designed to help most: cancer patients and their families.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Colleagues, we have 40 minutes until the winding-up speeches begin at 3.30, so we are looking at six-minute speeches, by voluntary submission. I will call Jim Shannon first, as he has to go and chair an important all-party parliamentary group; I hope that colleagues will accept that. He has promised to speak for no more than five minutes.

2.49 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Streeter. You have put me on a sticky wicket. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) on securing this debate. It is good to be here and to be involved. About six months ago, I had a similar debate on the availability of cancer drugs, at which I think she was present. We hoped that six months later we might be back to say that things were better or had advanced, but unfortunately that is not so, or not in the way that we would like.

I would just like to mention the many organisations that are helpful, because every one of us will have some cancer organisations close to their heart. Mine are Cancer Research UK, Macmillan Cancer Support and Marie Curie, because I have a very good friend, Irene Brown, who is terminally ill and she is in the Marie Curie centre in Belfast. The treatment that Marie Curie gives is second to none, and people only have to be there to be part of that family that helps.

The Macmillan charity says that 2.5 million people in the UK were living with cancer in 2015. It says that 5% of our total adult population are affected, which shows the problem is enormous. For many of us, cancer is not simply something that others talk about; it is something that affects each and every one of us every day. My father was a survivor of cancer on three occasions. I put that down to the skill of the surgeon, the prayers of God's people—something that many of us here would understand—and the care of the nurses. He survived and lived for another 36 years, dying just last year, at the ripe old age of 85. The marvellous steps that modern medicine has taken are fantastic.

Moves such as the removal of drugs prevents thousands of cancer sufferers across England and Wales from being able to access the quality treatment they deserve. Thousands of people are disadvantaged, thousands of people lose out and thousands of normal people are in despair. That is the reality of not having access to cancer drugs. I do not know what it is, but I have more

people coming to my office suffering from cancer than I can ever recall. I know that there is a 50% survival rate today for those with cancer, which is fantastic—what a step forward—but I see more people with cancer than ever before. I am not sure whether it is due to diet or lifestyle, or whatever it is, but cancer is certainly a greater issue for me than ever.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): We understand that, from April, NICE will have the overall say on what drugs and treatments people will receive. We know that we have to be prudent with money, but surely finance should not be the overriding factor when it comes to people's lives.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for saying that. Over the last few months and before Christmas, I had the opportunity to meet some of the pharmaceutical companies, and I have to say—and to be careful what I say—that they are not terribly happy with NICE and how it has responded to them. Some of those pharmaceutical companies have reduced their prices and still NICE does not respond in the positive fashion that we would expect it to. That is one of my concerns, certainly.

I would put Queen's University Belfast up there as one of the universities working in partnership with medical companies, including companies from China and from across the United Kingdom. The partnerships that the university has developed and the innovative drugs that it is coming up with, as well as the investigations and trials that take place there to find new drugs, are impressive. We have new developments in Northern Ireland in cancer research, and we need to see a national strategy. Perhaps the Minister could respond to that point—let me apologise to him again, having already done so beforehand, for not being here for his response to the debate.

My party colleague Simon Hamilton is a Member of the Legislative Assembly and the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Health is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland. We have a number of Members from Northern Ireland—there are five here today—which shows the interest in this issue in Northern Ireland. Simon Hamilton has taken the initiative to release £1.5 million to fund specialist cancer drugs. That will allow some of the NICE-approved cancer drugs and treatments to go ahead this year.

That move in Northern Ireland will go some way towards enabling the health service there to reach the cancer target. Each day in Northern Ireland, 23 people are diagnosed with cancer and 11 people die of it. There were more than 331,000 new cases of cancer in 2011 across the United Kingdom, and 161,823 deaths from cancer in 2012. The enormity of cancer—how it afflicts people and how many people die—cannot be underlined enough.

The latest delisting of drugs from the Cancer Drugs Fund looks like a step back rather than a step forward in the fight against cancer. I know that we cannot be completely resistant to change—the Minister knows that and, as elected representatives ourselves, we also know it. If drugs are proving ineffective, they should be delisted, but at the same time, if drugs are effective, let us get them on the list and make them available to those who need them most. We should be here to commend, I hope, the addition of a new form of effective treatment.

[*Jim Shannon*]

To conclude—I am very conscious of what you said earlier, Mr Streeter—the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire mentioned Abraxane, and here is the postcode lottery. Those living in Northern Ireland do not have any access to Abraxane whatsoever. Those living in England had access to it in March 2014, but not now. People in Scotland have had access to Abraxane since January 2015 and will still have it. In Wales, people have been able to access it since September 2014, but now it looks like that might be affected as well. That is the postcode lottery for cancer drugs. It is completely unacceptable, and I commend the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire for securing this debate.

2.54 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) on securing this debate. She asked many pertinent questions that I will be very interested to hear the answers to today.

First, let us look at some good points for a moment, before I give what is quite a Solihull perspective on this issue. This is a unique fund in the NHS—it is the only one of its type. I believe it was originally intended to run until March 2014, with a projected budget of some £650 million. To date, spend has been around £960 million and 84,000 people have been treated under this fund, which is a real positive. This year alone, the spend will be £340 million.

In the main, therefore, policy makers have ensured that resources have been in place. However, perhaps at times the allocation of those resources has not been of the best. As my hon. Friend mentioned, the most recent assessments have seen 23 drugs being delisted, including Abraxane. Imnovid, which was particular to the case of my hon. Friend's constituent, has also been delisted.

During the recent election campaign and since, Solihull's breast cancer care group has been in regular contact with me about this issue and more widely about cancer treatment in the NHS. Hon. Members will be aware of the great sensitivity in my constituency about such issues, because unfortunately the rogue surgeon—Mr Paterson—carried out his work in the Solihull area. Many of the botched operations have added to the misery of my constituents and their cancer has been made far worse by his activities. Many people are still waiting for compensation and justice. However, what Solihull's breast cancer care group and other patient groups in Solihull want is for the Cancer Drugs Fund to stay, and to be fair and transparent in its dealings. They do not want the fund to wither on the vine, but neither do they want it to become a free-for-all for drug companies. They understand that in a market we have to try to get the best possible price.

That is an important point, and I understand that there are still negotiations under way about all the drugs removed from the fund. Manufacturers have an opportunity to reduce the costs to the taxpayer. However, as my hon. Friend has pointed out, it is unfortunate that there are concerns about the negotiation process. Like my hon. Friend, I welcome the fact that data on every new Cancer Drugs Fund patient are now captured—it is quite an oversight that that was not the case before—but

I am concerned at the failure to adequately negotiate good deals for drugs, particularly those to treat rare cancers, so I would add to her calls in that respect.

There are some other aspects of the Cancer Drugs Fund that need to be emphasised. I have been told that patients who are already in receipt of treatment should be able to continue with it. Individual funding requests are an option; however, as many Members present have probably discovered, they can often be ad hoc and very difficult to secure. I emphasise that point again to Ministers today.

Policy makers have to be careful that the Cancer Drugs Fund does not become a hostage to fortune to the drugs companies and their lobbyists. There must be sensitivity as well. The Cancer Drugs Fund is precious. I am concerned that although 84,000 people have benefited from it, there are 1,700 patients with blood cancer who may miss certain treatments because of the removal of the drugs. The top 10 drugs, it seems, account for 71% of all patients treated. However, there seems to be a black spot when it comes to rarer cancers and drugs that are more difficult to acquire.

There are options for change for the Cancer Drugs Fund. As has been pointed out, NHS England has proposed that the fund should become a managed access fund—effectively, providing drugs in advance of NICE deciding whether or not they should be routinely available. However, my hon. Friend has quite rightly raised issues in that respect.

In conclusion, whatever the future direction of the Cancer Drugs Fund, let us not forget that thousands of people are alive today and thousands of families still have their loved ones because of its advent. We must not lose sight of what the Cancer Drugs Fund has achieved. We must protect those achievements for the future, but be very mindful of the case laid out by my hon. Friend.

2.59 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): As ever, Mr Streeter, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) on securing a debate on this important subject; she has tirelessly raised the issue of access to cancer treatments since she entered the House. She was right to describe the Cancer Drugs Fund as having moved from being a temporary measure to being a mainstay, and therein lies much of the challenge we face today. In that respect, the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) was right to remind us of the many good things the fund has done, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was right to emphasise the increased number of people with cancer and the need for cancer treatment.

Let us be clear: last year's delisting of drugs from the Cancer Drugs Fund was a retrograde step for many cancer patients across the country. The decision affected many thousands of patients, and I am sorry to report, as the chair of the all-party group on pancreatic cancer, that that included hundreds of pancreatic cancer patients, because the pancreatic cancer drug Abraxane was removed from the CDF on 4 November.

Pancreatic cancer has the worst survival rate of any of the 21 most common cancers, with less than 5% of patients surviving five years or longer. That survival rate has barely changed over the last 40 years. Sadly, as

my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) emphasised, pancreatic cancer is often diagnosed late, with about 80% of diagnoses taking place when the disease has spread to another part of the body. Patients diagnosed when the disease is metastatic live, on average, for just two to six more months.

Trials have shown that Abraxane, when used in combination with the standard chemotherapy drug gemcitabine, can extend eligible patients' lives by an average of about two months more than gemcitabine alone. However, it is important to note that some patients live for significantly longer than two months, with some on the trials living for more than two years, and with a significant increase in the number surviving for more than one year. Clearly, when the average survival rate is between two and six months, even an extra two months' survival gain represents a relatively large amount of time for patients to spend with their loved ones, and the value of that was indicated earlier.

That survival gain is why Abraxane is now in use around the world. From Germany to the USA, and from Austria to Australia, it is making a small but tangible difference to patients. It is worth noting that Scotland and Wales have also approved Abraxane for use on the NHS. Yet, in England, as of 4 November, it is no longer available to new patients, creating a devastating postcode lottery, as the hon. Member for Strangford said.

There has been a significant outcry from members of the public—people such as my constituent Maggie Watts who lost her husband, Kevin, to pancreatic cancer in 2009, and the 102,000 people who signed her petition on Change.org calling for Abraxane to be put back on the CDF list.

Why was Abraxane removed? Unlike some other drugs, it was not removed because of cost. Instead, it was decreed that it did not meet the minimum clinical effectiveness threshold when that was raised in 2015. In short, it was removed because the CDF scoring system did not take account of relative survival gain. The scorecard CDF panel members must complete requires them to give a score of zero to a drug that gives an average of less than three months' life extension. Despite there being few treatments for pancreatic cancer, the system also did not recognise that this cancer has an unmet need in terms of treatment options. Abraxane is the first significant new treatment for nearly two decades, but the scoring system was inflexible, so the drug scored low.

That is the issue: we cannot just compare a new treatment for, say, breast cancer, where the average five-year survival rate is more than 80%, and where there are many effective treatments, with a new drug for a cancer such as pancreatic cancer, which has the lowest survival rate and few treatment options. Put simply, where a cost-benefit analysis takes place in a system with a finite budget, and where drugs for cancers with relatively high survival rates are scored on the same basis as drugs with the lowest survival rates, that system will always work against new drugs for cancers such as pancreatic cancer.

That brings us to the NICE consultation on how the CDF will be used in the future, which the all-party group will be submitting its views on. If a NICE committee defines a drug as an end-of-life drug, it can approve it at a higher cost threshold than other drugs. That is extremely important for cancer drugs and especially for pancreatic

cancer drugs. However, the consultation document suggests only minor changes to the end-of-life three-month threshold, which, as hon. Members will gather from my earlier comments, is vital for cancers such as pancreatic cancer. This is where the issue of relative survival gain needs to be properly addressed.

Another way to have addressed issues affecting cancers with the worst survival rates would have been to introduce a system of patient and clinician engagement for pre-defined end-of-life drugs. That system is being used successfully in Scotland. Introducing it here would mean that NICE had to engage more with clinicians and patients to establish what extra benefits certain drugs might bring. NICE committees would then have to give due weight to that PACE evidence, in addition to the clinical and cost-effectiveness data they usually review. Without PACE, Abraxane would not be available in Scotland. The system could make a big difference to patients in England if it were introduced for certain pre-defined cancer types, such as rare cancers—the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire mentioned the failure we have seen in that respect—and cancers of unmet need with the lowest survival rates.

3.5 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) for calling a debate on an issue that is important not only to me and several of my constituents, but to the broader population.

The Cancer Drugs Fund is not fit for purpose. As the chief executive of Cancer Research UK, who chaired the independent taskforce that looked into the fund, pointed out, we have several problems. First, curative treatments cannot be accessed readily enough. Also, insufficient data are collected in the system to prove the benefits of drugs and their effectiveness for patients. Although we welcome the data collection that is taking place now, it is a little too late.

We continue to lag behind other countries in cancer recovery rates and appropriate prescribing. Indeed, 20% of cancer patients present at our accident and emergency wards, and the later a patient presents, the poorer the outcome. As the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) said, certain cancers, such as pancreatic cancer, are devastating in the speed with which they attack the individual.

It must be remembered that the Cancer Drugs Fund is unique: cancer is the only condition with a dedicated fund. My constituents and I welcome the Prime Minister's support, but I am a little concerned that cancer is being labelled as a special disease. My surgery often includes patients with other diseases, and we must look across the piece. My concern is that we should have a road map from the accelerated access review so that we can learn how to drive forward advances not only for cancer, but for all areas of medicine. Standing in this hall takes me back six months, to when I first spoke here, about a constituent's access to the rare-disease drug everolimus.

In a system that is challenged financially, we need to be very sure that any drug for whatever illness is effective and offers value for money. Within that landscape, the CDF has gone from its original four-year spend of £650 million to a six-year spend of £1.27 billion. It could be argued that it has been a victim of its own success.

[Jo Churchill]

With improved access to medicines for nearly 80,000 people, but with ever-increasing need and demand, it is right that the Cancer Drugs Fund should sit alongside the cancer strategy as part of the entire commissioning pathway. Non-surgical cancer treatments such as drugs can and should be incorporated into a treatment package of surgery and radiotherapy to deliver an integrated and effective approach. There is a need for radiotherapy machines right across our hospitals, because they deliver extremely high survival rates for cancer patients. We therefore need to be careful about these issues.

For me, the rub has been the lack of thought given to the removal of drugs, and like my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire, I have been approached on this issue by constituents—particularly those suffering from pancreatic cancer and, given my history, those with breast cancer. A review in September led to 23 separate treatments being removed from the Cancer Drugs Fund, before we understood what the new horizon will look like for the charities and pharmaceutical companies, how the pathway will progress and whether we have a solution to ensure that our constituents can access drugs. In short, this removed the clinical choice from doctors and, more importantly, from patients. Those patients are my constituents and friends. With the loss of Imnovid and Revlimid—two drugs for myeloma—and the removal of breast, bowel and pancreatic cancer drugs for all those patients, life suddenly became less certain. A new CDF should have clear entry and exit levels for promising drugs. It needs to be a trial area, and defined as such; if, as proposed, it is to be brought into NICE, we need answers to some of the questions that other hon. Members have asked about how the Minister will hold NICE to account. In the cancer drug future, once a drug was approved it would be made available for routine use and would go into baseline commissioning. That would take some of the fear about whether someone would get it out of the system.

What remains to be seen is whether new drugs will have to meet the current inflexibilities of the cost-effectiveness criteria. That is a concern for cancer charities and pharmaceutical companies, which predominantly have the care of the patient, and patient outcomes, at their heart. To deliver cost-effective and timely treatments, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, we need a flexible new system. The NICE appraisal process is slow and unwieldy. It should be flexible enough to cope with new cancer drugs and—the Minister is aware of my interest in this—off-patent and repurposed drugs, which can also be effective in the area in question. That is about gathering and delivering the data on the patient for the patient, to allow drugs to be recommended and prescribed, or to make it possible to return to an individual pathway for a funding request. However, that merely sends us back to where we are today—people not knowing whether they will get the drug or not.

The irony of our system is that with the vibrancy of our life science industry, drugs are often readily available in Europe or Scotland before patients in England and Wales can access them. That is the bigger problem. We have improved one-year survival rates in the UK; but despite that we lag behind many other countries and our five-year survival rates have shown little progress.

More must be done. In the world of pharmaceuticals and, more importantly, genomics, advances are happening at pace. We need a space where we can trial medicines for use not only in big cohorts but for rarer cancers and diseases. We need a landscape that will allow for the personalised medicine that is coming down the tracks to us. Cancer will not wait for NICE. Nor will it wait for the patient. I know: I have been diagnosed with cancer and pre-cancerous tumours on several occasions. That is why I challenge the Minister on behalf of other cancer patients and my constituents in need to ensure that the CDF delivers reforms that will improve patient access to effective cancer medicine.

3.13 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Streeter. I join other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) on securing a debate on a vital issue at such an important time.

No one is unaffected by cancer, and I am sure every Member present will know of a constituent who has had their cancer treatment improved by access to specialist drugs. However, particularly in light of recent decisions, I am sure that we all know stories of constituents and family members who have not had access to the drugs they need, and who have, sadly, suffered as a result. That is why we are here today to discuss this important subject.

There are many who believe that, wherever they live and whatever their age, cancer patients—and there are many different types of cancers—should be able to access clinically effective, evidence-based treatments in a fair, consistent, timely and transparent way from the point of diagnosis. It is therefore deeply regrettable that, given that the Cancer Drugs Fund was already scheduled to come to a close this year, additional funding could not be found to provide the 16 medicines that were delisted last September, at least until a more effective commissioning system for cancer drugs was put in place.

Of course, difficult decisions will always have to be made about the allocation of finite resources, but this has been a particularly hard blow. It is difficult to describe how it must feel for someone to be diagnosed with cancer and then told, as the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire described, that the life-extending drug they need was funded yesterday but will not be funded today. I take on board the issues about pancreatic cancer, which is one of the severest forms. In fact there are many forms within that spectrum. I note particularly that it was not necessarily resources that were the issue: it was to do with clinical commissioning and clinical effectiveness, and drug trials. Many people who are desperately in need of help and access to drugs, and who feel very unwell, are at the mercy of wider decisions that are part of the NICE agenda and the wider Government agenda.

We may not find ourselves in that position deliberately. However, the Rare Cancers Foundation estimates that it will have been the experience for thousands of patients across Britain and Northern Ireland, and I feel that that suffering should be put on record in our debate today. It is, at the very least, a dire indication of why commissioning reform is needed so badly. It is not too late for the

Government to provide the additional support needed to give relief to the patients who are being denied access to life-extending drugs, but, given that such an announcement is unlikely, I shall turn my attention to the ways in which a new system can be designed, to ensure that the same mistake will not happen again.

The funding given for cancer drugs, whether through a Cancer Drugs Fund or a special medicines fund, must be sustainable and well co-ordinated, and should work alongside comprehensive support for treatment and wider health infrastructure. On that basis, the review of how the Cancer Drugs Fund works with NICE should also consider how specialist drug support can be co-ordinated with more localised radiotherapy, chemotherapy and surgery options. Integrating the Cancer Drugs Fund with the NICE system creates an opportunity to address broader issues within the NICE commissioning process, offering the potential remedy for long-standing issues such as access to necessary specialist drugs.

I will mention by way of background, given that I represent a Northern Ireland constituency, a difficulty that we sometimes have. Many specialist drugs are trialled at Queen's University Belfast, but because of the commissioning process they are not available to our constituents in Northern Ireland. They have not yet been commissioned, or they are commissioned for England and Wales but not necessarily for Northern Ireland. Therefore I urge the UK Ministers responsible for the issue to engage fully with their counterparts in the devolved Administrations, including Northern Ireland, to make sure that the issue is considered fully, and to turn the potential danger into an opportunity to improve both the NHS and access to specialist drugs. I hope that today the Minister, whom I am glad to see here, will provide us with some form of resolution, and a panacea that will bring relief to many people throughout the UK who are suffering from any of a wide variety of cancers, and particularly sufferers of rare cancers.

3.18 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I too thank the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) for obtaining the debate. I feel that I am the most inexperienced of the Members present on this subject, having never been on a health committee, but having been lobbied hard; but I lost my sister some 25 years ago, and I know that everyone has either lost a family member to cancer or knows someone who won, and was cured.

There is a key thing to get across today. Every MP needs to realise the limitations on funding and what we are learning, so that we can all lobby, and help to find a better way forward. I was particularly impressed when President Obama said he wanted all cancers to be cured. I am not sure that that will always be possible, but it is the right aim with which to go forward.

As I have been trying to learn about, and get myself briefed on, the topic, I have realised that we need a more dynamic and flexible approach to what we are doing. It is right to have a fund that allows everyone to get to it, but we must find a way in which everyone does get to it—to the drugs. Taking drugs off the list seems to be the wrong way forward. Can we look for some form of flexibility, so that with drugs that have been removed there is perhaps a different way of getting at them, one step back?

I had two main reasons for wanting to speak today. One, which has been touched on by my colleagues, is the difficulty that comes from Northern Ireland being treated as a devolved country with its own cancer. As we have heard, only £1.5 million is being put forward and the cost of cancer is a phenomenal chunk out of a small budget. People often have to travel elsewhere in the UK to get the drugs and the cures they need.

One such case is this. I was sitting on a train once—before I ended up here—listening to two Northern Irish people speaking loudly about how useless all politicians were, not just here but also in Northern Ireland, because no one had helped them with their cancer. I interrupted them, and it turned out that a politician from the Social Democratic and Labour party was the only person who had, in fact, helped them. One of them had had to sell his house and use all his savings to get the cure he needed, which was available only here in London. My main point is that we have to find a more joined-up way of doing this, so that the drugs are available for everyone, everywhere. Can we consider an approach that includes all four countries?

We have heard from others that we have an extremely good Queen's University link-up with Almac and with other countries, and we also have, in my patch, Randox. We have fantastic pharmaceutical companies leading the way in Northern Ireland. However, it was from a meeting with one of those companies that a story we have touched on today emerged. The company tried to sell the diagnostic system to our local NHS, but it could not. It sold it to a company in America, which repackaged it, and the Northern Ireland health service then bought it from that company for an extra few million. We have heard about the difference in costs between Spain and Britain. There must be a system for looking at the procurement process, to ensure that we are more dynamic in how we buy things, so that the drugs are there and available to everyone.

Those are the two main points I wanted to make. Let us work it all together and get a better use of drugs. I am glad that we have had the debate today, and I am thankful for having had the chance to speak.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Thank you, colleagues, for your co-operation. We now turn to our winding-up speeches, and it is a pleasure to call first, for the Scottish National party, Marion Fellows.

3.22 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) for securing this important debate. I will give the debate a more Scottish context.

For patients with a life-threatening or highly symptomatic illness, getting access to the best treatment is crucial. Living with a condition that has no cure or treatment is difficult, but knowing that you or your loved one is denied access to an available treatment is intolerable. Our biggest problem is accessing new drugs, which are often very expensive and above the limit set for NHS access by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence—NICE—or its Scottish equivalent, the Scottish Medicines Consortium, the SMC. That results in delayed access to new treatments and, as has been mentioned, it appears to contribute to the UK's poor cancer outcomes

[Marion Fellows]

by comparison with other countries. The issue is even worse for those with rare diseases, because the commercial imperative to develop a drug in the first place is weaker, due to low patient numbers.

There is also frustration for clinical researchers who enter patients into trials that lead to a drug's development in the first place. The UK, and particularly Scotland, punch above their weight in the active recruitment of patients into drug trials for diseases such as cancer. Patients may benefit from gaining access to the new treatment during the trial but, once the trial has been successfully completed, new patients do not get that opportunity, which is demoralising and could undermine research efforts in the future. Some of the drugs that have been researched over the years are now being removed from the list in England.

Once a new drug has gained a licence, NICE and the SMC carry out their assessments. In Scotland, however, the SMC utilises the evidence gathered to carry out just a brief review, with the emphasis being more on the drug's effectiveness. Cost comes after that.

There are three major differences in the access systems north and south of the border. While both have drug access funds, in England the fund is only for cancer whereas in Scotland it is for any new drugs and rare diseases.

The Cancer Drugs Fund in England, which was meant to be temporary, has enabled patients to access new cancer drugs that would otherwise have been unobtainable. It has now been running for five years and some drugs are being excluded on cost grounds. In Scotland, after a review in 2014, the SMC established the patient and clinician evaluation, which allows reconsideration of a drug while taking into account the wider experience of it and capturing input from patients and clinicians. That gives patients a voice.

Sir Oliver Heald: Abraxane fails the test of three months' effectiveness, but it is useful in producing two. Why is it that the Scottish system allows Abraxane? Will the hon. Lady give us a bit more of an understanding of that? I would like to see the drug back on the list, and if the Scottish system is a way of doing that, it might be worth looking at.

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for his intervention. He has asked me something that I cannot answer definitively at the moment, because I am not a clinician. I am, however, more than happy to come back to him on that. I know that PACE—the patient and clinician engagement group—has done some development on it, but I would like to give the hon. and learned Gentleman a fuller answer and I can do that later, if he agrees.

Sir Oliver Heald *indicated assent.*

Marion Fellows: Where cost is a factor in prescribing drugs it is important that we consider ways of lowering it. The pharmaceutical price regulation scheme could be used. When a drug's spending threshold is reached, a rebate is paid. In England, it goes back to the Treasury but in Scotland it goes on to further new drugs.

The delisting of cancer drugs because of cost causes untold heartbreak to patients and families—the very people we all represent—and the time has come to find

a way of making new drugs accessible to, and affordable for, the NHS by considering arrangements such as multi-year budgeting, which would allow for a lower initial price. Pharmaceutical companies would hopefully be open to that in exchange for getting their drug into use at an earlier stage.

It is important to understand that drug companies fund drug development research for years before they even know if the drug is worth licensing. Many potential drugs fall by the wayside and, as the public purse would never be able to fund such a level of risk, it is necessary that pharmaceutical firms see a return on their investment, to secure ongoing research. That goes back to why some drugs are delisted because of their cost. However, there must also be recognition of the support provided by universities in Northern Ireland and Scotland, and in England, which get Government funding to help towards researching new drugs.

Off-patent drugs can also be used in cancer treatments, usually through repurposing. It is important that we consider that, as it could also lead to a cost—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry, I will just wind-up my speech. Some of the barriers to treatment can, however, be broken down through negotiation between all interested parties. The aim would be a system that worked equitably for all stakeholders, from patients, doctors and the NHS to Governments and the pharmaceutical industry.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): As a Front Bencher, the hon. Lady has 10 minutes if she wants them, so she should need not rush her important peroration.

Marion Fellows: It is fine. Thank you, Mr Streeter. I managed to get through my speech, with a rush at the end.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Thank you very much. I call Andrew Gwynne.

3.29 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) on securing this important debate and on the depth of knowledge she has demonstrated. We might not share the same political allegiances, but we share a commitment to improving the lives of people affected by cancer, as do all Members—those who have contributed to the debate and all those in the House of Commons. The nature of the cross-party debate we have had today stands as a testament to that. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Solihull (Julian Knight), for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), for South Down (Ms Ritchie), for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for their contributions too.

Cancer transcends party politics. Each and every one of us has had a constituent, family member or friend affected by cancer. It is a disease that sadly touches us all, and it deserves the proper attention of the House of Commons. It is because it transcends party politics that I commend the Government on introducing the Cancer Drugs Fund during the last Parliament. Patients have benefited significantly since the fund's introduction, and that has to be welcomed. However, we are here today because the progress over recent years to improve access to cancer drugs is now partially at risk.

The Government introduced the Cancer Drugs Fund, but they are now sadly presiding over damaging cuts to the treatment available through it, as we have heard in the debate. At the general election, the Conservatives promised to continue to invest in cancer drugs, but less than six months later they announced that a number of treatments would be removed from the fund, meaning that they would no longer be routinely available to patients. That will have a tragic human cost for cancer patients. Indeed, the Rarer Cancers Foundation has calculated that the reductions could affect as many as 4,100 cancer patients every year. Members from all parts of the House have expressed significant concerns about the impact those reductions will have on all our constituents.

Many important points have been made during this debate, but I would like to add a few of my own. First, can the Minister, whom I have a great deal of respect for, tell us what support is being made available to patients who will now miss out on treatments that have been removed? Will he promise that this is the last time we will see cuts of this nature? The sad truth is that the cuts were an inevitable consequence of an abject failure by Government to fix the drugs pricing system. The Cancer Drugs Fund was always meant to be a temporary measure, but the inability to implement value-based pricing and then value-based assessment during the last Parliament has to some extent led us to the situation we are in today. Cancer Research UK has said that it is “unacceptable that after five years of conversation, there still isn’t an effective solution in place,”

and I agree. We need a better system of drug pricing that is fair for patients and has the confidence of doctors. At the moment, patients are being badly let down.

Before the election, Labour promised to reform the Cancer Drugs Fund to make it a cancer treatment fund and end the bias towards certain types of treatment. We also promised reform of NICE to ensure a clear route for new treatments to be made available on the NHS. Nobody wants a return to the days when people’s access to treatment was determined by the first two characters of their postcode. Unfortunately, however, the latest promise of reform of the Cancer Drugs Fund has been riddled with confusion and delay. Ministers said the consultation would be published in July, then September, and it finally came out in November. The consultation is expected to run until mid-February, with a new system ready to be in place by April this year. The Minister might be able to hear the scepticism in my voice about whether the Government can deliver meaningful reform of the Cancer Drugs Fund in such a short period, so will he confirm, secondly, that these are still the timescales for delivering reform? If so, will he promise us that the outputs from the consultation will deliver the change being demanded by the cancer community and not leave a half-baked solution?

Although some aspects of the Cancer Drugs Fund proposals are to be welcomed, others cause concern. Beyond some tweaks at the edges, it is not clear that NICE is proposing the fundamental changes to its processes that charities have rightly requested. Breast Cancer Now has warned that the consultation

“does not offer sufficient changes to the way NICE currently operates...to allow drugs to be approved for routine use on the NHS.”

The charity has also said that it is

“concerned that these proposals may result in fewer drugs being made available rather than more.”

Those are troubling comments, so, thirdly, will the Minister respond to those concerns? Can he tell us the extent to which final decisions about treatment access will differ under the reforms? Which drugs that have previously been rejected by NICE will be available?

NHS England has not published an impact assessment for the Cancer Drugs Fund consultation. Members of the cancer community have raised concerns about that with me and asked what NHS England might be attempting to hide, so can the Minister confirm, fourthly, whether NHS England has carried out an impact assessment on the proposed changes? If so, will he promise to place a copy in the Library before the consultation closes, so that Members of this House can give it the scrutiny it deserves?

Beyond the current planned changes, there are disturbing stories of NHS England refusing to discuss price cuts with drug companies, effectively leaving deals on the table that could have helped patients and the taxpayer. Simon Stevens once said that he wanted NHS England to:

“Think like a patient, act like a taxpayer.”

At the moment, it is frankly doing neither. We cannot allow red tape to get in the way of what is right for patients. The reforms must create greater flexibility and pressure for both sides to get round the table and agree deals. Other countries seem to be able to make the drugs available without spending more money on their health services, which implies that they are better at striking deals, or at least are more flexible in doing so. Therefore, fifthly, will the Minister promise to intervene in NHS England to ensure it is doing everything it can to secure the best deal from industry for patients and taxpayers? Will he commit to reviewing the processes carried out in other countries for securing access to medicines and ensure that learnings from them are translated into NHS England’s new system?

It is also worrying that the drugs companies and the Secretary of State have negotiated a deal in secret that changes the drugs pricing scheme, effectively creating a half-a-billion-pound funding black hole over the course of the pharmaceutical price regulation scheme. I am fearful that that could lead to more bad news for cancer patients. I have pressed the Minister on that before, so will he tell me, sixthly and lastly, how that funding gap will be filled? Will he guarantee that the shortfall will not lead to any further damaging cuts in cancer patients’ access to treatments?

I want to end my contribution to this debate in the spirit in which I started, because this is not a party political issue. Our shared goal is an NHS that is the best health service in the world for treating cancer, but we will only achieve that if we can ensure that patients can access the most effective forms of treatment. Cancer patients need and deserve an end to the current uncertainty. We on this side of the House will stand with the Government to do all we can to ensure that cancer patients get that fairer deal.

3.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) on securing this debate and I thank her for the chance to discuss these important issues, which I know

[George Freeman]

are important to various Members who cannot be here this afternoon. I thank colleagues of all parties who have spoken. It was particularly powerful to hear the personal perspective of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who is a cancer survivor. I pay tribute to the work of Myeloma UK, Cancer Research UK, Macmillan and the other charities that have done, and continue to do, so much work looking after patients and supporting policy and research. As colleagues know, I am passionate that charities should have a bigger role to play in policy making. I have opened the Department's door and invited them to come to the top table.

Few families in the country are untouched by cancer, and I am no different. My father died of throat cancer when I was 19, 18 months after I had met him. My mother-in-law died of myeloid leukaemia a few years ago. The family, like so many families, had to watch her go from a wonderful and healthy, vibrant grandmother to a corpse in 12 to 15 months. It is a tragedy when it happens, but the truth is that our generation has lived through the most extraordinary advances in cancer. Certainly in my childhood it was a death sentence. One sat in the back of cars as a child and heard parents discussing in hushed tones that somebody had a cancer diagnosis, which meant they would die. Now that has changed: 2 million people live with cancer and it has become a treatable disease. In some cases, it has become a preventable disease. That is why it is such a pleasure to see my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds here. Many others in the country today work and live with cancer. It is a stunning tribute to the success of our life sciences sector and our academic and clinical scientists.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire talked about Tina and Graham and their experience of cancer. We should always remember—I do every day—that at the heart of difficult policy decisions there are people living with the disease. As constituency MPs and parliamentarians we need to bring that personal perspective to policy making. Certainly as a Minister I try to do that. My hon. Friend highlighted the trauma experienced by patients who, at diagnosis, think they will be eligible for a drug but find they have been caught by the timing of the CDF review, which means that the drug is tantalisingly taken away from them. We can all sympathise with that. As in all Administrations, when change comes, somebody normally gets caught at the point of change and it is very difficult. My hon. Friend also made a powerful point about data being crucial, and I accept that we need to do better on data. I have picked out those comments, but we have had excellent comments from across the House.

I want to set the context before dealing with specific questions. In the past 20 or 30 years, we have seen incredible transformations in biomedical research and in our ability to develop new treatments and diagnostics. My own 15-year career in biomedical research saw us go from the early days of genetics to extraordinary abilities to drive diagnosis and personalised therapy. One looks at Herceptin for breast cancer, a genomic biomarker theranostic partner drug. We have guaranteed that it works in patients who have that genetic biomarker. This is the future: much more genomic targeting of drugs. Genomics and informatics are transforming the way in which drugs are developed.

I arrived in the House of Commons six years ago. As a Government adviser on life sciences, I supported the Prime Minister in putting a life sciences strategy in place that built on the previous Government's good work. We set out an ambition for the NHS to become not only a passive recipient of new therapies, but an active partner in the development of them, making available our genomic and informatics leadership and our clinical research, which is at the heart of the life sciences strategy: two cylinders pumping together, with the NHS not just as a purchaser but a partner in development.

Although we have had phenomenal revolutions in genomics and informatics and in the pace of discovery—pioneered in cancer, which is why cancer has led with this pressure on our funding mechanisms—they give rise to great challenges: rising costs of treatment; ever more expensive drugs; smaller patient catchments, which puts a coach and horses through the traditional model of reimbursement; and the end of a one-size-fits-all blockbuster model of drug discovery, which is what NICE was originally set up to deal with. Those are very big challenges and I am putting policy responses in place. However, they are also big opportunities. As the world's only integrated comprehensive healthcare system, nowhere is better equipped in the world to unleash the power of genomics and informatics for public good. I believe Nye Bevan would be banging the table today and saying, "The NHS was about the collective use of our health assets to prevent disease. Come on! Let's harness the extraordinary ability of our NHS," which is what we are doing.

As we reform the way in which NICE works, there is an opportunity for us to take the lead in the development of these new drugs and new specialised therapies, and to pioneer new models of reimbursement as well. It will not happen overnight—that is the honest truth—but it will happen over the next few years. That is why we have set out a 10-year strategy, and I am absolutely honoured and privileged to be at the beginning of a five-year Parliament as the Minister for Life Sciences with a chance to drive the reforms through. That is at the heart of the accelerated access review that I have launched, which I will talk about in a moment.

I urge everyone to recognise that the Government are not complacent. We have put £250 million extra into Genomics England. We are the first country on earth to do, at scale, full genome sequencing in cancer and rare diseases. Rare cancers are particularly well served. We have led on data and informatics for research in the NHS, often at a high political price, but it is essential if we are to drive this forward. We have set up the precision medicine catapult, the cell therapy catapult and the £700 million Crick Institute. We have protected, increased and ring-fenced science budget increases. We have announced and secured a multi-billion pound drugs budget, and more on that will be announced shortly. We have set up the rare diseases consortium, the accelerated access review, the early access to medicines scheme and a £1.2 billion commitment to the Cancer Drugs Fund, so I hope colleagues will acknowledge, as some have, that we are serious about trying to both invest in and reform this space.

The Cancer Drugs Fund was set up with strong leadership from the Prime Minister. Because of the progress in cancer putting pressure on NICE's systems,

NICE's clinically led, world class, independent advice rejected many of the new cancer therapies that did not fit well with its scoring system, so the Prime Minister said that we must make the money available to make sure cancer patients do not suffer while we reform the system. The fund is now £1.2 billion; another £340 million was invested this year. Some 84,000 people have received life-extending drugs that they would not otherwise have got.

Andrew Gwynne: The situation is worse than described. There were drugs that NICE had approved, but the primary care trusts refused access to those treatments.

George Freeman: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about the balance of responsibilities between NICE and NHS England. The system was set up so that NHS England is statutorily bound by NICE's recommendations. Part of the problem in recent years has been that even treatments approved by NICE can take up to two, three and in some cases five years to be rolled out across NHS England. Much as we all love the NHS, we accept—even the NHS accepts—that there is a problem with patchy roll-out. That is also to do with data, which various colleagues have touched on.

David Mowat: The Minister used the words “world class” in respect of NICE, but said that its scoring system was such that drugs did not get authorised, and that many of the drugs fund includes were not authorised by NICE. Those two things do not seem to be consistent. Should we not look carefully at what NICE's criteria are, as they have done in Scotland, and make them more appropriate?

George Freeman: The answer is yes. That is why I have set up the accelerated access review, which is doing precisely that. NICE is heavily involved in contributing to setting up the reforms, giving it new flexibilities and changing the way we adopt, assess and reimburse new medicines. I meant that NICE is recognised internationally. Indeed, other countries follow its health technology assessments, and its methodology and protocols. The challenge now is to update them for a world of genomics and informatics, with a much more targeted and precision medicine landscape. I accept that in that context we are not yet world class—we have more to do—but NICE is a world class organisation. Given the chance to update its systems, I believe it will lead the world in that field.

In the autumn statement we fully funded the NHS's five-year forward view, including its cancer strategy, with a commitment to £10 billion extra per year by 2020. We frontloaded that with £6 billion, as was asked for, to allow it to make the investments necessary to modernise. That is a half-trillion pound commitment to spending on the NHS over this Parliament, so I gently point out to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), that to describe that as a cut is testing the admirable elasticity of the English language.

On the importance of NICE and independent, clinically led decision making, much as at times like this I yearn to reach for a big lever, pull it, make a decision and send hon. Members out dancing and cheering and send patients home happy, I think we all understand that it is right that such decisions are not taken by MPs or Ministers; they must be taken by clinicians, based on the very best evidence from the very best independent advice. That is how this system works: NICE makes an

independent judgment using the very best systems available to it. I take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat) that that needs to be, and it is being, updated to give NICE more flexibility to reflect the challenges of precision medicine—treatments that have a very definable, predictable response in a very small number of patients. NICE's advice goes to NHS England, which makes the clinical judgment about treatment protocols. It is right that the Cancer Drugs Fund is based on that clinical decision making.

Nevertheless, there is an anomaly. Although we expect NHS England to be guided by NICE, in one therapeutic area, with the best of intentions, we have created a fund that sits at the end of the process, so that NHS England has a fund to buy drugs that NICE has said no to. That is an anomaly in the system. The point of the review is to take the CDF commitment to fund earlier, so that NICE can use it as an assessment fund to enable it to look earlier in the process at new drugs that are coming on stream and then give NHS England advice. That is in keeping with our general policy of opening up a space between research and medical practice in which we use data from the front-line treatment of patients and from the system to inform our procurement and reimbursement system.

Rather than “finger in the air” theoretical models of health-economic benefits, we are within touching distance of a system that is able to use real data in real time from real patients with real diseases to drive real models of cost-benefit and health economics, and we are trying to wire the system in order to deliver that exciting prize. Members will understand that, where funding is finite—£1.3 billion is a big commitment, but it is finite—the system must re-prioritise which drugs it purchases. That is difficult for those who are in the process of getting a diagnosis and expecting a treatment that is then withdrawn, but I stress that no patient who is in receipt of a treatment that is withdrawn has that treatment withdrawn from them specifically. If they are getting a drug, they continue to get it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire mentioned pomalidomide, a drug used to treat relapsed myeloma. The CDF clinical panel looked at it, reviewed it, and, based on its independent, best-in-class assessment, the score was too low so the panel recommended that it not be approved. As I understand it, NICE is currently looking at other treatments for multiple myeloma, including panobinostat. I checked with NICE before the debate, and can say that final guidance on that treatment for that condition is imminent.

I remind Members that any patients receiving drugs continue to be treated, and that no drug will be removed if it is the only proven therapy available on the NHS. Sometimes in debates such as this we give the impression that we are taking away a drug, patients will stop getting it, and patients who have no other treatment will be left without treatment. That is not what happens. We should remember that there is an individual funding request mechanism—the IFR—for patients with exceptional conditions that are not met by other drugs. That is there specifically so that if any constituents have a unique claim on clinical exceptionality, their clinicians can make that case.

I should highlight the fact that two new drugs were approved in the previous CDF round. We sometimes forget that new drugs are being approved. We do not get

[George Freeman]

requests for debates in Westminster Hall to congratulate the system on their approval, but it is worth mentioning them. The system approved panitumumab for bowel cancer and ibrutinib for cell lymphoma. Those approvals have been widely welcomed by patients and charities in the relevant sectors. I am delighted that, through the early access to medicine scheme that we introduced last year, which, with patient consent and their clinician's approval, enables unlicensed drugs to be fast-tracked, we have now got pembrolizumab through, tested, into patients and purchased by NHS England several years earlier than would have been the case. That is a precursor of what we want to do much more widely through the accelerated access review.

It is no coincidence that one reason for the delay that was referred to earlier is that I am very keen for the CDF review to be done at the same time as the accelerated access review. Had we not done that, colleagues would have been saying to me, "How ridiculous, Minister, that you have reviewed the Cancer Drugs Fund and closed it before you have received the recommendations of the accelerated access review this spring." I wanted to ensure that we are building a landscape that is logical and fit.

Sir Oliver Heald: Does my hon. Friend the Minister accept that it is worth while to look at the difference between a condition that goes from diagnosis to death over, say, 18 months, where an extra two months of life is proportionately quite small, and one of these very fast-acting cancers, such as pancreatic, where a person gets only six months and giving them an extra two would be very important in allowing them to settle their affairs and come to terms with the world?

George Freeman: My hon. and learned Friend makes an important point. I urge colleagues, as elected representatives, to make such points to NHS England through the CDF review, which closes on 11 February. We represent 70,000 or 80,000-odd people, so it is appropriate to make the point that for different diseases there is a big difference between the benefits of extra time for patients.

In the limited time I have left, I want to touch on some of the questions that came up. Colleagues asked about performance measures for data. It is important that we use the data from the CDF better. We are introducing measures to ensure that the contracts for 2016-17 specify that trusts that do not submit complete datasets will be penalised. One hundred per cent. of

trusts are now submitting data, so we have closed that door. Some of the horses may have bolted, but we are getting properly on top of the data.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire asked first about a draft treatment pathway for multiple myeloma. NHS England advises that that is currently in the process of being finalised. It has been the subject of public consultation and is being revised to take account of the comments received and the potential impact of treatments that have been removed from the CDF. The treatment pathway is due to be published in 2016. Secondly, on individual funding requests, NHS England does publish data on its website, including the number of individual funding requests for each drug on the national CDF list. Thirdly, on the issue of penalties for failing to produce data, we have built specific performance measures into the systemic anti-cancer therapy database.

My hon. Friend also mentioned multi-drug treatment cost reductions. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on NHS England's individual commercial discussions with companies, but I can say that I am actively looking at ways to integrate better the Department of Health negotiators with NHS England commissioners through the accelerated access programme, so that we can get the benefit of time, cost and risk reductions in the pathway in more enterprising pricing mechanisms. I am confident that there is interesting progress to be made in that space.

I am aware that it is traditional for the Minister to leave a little time for the Member who secured the debate to wind up. I have around 15 questions that I have not had the chance to answer, so with your permission, Mr Streeter, I will write to the Members who contributed to the debate. I close by reiterating our commitment, as a Government, to get on top of the issues that have been raised. I hope that Members can see that, as the first Minister for Life Sciences, I am making progress in the direction that has been highlighted.

3.59 pm

Pauline Latham: I thank all Members who have taken part in this very important debate. Turning to my hon. friend the Minister, I would just like to say that imminent is great, but it might not be imminent enough for my constituent Graham. He needs help now. I accept that the Minister is doing all he can to accelerate things, but imminent might not be soon enough.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the removal of drugs from the Cancer Drugs Fund list.

Towed Trailers

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the safety of towed trailers on public roads.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful for the opportunity to hold this important debate.

My objective in securing this debate is to articulate the experiences of a constituent family who, just under two years ago on 27 January 2014, found themselves facing every parent's worst nightmare. Although I need to explain the tragic circumstances that caused the death of three-year-old Bedminster resident Freddie Hussey, devastating the lives of his mum, dad and older brother, I hope to ensure that the Minister's attention is focused on the action, legislative or otherwise, that can be taken to prevent similar avoidable tragedies from befalling others. I also hope that this debate will raise the profile of an issue that the family believes—and my research backs this up—is far more widespread and potentially life-threatening than might first appear.

On Monday 27 January 2014, three-year-old Freddie Hussey and his mother Donna were walking home along Parson Street, Bristol, after dropping off Freddie's older brother at school. A Land Rover was driving along Parson Street that day towing a 2-tonne trailer, which became detached from the vehicle as the hitch had not been correctly attached and careered across the pavement, fatally crushing Freddie. I do not want to delve into the detail of the case brought against the driver, other than to say that at court he was sentenced to 200 hours of unpaid work and handed a six-month driving ban. It is easy in such tragic circumstances to call for sentence structures to be reviewed and so on, but I and Freddie's family are keen that in this debate we instead focus on the possibility of introducing legislation to prevent unsafe trailers from being towed on our roads.

South Bristol's people are made of strong stuff. They are resilient, they support each other and they are generous. In the face of that local tragedy, local residents rallied round with donations, which was particularly valuable after Freddie's dad, Scott, a professional driver, lost his job after having become so traumatised that every time he got into his lorry he suffered panic attacks. I pay tribute to my constituents for their dignified response, which saw them hoisted into the public eye. The Hussey family deserve and expect to be allowed to continue to reflect on the tragedy that ripped apart their lives without any media intrusion. I express in anticipation our thanks to media representatives for their understanding of and respect for the family's wishes.

Having experienced that personal tragedy, the family impressed on me their determination that some good will come from Freddie's death. Other families should not be forced to undergo a similar nightmare. They seek certain outcomes, which I want to articulate on their behalf. They accept that nothing can be done about the driver's sentence, but they wish the law to be changed so trailers must pass a roadworthiness test.

First and foremost, I ask the Government to state their position on the law surrounding the roadworthiness of trailers and the ability of drivers to ensure safe attachment, and why it will not be changed. Looking at this issue from a layperson's perspective, people are surprised that there is no requirement for a person driving with a 2-tonne trailer on their tail to check how it can be safely fixed or to ensure it is roadworthy. I have been told by the Minister responsible that no change is planned, but I do not have a clear idea why that is so. I sought a clear understanding on my constituents' behalf over a period of several months last year.

I was elected in May 2015, and I was first contacted by Freddie's mum, Donna, a month later. I subsequently met her and her husband. Donna's email outlined the tragic circumstances and explained:

"We want trailer and towing laws changed and tougher sentences for drivers. Our little boy cannot have been killed for nothing."

Like many other residents of Bristol and elsewhere, I still remember where I was when I heard the awful news of Freddie's death. The depth and cruelty of the disaster felt almost unreal, and shattered the special home-to-school journey that thousands of parents make every day. It surely must have been a one in a million occurrence, but Freddie's mum explained that

"in the last two weeks alone I have come across four separate incidents where trailers have come loose."

She gave me web links to news stories, and has added to them since, from North Yorkshire, Kent, Dorset, Tameside, Essex and Somerset. One from Taunton, Somerset, even included a dash-cam video of the incident. Anyone who watches that footage of a trailer smashing across a busy road into traffic lights, luckily without hitting anyone, will understand the risk to public safety we are dealing with. My constituents told me that they have kept a log of further similar incidents, and they assure me that many similar cases have come to light. Such incidents are far from uncommon. The work they have undertaken to highlight this issue means they have been alerted to new accidents on an ongoing basis by a network of people across the country who share their concerns. If the Minister would like to know more, they will be pleased to furnish him with more information.

In her email, my constituent stated:

"in the UK trailers do not carry MOT or safety checks. In countries like Australia or New Zealand they do, and if you are caught with an unsafe trailer you are prosecuted."

The Minister will be aware of the legal position in other countries across the world. For example, I understand that in New Zealand trailers require a warrant of fitness similar in principle to an MOT, and in Sweden all trailers are required to be registered, to have a certificate of conformity from the manufacturer and to pass a roadworthiness test. The family understandably wondered why similar measures cannot be enacted at home, so I wrote to the Secretary of State for Transport outlining the case and asking what plans his Department has to introduce safety checks for trailers and other towed vehicles. I also asked whether any consideration had been given to changing the driving test regime to include towing a trailer. The short reply I received stated that

"there are no plans at this time to require MOT tests for small trailers".

From my research, I became aware of a similar case that was raised in Parliament in January 2008 by the then Member for Amber Valley. It involved a hauntingly

[Karin Smyth]

similar case of a four-year-old boy tragically killed when he was hit by a trailer that broke free from a car while he was walking in a Derbyshire village with his mother.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. She raised the tragic case of young Finlay Martin in my constituency, who died just over eight years ago. I agree, first, that sentences for people who cause such accidents should be much tougher—the sentence for Finlay’s killers was derisory—and, secondly, that there need to be tests of trailers’ roadworthiness. When they are manufactured, we must ensure that they have all the controls and safety checks that they need. When they are used, an MOT is the right idea.

Karin Smyth: I am grateful for that intervention. I agree that sentences are an issue, although the Hussey family do not want to look at them. It is surprising that there are no checks at the moment, and I am interested to hear the Minister’s response to that.

That case was raised in Parliament at the time. Having expressed his condolences, the then Under-Secretary of State for Transport responded to the then Member for Amber Valley:

“Introducing MOT-style tests for such trailers is a possibility that we have considered before, and it is a matter that we keep under review. There have been several such accidents in recent months, and I will certainly consider the matter with officials in the Department to see whether we need to move on that.”—[*Official Report*, 22 January 2008; Vol. 470, c. 1354.]

As I was aware from that parliamentary record that the Department pledged to keep the issue under review, last August I wrote to the Minister to draw attention to that case. I asked to see any documentation or advice that his Department officials had provided, and I asked whether the Department had considered whether it is now appropriate to introduce MOT-type tests for small trailers. The somewhat terse reply was:

“I am not able to provide information about advice given to Ministers in a previous government.”

It stated that the testing of small trailers had been considered at a European Union level in 2014, but that it would not be mandated. It did not explain why, so my constituents remain in the dark. It concluded, in the fourth short paragraph of four, by repeating that the Minister is not considering introducing MOT tests for small trailers at this time. Again, it failed to explain why. It prompted me and my constituents to ask, what has changed since 2008 and why? Had incidents of trailers becoming detached fallen or ceased? We know that they have not. In 2008, the Government kept the matter under review. Had the active review policy changed? If so, when? Who changed it? Why? My constituents are angry, but they are dignified and tenacious. They have asked me to seek answers. I have tried, but the Minister’s written responses have been unhelpful, in the opinion of those who have read them, because they failed to give answers to those key questions and prompted further questions.

Let me be clear. I am not calling for the Government to introduce a compulsory MOT test for trailers immediately, although I would like the Minister to set out how UK law compares with that of other countries

that do have roadworthiness tests for towed trailers. It might be that a change in the law is the right course for the UK, but at this stage I, along with the family whom I represent, want to understand fully why the considerations that were actively undertaken as recently as 2008 have now apparently been dropped. If the process of introducing such a test is felt to be too bureaucratic or too expensive for trailer owners or for the taxpayer or both, what is the evidence base? Perhaps the issue is not considered important enough to justify public expenditure. Will the Minister please explain the sums involved? Speaking of the evidence base, will he outline data showing the number of recorded incidents of trailers becoming detached? If he will not or cannot, will he accept my constituents’ help in understanding the levels, and therefore the extent, of the issue, which would then allow them to contribute in some way to shaping future Department for Transport policy on an issue that has devastated their family and their south Bristol community?

Finally, will the Minister agree to meet my constituents, should they wish it, so that he can explain personally, face to face, what the Government can do to address this serious issue? My constituents believe that it cannot be long before there are further fatalities and, based on my research, I agree with them. They know that they cannot rewrite history, but they want to help shape a better future and to do all that they can to help avoid any other families suffering as they do. As a minimum, the Government should publish any evidence they have considered around trailer safety and allow further consideration of how tragic deaths from unsafe trailers can be avoided in the future in this country.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I should advise the House that my information is that there are likely to be two Divisions at 4.20 pm, in which case the sitting will be suspended, the clock will stop on the Minister, and he will have to come back to finish his remarks.

4.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I fully share the sadness, so eloquently detailed by the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), at the death of Freddie Hussey. I can only extend my deepest sympathies to his parents, Donna and Scott, and their other son, Archie, for their tragic loss. It is always devastating to hear about the impact that road deaths have on families. Losing a child is a burden that no parent should have to bear.

Road safety is right at the heart of transport policy and is a top priority for me, so I will first put my remarks into context with some words on road safety. I recently set out our new road safety statement, which contains our commitments to realistic and appropriate action to tackle deaths on our roads. We are particularly concerned about the deaths of vulnerable road users such as children. The statement sets out our key priorities for road safety, which include adopting the safe systems approach. That approach is clear in the framework we have set with Highways England, which it is now implementing. It is also a theme that runs throughout the statement. We are protecting vulnerable road users, including pedestrians, cyclists, motorcyclists and horse riders, through infrastructure and vehicle improvements, the promotion of safer behaviour and equipment, and ensuring that other road users are aware of the risks posed to these groups and adapt accordingly.

Taking tough action against those who speed, exceed the drink-drive limit, take drugs or use their mobile phone has been a priority for successive Governments, and I intend to build on that. We are increasing the fixed penalty for handheld mobile phone use behind the wheel from £100 to £150 and increasing the penalty points for the offence from three to four for motorists and from three to six for HGV drivers. We are also consulting on legislative changes to improve urban cycle safety by ensuring that sideguards and rear under-run devices remain permanently fitted to HGVs.

I have also ensured that a £750,000 grant will be made available in this financial year to police forces in England and Wales to build drug-driving enforcement capacity, and we are consulting on options for a drug-drive rehabilitation scheme course and a high-risk offenders regime for drug-drivers. Further to that, I am consulting on proposals to support safety for motorcyclists, who tragically account for 19% of all road deaths and yet make up only 1% of road users, including better training and improved safety equipment. It is a comprehensive package of initiatives to tackle road safety and build on the progress that our country has made over many years.

Turning to towed trailers specifically, I should start by explaining the type approval and licensing processes for trailers. While small trailers are not subject to MOT testing, all new trailers now need to be type approved. Trailers are, for legal purposes, divided into four different types. Category O1 and O2 trailers are the smaller variety—meaning under 3.5 tonnes laden—which are mostly for personal and domestic use and include caravans. The trailer in this case was in the O2 category. Categories O3 and O4 cover larger trailers, which are usually used commercially and include, for example, articulated lorry trailers. The latter varieties are subject to more rigorous inspection procedures that are appropriate to large and heavily used vehicles.

Recent developments have improved the safety of all new trailers, but given the long life of trailers, it will take some time for the trailer fleet to be completely renewed. All new road-going trailers that are towed behind road vehicles such as cars, lorries or buses need to be submitted for European type approval. The system checks the safety of a new trailer, with regard to important items relevant to road safety such as the braking system, the lights, the tyres and the towing coupling. For larger trailers, devices to protect other road users from under-running the side or rear of the trailer were already fitted in most cases, but they have been subject to more stringent strength testing. We and the industry believe that that has achieved a significant improvement in the safety and quality of trailers. The trailer manufacturing industry has invested in improving the build quality of its product and in more thorough testing, in particular of their braking systems and devices for protecting other road users.

Moving on, we have also made it road users what is acceptable behaviour while towing a vehicle and we consistently make clear how people should behave. Rule 98 of the Highway Code makes it clear that individuals should not tow more than their licence permits and should ensure that loads are secured and distributed throughout the trailer body. The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency also issues a significant degree of guidance on responsible trailer use, including on how

much weight a trailer is allowed to bear and the checks that a responsible driver ought to undertake before driving off. The checks include ensuring that the lights are working and the coupling height is correct and checking that the load is secure. The DVSA also provides advice on what to do if the trailer starts to snake or swerve, which is to ease off the accelerator and reduce speed gently. It is entirely reprehensible for an individual driver to set off without ensuring that the trailer is correctly and appropriately coupled and the load correctly distributed through the trailer.

Karin Smyth: I am grateful for what the Minister is outlining. I agree that that is entirely reprehensible, but we are talking about guidance and advice, and there is no onus on the driver or any enforcement authorities to enforce the advice. Will the Minister expand on how exactly he sees that working?

Andrew Jones: I will come on to further points, so perhaps we can pick up some of the issues then.

One issue that came out clearly in the hon. Lady's speech was MOT-type testing. As I said earlier, smaller trailers are not subject to MOT testing, although larger ones are. There is no statutory or comprehensive national database to identify small trailers or to detail when they were built, so any such MOT scheme would prove difficult to implement.

A more universal testing regime for smaller trailers, such as those with the O2 category, was considered as part of a 2013 debate on the European Union roadworthiness directive. At the time, EU member states were in agreement that a scheme to register and test those vehicles throughout Europe was disproportionately burdensome—that was the phrase used—to establish and operate. Unless a registration scheme for such vehicles were established in advance of any testing scheme, it would be hard for enforcement authorities to check effectively that a trailer, such as a caravan, had its own authentic test pass certificate or, indeed, documentation on who owned it. It would be too easy, for example, for a certificate to be used for another, similar vehicle.

It might help our debate if I detail some accident data—I am aware that the hon. Lady's opening speech included a request for more data to be published and, if I can find more, I will certainly write to her with that information. The number of accidents and casualties involving towed vehicles, compared with other types of vehicles, is low, at about 1% of all accidents. If we take 2014, the latest full year of data, 268,527 vehicles were involved in road accidents of all severities on the roads in our country. Within that total, 1,257 vehicles were towing a trailer, which equates to less than 1% of all vehicles involved in reported road accidents. Obviously that is absolutely no comfort whatever to families who have lost someone in any kind of incident, including the Husseys.

Furthermore, in many of those accidents the trailers are of the larger type, over 3.5 tonnes. Such heavier trailers are used by the operators of HGVs and for many years have been registered and tested under the DVSA's heavy vehicles plating and testing scheme. The drivers are also used to towing trailers day after day, in the normal course of their jobs.

In respect of large and small trailers, much of the work on road safety, including in relation to careless driving, mobile phone use, drug-hindered driving and

[Andrew Jones]

drink-driving, is also relevant to those vehicle combinations and applies to drivers irrespective of what they are driving. In the case that we have been discussing, I understand that the failure was to do with coupling the trailer to the Land Rover, which was an error by the driver. It is therefore unlikely that that type of failure would be picked up in a test designed for equipment, such as an equivalent to the MOT test for trailers.

The available data suggest that most accidents involving light trailers relate to driver behaviour, such as inappropriate driving behaviour for the conditions or breaking the speed limit. Indeed, the national speed limits for vehicles towing trailers, including caravans, are lower than standard national road speed limits. That is because of the handling characteristics of those vehicle combinations. Sixty miles per hour is the legal maximum on motorways and other dual carriageways, with 50 mph being the maximum on single carriageway roads, subject to the national 60 mph limit for general traffic.

I want lessons to be learned from the sad case that we have been discussing. We should all bear in mind the comments made about the family's aspirations. I have met many families who have lost loved ones in road accidents, and I am happy to meet with the Husseys, should they wish to do so. We are always seeking to learn lessons, so I will spend a little time on what we can do with driver behaviour.

I will ask the DVSA to review all the advice it publishes about trailer safety. That will include in relation to trailer coupling—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. There is a Division in the House on the Opposition day motion. I think there will be another Division straight afterwards, on the Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2015, so I will suspend the sitting until after the second Division, when the Minister will have five and a half minutes remaining.

4.24 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

4.50 pm

On resuming—

Andrew Jones: Let me pick up on the points I was making in the context of driver behaviour, because it is important that we learn as many lessons as we can, not just from this case, but from all incidents that have resulted in fatalities or serious injuries on our roads.

I will ask the DVSA to review all the advice that it publishes about trailer safety, including in relation to trailer coupling. Safety of trailers, of course, involves more than the operation of coupling them safely. Cars, including four-wheel drives, and vans towing trailers can be driven in an unsafe way at excessive speeds. I will look at checking that those messages about vehicle control and speed are clearly put as well.

The DVSA can and does undertake regular checks of trailers. I will ask officials to examine the trends and patterns being picked up at those checks in respect of trailer maintenance and use, and to feed back to me some underlying trends, if, indeed, that is what is identified. I will ask officials to consider how the DVSA guidance about trailers and the lessons learned from the checks can be brought home to more of these motorists through some of their representative groups. That includes considering how we can communicate these issues to people towing trailers. For example, we can reach groups representing people towing caravans and horseboxes, although I appreciate that the trailer in this tragic incident was of a different type.

The hon. Lady mentioned other points, including European comparisons. I will ask my officials to make contact with their European counterparts and report back to me on any lessons that people may have learnt in other countries.

I mentioned earlier that I would write regarding data. I have some comparative data: in 2014, as I said, there were 1,257 total incidents involving trailers. That was broken down to 39 fatalities, 214 serious injuries and 1,004 slight injuries. Although that is a slight increase on the previous year, it is part of a broader downward trend. However, I will write with the data that we have, as they might help to inform the debate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister mentioned discussing the matter with different bodies. I know that this particular issue is not the same, but have there been discussions with the National Farmers Union, for instance, about the safety of farm vehicles? That is important: they are on the roads regularly and there are sometimes issues with lights, trailers and so on.

Andrew Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, which I will certainly pick up with farmers' unions.

I come to my last point. I have detailed a number of positive actions, which I will progress personally. I am extremely keen to see our country's record on road safety improve. We have a good road safety record in our country and some of the safest roads in the world—I do not want people who may be following this debate to go away thinking anything other than that—but at the same time, we still lose many hundreds of people every year on our roads. Those people represent not just statistics, but families shattered, so I will continue to work to improve on our record. The case of Freddie Hussey is particularly sad, and I will do all I can to ensure that we learn from this case, so that the tragic circumstances faced by the Hussey family are not endured by any other families.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the safety of towed trailers on public roads.

STEM Careers: Diversity

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Would all those who are not staying for this debate please leave quickly and quietly? It is now the big moment for Ben Howlett—whom I barely recognise without his jumper on—and it is his job to move the motion.

4.54 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered increasing diversity in STEM careers.

Thank you, Mr Hollobone—my new style consultant, apparently. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

Put simply, the science, technology, engineering and mathematics sector is largely dominated by white men and much more needs to be done to create a diverse and more balanced sector. I am sure that I do not need to explain to anyone why a more balanced sector will be beneficial to our economy and productivity, and to creating a much more equal society. I will therefore spend most of my time today discussing the lack of female representation in the sector, as well as the need to make it more appealing to the black, Asian and minority ethnic community, as well as disabled individuals.

As a man and as a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, I must say that it is an absolute privilege to be leading this debate, as I believe strongly that it is not just a woman's job to end up championing diversity in the sector; rather, it is for all of us to do so. I first got interested in this subject quite a while ago, but I saw a stark example of the problem last year, when I attended a school—which shall remain nameless—in my constituency to see an IT development class. There was a single woman in that class and a sea of men. To be frank, that is appalling in 21st-century Britain and we should be doing an awful lot more to change that.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on leading this very important debate. As someone who still is a chartered engineer, and who worked as an engineer across the world for 20 years before coming to this House, may I say how pleased I am to hear him say that this is the responsibility of everyone, including white men? Having men who talk about the importance of diversity—and not simply when they are being asked about it by women—and who raise it in the boardroom constantly is an important part of changing the culture. We need both men and women to speak up for it.

Ben Howlett: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution. I completely agree that it is the job of men and women to be championing this issue. Black, white, BME—from whichever sector of the community, it is important that we get that voice out there. I pay tribute to her for her work on championing this area, and particularly diversity in STEM, given her background. I have heard an awful lot from her over the last few months and I look forward to working with her on that in future.

Before I came here today, I was pleased to lead a digital debate on Twitter, alongside the House of Commons engagement team, using the hashtag #WomenInSTEM. As well as trending at No. 1 in the UK—it was the first time I have been involved in something like that that has been as successful, which was quite exciting—the debate

was really insightful, with a huge number of ideas, which I will hopefully be able to reference today, although I cannot reference every single one of them. There were over 800 tweets altogether, and I will try my best to summarise as many as possible. I want to thank the hundreds, if not thousands, of people who took part in the debate—I hope many of them will be watching today's debate—which shows that Parliament can really speak up for people out there who do not necessarily have a voice. I am sure that the hashtag #WomenInSTEM can be used throughout today's debate as well. Sometimes Parliament can be seen as distant from people's everyday lives. Looking at the debate yesterday online, I hope that we were able to show that this place was and is listening, and is working to improve the everyday lives of hard-working people.

There are some truly shocking figures that show the lack of diversity in STEM. For example, in 2012, a survey of girls between the ages of seven and 21 found that the top three careers they would choose for themselves were teacher, hairdresser and beautician. As I am sure we can all agree, these are often seen as “traditional” female roles. We need to ask ourselves why engineer, physicist, chemist and mechanic are not mentioned in that list. When it comes to engineering, only 3% of engineering degree applicants are girls and just 6% of the UK engineering workforce are female. Physics is the third most popular A-level for boys, but only the 19th for girls, and around half of all state schools in the UK have no girls studying physics A-level at all.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to start earlier? A lot of research shows that from the age of seven upwards, girls are ruling out such careers. We need to tackle that stigma in primary schools, not just when it becomes too late in secondary schools.

Ben Howlett: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. She is absolutely right, and I will come to that. We should be looking at diversity and removing gender biases even earlier, in nursery or even from birth—I will provide evidence to back that up.

It is not only science that has an issue with diversity. There is a lack of female academics in the English department of a very prestigious university—although I will spare its blushes by not mentioning which. An inherent misconception is putting girls off a career in STEM subjects, but that does not apply to other sectors. The figures speak for themselves. There is something about STEM subjects that appeals to boys but puts off girls. I want to look at various key stages throughout life before suggesting some steps to see more girls taking a greater interest in STEM subjects and, ultimately, STEM careers. The trend will not change overnight, but we must stop stalling and start to bring about real change.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): This is an important debate. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is real value in mentoring women and young girls in STEM subjects so that they look forward to careers in those subjects? Does he also agree that we could and should be doing a lot more to encourage women to step forward and to help in this way?

Ben Howlett: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is absolutely right. Mentoring is a key and valuable part of helping girls into careers in STEM subjects and, when they are in such careers, helping them to progress. It is clear from all the evidence across all age groups that women, black, Asian and minority ethnic people and all groups that are under-represented in the STEM sector should also have improved access to mentoring.

I want to thank a local councillor in Bath who has done a lot of work to increase diversity in STEM and lobbied me for this debate. He rightly pointed out that there is a huge benefit to our economy from having the best of all potential talent going into science, technology and engineering, and anyone who makes a career in these industries will be guaranteed excitement, satisfaction and opportunities that are unique and rewarding. I also want to thank a constituent, Danielle Workman from Ralph Allen School in Bath, who produced a superb report on the lack of women taking STEM subjects, which helped me to construct today's debate. I thank her for her time and commitment.

We will never address the lack of diversity without addressing the very foundation of career choice. In 2016, children are still pressed to conform to gender stereotypes, with pink Babygro, Barbie dolls and ovens for girls, and blue rooms, cars and chemistry sets for boys. Children obviously do not make that conscious decision; they are guided by their parents, family and society from an early age. That guidance is not malicious, but I am concerned that some decisions are affecting the take-up of STEM careers later on. The Campaign for Science and Engineering produced an excellent report backing up that evidence.

Even children's advertising exploits gender stereotypes. Adverts for toys targeted at girls commonly use words such as cuddly, magic, princess and glitter, and those targeted at boys use words such as adventure, battle, action and launch. Yesterday's Twitter debate on the "Let Toys be Toys" campaign, which campaigns to de-gender children's toys, said that just 4% of adverts for toy vehicles feature girls. When so much of what children are exposed to seems to be so gender-biased, how are children expected to take a neutral look at future careers?

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some interesting points. Does he agree that much of the problem is about role models and that if children cannot see a role model they can identify with, their career choices will naturally go elsewhere? Torquay Girls Grammar School in my constituency has had STEM days with STEM ambassadors from the Met Office. Does he see a role for local employers to go out and ensure that technology is seen as an attractive career choice?

Ben Howlett: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I agree that that is one way in which schools can work better with businesses to help to de-gender the STEM career field. I pay tribute to him for his work in his constituency to help to promote that.

I want parents to encourage both their sons and daughters to look at all available careers options. That means acceptance by parents that their daughters can consider a profession in which females may be in a minority. If young girls are encouraged to get excited by

chemistry sets and to enjoy thinking about space, more might start to dream about a career in STEM, rather than some of the more stereotypically female sectors.

By the age of six, children are already beginning to classify certain jobs as male or female, and by 13 many limit their career aspirations to fit in with these artificial boundaries. That is shocking and shows why the problem has been so difficult to overturn. Any action at older ages is potentially redundant unless these early misconceptions are challenged. As well as taking further steps to encourage retention of STEM subjects and uptake of STEM careers, those early preconceptions need to be altered.

If young girls have parents who think they should enter a gender-stereotypical career when they have grown up, how are they expected to look at STEM careers with an open mind? To increase uptake of STEM subjects and ultimately careers, we must remove this hugely inaccurate preconception, and that has to be reflected in the way these careers and subjects are treated both at school and at home. I hope the Minister will explain not just what the Government are doing to change the mind set in early years, but how we are going to take these arguments and change the minds of parents.

Following on from the development of early opinions on the gender of particular careers and subjects, the next key step is the choice of A-levels. At the age of 15 and 16, pupils are given the option to choose their A-levels and think more carefully about their future careers. Of course, some will have a clear career path in mind, but others will try to pick subjects that they enjoy, which could lead to a wide range of careers when they have decided what they want to pursue in life. It is important that young girls are reminded at this stage that a STEM career may be limited if they choose restricting subjects.

It is key at this point, when girls may turn their back on STEM subjects, that as many as possible are encouraged to consider STEM careers. When it comes to educational attainment, girls often outperform their male counterparts in STEM subjects, so that is not putting off girls. A large variety of careers advice is given to students and it is key that female role models are used to show where maths, biology, chemistry, physics, IT, and so on, can take girls. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) alluded to that.

Examples of successful women in STEM careers would hopefully see more girls continuing with STEM subjects and looking further into a career in the sector. That point was brought up repeatedly during the online Twitter debate yesterday, with many people agreeing that a mentoring system to support girls who have an interest in STEM subjects and show them where such careers could take them would help them and could see the industry change for the better. Some involved in the debate said they would support such an initiative. I urge schools to get in touch with local businesses to see whether they can help with giving young girls role models in STEM subjects. I hope the Minister will explore the various ways that the Government can facilitate and help to develop an alumni and mentoring scheme across the UK to encourage young women into the sector.

I want to make it clear that the uptake of STEM subjects at A-level and university is important. Apprenticeships are a key part of our economy, and a

fundamental part of STEM careers. They are a fantastic way to get into the sector while earning, and millions of people are accessing apprenticeships. We need to tackle the fact that under 5% of engineering apprenticeships are being undertaken by women. Increasing the uptake of women in STEM apprenticeships is another route to improving the gender balance within STEM careers and ultimately changing the misconception that they are careers just for men.

Michelle Donelan: Will my hon. Friend acknowledge that encouraging women and people from ethnic minorities into STEM careers will not only improve diversity, but alleviate the bigger problem of the skills shortage in the industry throughout the country? It is a ticking time bomb in areas such as Chippenham, because companies will leave if they cannot find the right skills there.

Ben Howlett: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It seems outrageous to me, or at least incredibly strange, that the understanding that a woman can be as productive as, or more productive than, a man is not part of the mindset of many businesses in the sector. The skill sets that should be created to help to grow the economies that are important to us—the tech economy, in particular—are simply not being built. We need to be generating a whole new pool of talent, which can, obviously, come from women. There is no reason why it cannot; there simply seems to be a culture out there that prevents women from being able to access the sector.

Chi Onwurah: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. Part of the culture that he has just mentioned may well be the idea that science and engineering are somehow separate from arts and creativity, and that people must choose between the two. The great thing about engineering and science careers is that the best and the most productive involve creativity and imagination, which are the sorts of skills that we need for our future.

Ben Howlett: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. There is no difference between the two. Some of the most creative women I have met work in professions in the tech economy, and I do not know why the separation that she mentioned exists. The application of a particular type of STEM, whether it is science, technology, engineering or maths, seems to be missed in the wider debate. Women would be much better able to access the sector if they knew that science or technology would help them in their future careers and that they would be accessing a very creative sector.

Once women have chosen a career in STEM, we must work to make sure the sector retains them. I was saddened to learn of a former constituent of mine, one of Bath's only female IT developers—given the fact that we have a huge tech economy, I find it absurd that we had literally one IT developer who was a woman—who needed flexible working and found that her only option was to move to London. Sadly, we have lost her now. The tech economy in the west of England, and elsewhere in the UK, should learn from that, understand the reasons why it happened and encourage more women to access the sector. I hope that example will shift the mindset of many employers.

It should not be difficult to allow women to work flexibly and pursue a career in STEM. I am not saying that every company that contributes to the STEM sector

is not flexible or accommodating of women with families, but a sizeable number are not. All sectors need to step into the 21st century and be flexible. The STEM sector is no different, and I hope that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills will work to encourage that.

I did say that I would touch on the importance of extending STEM to be more inclusive of the BAME community and disabled people. Just as we need to work to break down barriers for women, we need to break down any barriers that exist for the BAME community, and even more so for women BAME community members. There is much information available about female uptake of STEM, but for some reason far less when it comes to the BAME community. To create an appropriate strategy to combat any issues, we need to monitor the uptake of subjects and careers, and highlight trends, which policy can work to mitigate. We need to focus much more on workplace adjustments in STEM careers to help disabled people to access roles and further their careers in the sector.

I am pleased to say that there are success stories, which we need to hold high and use as models to improve the diversity of STEM in the future. Athena SWAN, as I am sure many Members are aware, is a national scheme that recognises a commitment to supporting and advancing women's careers in STEM within higher education and research. Members across the country sign up to its charter, which contains principles such as

“To address gender inequalities requires commitment and action from everyone, at all levels of the organisation”,
and

“The high loss rate of women in science is an urgent concern which the organisation will address”,

to name but two. Athena SWAN grants awards to organisations for good practice in recruiting, retaining and promoting women in higher education. Universities proudly display their certificates, which no doubt help when they are competing to attract the best staff and students.

In the last Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) was a strong champion in this area, and I pay tribute to her for her work on increasing diversity. I direct the Minister's attention to the excellent report published by the Select Committee on Science and Technology during the last Parliament, which included a range of recommendations to improve diversity in STEM. Other sectors need to look at Athena SWAN and bring in similar charters to ensure that they are doing all that they can to put increasing and maintaining a diverse workforce at the centre of their work.

I am pleased to see that the Government have committed to addressing the lack of diversity in STEM, and I would like to suggest, as I am sure other colleagues will too, ways in which we could start to de-gender STEM careers and ensure that the sector is as attractive to young girls as it is to young boys.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): I rise as someone who has three daughters and has failed with two of them, in spite of intense parental pressure, to get them to do STEM subjects. It is important to recognise that one area of STEM is medicine, which is increasingly dominated by women. Perhaps the propensity to do medicine, as opposed to engineering, can be an issue.

Ben Howlett: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. There has been a propensity to encourage women to pursue careers in biology and medicine, but that has not been the case in maths, science, manufacturing and technology for generations.

David Mowat: Medicine is principally chemistry-driven.

Ben Howlett: Medicine and chemistry are intertwined. Chemistry is slightly less behind maths, technology and science; indeed, it seems to be positively favoured. We need to learn why more women are coming forward to do medicine, and we must apply that knowledge to maths, engineering and science. A range of different organisations has published recommendations about how to do that. We need to stop so many 16-year-old girls walking away from STEM. Some level of science is compulsory until that age, but we need to stop girls abandoning it just as they are getting started. The more girls choose to take STEM-related A-level subjects, the more will consider studying a STEM subject at university, and so on. To make sure that happens, I would like to see more female role models to show young girls the success that can be had in male-dominated areas.

Finally, I would like to add my voice to those who have called for a link between STEM research funding and a university's progress in Athena SWAN. That would lead to an increase in research funding for universities that have successful diversity strategies, and it might encourage more universities to reconsider STEM policies and encourage diversity.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is so important that we get women into these areas. Does my hon. Friend agree that one big driver should be the fact that people who enter STEM industries attract wages that are significantly higher—up to 20% higher—than those in other industries? In my constituency, NXP Semiconductors, which is a big manufacturing exporter in a big industry, is looking for people to come and work in its industry. We want to see more women doing so.

Ben Howlett: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution, and for the work she is doing in her constituency to champion this area. From my conversations with her, I know that it is high on her agenda. There are two angles. First, we need to improve careers advice and explain to many women that entering a STEM career will give them a higher earning potential. Such advice is not necessarily available, although careers advice in the UK is getting better. My experience was that I was told to go into the Army when I left school—that was the only career option available to me in rural Colchester. Secondly, we have to explain to companies that they can increase productivity and grow into much more profitable businesses by employing more women. It is quite clear that women are incredibly productive members of whatever sector they are in, and we need to break down the stereotypes that exist in the business community.

I know that the Minister cares deeply about the issue and that she understands the need to improve diversity in the sector for the sake of increasing productivity. We must live in a more equal society, and if we do nothing, we will be damaging the opportunity to fulfil every woman's potential.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate finishes at 5.56 pm. The Front Benchers will be called at 5.33 pm and will have five minutes, five minutes and 10 minutes. With four Members standing, I will have to impose a time limit of three and a half minutes, which will include interventions.

5.19 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for securing this debate. It is good for a representative of Aberdeen to be thinking about this subject. The oil and gas industry is one of the major employers in Aberdeen, if not the biggest employer in the whole city—it certainly has a huge ripple effect. The other thing that we do quite well is academia. We have a major issue with the lack of women in STEM careers.

As an MP, I travel through Aberdeen airport quite a lot. I am there twice a week most weeks. It has the world's busiest heliport, and it is the UK's fifth-busiest airport in terms of total movements. There is a huge number of oil-related movements. There are very few women in the airport. Almost all the women I see at Aberdeen airport are going on holiday or are there with a male partner. Very few of those women are travelling on business in their own right. I have mentioned the two major industries in the city, and from the airport alone I can see that there is huge under-representation. OPITO, the oil and gas training body, did a survey in 2011 on the proportion of female employees in the industry as a whole. The survey found that more than 50% of those employed in the admin sector are women, and in all other sectors, including marketing, communications and engineering, it was less than 20%. Women are woefully under-represented in the whole oil and gas industry, particularly in higher-paid jobs, and not just in STEM careers.

I am beginning to wonder why that should be. I tried to find evidence for it, and all I could come up with was that these jobs are “not for women.” If we start with the entrenched cultural position—the hon. Gentleman said that there is a culture around this—that jobs in the oil and gas industry are not for women, women will not go into those jobs, and when they do go into them they will not be promoted because it will be assumed that women will not do very well. Actually, we are just as good—some of us might be better.

We are doing a couple of things in Aberdeen. At the weekend I visited Satosphere, which is basically Aberdeen's science centre. I went with my children, and it was fantastic. The boys and girls were equally involved in all the activities, and it was totally non-gendered. There was no place where there were more women or more men. Even the staff were pretty representative—they were pretty fifty-fifty—which is good for people to see. Aberdeen does some of those things well.

Aberdeen has TechFest, which is also encouraging young people to get into STEM subjects. Again, there is no bias towards either women or men at TechFest, and it will be interesting in a few years' time to see whether these young people begin to choose STEM careers as a result. I studied advanced higher applied maths with mechanics in my sixth year of secondary school, and I was the only girl doing that subject. As the hon. Gentleman

says, we also have a huge lack of women studying physics. Hopefully, talking about it can improve the situation.

5.23 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for securing this debate. He is passionate about this topic, as I am, and his debate on Twitter yesterday was seen by 2 million people. The STEM agenda is very important to us in Portsmouth, where we have a history of naval engineering and are moving into high-tech industries. One graduate of Portsmouth University, Tim Peake, is now working on the space station, which I hope is inspiring a new generation of scientists.

To me, however, STEM does not necessarily mean academic subjects; to me, STEM is about a range of careers. That is one of the reasons why I invited the university technical colleges to look again at setting up in Portsmouth, and I am pleased that they will be setting up in 2017. The college will not only be doing maths and sciences but technical engineering, training draughtsmen and teaching craftsmanship in areas such as carpentry and other vocational subjects.

Many STEM subjects are perceived as boring, with little practical relevance. I remember being interested only in the space shuttle's heat-resistant tiles, rather than in the equations that got it into space. My daughter started doing engineering at university only to find it boring. She changed to natural sciences and is now training to be a doctor. Members will be glad to know that my other daughter also did science at A-level, but my sons did not.

I agree with many of the things that my hon. Friend said, but my wish is that plumbers, electricians and other technicians, whom I consider to be part of the STEM agenda, will be invited into schools. How much more interesting would it be to learn electricity from an electrician in the classroom and to learn about angles and the movement of water from a plumber? Architects could come in and show how everything fits together. Those jobs need a lot of trigonometry and maths. Would children not feel more engaged if they could see the everyday practical consequences of technology? As has been mentioned, this needs to start in primary schools to inspire children and to increase participation. Children all learn differently, and I suspect that we would get more women and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds engaged in STEM subjects if we made them more relevant in the classroom. I encourage schools to use their imagination in the way that they teach STEM subjects, using people from the community to come in and show practical applications of why STEM is important to life. I guarantee that it would also lead to more diversity.

5.25 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on securing this debate and on setting an excellent scene. In Northern Ireland our society is not as ethnically diverse as in some parts of England, but with the rest of the country we share a lack of gender diversity in STEM careers.

We have made some giant steps forward. The hon. Gentleman mentioned role models, and what better role model is there than to have Arlene Foster as the leader

of our party? I am immensely pleased to see that happening. I supported her when she was an Ulster Unionist. She is now a member of the Democratic Unionist party, and I am pleased to see her in place. Not only is she the leader of our party; she is now First Minister, too. If someone wants a role model, they should look no further than Arlene Foster. The sky is the limit for what can be achieved. It is good news to have ambition, drive and a target to aim for.

Nationwide, just 9% of people in non-medical STEM careers are women, despite women making up more than half the population. We could consider quotas to address the situation, but with such a low figure there clearly needs to be a much more thorough and comprehensive approach. Last week the House debated space policy, and the idea of introducing young girls and ladies to engineering and STEM careers was raised. There are obviously great possibilities for space policy, too.

With public spending in Northern Ireland still stubbornly high at a staggering 77% of GDP, STEM careers will be an integral part of future growth. It is essential that a STEM sector emerges that reflects the population. We must be more proactive in addressing the gender imbalance both here on the mainland and back home.

We also have a disabled population, and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman referred to that, because it was in my mind to do so. We must highlight that disabled people also need to benefit from any moves to address the lack of diversity in STEM subjects and STEM careers. There are 5.2 million disabled adults of working age in the UK, and almost half of them have a degree-level qualification—the same as for those without a disability—yet a small number are in employment. There have been noticeable steps forward since 2008, particularly on resources for disabled students and employees in STEM. The STEM Disability Advisory Committee was founded in 2011, which is a welcome step. Both the Northern Ireland Executive's programme for Government and the skills strategy for Northern Ireland, "Success through Skills—Transforming Futures," recognise that the Northern Ireland economy's future success will require increased numbers of skilled workers with a science, technology, engineering or mathematics qualification.

In engineering in Northern Ireland, I am encouraged by the number of young girls who are interested in apprenticeships at Bombardier, Shorts and Magellan. I am keenly encouraged by those who are taking up engineering opportunities, and I have advised many young girls when going around schools and universities, "There are opportunities in engineering for girls in Northern Ireland. Take the course now, get the university degree and get the job." We can move forward very positively. We just need to focus on the right way to do so.

5.29 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I welcome this debate and both the fact that it has been secured by a fellow member of the Women and Equalities Committee and that he is a white man. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for securing this debate—he is setting an example by doing so.

[Ruth Cadbury]

We have a lot of work to do in this country. Only 14% of all STEM roles and jobs are taken by women, and only 9% of engineering jobs, the lowest proportion among European countries. My constituency is home to a large number of employers that depend on technology, information and communications technology and transport roles. One of those is GlaxoSmithKline, which is headquartered locally. I congratulate GSK on the successful work that it has done to recruit women into STEM apprenticeships: 34% of its STEM apprenticeships are taken by women, against a national average of 16%. GSK has done so through a number of initiatives, particularly by promoting role models, ensuring that female apprentices and other staff attend careers fairs and feature in promotional videos, and talking to young women who might consider taking up a career in a STEM field.

Other Members have addressed gender stereotyping, an issue for which we all need to take responsibility, particularly employers and the Government. The small proportion of female teachers of STEM subjects is concerning. Teachers play such an important role in the career choices that young women make, and it saddens me that in the 21st century, we still have gender differentiation in the career choices of young people in our schools. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response, because I believe that the Government have a significant role to play in taking action and leadership on this important issue.

5.31 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on raising this important issue.

I wish it were hard to believe, but 40 years ago I did a study of women in politics. For more than 40 years, I have had an interest in gender divides in society. I was particularly interested in the issue raised by the hon. Member for Bath, which I think is fundamental: this is predominantly a cultural matter. It is about our society and how we view one another. I was intrigued, too, when he raised the issue—if I recall his speech correctly—of the difficulty of getting an IT developer in his constituency, and the small number of women involved in that scientific area. It reminded me of the daughter of Lord Byron.

Lord Byron's daughter began to study and show an interest in mathematics as a young child. She was fortunate for the 19th century in that she was strongly supported by her mother, who was keen for her to move away from the romantic and emotional interests of her father and take on something rather more practical, in her view. But, of course, it was difficult. Women had few rights to enter such areas at that time.

She began to correspond with Charles Babbage, the mathematician, who asked her to translate from the Italian a memoir describing his analytical machine, which was one of the first to carry out computations. Not only did she translate it, but she made her own notes about the machine, which even included a method for calculating a sequence of Bernoulli numbers. Because of that, she is acknowledged as the world's first computer programmer. The world's first computer programmer

was a female from our society, but she had to fight against many odds and break down many barriers to get there.

Hopefully, it is much easier for young women to break into such areas today, but they still face the same cultural biases. I am pleased that in Scotland we have a programme called Improving Gender Balance Scotland, which involves not only young people and teachers but, centrally, parents. They are the people who carry many of the myths, values and prejudices in our society. These matters will not be resolved by dealing with them through curriculum alone; we need to look much more widely at the things that create cultural influences in our society.

I was therefore pleased when the hon. Member for Bath mentioned the role of television and the like in the modern era—the types of adverts we get, and how they can discriminate, perhaps unwittingly, by characterising some things as only for girls and some as only for boys. That must be tackled from the earliest stage. It is too late to leave it to secondary school, and probably too late to leave it to primary school. We must think about influencing people from the earliest days, which means that parents are crucial in the campaign, as are nurseries and other people who come into contact with young children.

I mentioned Ada Lovelace, the daughter of Lord Byron. She faced many barriers to her rights. I thought that, since this is January and I am a Scot, I would perhaps say a few words on the rights of women by one Robert Burns:

While Europe's eye is fix'd on mighty things,
The fate of Empires and the fall of Kings;
While quacks of State must each produce his plan,
And even children lisp the Rights of Man;
Amid this mighty fuss just let me mention,
The Rights of Woman merit some attention.

5.36 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on obtaining this debate. We have heard about the Campaign for Science and Engineering report. Yes, the statistics are indeed depressing, although I was pleased to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) that there are exceptions. However, we must consider what we are doing to harness the enthusiasm for the subject that young people, both girls and boys, have from an early age. In primary school, at the age of eight, they are equally enthusiastic about STEM subjects, but by the time they reach 16, that enthusiasm has waned.

We have heard a lot about gender stereotyping, and some of it is down to that, but we must also consider the teaching methods used. A science teacher said to me, "It's all big bangs and noise." STEM subjects can put off young women by being seen as a bit dirty. The impression still exists that engineering and science are dirty and that it is about men in hard hats and is not for young women. Hairdressing and beauty are still the apprenticeships of choice for young women.

I have some questions for the Minister. First, what work is being done with the Department for Education to improve the quality of careers advice and, crucially, to involve parents? In areas such as mine, apprenticeships

in Heinz, as they say, are for the boys, and apprenticeships in hair and beauty are for the girls, and teachers sometimes encourage that. A young woman came to me who is apprentice of the year at MBDA. Her maths teacher said, “Why are you taking an apprenticeship? You’re far too bright to be taking an apprenticeship. Go to university first.” She has a degree now, through taking up that apprenticeship.

I agree with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that more role models are needed. We must ensure, as the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said, that high-quality jobs are available to young women as well as young men. We also need to consider career progression. Only 19% of young women working in the private sector are in engineering or STEM subjects. For all STEM occupations, only 13% employed in them are women, and only 10% of STEM managers are women.

What is being done to identify and address the barriers to women once they have entered these careers? We know from research that one barrier is the fact that if someone takes a career break, they tend to lose their immediacy of research. How can we identify that and help with that?

I would also like to know what strategy there is for the black, Asian and minority ethnic community to break down the barriers that members of that community face, and to explain why BAME men are 28% less likely to work in STEM careers than white men.

Finally, I would like the Minister’s comments on what is being done to break down barriers between employers and the employment of people with disabilities. I no longer want to hear from someone with a disability, as I have already heard, that they were not taken on in a factory as an apprentice in a STEM subject because they were a fire risk. Education matters, and again role models, to provide practical examples of how people with disabilities are forging forward in these careers, would be extremely useful.

We all know that these are the high-quality jobs. They range right from under the ocean to the moon, and we need to do a lot more to encourage people from disadvantaged backgrounds—young women, members of the BAME community and people with disabilities—to take full advantage of all the opportunities offered by these wonderful careers.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): If the Minister is able to keep her remarks to 10 minutes, that would allow Mr Howlett a few minutes to sum up the debate before I put the motion to the House.

5.41 pm

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I will do everything I can to comply. I have taken out some large chunks of the speech that was helpfully provided by my officials. And I always say—there are some here this afternoon who have heard the usual line that I trot out, and I am looking at my hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as I say this—that the usual rules apply. Anyone who I do not reply to by way of my speech will receive a letter that will answer all the points that have been raised in what has been an

excellent debate, and I pay full credit to my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for securing it. Truthfully, we could have gone on.

There have been some splendid contributions and perhaps most importantly of all there has been huge agreement across the House. It is not often that we hear that, but when these sorts of debates occur we hear people speaking in the way they have done today: free of party politics and not making daft points half the time; and speaking from experience but with shared common goals about wanting to make sure that more women and in particular young girls take up these STEM subjects and then do as well as any boy or man and flourish in them.

I will try to answer some of the points that have been made and obviously I will make the case for what the Government are doing. However, I begin by saying that I am getting very concerned, because I am becoming increasingly fond of the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin). I am concerned that he is becoming the Scottish National party’s answer to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). [*Laughter.*] That is a compliment, because my hon. Friend is an outstanding historian and the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath is also a great historian, and I thought that his contribution today was very useful.

I just want to make a sensible point; I am now in my sixtieth year. I know that is difficult to believe; some would say that I look nearer 65 and it often feels it. The thing that slightly concerns me is that I think that when I was in my early 20s—almost 40 years ago—I heard this very same debate. What worries me and troubles me is that despite the efforts of all Governments to try to get more young women to break down these dreadful stereotypes, to get rid of the barriers and to open up all the channels of opportunity, I sometimes wonder whether we have made progress; I do not think we have made the progress that we all want. And trying to crack this problem is incredibly difficult. Yes, there are schemes and, yes, there is money going into it.

I praise the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, but actually he reflected what my hon. Friend the Member for Bath said—it is all about culture and changing culture. Yes, we can do masses in our primary schools, secondary schools and universities, but it probably begins long before that with the attitudes that we as parents impart to our children.

There were some great contributions. There was an intervention from the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) and I could not agree with her more; there was the contribution from the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman); and I thought that the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) was particularly important, and I will just concentrate on one particular thing she said. That was when she talked, quite rightly, about the fine tradition within Portsmouth in relation to the Navy. When I was in the Ministry of Defence, one of the things that really struck me was the fact that so many young women are now going into the Navy. They are doing particularly well in those highly skilled jobs—they are all skilled in the Navy, as indeed they are in all our armed forces—and the number of women going into the Royal Navy really struck me.

[Anna Soubry]

Those women are doing incredibly well, which resonates with the point that the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) made in her speech. I do not know whether hon. Members find this as they go round their constituencies, as I have done in my new role in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, but often employers will talk about the quality of their apprentices and then they will produce the prize apprentice, and invariably they are women. So, we have those brilliant role models there; the trouble is that we do not have enough of them, and we all understand and recognise that.

We know that science is a universal culture; no one should face barriers to involvement in science because of their background. However, I will give what I suggest is a horrible statistic. The provisional figures for 2015 show more than 25,000 boys taking A-level physics; for girls, the figure is less than 7,000. And the United Kingdom has the lowest percentage of female engineers in Europe, at less than 10%. If those figures are accurate, they are not good ones.

In the research community, when we look at grant applications we see that men have higher success rates than women across all but one research council. White applicants have higher success rates than black, Asian and minority ethnic applicants. We know that there are barriers to achieving a diverse team at various stages of education and work, so as a Government we are committed to developing a strong, diverse STEM community, and we are working with the research councils, the national academies, industry and educators to deliver it.

There are some other facts that I hope will give people some encouragement that we are on the right track. We are investing £2.15 million in the Stimulating Physics network and £5 million in the Further Mathematics Support programme to help schools, academies and colleges to increase the take-up of maths and physics, with a particular focus on engaging more girls.

From 2014 to 2016, we will invest £11 million in the maths hubs. I pay tribute to the one in my own constituency of Broxtowe, which is at the George Spencer Academy, and I know that the academy's brilliant principal—its headteacher, who is an outstanding woman—is determined that she will get more young women taking up maths. We are also investing £7.2 million in the Science Learning Partnerships to support better teaching in schools.

There are some other interesting statistics. I put my hand up to ask, "Please don't tweet out in an adversarial way about this", because I had not heard—it is not within my departmental responsibility, I quickly add, so I am grateful to be able to come along and respond to this debate—of the Careers & Enterprise Company. It is an employer-led, Department for Education-funded organisation that strengthens links between employers, schools and colleges. It will inspire young people—of course it will—and it has a £5 million investment fund. I shall certainly contact it, because I am finding in my own constituency a real willingness by schools to engage far more now with the business community and to bring people in.

We have heard from a number of hon. Members today about some of the work in their own constituencies, and their encouragement of schools and teachers to engage far more with businesses. Some really sensible

and good points have been made about bringing in the engineers and the plumbers—it does not matter—to break down these stereotypes and to open the minds of all our young people to the fact that there is a full range of opportunities available to them, and to break out of those stereotypical opportunities of fashion and beauty.

I do not know what it is about our culture, which seems in some ways to be going backwards; whether that is because of the predominance of the personality culture, I do not know. So I pay full tribute to the fact that we have the first woman First Minister in Northern Ireland—fantastic—and the first woman First Minister in Scotland. Do you know what? I do not care what Nicola Sturgeon's clothes are like; I am not interested in her hair, any more than I am interested in whether the Chancellor is on the 5:2 diet. [Laughter.] It really is so totally, utterly irrelevant, is it not? What matters much more is what they do; the Chancellor, of course, is brilliant, and Nicola Sturgeon could do an awful lot more. No—I am making a cheap political point. But we all know what the point is. We have an obsession now with the way people look, with what they are wearing and how they dress, but it does not matter; it is what they do and say that matters most. We have moved backwards in that respect, and changing that would encourage more young women to get involved in STEM subjects.

You will probably be pleased to know, Mr Hollobone, that I fear hugely that I will be unable to deal with all of the speech. In any event, it is far too long to deal with in the time available to me.

I pay full credit to the Secretary of State for Education, who is also the Minister for Women and Equalities, for the work she does and her absolute determination to ensure that girls and young women have all possible opportunities. For example, in 2014 we set up the Your Life campaign, which aimed over three years significantly to increase the numbers taking A-level maths and physics. It has a strong social media presence on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, which is the way of communicating with young people, even if at times it drives people like me completely bonkers, because of the trolls and the abuse.

Regarding the levels of misogyny, I do not know whether the number of attacks on women in public life has increased, but certainly on social media we see that sort of abuse, and it is absolutely not acceptable in a modern world and does nothing to encourage women to step away from the stereotype.

I want to say just one other thing, and it is about mentoring. We have a great scheme to ensure that we get mentors into schools, and we have STEM ambassadors. In BIS we support more than 32,000 ambassadors to go into our schools, and I want to find out more about them when I go back to my Department. That really is the future, but it is also about changing the culture.

5.51 pm

Ben Howlett: I thank the Minister very much for her closing remarks. Her passion for the subject is clear. She is obviously looking to take on board the recommendations and the issues raised in the debate today and report back to us later, to carry on the good work that the Government are doing to address this culture.

Members on both sides of the House are right to say that there is a cultural problem. We have talked about role models that need to be rolled out, and we need to ensure that the 5.2 million disabled people are not left to one side and forgotten about. They are hugely productive members of our community and we should do everything we can to encourage them into STEM careers as well. In addition, we have heard about the Improving Gender Balance Scotland project, and I will go away and read about that and find out what work has been done there too.

In particular, I hugely congratulate everyone who was on Twitter yesterday—I have to say that there was a limited number of trolls. The debate has been amazing, incredibly sensible and forthright and has shown how

wonderful this place can be when we focus on an issue that has cross-party support. I hope that this will not be a single debate but a long-term campaign to ensure that we change our culture, so that in a number of decades' time we will not have to talk about these same problems. I thank everyone who has taken part today, and particularly the millions of people out there who were watching the Twitter debate yesterday.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered increasing diversity in STEM careers.

5.53 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 19 January 2016

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Trade

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Trade and Investment (Lord Maude of Horsham) has today made the following statement.

The Government aim to increase the number of exporting businesses by 100,000, from 188,000 in 2010 to 288,000 by 2020, and to increase the value of exports significantly. This will require a step-change in UK exports. Some of the factors that affect exports are beyond our control, including for example the strength of the pound vis-a-vis other major currencies, the decline in the growth of global trade and the changing role of emerging markets. There are, however, things that Government can and should do to make a difference to exports.

We intend to:

drive up the number of exporters through an increasingly digital offer (such as exporting is great) that will lead businesses to the right advice and support, including a joined-up HMG toolkit;

drive up the value of exports, by focusing attention on those markets with the biggest opportunities for sectors in which the UK is or can be a strong competitor and where Government can add most value; and,

drive up the future pipeline of export opportunities, which includes ensuring that British businesses are poised to seize the opportunities generated through the prosperity fund's activities to promote inclusive growth and sustainable development.

This will require a whole-of-Government approach, bringing together resources from across Whitehall. Integrated industry sector teams will report to departmental Ministers with responsibility for wider policies for that sector (e.g. food and drink in DEFRA). This will better leverage our specialist knowledge and existing relationships with business, and enable joined-up policy and operational delivery. This will require significantly improved cross-Whitehall engagement on exports, as well as other major changes to UKTI's operating model. Under the new model, a streamlined UKTI HQ will lead and convene overall Government activity to drive up exports. Business planning will become more rigorous, to give greater clarity and confidence on the resources available to sector Ministers and overseas heads of missions. Importantly, this joined-up approach will help ensure that exports are supported by domestic policies.

UKTI is developing a single digital platform through which businesses can access HMG and private sector support. On its own, however, this is not enough to deliver the step-change needed in exports. UKTI's current model relies heavily on giving advice to businesses. The new model will over time place much more emphasis on direct support for businesses that are seeking to export, drawing on the experience of what export promotion agencies do elsewhere in the world. We will pilot some of these ideas in a few sectors and/or localities over the coming months. As part of this, UKEF will work alongside the British Business Bank to ensure that Government's financial offering to SMEs is coherent, easy to use, and fills identified market gaps. Importantly, where export services can be provided by the private sector, with little or no value provided by Government's involvement, HMG ultimately intends to exit that market and focus instead on fostering the conditions for an invigorated private sector export support marketplace.

Other work that supports exports will continue. This includes making the UK a more attractive environment for inward investment (which can often be a driver for exports), and working within the European Union to encourage the negotiation and implementation of free trade agreements.

The focus on trade as a Government priority has also been reinforced by the Prime Minister's decision to appoint a number of new trade envoys, taking the total up to 24 covering 50 high growth and emerging markets. The trade envoy programme supports HMG's overall strategy to drive economic growth. Envoys are carefully selected for their experience, skills and knowledge of particular sectors or markets, or their knowledge of business. Their role is to help promote the UK's excellence globally and champion HMG's trade and investment priorities. The newly appointed trade envoys are:

Angola—The right hon. Baroness Northover

Burma, Brunei, Thailand—Mark Gamier MP

Canada—Andrew Percy MP

DRC, Mozambique—Richard Benyon MP

Ethiopia—Jeremy Lefroy MP

Ghana—Adam Afriyie MP

Iran—The right hon. Lord Lamont of Lerwick

Morocco, Tunisia—Andrew Murrison MP

Nigeria—John Howell MP

Philippines, Malaysia—Richard Graham MP (extending his existing envoy role in Indonesia, ASEAN Economic Community)

Taiwan—Lord Faulkner of Worcester

Uganda, Rwanda—Lord Popat.

[HCWS474]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Voluntary Right to Buy Pilot

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): In October 2015, the Government announced the voluntary agreement with housing associations and the National Housing Federation that will extend right to buy discounts to 1.3 million more families across the country.

At autumn statement 2015, the Chancellor announced that, ahead of full implementation, there would be a pilot with five housing associations, which would inform the design of the main scheme.

The power of the Secretary of State to make payments to housing associations in respect of right to buy discounts would be established by clause 62 of the Housing and Planning Bill 2015.

The Government will provide funding for the pilot. The five housing associations will be compensated for their administrative costs up to the point of sale, and once the Housing and Planning Bill receives Royal Assent, would be compensated in full for the cost of the discounts.

Expenditure on the implementation of the pilot, including routine administration, communication, marketing, valuation and legal costs will take place relying on the sole authority of the Supply and Appropriation Act, subject to eligibility and approval. Expenditure will be met from the Department for Communities and Local Government's existing budget.

The funding of sales and the contractual commitment to sales will be contingent upon the Housing and Planning Bill receiving Royal Assent.

[HCWS476]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Football Supporter Engagement and Ownership

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I am today publishing the final report of the Government expert working group on football supporter ownership and engagement.

This is a report prepared by football, with the authorities that run the game, working together with supporter organisations that speak on behalf of fans up and down the land, with help from Government. It sets out a number of recommendations for what more can be done to encourage greater engagement between supporters and those that run their club, while also helping to remove barriers to supporter ownership, when such opportunities arise for credible supporters' trusts to bid to own their club.

In bringing the various football interests together to report on issues creating barriers to supporter ownership and recommended action to overcome these, Government are fulfilling the commitment they made to the Culture Media and Sport Select Committee, following its inquiry into football governance in 2011 and the follow-up report in 2013.

The report recognises that football clubs play an important role in their local communities, and that supporter ownership is already happening at a number of football clubs, especially in the lower leagues. However, the path to achieving ownership has not been as straightforward as it seems, with supporters often without the necessary finance, expertise and opportunity to bid for their club when it becomes available.

This report sets out proposals to give supporters a fairer, more realistic chance of bidding for ownership should the opportunity arise. For example, administrators appointed for football club insolvencies will now be obliged to meet with the accredited supporter trust and given the opportunity to bid for ownership. Supporters can also apply to the Premier League and fans fund panel for assistance to help with professional fees to build a credible bid, and a database will be created of suitable professional experts, who are football fans, willing to provide pro-bono advice to supporters' bids. It goes without saying that supporters should be given an opportunity to bid for their club if it has failed, cannot continue in its current state or if there is consent from an owner looking to sell.

The Premier League has also agreed to provide an extra £1 million in funding—pending the outcome of the Ofcom investigation into how it sells its broadcasting rights—over the next three years via the fans fund to recognised football supporter organisations which provide a voice for supporters on ownership issues.

The report also asks Government to review the UK tax system, to see whether they may be able to offer incentives to supporter ownership bids, and community ownership in sport more generally. The Government will consider these proposals.

The report signals a need for there to be stronger dialogue between football club owners and a representative group of supporters on matters of strategic importance to the running of football clubs. This structured dialogue will provide a more inclusive way of ensuring supporters

have access to strategic information, can discuss key issues with club owners and directors, and can hold them accountable. This should also foster improved relationships between fans groups and their clubs which may, over time, facilitate new opportunities for fans to invest in their clubs and encourage opportunities for collective share ownership.

Proposals outlined in the report have been approved by the various boards of the football authorities. The next step is for those boards to seek approval to these from their members and clubs, and where needed for these changes to be enshrined in their rulebooks. Government will work with them, where possible, to achieve this, and in doing so open up better supporter engagement with those that run their clubs and greater opportunities for supporter ownership.

I welcome this report and thank everyone involved, including the independent Chair Joanna Manning Cooper, for their hard work in the real progress that has been made. It shows what can be achieved with football and Government working together in partnership.

This report does not signal the end of the Government's interest in supporter ownership and engagement. We will continue to review the situation and take further action if needed.

Government will also continue to challenge the football authorities to improve other areas in the governance and regulation in sport, including greater reform of their decision-making bodies, to make these more representative of the game.

The report of the expert working group is being deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-expert-working-group-on-football-supporter-ownership-and-engagement>

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements>

[HCWS475]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Iran: Implementation Day

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): On 15 July 2015, I made a statement to this House on the outcome of the nuclear negotiations with Iran, *Official Report*, columns 895-896. Almost exactly six months later, I would like to take this opportunity to update the House about reaching implementation day of the joint comprehensive plan of action, or JCPoA.

On 16 January the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) verified that Iran has completed all of the steps required of it under annex V of the JCPoA in order to trigger phased sanctions relief. To reach this point Iran has: shipped out over 12 tonnes of enriched uranium to Russia, thus significantly reducing its stockpile to below 300 kg; removed over 13,000 centrifuges and associated infrastructure; and removed and made inoperable the core of the Arak plutonium reactor among other actions, a detailed list of which is included within the IAEA's report. Implementation gives the IAEA unprecedented access to sites in Iran, so that Iran's civil nuclear programme will operate transparently.

In return, these measures have triggered the first phase of significant UN, EU and US sanctions relief. This will begin to improve many of Iran's commercial relations, enabling it to trade with the world and benefit economically. There will be significant opportunities for British businesses and the Government are assisting them in identifying how to benefit from these. Restrictions remain in place to prevent proliferation, and Iran's ballistic missile programme and arms sales also continue to be sanctioned.

Under the JCPoA, Iran is required to take further steps in order to trigger additional sanctions relief. Only after a further eight years, or when the IAEA reaches its broader conclusion about Iran's nuclear programme, will the remaining sanctions on Iran be lifted. We will continue to work, with our partners in the joint commission, to ensure that any concerns about the implementation of the deal are appropriately addressed.

Reaching this point is an important step in improving global security. I told the House in July that the threat of an Iranian bomb was removed. Implementation of the JCPoA cements this achievement. I shall continue to inform the House of significant developments on the JCPoA throughout this Parliament.

[HCWS472]

Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy 2016-17

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): On 18 January, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) launched a bidding round for the 2016-17 Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy (MCFHRD), doubling

(to £10.6 million) a fund known last year as the Human Rights and Democracy Programme (HRDP).

The Magna Carta Fund is the FCO's strategic programme dedicated to human rights and democracy work. It aims to further British interests overseas by supporting high-impact projects which promote institution-building, and target systemic issues and the underlying causes of human rights problems. The increased size of the fund reflects the Government's strong commitment to human rights and focus on strategic interventions which prevent their violation. It will play an important role in helping to meet objectives set out in the 2015 strategic defence and security review, to prevent conflict, strengthen the rule-based international system and promote human rights, good governance and the rule of law.

The programme has been reconfigured around manifesto commitments and three broad themes, which exploit the mutually reinforcing nature of human rights and effective institutions. The new strategy (published in full at: <https://www.gov.uk/human-rights-and-democracy-programme>) invites proposals that support:

- democratic values and the rule of law;
- the rules-based international order; and
- human rights for a stable world.

This approach encompasses our previous eight thematic priorities, but allows British embassies, high commissions and implementers around the world the flexibility to address the issues that matter most in the local context and to respond to developments. Over the course of this Parliament the programme aims to amass evidence that human rights provide practical solutions to a wide variety of real-world problems, and are integral to the security and prosperity of all.

[HCWS473]

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