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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 11 February 2016

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Energy-efficient Homes

1. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What estimate she has made of the number of homes that need to be brought up to the minimum band C energy efficiency standard by 2030. [903584]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): According to my Department's latest fuel poverty statistics, less than 5% of fuel-poor households in England have a minimum energy efficiency standard of band C, leaving 2.2 million households below this standard. Bringing these households up to the minimum standard is a challenging ambition, but one we are determined to meet. That is why we have been clear that available support needs to be focused on those most in need. We will be reforming both the renewable heat incentive and the energy company obligation, to make sure that both schemes are sufficiently targeted towards the fuel poor and to tackle the root causes of fuel poverty.

Dr Huq: The Government recently spent £50 million of taxpayers' money assisting a bunch of big businesses such as Sainsbury's to change their lightbulbs. Meanwhile, they halved home insulation funding in the last Parliament, which was meant to help families out of fuel poverty. I will not ask how many Tories it takes to change a lightbulb, but does that not show whose side they are on?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady is in danger of misunderstanding demand-side reduction. Two pilots have been launched, and both have been effective in reducing the amount of energy used, which is one of our key targets in carbon emissions and energy security. That in no way interferes with our key objective of ensuring that we reduce fuel poverty at all levels.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend be good enough to publish the statistics for Northamptonshire for the number of homes that do not meet that standard? One of the big issues we have in Northamptonshire is the very large number of new houses being built. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that all those new houses are required to meet that minimum standard?

Amber Rudd: I would be delighted to publish those statistics and will write to my hon. Friend with them. New-build houses are always built to a far higher standard than the existing build. The challenge of fuel poverty is almost eradicated for new builds, so I hope his constituents will be able to welcome affordable, warmer winters in future.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State managed to have any discussions with her Welsh Government counterparts about the wonderful Arbed scheme? Arbed in Welsh is to save. The scheme worked with 28 social landlords in its first phase, and worked with more than 5,000 homes on energy efficiency in its second phase. It is funded partly by European structural funds. It is a great example of energy efficiency and a great reason for Wales to stay within the European Union and the United Kingdom.

Amber Rudd: That is a very interesting proposal from the hon. Gentleman. I clearly should spend more time talking to my Welsh counterpart in order to learn from the good work that the Welsh Government are doing to address fuel poverty.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Energy Saving Trust has a useful website that directs people to the boiler grant scheme that we operate in Northern Ireland—a package of energy efficiency and heating measures is tailored to each household. Will the Minister consider that Northern Ireland example and consider providing something similar on the mainland UK?

Amber Rudd: I am aware of the interesting boiler scheme that is being run in Northern Ireland. I welcome such initiatives to address the difficulty of fuel poverty and of reducing heat and carbon emissions. The Mayor of London has launched a similar scheme. We will look carefully at how that works to see whether we can adopt it in the United Kingdom.

Onshore Wind

2. **Chris Heaton-Harris** (Daventry) (Con): What progress she has made on ensuring that local authorities decide all onshore wind applications. [903585]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): My hon. Friend has worked incredibly hard to support local communities in having their say on the siting of wind farms. The Department for Communities and Local Government updated planning guidance alongside its written ministerial statement on 18 June 2015, giving local authorities the final say. Now that the Energy Bill has completed its Committee stage, with my hon. Friend's support, I can tell him that we are making excellent progress on delivering the Government's manifesto commitment.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the Minister for that answer. Like me, she will know that the Conservative manifesto contained two pledges on onshore wind: one to remove subsidies and the other to change planning guidance. Given the growing concern about amplitude modulation coming from onshore wind turbines, when will planning guidance on that be given to local authorities?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has personally done some excellent work researching this serious issue, and my Department has commissioned an independent review that includes many of the issues he has raised. We expect to receive the final report of the review shortly, and the Government will then consider how to take forward their recommendations, including on whether a planning condition might be appropriate.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister must be aware that applications for onshore wind power should be based on merit. Given what has happened over the past five years, is there not a real danger that the barmy army of nimbys on the Benches behind her will ensure, working with their local councils, that no good proposal goes through?

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to some of my excellent hon. Friends, who are superb constituency MPs. We will have to agree to disagree. I am sure he would agree, however, that the role of an MP is to represent the interests of their constituency as they see them. We have now struck the right balance between the country's need for superb renewables—it is now a very successful sector—and the need of local communities to have their wishes and their environment taken into account.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Prior to the Energy Act 2013, Scottish Ministers had full control over the renewables obligation. That power was removed on the clear understanding and promise that there would be no policy implications. Why was that promise broken, and will the Minister commit to backing the Scottish National party's calls for that power to be returned to Holyrood as part of the Energy Bill?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is aware that the reason we are closing the subsidy for onshore wind a year early is in great part to avoid the additional costs to the bill payer of extra deployment beyond our calculations of what could be expected. This is about trying to keep consumers' bills down. We have had a number of debates about fuel poverty, and striking that balance is absolutely vital. It is in the interests of the whole of UK that we do not keep burdening bill payers with more costs.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): What discussions has the Minister had with her colleagues in the devolved Administrations to ensure that wind applications made in those jurisdictions are able to be processed effectively?

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Lady will know, we have frequent conversations with Ministers in the devolved Parliaments and we try to ensure that they are included in all the discussions, as they certainly have been with those on onshore wind. As she will know, planning at all levels is being devolved to local planning authorities, and it will then be for the Scottish Parliament to decide exactly what the appropriate planning process should be for onshore wind in Scotland.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Can we have some consistency from the Minister? Why does she support the imposition of fracking on communities against their will? Why can she not extend the same courtesy to those communities that she has extended to those affected by wind farms?

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, onshore wind has already been deployed to a great extent. As I have just said, it is already at the level of deployment we expected to see by 2020, so it is right that local communities' views should be taken into account. With hydraulic fracturing, however, absolutely no shale gas extraction is taking place anywhere in the UK at the moment. There are no wells, and there is not even any exploration, yet it is vital to the UK's energy interests that we explore this home-grown energy, which could be vital for jobs, growth and of course energy security.

Capacity Market Auctions

3. **Kate Hollern** (Blackburn) (Lab): What changes she plans to make to the structure of capacity market auctions before the next auction round. [903586]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): Security of supply is my No. 1 priority. The capacity market was put in place to ensure sufficient security of electricity supply. It supports existing technically reliable plants to remain in the market and, as coal and other ageing plants retire, it will enable new plants to be financed and built, securing our energy supplies for the future. Following the capacity market auction conducted at the end of last year, I have been considering whether any changes are needed, and I hope to be able to announce my conclusions shortly and to undertake any consultation quickly if we decide that any regulatory changes are needed.

Kate Hollern: Is the Secretary of State concerned that the latest capacity market option is having the unintended consequence of undermining capacity, as unfavoured power stations are mothballed or closed? Can the Government be certain that they can maintain security of electricity supply while reducing investment in the solar industry?

Amber Rudd: I do not share the hon. Lady's views. The whole purpose of the capacity market is to guarantee security three or four years out and that is exactly what we are delivering. As I said earlier, however, having had two capacity auctions so far, we will be reviewing how we can improve so that the third delivers even more certain security going forward.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): I am pleased to hear that the Secretary of State is willing to look again at the way the capacity market works to encourage cleaner forms of energy rather than a reliance on fuels such as diesel, which, sadly, was a large beneficiary of the latest round. Will she give us a timescale for when the new proposals will come forward?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, which gives me the opportunity to point out that diesel was in fact 1.5% of the capacity market—a very small amount. However, it is absolutely essential to make sure that we have no risk at all to security, which is why diesel was included at that stage. I cannot give him an exact timeline, but I can say we are working on it intently at the moment and will be coming forward with proposals shortly.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the right hon. Lady look to make changes to the capacity market, so that battery energy storage

can compete and provide an alternative to thermal generation? Will she also look at final consumption levies that are affecting battery storage, because battery storage is not, of course, final consumption? It is just storage.

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and share his enthusiasm for storage. We are at the moment working with Ofgem to address how we can best encourage it within a secure regulatory environment. I cannot at this point say whether it will be within the capacity market, but that is certainly one of the considerations we will be looking at.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): It is with sadness that I stand here without Harry Harpham in his familiar place. He was my Parliamentary Private Secretary and a much-loved and valued member of the shadow Energy team. Owing to his background, Harry never let us forget that energy is about people. Last month, he told the *Yorkshire Post* that he would be the last deep coalminer elected to this place. Our promise to Harry is to ensure that the voice of working people remains at the heart of the energy debate. I will miss him enormously. We will never, ever forget him.

The capacity market was supposed to bring forward new investment in gas power stations and ensure that we have enough back-up power stations in case of a power crunch. We know that it has failed on the first count. Now, one of the companies contracted to provide back-up capacity, SSE, has pulled the Fiddlers Ferry power station out of the scheme, throwing the Government's entire policy into doubt. Will the Secretary of State give the House a guarantee that no other power stations will pull out?

Amber Rudd: Before I answer that question, I join the hon. Lady in sharing our condolences from the Conservative Benches on the sad loss of Harry, her friend and able Labour Member of Parliament.

On the capacity market, I reassure the hon. Lady that we are looking at it again to ensure that it delivers the mix of sources. As far as losing old power stations is concerned, she is as aware as I am that these are very old power stations and that it is not surprising that some of them are closing. In our plans for capacity and in our discussions to ensure security, we always plan for a certain amount of closures. We do not feel it is a threat to security of supply, but we take nothing for granted and will never be complacent. We will always make sure we have a secure supply.

Lisa Nandy: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Unfortunately, it is not the answer to the question I asked her. No new gas stations have come on stream since the Prime Minister took office. The final investment decision on Hinkley has been delayed yet again. Analysts said recently that renewables investment is about to fall off a cliff. I ask the Secretary of State again: can she confirm that no other power stations will pull out of this scheme?

Amber Rudd: I simply do not recognise the picture the hon. Lady portrays. It is, of course, a bit rich for Labour to point that out when it has absolutely no record of planning for the future. We are the Government who are delivering the first nuclear power station. We are

the Government who are taking the difficult choices for the next 10 to 15 years. I remind the hon. Lady that the Carrington closed cycle is going to start this year.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): One!

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman says one. That is, of course, more than the zero to which his hon. Friend referred. This is exactly why we will be looking at the capacity market again, to ensure it delivers new gas.

Electricity Storage

4. **Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab):** What plans she has to support the development of electricity storage. [903587]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): Energy storage was identified in 2012 as one of the eight great technologies where the UK can lead the world, and I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I am a very keen supporter. More than £80 million of public sector support has been committed to UK energy storage research and development since 2012. We now are looking at what more we can do to improve the incentives for electricity storage in particular. We will be publishing a call for evidence soon. I do hope he will put his thoughts into that call for evidence.

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank the Minister for her answer, but may I be a bit more specific? As a spin-off from developing battery-driven cars, domestic battery storage is now becoming practicable and commercially viable, and indeed in America it is now taking off. What are the Government specifically doing to promote the adoption of domestic battery storage in homes?

Andrea Leadsom: As I say, we will shortly issue a call for evidence on energy storage at grid level—at battery generation level—to try to ensure that we give as much scope and capacity to energy storage in the system. At domestic level, people are starting to look at those systems and, as part of the improvement of house-building performance, builders are required to look at other opportunities such as battery storage, solar panels and the like. There will be more work on that, but, as the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, it is still at a fairly early stage as things stand.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The energy storage industry sees 2016 as a breakthrough year, with many emerging technologies coming into the mainstream. Will the Minister concede that current subsidy cuts to renewables are lacking the foresight needed if we are to promote a genuinely green future in this truly innovative industry?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly would not. Since 2010, £52 billion has been invested in renewables. The pipeline is still enormous. There are lots of new projects that will be coming to the fore over the next five to 10 years. It is simply not true to say that support for renewables is in any sense dropping off a cliff. The advantage of energy storage will be to deal with the intermittency of renewables, so it should be a win-win for the UK.

Onshore Wind

5. **Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): When her Department plans to publish proposals on delivering a subsidy-free contract for difference mechanism for onshore wind. [903588]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): Our priorities are to decarbonise at the lowest price while always ensuring our energy security. That is why we have taken steps to end new subsidies for onshore wind. It was interesting, after my right hon. Friend's announcement, to hear companies almost immediately seeking a subsidy-free contract for difference, which suggests that our analysis that this industry can stand on its own two feet was correct. We are calling it a market-stabilising CfD and we are listening carefully to industry on how it can be delivered.

Brendan O'Hara: The early closure of the renewables obligation has severely damaged investor confidence in onshore wind, which is a vital part of the fragile economy of my Argyll and Bute constituency. The Government desperately need to restore that confidence quickly. The Minister could make a start today by announcing a date for the introduction of subsidy-free CfD. Why will she not get on and do exactly that?

Andrea Leadsom: As I said to the hon. Gentleman, we are looking at it. It is not something that we would introduce just on the back of a fag packet; it requires careful consultation and consideration. He will appreciate, alongside all the other priorities, that a subsidy-free CfD is not cost-free or risk-free to the bill consumer, and we are absolutely determined to ensure that we keep the costs down for consumers in his constituency as well as right across the UK.

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recognise, when she comes to introduce a subsidy-free contract for difference, that it will be subsidy free only if the price reflects the value of the electricity, and the value of the electricity depends on the time that it is produced, where it is produced and how reliably it is produced? Therefore, variable renewable electricity is worth much less than regular supplies from ordinary power stations.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend points out exactly correctly that there are limitations to intermittent renewables technologies, and that there are costs associated with ensuring energy security when we become over-reliant on renewables. That is an absolute case in point. On the subsidy-free CfD, he is also right that we must take into account all the various costs. We are looking at the matter very closely. I am not making any promises here, but, alongside other subsidies and other CfDs, we are looking carefully at the proposition.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): May I follow the previous comments by suggesting that we introduce subsidy-free CfDs as quickly as possible? The most important thing that was needed in relation to onshore wind was to make sure that local communities did not have it imposed on them. The Government have rightly done that. What can the Minister do to ensure that where communities do want it, we get as much onshore wind as we can at the lowest possible price?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree. The important thing was to give local communities the final say. I agree also that where local communities want more onshore wind, that should be supported. Nevertheless, as I said, even what we are calling a market-stabilising CfD would not be without risk or cost to the consumer, and our priority is to keep bills down for all energy consumers.

Solar Energy

6. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps she is taking to support small-scale solar energy production. [903589]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): The solar industry is an amazing UK success story, with 99% of all solar panel installations taking place since 2010. We are determined to keep supporting this great industry, but we are also mindful of the need to keep costs down for consumers, so with our feed-in tariff review we have tried to find the right balance between the needs of the bill payer and those of industry. We project that the revised FIT scheme could support up to 220,000 brand new solar installations between now and 2019.

Alex Chalk: A reduction in the solar feed-in tariff was probably inevitable given the falling commodity prices, but many of us want to see a thriving solar industry in the UK. Although it is early days, what assessment has been made of the impact of the 63.5% reduction on jobs and prosperity in the UK solar industry?

Andrea Leadsom: I know that my hon. Friend has big constituency interests in the success of this industry. I can reassure him that our tariff reset was built on a huge data set submitted by industry and, in terms of domestic rates of return, nearly 5% will still be offered for well-sited projects. After our announcement, the Solar Trade Association said:

"The new tariff levels are challenging, but solar power will still remain a great investment for forward-thinking home owners".

14. [903603] **Philip Boswell** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): The Scottish Government have led the way, setting ambitious building standards for every new build home, the Glasgow Commonwealth village being a prime example. Does the Minister agree that our goal should be for every suitable home to be equipped with solar PV?

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with the hon. Gentleman up to a point. What is essential for the UK right now is that new homes get built. That is our absolute priority; people are in desperate need of more homes being built. I can assure him that since April 2014 builders have had to consider the use of renewables in all their designs, and I am pleased that during the previous Parliament the energy standard for new buildings was improved by 30%.

Coal-fired Power Stations

7. **David Mowat** (Warrington South) (Con): What representations she has received from her international counterparts on the proposed closure of the UK's coal-fired power stations by 2025. [903590]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): As the Prime Minister made clear yesterday, the UK owes a great debt to the coal industry for all it has done to keep the lights on and keep our economy moving. Both I and officials in my Department regularly discuss a range of energy and climate change issues with our international counterparts, and it is clear from these conversations that the UK remains respected internationally for our ability to reduce emissions while at the same time growing our economy.

David Mowat: The Secretary of State will be aware that the day after the UK announced the closure programme, Germany commissioned a brand-new lignite building unabated coal power station as yet another addition to its coal fleet. In Belgium, Holland and Spain, coal use increased in 2014. Much of that electricity will be imported to this country through interconnectors, yet in my constituency the closure of Fiddlers Ferry was announced last week. Many of the workers there ask me how these various factors can be part of a coherent European energy policy. What should I tell them?

Amber Rudd: I start by expressing my sympathies for all those workers in my hon. Friend's constituency who have been impacted by the recent announcement of the closure of Fiddlers Ferry, as well as of Ferrybridge. On different countries in the EU making different choices about how to deliver their renewables targets, it is up to them to address how they reduce their emissions. Germany, for instance, is also having an enormous amount of solar. It has 52 GW of solar at an eye-watering cost of €10.5 billion.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The question is how we phase out coal use. Will the Secretary of State be taking new legislative measures to deliver on the Government's commitment?

Amber Rudd: On coal—I think that was the subject of the hon. Gentleman's question—we will be consulting and looking at the different methods we might or might not need. Those may be regulatory, or they may be legislative, but we have an open mind about how we achieve these things. That consultation will begin shortly.

12. [903600] **Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con):** My right hon. Friend will know about the recent announcement of the closure of Rugeley power station, which is half in my constituency and half in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling). The station was sited there in the first place because of a coalmine, which, like many others throughout western Europe, is long gone. However, the closure may mean that up to 150 people are made redundant, although ENGIE says it will try to redeploy them elsewhere. Will my right hon. Friend commit to speak to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about actively playing a role in making sure that those people can be re-employed somewhere else?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and we have, of course, spoken already this week about this matter. I have also spoken to his neighbour, whose constituency covers half the Rugeley power plant area. I will, of course, actively engage with my hon. Friend and his colleague to make sure that we do what we can for the people who have lost their jobs.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Given that the timetable for the closure of coalmines is linked to the construction and bringing online of new nuclear power, and given that the board of EDF—a cash-strapped company that is dripping with debt—has this month yet again postponed giving a green light to the construction of Hinkley C, will the Minister commit to meeting EDF's board and reporting back urgently to the House as to what the project's status actually is?

Amber Rudd: I would dispute with the hon. Gentleman the direct connection he has made. The closure of coal will be part of a consultation, but it is influenced by many different things, including the age of the fleet, the wholesale price that is being delivered and other matters. On his question about EDF, may I reassure him that I have regular conversations with the board and the chief executive? I am confident that we will have good news soon.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The Secretary of State, in her energy reset speech, said that taking "coal off the system" by 2025 will "only proceed if we're confident that the shift to new gas can be achieved within these timescales."

Bearing in mind that no new large gas-fired power station has commenced building in the past six years, and that the last two capacity auctions have underwritten the building of only one power station, which will probably not be built, what plans does she have to procure the building of new gas-fired power stations to ensure that her pledge is actually met?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the plan is to move from coal to gas so that we can reduce our emissions and have secure investment going forward. I am delighted to say that the Carrington closed cycle gas turbine will commission next year, and we have 12 additional CCGTs commissioned. I have also stated that we will have the capacity market adapted to make sure that we can deliver gas. It is going to be an essential part of the low-carbon mix, and it is this Government who are making the plans and securing energy sources for the future.

Electricity Distribution

8. **Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP):** If she will create one national electricity distribution market. [903591]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): The Government do not intend to introduce national electricity distribution pricing as this would weaken each network company's local accountability to its customers and risk an overall increase in network costs across Great Britain. We are currently consulting, however, on the level of protection provided to consumers in the north of Scotland, which amounts to an average of £41 per household this year.

Ian Blackford: I thank the Minister for that answer, but may I point out what she said just before Christmas:

"It is not right that people face higher electricity costs just because of where they live?"

I agree with her. Why does she not now take action to introduce fairness into the electricity market? Why are people in the highlands and islands paying 2p per kWh more than people elsewhere? Why are people in my constituency being discriminated against? Do the right thing and create a national market.

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said to the hon. Gentleman—we have had this discussion a number of times—I sympathise with his point, but he needs to appreciate that a national charge would mean lower charges in some areas and increases in others. Specifically in Scotland, 1.8 million households would face higher bills while 700,000 would see reductions. This is a very serious problem; he cannot just wave a magic wand and have us change it.

Energy-efficient Homes

9. **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the contribution made to meeting targets on energy efficiency and on the use of low-carbon energy by residential buildings; and if she will make a statement. [903592]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): Our new domestic supplier obligation will provide support to over 200,000 homes per year from 2017 for a period of five years by improving energy efficiency, tackling fuel poverty, and continuing to deliver on our commitment to insulate 1 million more homes during this Parliament.

Mike Wood: Will my right hon. Friend work with industry bodies such as the Sustainable Energy Association to bring forward ideas for a comprehensive strategy to increase uptake of energy efficiency measures?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this. We will engage with the industry in order to reform these grants—the renewable heat incentive and ECO, the energy company obligation. The Sustainable Energy Association is one of the stakeholders we will work with to make sure that our reformed system delivers even better value for the people who are really in need.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): We know there is a link between cold homes and excess winter deaths. Last winter, 43,000 people died completely unnecessarily as a result of the cold. What work is the Secretary of State doing with colleagues at the Department of Health to reduce excess winter deaths, specifically by ensuring that households meet minimum energy efficiency standards?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point this out. Any excess winter deaths are too many, and we work very hard across Departments to make sure that we do what we can to help people who are in the poorest homes. We do work with the Department of Health, but also with the Department for Communities and Local Government. There is more we can do through regulation to address cold homes and some of the energy efficiency measures that I would like to put in place in existing homes.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Yesterday the Park Homes Owners Justice Campaign was here launching its new PARK-LINE helpline and talking to Age Concern about its warm homes campaign. It then delivered a petition to the Secretary of State. Can she confirm that she has it and will give it active and proper consideration?

Amber Rudd: I did receive the petition yesterday. We have already taken steps to help people in park homes by ensuring that they are eligible for the warm home discount of £140 and can apply for ECO where appropriate. However, I am always looking for opportunities to be more helpful and to give more support for people in need, so I will look carefully at the petition.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The Data Communications Company is an integral part of the roll-out of the Government's smart meter programme, but it is now nine months behind schedule, and the delay is narrowing the window for the installation of SMETS 2 meters, with the risk that any additional cost might be borne by consumers. At the very minimum, can we have an updated impact assessment to reflect these delays and ensure that we are getting value for money for customers?

Amber Rudd: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are making good progress on smart meters. My colleagues and I have regular meetings with the energy companies about progress, and some of them are even ahead of schedule. However, we will continue to monitor the situation and continue to ensure that customers get the best value from smart meters, because this is an incredibly important infrastructure project that will help to reduce bills.

Shale Gas

10. **Graham Evans** (Weaver Vale) (Con): What steps she is taking to safeguard protected areas from shale gas development. [903594]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): Shale gas could become a very valuable new industry, and it is in the strong interests of the UK to explore its potential. However, we are determined to protect our most valuable spaces and have consulted on banning surface-level drilling in the most precious areas. We have also regulated to set the minimum depth of hydraulic fracturing under sensitive areas.

Graham Evans: Last month, I held a second successful fact-finding fracking meeting at Helsby high school, ably assisted by the Environment Agency, Public Health England, and the Health and Safety Executive. Over 400 constituents from Frodsham and Helsby left better informed. What steps is the Minister taking to encourage regulatory bodies to engage further in such public meetings?

Andrea Leadsom: I am impressed by my hon. Friend's managing three F-words in one parliamentary question. It is vital for local communities to have access to the facts about fracking and our stringent regulations, and I congratulate him on organising those important events. We are working with the regulators to make sure that they have every opportunity and encouragement from the Department to engage with the public. The Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive, the Oil and Gas Authority and Public Health England regularly attend public meetings such as the one he mentioned, and they will continue to do so.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): An application was made to start drilling at a little place called Calow in the Bolsover area. Most of the villagers were against the application, and it was turned down by the local planning committee. It then went to the Government inspector, because Cuadrilla wanted to appeal, and the Government inspector turned it down. Now I am told that it is possible that the Government are quite capable of overruling the decision of their own inspector and allowing fracking. Is that correct?

Andrea Leadsom: First, may I wish the hon. Gentleman a very happy birthday? I am sure that all Members would want me to do so.

Mr Skinner: I spent it on the picket line yesterday with the doctors.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is a real challenge to, but a role model for, the House in the work that he does. I genuinely congratulate him and wish him a very happy birthday. In terms of the appeal, he has set out exactly what is supposed to happen. Local communities have their say and feed into the process. Developers can appeal, of course—it is right that they should be able to—and the inspector can turn it down. There is an appeal process. I am not sure about the specifics of the case he mentions, but the point is that democracy is done, and is seen to be done. That is very important.

Mr Skinner: Whatever happened to localism?

Andrea Leadsom: That is localism in action.

Climate Change: Adaptation Costs

11. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What discussions she has had with her Cabinet colleagues on limiting climate change to prevent greater future expenditure on adaptation. [903595]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): I am clear that the only way to address climate change effectively is through global action, building on the global agreement that the UK was instrumental in achieving in Paris in December. All countries need to act if we are to bring down emissions and minimise adaptation costs in the future. I want the UK to continue to set an example by addressing the 1.2% of global emissions that we are responsible for, while at the same time continuing to grow our economy.

Cat Smith: The Government's advisers have warned them that if global temperature rises are not limited, there will be a big increase in flooding in the UK. The effects of flooding were felt acutely in the Lancaster district during Storm Desmond, when our substation was flooded and we lost the electricity supply for three days, affecting tens of thousands of homes and businesses. Will the Secretary of State commit to upgrading our adaptation plans, including our flood defence budgets, especially those for defending our electricity supplies?

Amber Rudd: I am aware of the impact of flooding in the hon. Lady's constituency, and I remember her speaking during the debate that we had on the subject with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

The best way to address dangerous climate change and its potential impact on extreme weather events is to get a global deal, which is why we have been so focused on trying to do so. I reassure her that I will work closely with my colleagues in DEFRA to ensure that we have a national adaptation programme in place.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): One thing that we have to do in the UK to meet our obligations under that international deal is to reduce further our emissions from buildings. When people buy a more efficient car, they pay less tax than they would on a less efficient model. Should not the same apply to the taxation of buildings?

Amber Rudd: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that addressing buildings is an incredibly important part of trying to meet the renewable energy targets that we have set for 2020 through the EU. I am working closely with the Department for Communities and Local Government to see what action we can take to address that, but buildings are an important part of the mix.

Mr Speaker: I would be reassured to know that the Secretary of State does not literally address buildings.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Surely one of the most important things that the Secretary of State can do to limit climate change is publicly to state how she will meet the shortfall in our legally binding renewable targets for 2020. She knows that beyond 2017, her Department projects a 25% shortfall across the heating, electricity and transport sectors. The Eurostat data released yesterday show the UK to be missing its target by the widest margin of any European country. What assessment has she made of the potential fines the UK may face as a result of that failure?

Amber Rudd: I do not share the hon. Gentleman's catastrophic view of the progress that we have made. We already have nearly 25% of our electricity coming from renewables, and we believe that we may well exceed our target of 30% by 2020. In terms of the overall renewable target, I hope he will welcome, as I do, the fact that we have already exceeded our interim target, which was 5.4%; we are now at 6.3%. However, we are aware that we need to make more progress, and we have set out clearly what we will do during this Parliament to address the shortfall.

Offshore Wind

13. **Oliver Colvile** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure the long-term future of the offshore wind industry. [903602]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): My hon. Friend will be aware that I announced last November that, in addition to the 10 GW I expect to be installed by 2020, the UK could support up to 10 GW of new offshore wind in the 2020s, subject to costs coming down. The next contract for difference round will take place by the end of this year, and I will set out further information in due course so that potential bidders can start planning their bids.

Oliver Colvile: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Offshore wind is an important part of renewable energy policy but so, for that matter, is marine energy. What progress have the Government made on the marine energy park to be situated down in the south-west?

Amber Rudd: I am aware of the good work that my hon. Friend has done this year and the progress he has made, and that Plymouth's world-leading expertise is at the heart of the south-west marine energy park. Last year, I was delighted to host, with him, a conference in Plymouth to take forward marine energy planning. I can reassure him that we will continue to work with him to ensure that Plymouth stands at the front of any marine energy park.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The development of Hornsea Project One by DONG Energy will be funded by UK taxpayers and UK energy bill payers. How will the Government use their new procurement guidelines to ensure that UK content, such as UK steel, is used in that development?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this matter. May I reassure him that we are having regular meetings with DONG and with the MPs involved to ensure that the UK content is as high as possible, within the procurement rules?

Energy Prices

15. **Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to ensure that changes in gas prices are passed on to consumers. [903604]

16. **Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP):** What steps she is taking to ensure that reductions in the wholesale price of energy are passed on to consumers. [903606]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): As the hon. Gentlemen may be aware, average domestic gas prices fell by £37 during 2015. Six major suppliers have announced a further cut in their tariffs; two more have announced that this morning. It is a good start, but the Government expect all suppliers to pass on reductions in the costs of supplying energy to consumers. I have met all the major energy suppliers in recent months to make that point clear.

Jim McMahon: Will the Secretary of State join me in celebrating the work of our local councils in assisting people to save energy? Oldham Council's collective buying scheme has attracted 8,700 households to sign up to it, each of which will save about £170. In Nottingham, the first local authority energy company, which employs 30 staff, is hoping to sign up 10,000 households.

Amber Rudd: I will join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating his council on doing that. Some individual councils are doing exceptionally good work on group switching and are trying to help their constituents. I visited Nottingham last year to see the good work that has been done there. I hope that more councils will follow that lead.

Martyn Day: Does the Secretary of State think that the Competition and Markets Authority should, as part of its investigation into the energy market, introduce measures to make switching suppliers easier, as the consumer group Which? has called for?

Amber Rudd: Like the hon. Gentleman, I am impatient to receive the comments of the Competition and Markets Authority. It was predominately to address the difficulties with switching and the difficulties that some consumers find in engaging with the energy market that the Prime Minister referred the energy market, via Ofgem, to the authority. I certainly hope that it comes forward with such suggestions.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Just over a year ago, the Government announced an investigation into whether families should pay less for their energy because of the fall in the wholesale price of gas. The Chancellor told *The Telegraph*:

"Falling oil and gas prices should bring cheaper household bills".

A spokesman added that the Government were conducting a series of studies of utility companies to examine whether action was needed. The investigation was backed by the Prime Minister, the then Energy and Climate Change Secretary and the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury. It was reported that Ministers would be watching the energy companies "like a hawk". What happened to that study, and what action was taken?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Lady that we continue to watch the energy companies like a hawk. I am pleased that we continue to see reductions, with two more being announced just this morning, and I hope she will join me in welcoming them. The great news for consumers is that they are not faced with the price freeze that I cannot forget Labour promised last year. If that had happened, none of these reductions would have taken place.

Mr Speaker: Progress has been rather slow today, on account of some quite long questions and some long answers, but I do not like Back-Bench Members who are waiting patiently to lose out. The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne will not lose out. I call Angela Rayner.

Solar Energy: VAT

17. **Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab):** Whether the Secretary of State has had discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on proposals to increase VAT on solar panels. [903607]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): A recent European Court of Justice ruling found that the reduced rate of VAT on certain "energy saving materials" was in breach of EU law. As a result, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs recently consulted on changes to the rate of VAT and is considering the responses. If the rate of VAT does change, we will consider the options for how to maintain a suitable rate of return for investors under the feed-in tariff.

Angela Rayner: May I, along with the Minister, wish my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) a happy birthday? I am so pleased that he is still winning. He is fantastic.

Following on from the question from the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), the proposed hike in VAT would raise the typical cost of a 4 kW residential solar PV system by nearly £1,000, even though industry experts advise us to retain the lower tax rate for solar under the recent ECJ judgment. The Government are keeping the lower rate for heat pumps, biomass boilers and combined heat and power units. The same should surely apply to solar PV thermal; otherwise we will have the perverse situation in which electricity generated from fossil fuels is taxed at 5% VAT, while homeowners have to pay 20% VAT for their own renewable energy. Can the Minister not persuade the Chancellor to reverse this tax hike and, if she cannot, will she make commensurate increases?

Andrea Leadsom: I want to be clear with the hon. Lady that this is not the Chancellor's choice. As I have made very clear, this is an EU Court ruling; it is not our choice. In the event that we have to impose an increase in VAT, we will look at the returns to investors under the feed-in tariff.

Topical Questions

T1. [903609] **Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): Since the last Question Time, there has been a dramatic fall in the oil price. The Government are clear that the broad shoulders of the UK are 100% behind our oil and gas industry, the hard-working people it employs and the families it supports. The Government have set up the Oil and Gas Authority to drive collaboration and productivity in the industry. We recently set out an action plan to back the export of our world-class skills in oil and gas, and to diversify the economy of the north-east of Scotland, including through investment in exploration, innovation and skills.

Nusrat Ghani: Will the Secretary of State outline what progress is being made to secure vital infrastructure investment in the energy sector? Are not thinking for the long term and investing in infrastructure the best way to get secure, low-cost electricity for my constituents in Wealden? Before I forget, I wish the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) a happy birthday.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are tackling the legacy of under-investment, the failure to deliver the next generation of energy projects and the energy security black hole that were left by the last Labour Government. We are getting on with the job of building a system of energy infrastructure fit for the 21st century. We have made substantial progress in securing infrastructure investment. The UK has enjoyed record levels in the deployment of renewables over recent years and it maintains a healthy energy investment pipeline, as is shown in our national infrastructure plan.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Last week, a Bloomberg report showed that the UK is the biggest beneficiary of European Investment Bank funding for clean energy projects and we are the third largest recipient of the new

European fund for strategic investments, which is being spent mostly on energy. Some 70,000 jobs are expected to be created as a result. Does the Secretary of State agree that that is further evidence that Britain should stay in the European Union?

Amber Rudd: There are, of course, tremendous benefits from a united energy market, and I am interested and excited to work on the progress of the energy union.

T4. [903612] **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that energy companies automatically switch their customers to the cheapest tariff possible, because many constituents find the current system confusing and somewhat disappointing?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend puts his finger on a sensitive and tricky issue about delivering the best for consumers, which is what the Government want to achieve, while also encouraging competition. I ask him to wait for the Competition and Markets Authority report, which I hope will address the issue, and then I believe we will make some progress.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): At Prime Minister's questions on 27 January, the Prime Minister said about oil and gas:

"I am determined that we build a bridge to the future for all those involved"—[*Official Report*, 27 January 2016; Vol. 605, c. 260.]

Following his visit to Aberdeen, it is clear that that bridge will be built on the cheap. Industry needs meaningful support in the forthcoming Budget, so can we have less talk about the broad shoulders of the UK, and will the Secretary of State put her back into delivering the change we need?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman is being a little churlish about the significant investment that the broad shoulders of the United Kingdom are putting into the north-east, particularly to ensure that jobs and skills are secured. I am working across Departments, and chairing a ministerial group, to ensure that those skills are preserved, and I will be working with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to ensure that we have a taskforce to take that forward. I hope he will also welcome the £250 million put into Aberdeen for its city deal, but there is a lot of progress to be made and a lot more to take forward.

T6. [903614] **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): Will the Secretary of State consider how the current system model, including the National Infrastructure Commission, National Grid and Ofgem, could be reformed to make it a more flexible and independent part of an energy infrastructure that is fit for the 21st century?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend has a great deal of experience in this sector, and he will be aware, as I am, that National Grid as system operator has played a pivotal role in keeping the energy market working. As our system changes, we must ensure that it is as productive, secure and cost-effective as possible. There is a strong case for greater independence for the system operator, to allow it to make the necessary changes, and we will work alongside the National Infrastructure Commission to consider how best to reform the current model.

T2. [903610] **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): As Valentine's day approaches, will the Secretary of State support the climate coalition "Show the love" campaign and encourage all Members to wear the green hearts that we have been sent, which symbolise how so much of what we love, wherever we are in the world, is affected by climate change?

Amber Rudd: That is a very interesting approach, and it is always good to welcome Valentine's day. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could give one of those hearts to the birthday boy who is sitting in front of him.

T7. [903615] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): Dozens of my constituents are employed in the solar power industry, and I meet them regularly. May I add my voice to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) in asking the ministerial team to continue to assess and analyse what effect the changes to solar subsidies are having on microbusinesses and small and medium-sized businesses that are engaged in the solar industry?

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): As my hon. Friend knows, the solar industry is a great UK success story, and we are set to exceed massively our targets for solar power, achieving almost 13 GW of solar energy capacity forecast for 2020. With our revised tariff we expect up to 220,000 brand-new solar installations between now and 2019, which will give a rate of return of nearly 5% to well-sited installations.

T3. [903611] **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): Pinsent Masons recently published a report on the prospects for the oil and gas sector in 2016, which highlighted that 67% of oil and gas executives see the UK as a prime opportunity for growth over the next three years, under the right fiscal environment. What fiscal support is being considered for the oil and gas industry ahead of the Budget?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that fiscal changes are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but I reassure him that we take seriously the support that we want to give to the UK continental shelf and all the jobs around it. I chair the cross-ministerial group, which also includes a member from the Treasury.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The new Anglia local enterprise partnership's oil and gas taskforce has developed a package of measures to support businesses and workers at this difficult time. Will the Secretary of State consider a proposal from the LEP for the Government to match the local funding that it is providing?

Amber Rudd: I hesitate to agree to any financial commitments in this Chamber, but I am always interested in looking at proposals from my hon. Friend.

T5. [903613] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What progress is the Secretary of State making on getting state aid consent for the strike price for island communities in offshore wind projects? When does she expect to go out to consultation on what that strike price should be?

Andrea Leadsom: We absolutely appreciate that industry, across all technologies, needs clarity on Government policies in future allocation rounds so that it can manage its investment decisions, and we aim to support that. We are currently working with Her Majesty's Treasury to finalise the budget for future auctions, and we will set out more information as soon as we can.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I thank the Minister for her robust and informative response to my Adjournment debate about the Humber estuary on Tuesday evening. May I draw her attention to a statement issued to the local media by DONG Energy? The statement is wet, woolly and non-committal. Will she reaffirm her determination to be involved in the future developments in northern Lincolnshire?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his excellent support for his area. I was delighted to respond to him in the Adjournment debate, and I can absolutely assure him that there will be no wriggle room; in order for the UK to benefit properly from our decision to support new offshore wind, we will require UK content and the UK supply chain be a key beneficiary of it.

T8. [903616] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What plans does the Secretary of State have to allow large-scale solar generators to apply for a contract under the contract for difference mechanism?

Amber Rudd: We do not have plans at the moment for a large-scale solar contract. What we have found is that the large-scale ground mounted solar industry has confirmed to us that it does not need any subsidy and that because costs have fallen to such a great degree, it can continue, subject to planning permission, to develop and to supply electricity without a formal contract. That is surely in the better interests of the taxpayer and the bill payer, if it can be achieved.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Given that Cheshire has a centre of excellence in relation to the nuclear industry, what steps are the Government taking to ensure funding for new nuclear centres in the universities in the north of England?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend may be aware that in the recent spending review one area where we did get an increase was in innovation. Specifically, we have allocated half of the new increase for small modular reactors. We are working on delivery in that area with universities and with Innovate UK and we will continue to do so.

T9. [903617] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Select Committee has found that scrapping the Government's support for carbon capture and storage technology puts at risk the UK's international commitments on tackling climate change and makes it more expensive to do this. We have also lost out on about £250 million-worth of EU investment. Can the Minister just explain to me how this makes sense?

Andrea Leadsom: Our view is that CCS has a potentially important role to play in long-term decarbonisation. We continue to invest in the development of CCS; we are investing more than £130 million to develop the

technology through innovation support. My Department is looking at what our new policy is to develop this important technology.

T10. [903618] **Roger Mullin** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Electrical network losses from theft and so-called “copper losses” are estimated by the Department to cost consumers in excess of £3 billion annually. What recent analysis has the Department undertaken on the potential contribution of power line carrier technology to address this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: This area interests me a great deal. Obviously, it is a complete disaster if pipeline tapping—in effect, stealing—takes product away from consumers which then has to be paid for. This is a vital area and I am looking at it. I am not familiar with the proposal the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, but if he would like to write to me about it, I would be happy to take a look at it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Historically, all mining has been prohibited under the city of York. City of York Council passed a motion to say that no licences should be given for fracking, yet a licence has been given. What guarantee will the Minister give that the local voice now will determine what happens?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me a chance to explain that the licence is not a

licence to frack—that sounds a bit Bond-like; it is simply a licence to be able to consider the seismic opportunity of the shale gas that is potentially underneath. It is absolutely not a guarantee that anything will happen at all. There is then a whole planning process to go through, including environmental assessments, health and safety assessments and so on. And there is a very clear local planning process, which is very well communicated and with which she will be very familiar.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): This morning, energy experts reported that we were way behind on the target emission levels set at the Paris COP and in the fourth carbon budget. This comes only weeks after the important agreement in Paris. How on earth can this be the case?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman might be aware that the Paris agreement called for temperature increases to be limited to a maximum of 2°, yet the intended nationally determined contributions—the voluntary contributions from each country—only reached 2.7°, so that comes as no surprise. Everyone who signed up to the agreement—let us celebrate the fact that nearly 200 countries did so—knows that there is more work to do. It is not the end of the journey; it is just the start.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but we must now move on.

Short Money and Policy Development Grant

10.35 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Leader of the House to make a statement on Short money and the policy development grant.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose) *rose*—

Hon. Members: Where's the Leader of the House?

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister with responsibility for constitutional reform.

John Penrose: That includes the policy development grant, Mr Speaker.

As the shadow Leader of the House will already know, the Electoral Commission has been consulting on changes to policy development grant, and there have been informal discussions about parallel changes to Short money between the political parties as well. I can confirm that we plan to initiate further, more formal consultations on Short money shortly. There will be plenty of time and opportunity for views to be expressed on both sides of the House, and I am sure, if he runs true to form, he will use those opportunities well.

I am also required, under the terms of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, to lay a statutory instrument before the House to adjust the shares of policy development grant between political parties to reflect the results of the recent general election. This statutory instrument is nearly ready and will be laid soon. I am sure it will then be scrutinised and debated carefully by the House, if it wishes, in the usual way.

Chris Bryant: Does the Minister agree that it

“cannot be right...for Opposition parties to be under-resourced, particularly when...the Government have increased substantially, from taxpayers' money, the resources that they receive for their own special advisers”?—[*Official Report*, 26 May 1999; Vol. 332, c. 428-9.]

Those are not my words; they were the words of Sir George Young, when he was the Conservative shadow Leader of the House, arguing for even more Short money for the Tories when the Labour Government trebled it for them in 1999. In opposition, the Prime Minister said he would cut the number and cost of special advisers, yet in government he has appointed 27 more than ever before and the cost to the taxpayer has gone up by £2.5 million a year. There is a word for that, Mr Speaker, but it is not parliamentary.

In opposition, the Conservatives banked £46 million a year in Short money, yet in government they want to cut it for the Opposition by 20%. There is a word for that, Mr Speaker, but it is not parliamentary. How can it be right for the Government to cut the policy development grant to political parties by 19%, when they are not cutting the amount of money spent on their own special advisers? Surely history has taught us that an overweening Executive is always a mistake. Surely, if a party in government needs financial support in addition to the civil service, it is in the national interest that all the Opposition parties should be properly resourced as well.

The Government have briefed journalists that they will publish their proposals on Short money tomorrow—in the recess—and that, basically, is what the Minister just admitted. Surely, above all else, this is a matter for the House. Short money was created by the House, and amendments have to be agreed by the House, so surely the House should hear first. Why, then, has the Leader of the House made absolutely no attempt to meet me or representatives of any other political party for proper consultation? Why did he fail to turn up for three meetings yesterday? Why is he not doing his proper job and standing at the Dispatch Box today? Mr Speaker, what is the word for this behaviour? Is it shabby, tawdry or just downright cynical?

John Penrose: I apologise fulsomely for not being the Leader of the House. I am sure that the shadow Leader of the House is looking forward to his weekly arm wrestle with him, but in the meantime I hope that he will accept having the other policy Minister—I am responsible for policy development grants—responding to his question and treat it as an amuse-bouche for his later work-outs with the Leader of the House.

To clarify one further point, I did not say we were launching “proposals”; I said we would be launching further “consultations”—and it is extremely important to understand that consultations involve a dialogue. The determined assault of the shadow Leader of the House is rather blunted by the fact that he will have a huge opportunity to contribute, as will others of all parties, as required, as soon as this consultation is launched.

One important point that the shadow Leader of the House managed to gloss over—I am sure inadvertently—is that Short money, contrary to the impression given by his remarks, has actually risen very substantially over the course of the last five years. It has gone up by more than 50%; it is more than 50% higher than it used to be. If we make no changes over the next few years, it will continue to rise still further. The population—the voters—who have had five or more years of having to tighten their belts to deal with the—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I appreciate that this is a high-octane issue, and it is because I judged it worthy of treatment today that the urgent question was granted. Members must, however, listen to the Minister who is, to be fair, among the most courteous of Ministers. He must be heard—[*Interruption.*] Order. There will then be a full opportunity for colleagues to question him.

John Penrose: Thank you, Mr Speaker. To finish my point, the country will not understand why politicians should be exempt from having to deal with the effects of the financial deficit that we were bequeathed by the last Labour Government. The reason why we have to tighten our belts as a nation is that whopping financial deficit. It cannot be right for politicians to argue that they should be in some way exempt—a special class—and not have to do their bit. Short money has gone up by 50% so far, and it will continue to rise if we do nothing. I think that the country expects us as politicians to set an example and to do our bit.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I have great sympathy for my hon. Friend the Minister who has been sent here to be shouted at by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) because I doubt

whether he is the author of this policy or that he is responsible for determining the outcome. If the policy is as reasonable as the Minister insists, however, it is quite clear from these exchanges that the Government have handled the matter in a clumsy manner so that the Opposition feel they have not been consulted. On the other hand, could there be an agenda behind this change, which is rather more political in its intent?

I would like to inform Members that my Select Committee has already received correspondence from another Conservative Chair of a Select Committee expressing concern about this matter. We are looking into it and will be holding an inquiry. All sides should have a fair hearing so that these matters can be agreed by consensus.

John Penrose: I welcome the Select Committee Chairman's pledge of a further consultation. That will provide further opportunities to air the issues around this matter in addition to—and possibly in parallel with, depending on the timing—the consultation I mentioned in my earlier remarks.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I declare an interest as the national secretary of the Scottish National party. I echo the points already made on Short money. Government is growing, special advisers are growing, the House of Lords is growing, but our ability to hold the Government to account is being stripped back. There is one rule for Tory cronies and another rule for everyone else.

The policy development grant poses serious issues for the headquarters, especially of smaller parties and especially given the prospect of a cut in the middle of devolved election campaigns. Will the Minister take on board the recommendations of the Electoral Commission? What opportunities will be there be for further consultation and cross-party negotiation on both these issues?

John Penrose: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the policy development grant has a slightly different mechanism. It has to be dealt with through a statutory instrument rather than by resolution of the House. The statutory instrument will be laid as soon as it is ready, whereupon the hon. Gentleman and everybody else will have an opportunity to debate it. The hon. Gentleman is also right to say that the Electoral Commission has been consulting carefully and making recommendations about the revised shares to reflect the results of the last general election. I look forward to hearing his further comments at that point.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I make two points on behalf of my constituents? First, I absolutely agree with the shadow Leader of the House that the growth in the number of special advisers has got completely out of hand. If the Government want sensible policy advice, they should speak to their Back Benchers. After all, we are the ones who are in touch with our electorate.

Secondly, there should be some mechanism for measuring the effectiveness of the Opposition, because from where I am sitting it would seem that, pro rata, the Scottish National party offers a far more effective opposition than the present Labour party.

John Penrose: The shadow Leader of the House delights in using the standard format, "There is a word for that." He has used that rhetorical device on several

previous occasions, but one of the words he has not used is "shambles", which is perhaps what my hon. Friend is suggesting about Labour's performance on at least one or two issues.

I can happily confirm that the cost of Spads has started to fall since the last general election, which is tremendously important. I also heartily endorse my hon. Friend's point that, in order to remain in touch with both the feelings of the House and those of the electorate, Governments need to listen to Back Benchers as well as to others very carefully indeed.

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that I was fortunate enough to be the Leader of the House who put through the settlement on Short money to which my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has referred? At the time, we had a massive majority and every opportunity to use office to disadvantage our opponents, had we wished. The Conservative party was politically on its knees, and financially as close to it as it had ever been. We had experienced one of the features of the proposal that is being considered, namely the freezing of the grant after it has been cut. We experienced inflation of 10% to 15% under the triumphant preceding Conservative Government. Consequently, not only did we treble the money and make special provision for the special needs of the Leader of the Opposition, but we inflation-proofed it. That is why the money has gone up for the past five years: it is his party's own record on inflation that the Minister is criticising.

John Penrose: The right hon. Lady makes a very important point, but there is a crucial difference between the situation when she was in charge and the current situation: we have a huge deficit to deal with, while Labour inherited an economy that was doing incredibly well and a set of Government finances that were in a far stronger position. The difference is the deficit, and the reason for the deficit is sitting opposite me. I am afraid that that is why politicians and the rest of the country have to tighten our belts.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Will my hon. Friend, despite all the outrage on the Opposition Benches, just remind us again by precisely how much Short money has risen since 2010?

John Penrose: It has gone up by 50% when everybody else has had to tighten their belts, and if we do nothing, it will continue to rise further.

Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): I am delighted that the Government are cutting Short money; few things this Administration have announced have pleased me more. Does the Minister agree that this is public money and that the public will deeply resent it being spent on politicians to do more politics? Does he agree that the rules on Short money need to reflect the fact that the cost of doing politics—of doing policy, research and communication—have come down? We live in a world where Google is at our fingertips, so we do not need researchers. We also have Twitter and blogs so we do not need a whole department of press officers. Does he agree that the public will resent using public money to pay for Spads and shadow special advisers, who have watched too much of "The West Wing", to sit in Portcullis House at public expense?

John Penrose: I agree with large parts of what the hon. Gentleman says. I think that the public will look at these contributions from the public purse—which taxpayers fund without choice, unlike other forms of political donation about which people do have a choice—and wonder why the political classes think that they should be exempt, particularly because, as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, it is far more possible nowadays to do this work in an efficient fashion and to deliver greater efficiencies. I believe that he has in the past turned down potential allocations of either Short money or the policy development grant to which he was theoretically entitled, and I compliment him on that principled stand.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Speaking as one who managed Short money and the policy development grant for the Conservative party when we were in opposition, I think that they are critical elements of what we need in order to function effectively in a democracy. I recognise that the grants have increased significantly, but I would gently say to those on the Front Bench that when making proposals about the future of these sums and how they are to be spent, due consideration should be given to the risks of their being spent more broadly in political parties, and also the opportunities that exist to fund a great deal of the work involved from sources outside political parties in the modern age of politics.

John Penrose: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and, as he says, he speaks from personal experience. I think that the crucial point we all need to remember—the guiding star—is that at some point whoever is in government will be in opposition, although I hope it will not be for a great deal of time in our case. We must therefore come up with rules that we are all happy to live with, whichever side of the aisle we are on.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): The Government are setting to one side all the conventions for dealing with issues of this kind. There is no precedent for them to proceed in this way. In fact, what they are doing does not amount to anything more than Bullingdon Club bullying of Parliament. They are treating Parliament as if it were a Department of Government, and an unfavoured Department of Government at that. Will the Leader of the House—sorry, I mean the Minister, although it ought to be the Leader of the House—tell us what he has done to defend the interests of Parliament, rather than the narrow political interests of the Conservative Government?

John Penrose: I would gently and respectfully demur from the right hon. Gentleman's starting point. We have been undertaking some informal discussions between parties, which we are planning to make much more formal in the future, and I think that means that there will be plenty of opportunities for cross-party views to be gathered. There is absolutely no intention to subvert the will of Parliament. In fact, as you know, Mr Speaker, whatever proposals are made will have to be subject to debate and passage through the House when they eventually materialise.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Will my hon. Friend tell me how much money we are talking about, in cash terms? If he does not know, will he write to me about it, please?

John Penrose: I shall.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Can the Minister reassure me that all parties in the House will be fully involved in every stage of all the consultations? Will he also bear it in mind that a flat cut in both Short money and policy development grant will have a disproportionate effect on smaller parties, particularly regional parties? They are important elements in allowing us to function properly.

John Penrose: I can give the right hon. Gentleman exactly that reassurance. We will ensure that all political parties are involved in our consultation.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): If this is about responding to the deficit and the cuts are therefore justified, will the Minister explain how it is justified that the number of Spads has risen from 79 to 95, at an extra cost of more than £2 million?

John Penrose: As I said earlier, the cost of Spads has started to fall in the current Parliament. It is also important to remember that the total amount of Short money and policy development grant comes to dramatically more than the cost of Spads or anything of that sort.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Government, and the Conservatives, have form when it comes to rigging the electoral playing field. The Conservatives may have broken the law by spending more than the legal limit at by-elections. They are ramming through one-sided changes in the funding of political parties, while leaving in place their ability to raise huge sums from hedge fund managers. Now they intend to slash the Short money which ensures that Opposition parties can hold Governments to account. Can the Minister guarantee that the cuts will not be the final chapter in our transition from a multi-party state to a one-party state in which Robert Mugabe would be at home?

John Penrose: I do not know where to start in trying to rebut some of the absurd assumptions in that question, but I think that the short answer to all of them is “No.”

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): These proposals come on the back of the Government's attack on Labour's funding via the Trade Union Bill. It is clearly part of a partisan move to hit the Opposition and give the Government an unfair advantage, while leaving their own funding base of big donors untouched. Can the Minister confirm that the Government are now in favour of rigging the rules to suit themselves?

John Penrose: The hon. Lady will be unsurprised to hear that I disagree strongly with almost every word of her question. I am happy to confirm that I and my hon. Friend the Minister for Skills in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills will give evidence on the Trade Union Bill to the House of Lords Trade Union Political Funds and Political Party Funding Committee later today, when we will perhaps have an opportunity to debate the proposals in even greater depth.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): The name is after the Leader of the House at the time, Edward Short, who provided money for the Opposition parties, particularly the Tories. Is the Minister aware that the

measure he has announced will be seen, despite all his denials, as sheer spite against the Opposition parties, particularly the main Opposition party? The Government should be thoroughly ashamed of taking such a measure together with others to introduce, as was rightly said, a one-party state.

John Penrose: I am terribly sorry to disagree with such a senior and experienced Member, but I must remind the hon. Gentleman and others that the public at large have had several years of belt-tightening. They have had to deal with the effects of the deficit and have all had to contribute to try to close the yawning financial gap that we were bequeathed by the previous Government. They will just not understand—they will judge politicians and the political classes, as they see them, extremely harshly—if we are not willing to do our bit and make this work.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): There is a great sense of fairness in the British public at large and a much better sense of fairness among some Government Back Benchers. When the Minister is talking to the public about belt-tightening, it does not wash very well when they see the gala fundraisers the Conservative party is currently holding. If the proposal comes to this House of Commons for a vote, I warn him that reasonable people who value democracy and a healthy Opposition will not give him a majority.

John Penrose: The measures will in due course come to the House for a vote, and rightly so. They will be subject to proper democratic scrutiny in due course, so the hon. Gentleman will have his opportunity to try to persuade others of his point of view, but I again draw a crucial distinction between the provision of public money, funded by taxpayers, who do not have a choice about whether the money goes to political parties, and voluntary political donations made by whoever it may be—individuals or trade unions. In the end, people should have a choice. That is the crucial distinction between those two sources.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Short money and the policy development grant are vital for parties such as mine in developing ideas and policies, which are the vital ingredients of any functioning democracy. If the UK Government are serious about cutting the cost of politics, why do they not reduce the membership of the over-bloated other House?

John Penrose: We are extremely serious about cutting the cost of politics. As you know, Mr Speaker, we have plans to reduce the size of this Chamber from 650 to 600 MPs, as was agreed in the last Parliament. The number of peers is going up, but the cost of the upper House is falling. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will welcome that news and the news that there are ongoing political discussions on a cross-party basis on how other reforms might be effected in the House of Lords.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): If the money for democracy is cut and if the ermine-clad pantomime of the House of Lords is further bloated, contrary to what the Minister just said, is it not likely to bring shameless hypocrisy into disrepute?

John Penrose: There were an awful lot of negatives in that question, but I think that I get the hon. Gentleman's drift. I take his point on the concerns about the overall

size of the House of Lords, but it is important for us not to forget that it has managed to reduce its total costs. As I mentioned earlier, there are ongoing cross-party discussions on how to address its overall size. I encourage their lordships to continue those discussions and, with any luck, to produce proposals shortly.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Minister has repeatedly spoken this morning of tightening belts, but will he confirm that, when in opposition, the Conservative party took every penny of the £4.8 million Short money it was offered each year? There was no tightening of the belts then.

John Penrose: I cannot speak for what happened while we were in opposition, but I can confirm that we have on occasion handed back parts of, I think, the policy development grant because we were unable to spend it and we felt that it was appropriate to ensure that the taxpayer was reimbursed.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that 63% of the British population did not vote for this Government, and those people need to have their voices heard when policies hurt them. This is not about money for hotel rooms during by-elections; this is about democracy. Will the Minister start the consultation after the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has reported?

John Penrose: We are all anxious to crack on with this as soon as we can, and we would like to start the consultation shortly. Given the level of interest that has been made evident during this urgent question, I am sure that we would be criticised further if we were to delay the consultation. I would like to get on with it soon, if we can, and to allow plenty of time for people to respond over a period of weeks. I am sure that the Select Committee's Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), will understand that timetable and that he will time his Committee's investigations appropriately.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The Chancellor of the Exchequer has increased the pay of one of his special advisers by as much as 42%. How on earth can it be justified for the Chancellor to lecture the rest of us on tightening our belts when that does not seem to apply to him?

John Penrose: As I mentioned before, the total cost of Spads since the general election has started to fall.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): This cannot be taken in isolation. The fact is that the Government do not like being held to account. That is precisely why we now have the Trade Union Bill, why charities are being gagged by the Charities (Protection and Social Investment) Bill and why the Government are cutting the money to the Opposition. The truth is that they might be able to win a vote, but they cannot win the argument.

John Penrose: I keep on coming back to the central point that it is perfectly possible to undertake policy raising and policy development tasks more cheaply than before, as the hon. Member for Clacton (Mr Carswell) mentioned.

[John Penrose]

The rest of the country would not understand why, when everyone else has had to become more efficient, politicians should somehow be a special case. They would accuse us of feathering our own nests, and it would be extremely hard to justify that kind of action to anyone outside this place.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you said earlier that the Minister was one of the most courteous in the House—indeed he is—but he has now been in denial for the best part of half an hour. Does he not accept that the combination of a Trade Union Bill attacking Labour party funds, a boundary review that is likely to favour the Conservative party and a reduction in Short money and policy development money gives the impression outside this place that the Government are acting like the bully in the playground? The damage will be inflicted not on a child but on the integrity of Parliament and on the health of our democracy.

John Penrose: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned the boundary review. It is important that we all sign up to the principle that everybody's vote, right the way across the country, no matter which constituency they might be in, should weigh the same. It cannot be right to have a system in which, in the past, Members of Parliament from some political parties have been elected in constituencies with many fewer people than others. People might justifiably ask why the Labour party, which benefited from that system for a very long time, is so against the notion of having equal votes for equal weight. I commend the new changes and the equalisation of the size of constituencies to all here.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The Minister is desperately trying, and failing, to justify the 19% cut to the Short money in the context of a Trade Union Bill that takes funds from the Labour party, of stuffing up the House of Lords and of changes to the electoral register and general election boundaries. Will he now admit that the so-called one nation party is trying to create a one-party nation?

John Penrose: I compliment the hon. Lady on a well-rehearsed soundbite, but I have to tell her that I am not feeling terribly desperate at the moment. Indeed, I am feeling quite principled, because we are trying to make the system fairer and to ensure that our democracy works in a fairer fashion in future.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister has said several times we all need to tighten our belts, so can he just answer this question: how come the Chancellor of the Exchequer can increase his Spad's pay by 42%? Just answer the question, please.

John Penrose: I believe that I already have. The cost of Spads has fallen since the general election.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is right when he says that in times of austerity politicians have to take their cut in expenditure. Will he therefore give a commitment that any percentage drop in Short money for the Opposition is more than matched by cuts in expenditure on Government Spads?

John Penrose: I can go broader than that. I can promise that the proposed cuts are the same as those being applied to all non-protected Departments right the way across the Government. This is not picking on any particular area at all. This is the standard cut, which every other Department that has not been protected has had to deal with. That is an important point to get across to the rest of the country.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The number of Government political advisers is up to nearly 100. The number of political advisers on the highest pay grade is up 150%. The Prime Minister's reportable salaries have increased by 51% and the Chancellor's reportable political salaries have increased by 277%. When the Minister told us, just minutes ago, that the Government were tightening their belt on their political budget, did he deliberately mislead the House?

Mr Speaker: Order. I think understand what the hon. Gentleman was driving at, but it is wholly disorderly to deliberately mislead the House. The notion that somebody might do so should not be put to a Minister. The hon. Gentleman is extremely felicitous of phrase and I feel sure he can find another way to convey the thrust of what he wishes to communicate to the Minister. I very politely now invite him to do so.

Jonathan Reynolds: It appears that the facts contradict the Minister, so I just wonder if he made an inadvertent mistake in the statement he has made to us today.

Mr Speaker: Very dextrous.

John Penrose: Not as far as I am aware.

Business of the House

11.6 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the absentee, part-time Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling): It is a pleasure to follow an urgent question responded to by the Minister responsible.

The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 22 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill. I also expect my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to make a statement, following the European Council meeting.

TUESDAY 23 FEBRUARY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Education and Adoption Bill, followed by business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 24 FEBRUARY—Opposition day (19th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 25 FEBRUARY—General debate on European affairs.

FRIDAY 26 FEBRUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 29 February will include:

MONDAY 29 FEBRUARY—Estimates (1st allotted day). There will be a debate on the science budget, followed by a debate on end-of-life care. Further details will be given in the *Official Report*.

[The details are as follows: First Report from the Science and Technology Committee, The Science Budget, HC 340, and the Government response, HC 729; and Fifth Report from the Health Committee, Session 2014-15, HC 805, and the Government response, Cm 9143; First Report from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Follow-up to PHSO Report: Dying without dignity, HC 432; Sixth Report from the Public Administration Committee, Session 2014-15, Investigating clinical incidents in the NHS, HC 886.]

TUESDAY 1 MARCH—Estimates (2nd allotted day). There will be a debate on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the 2015 spending review, followed by a debate on the reform of the police funding formula. At 7 pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates. Further details will be given in the *Official Report*.

[The details are as follows: First Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee, The FCO and the 2015 Spending Review, HC 467, and the Government response, HC 816; and Fourth Report from the Home Affairs Committee, Reform of the Police Funding Formula, HC 476.]

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 25 February will be:

THURSDAY 25 FEBRUARY—Debate on the seventh report from the Communities and Local Government Committee on litter and fly-tipping in England.

Chris Bryant: Let me pay tribute to Harry Harpham. I know others have done so, but there are few miners left in this House and my constituents in the Rhondda

would want to mark his passing with a warm comradely salute. And talking of miners, I would like to wish my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) an 84th happy birthday. He has still got the oomph of a 48-year-old.

I hope that the announcement made by the Leader of the House got you all excited, Mr Speaker, and that you were all atingle. I am genuinely excited, because if you read between the lines you will have spotted that Monday 22 February is going to be a very special day indeed. It is not just that the Prime Minister is making a statement on the EU Council. Far more importantly, 22 February 2016 will be the day the Government abandon collective responsibility on the EU. Cabinet Ministers will be hurtling down the corridors of power to get to television studios to be the first to go live on air to declare themselves an out-er. Forget the relief of Mafeking; forget the liberation of Paris; forget "Free Willy"; and even forget "Free Nelson Mandela", because the 22 February 2016 will be known hereafter as the National Liberation of Grayling Day. Buy your bunting now, Mr Speaker.

Talking of the 22 February, the Leader of the House has also announced, finally, the mystery Second Reading Bill, which will be a Northern Ireland Bill. Will he ensure that the Committee and Report stages of that Bill are all taken on the Floor of the House, so that all Northern Ireland Members can take part in the debate?

Can the Leader of the House tell us the date of the State Opening of Parliament? We have fixed-term Parliaments now, so can he tell us whether it will even be in May? If it is to be in May, there are four possible Wednesdays. The 4 May is the day before local elections, so that is out. The 25 May is just before the bank holiday and would fall in purdah for the EU referendum, so will it be the 11 or the 18 May? Come on! Or are the Government intending to keep this Session going indefinitely, way beyond the European referendum, into the autumn and into next year? If so, will he give us some more dates for private Members' Bills as we have no more Fridays allocated?

We have been saying for a while that the Trade Union Bill is partisan, petty-minded and vindictive, but now we know that the Government think so, too. After all, the Minister for Skills, who is the Minister in charge, has written to the Leader of the House, saying that large chunks of the Bill need redrafting—would you believe it?—because they are simply not "rational"—his word. He is seeking clearance on possible concessions to ease handling in the House of Lords.

Apparently, one concession under consideration relates to check-off—obviously, I do not mean the playwright—whereby most trade union members have their union subscriptions deducted from their pay and sent to their union by their employer. The Government want to ban check-off, but the leaked letter makes it absolutely clear that it would be illegal to do so in Scotland and Wales due to devolution, but how on earth can it be right for the Government to ban check-off at all? The Government's own website makes it absolutely clear that this arrangement is entirely voluntary. This is what it says:

"There is no legal requirement for your employer to do this".

For petty, partisan advantage a Conservative Government are intending to outlaw a perfectly sensible private contract between employer and employee. How does that fit with Edmund Burke and Adam Smith?

[Chris Bryant]

When the Bill was in this House, the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) quite wisely tabled a perfectly sensible amendment to allow check-off to continue. Why does the Leader of the House not stand up today and tell us that that is one of the Government's concessions?

Also speaking of the Trade Union Bill, Lord Adebowale, a Cross Bencher, said:

"If ever there was evidence that the intention of the Bill is not entirely honourable, it is in the refusal to allow electronic workplace ballots".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 11 January 2016; Vol. 768, c. 63.]

Would it not be utterly hypocritical to campaign for the Tory candidate for Mayor of London, who was elected by Tory Members in an e-ballot, while refusing to allow trade unions to e-ballot their own members?

Will the Government finally back down on their preposterous 50% minimum threshold proposal for strike action? How many MPs would be sitting in this House if we had to get 50% of the electorate? Can the Leader of the House confirm that not a single Conservative MP achieved that? He got just 43%, so by his own logic he should not be here, but, frankly, by his own attendance record at the moment, he is not here anyway.

Going back to that letter that was sent to the Leader of the House, what really fascinates me is that it was leaked not to *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, or *Daily Mail* but to the *Socialist Worker*. What is going on? Is there something the Leader of the House wants to tell us?

Talking of two-facedness, can we have a debate on pork barrel politics? After all, the Government were so terrified of losing their local government allocation yesterday that they bought off their own Members with a special slush fund of £300 million. How on earth did they decide how that money was to be allocated? Did Tory Ministers just sit down with their address books and shout out the postcodes of their friends and relatives and people who went to the black and white ball, while the Local Government Minister notched up £24 million for Surrey, £19 million for hard-up Hampshire, £16 million for Hertfordshire and £9 million each for Buckinghamshire and for the Prime Minister's backyard in Oxfordshire? Why on earth are the five poorest councils in the land, with the toughest circumstances and with multiple levels of deprivation, getting not a single penny of extra money, while the richest are being showered with £5.3 million? It is thoroughly disreputable—it is Robin Hood in reverse.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is clearly incapable of keeping his remarks to five minutes.

May I start by echoing the hon. Gentleman's comments about Harry Harpham? It is always a tragedy when any Member of this House passes away, particularly after such a short time in this House. I am sure I express the sentiments of all hon. Members in sending good wishes to his family.

I, too, extend birthday wishes to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner). I suspect he will not join me, although I hope that the shadow Leader of the House, as a great champion of equalities issues, will in celebrating the 41st anniversary of the first woman party leader in this country—a woman who became one of our greatest Prime Ministers, a great leader of this country. I am sure he would want to celebrate her achievement in demonstrating that the Conservative party is the one that creates opportunity for all.

As we heard yesterday at Prime Minister's questions, there is no doubt about the winner of this week's quote of the week award:

"Oh dear oh dear omg oh dear oh dear need to go rest in a darkened room".

The surprising thing is that that tweet from the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) was not about her party leader's stunning success in launching his local election campaign 2016 in Nottingham, a city which this year has no local elections. Of course her comments came in the wake of her party being briefed on progress in its defence review. The party was told that Trident would soon be as obsolete as Spitfire because of a new generation of demon underwater drones that no defence specialist has ever heard of. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, indeed. This is the madness that has now engulfed the Labour party. And the hon. Gentleman still thinks he has any credibility sitting in the shadow Cabinet.

I am pleased to have been able to confirm that the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill will receive its Second Reading on 22 February. I place on record my thanks and congratulations to all those who have been involved in the negotiations leading to the publication of the Bill. I am also grateful for the constructive discussions that have taken place between the Government and Opposition parties about the Bill.

The only rather surprising thing is that when the shadow Leader of the House started jumping up and down last week about the Second Reading on 22 February, no one on his side had apparently bothered to tell him that all those discussions were happening. But we know that the hon. Gentleman is not much in the loop with his party these days anyway. At these sessions he asks for debate after debate, but when I give him and his colleagues an Opposition day and they pick their subject, it is virtually never on the subjects he says are important. He has asked for various things this morning. I have given him a new Opposition day, but I bet his party still does not listen to him.

It has not been a great week for the hon. Gentleman. He managed to turn an important debate about domestic violence into one about whether Welsh rugby fans should sing the Tom Jones song "Delilah" at the start of matches. He ended up in a spat with the songwriter, who said that the hon. Gentleman did not even know what the song was about. He may love the sound of his own voice, but right now it is not unusual to find that no one is listening to him.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): The roads around Glossop in my constituency have been gridlocked this week owing to the closure of Long Lane in Charlesworth. It is a short country road used as a shortcut. The congestion was so bad that a child who was taken ill on her way to school had to wait 20 minutes for an ambulance to get through. A road is proposed in our road building programme, but may we have an urgent debate about when and which is the quickest way we can get this overdue bypass built? The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) talks about out-ers; my constituents would like to get out of Glossop to get to work.

Chris Grayling: I congratulate my hon. Friend, who has been an assiduous campaigner on these issues. I know that the Department is considering road improvements

in his area and has plans in development. I also know that he has an Adjournment debate planned for the week after next, when I know he will put his points across to the Minister with his customary effectiveness.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I too thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for the week after next? We on the Scottish National party Benches also express our condolences to the family of Harry Harpham. Obviously, we also wish the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) a happy 84th birthday. We might have had a bit of a difference with him initially about sharing the Front Bench, but we could not have a finer Member of Parliament to share it with.

We may be approaching Valentine's day, but there is not much love coming from the Leader of the House. This morning, we saw the report on English votes for English laws from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee—and what a report it was. I hope we will start to see the death knell of the absurdity that is EVEL. It is over-complicated and ad hoc, it lacks transparency, and it is incompatible with Barnett. Those are not the words of the Scottish National party, although I would be proud of every one of them; they are the words of a Select Committee of this House with a Conservative Chair and a Conservative majority. Can we not just conclude that this dog's breakfast is not fit for purpose? It commands no support beyond the ranks of the Conservative party, and it is deeply divisive. Let us go back to equality—equality of membership of this House—and not have division by nationality or geographic location of constituency. We have tried that. It has failed. Let us now move on.

One striking anomaly in this mess is that we still have to contend with Barnett consequentials. We all remember what the Leader of the House said: this is nothing to do with legislation, and there is no such thing as Barnett consequentials—a bit like the Easter bunny, I suppose. That is what he said: Barnett consequentials would be found in the consolidated spending Departments' estimates process, but there is no difference in the way we are debating estimates—it is business as usual. Will he tell us, then, how we are supposed to examine the Barnett consequentials when the Speaker is invited to disregard it in English-only certification, and we cannot find it in anything to do with the estimates? Will he tell us where we can have these debates, and if necessary Divisions, on Barnett consequentials, because we cannot do that at all just now?

Everybody is working extremely hard to get a deal on the fiscal framework, and the Leader of the House will know of and appreciate their efforts. I hope the Scottish Affairs Committee report will help to find a solution to these difficult and fragile conversations. However, there does seem to be a real distance to go in achieving a coming together of minds on the “no detriment” principle. Will the Leader of the House tell us what happens if no agreement is reached? What would happen to the Scotland Bill if the two Governments reached no agreement on the fiscal framework? Can he categorically rule out this Government imposing a deal and a solution on the Scottish Parliament?

Last week, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis)—I am glad he is in his place—asked the Leader of the House when we could expect the Trident maingate decision, and we got the usual response from

the Leader of the House that it would be sometime. I really hope that he—I hope he will rule this out—is not using the chaos and crisis in the Labour party on this issue to play games on something so important. I hope he will bring this critical decision to the House, regardless of the mess the Labour party is in, so that the House can properly debate it and vote on it.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman was right to echo the birthday wishes to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner). We do look back nostalgically to last summer—to those mornings when the Scottish nationalists and the more Union-focused members of the Labour party rushed for the same seats. They then reached a peace agreement and an accommodation, and it seems as though happiness has reigned on those Benches ever since.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) asked about English votes. I have to say that the English votes process has bedded down pretty well in this House. I do not accept what he says about the changes we have put in place: they were set out in detail in the Conservative manifesto, and they are the right thing to do. At the moment, it is still the case that the hon. Gentleman's responsibilities are very different from mine. I have a duty to represent my constituents on issues such as education and health; in his constituency, it is a Member of the Scottish Parliament who deals with those issues. It is therefore only right and proper that we have a settlement that reflects the reality of devolution and gives the English a fair say in what happens as well.

On the estimates debate, I have always regarded the hon. Gentleman as an influential Member of this House. However, the topics for the estimates debate are picked by the Liaison Committee. As a Committee Chair himself, he is a member of the Liaison Committee, so he is in a most effective position to secure the debates on estimates that he wants. Knowing how influential he can be, I cannot understand what went wrong. Why did he not get the debates he wanted? He needs to go back to his colleagues on the Committee and try to do better next time.

On the fiscal framework, the hon. Gentleman asked what happens if it does not work. Well, I am afraid that I am not going to accept the concept of failure. We will reach an agreement. It is in his party's interest to do the right thing for Scotland and in our party's interest to do the right thing for Scotland, and I am sure that we will.

On Trident, we will bring forward the motion for debate in due course. In the meantime, I think we are all enjoying the spectacle of the utter chaos on the Labour Benches. Surely not even those Front Benchers who are doggedly determined to hold on to their jobs could avoid the reality that they are now a total shambles.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): While the world focuses on the crisis in Syria, it is all too easy to overlook the unfolding crisis in Africa. The drought in Ethiopia is putting at risk over 10 million people who are in desperate need of food aid. The Government have responded, but much more needs to be done. Can the House consider this matter as a matter of urgency? Given that we are in recess next week, will my right hon. Friend bring it to the attention of the Secretary of State for International Development to see what urgent relief can be brought to those people?

Chris Grayling: I think we would all regard the current situation in Ethiopia as enormously distressing. I can assure my hon. Friend that discussions about this have already taken place within Government. The Government are already providing more than £100 million of aid to address this challenge, and we will continue to work with international agencies to do everything we can to alleviate what is potentially a dreadful humanitarian crisis.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House make time to debate the Government's manifesto commitment to install smart meters in every household by 2020? This important move will help to end the pre-pay rip-off if the customers affected are prioritised in the smart meter roll-out.

Chris Grayling: This is a focus of the Government, as are broader changes to try to ensure that consumers get a better deal. We will make more information about this available in the months ahead. I shall make sure that the hon. Lady's concerns are passed to the relevant Minister. She may also want to bring the matter to the Floor of the House through the Backbench Business Committee or an Adjournment debate.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): We are going absolutely over the top with the European debate at the moment. The only place that can make a decision to stop this is the House of Commons. May we have a debate in Government time so that all Members across the House can have a say on the EU referendum before it takes on a life of its own and we start to get more and more innuendos on the front pages of the press? Will the Government please make two to three days available so that Members can say what they really want?

Chris Grayling: First, I congratulate my hon. Friend on the role he has taken up in the Council of Europe on behalf of this country. This issue is enormously important. Of course, as I said earlier, we will be making time available for a debate. He is right that the debate that takes place both in this House and in this country needs to be a measured one that is based on facts and information. With all the talk about "project fear" and innuendo, we have to table information and make arguments in a measured way so that the public can make an informed decision before they vote in the summer, or whenever it is.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Backbench Business Committee was aware that there was a possibility of getting some time on Tuesday 23 February, and we have a number of debates that we would possibly like to table for then. However, it is now only two sitting days away and we have not yet had an undertaking that there will be guaranteed time for such debates. We have an application for a debate on the serious issue of gangs and serious youth violence, but we would be reticent to table it unless we were guaranteed that it would get a good airing. We also have two debates that are time-sensitive for which we would like notification on tabling: one on Welsh affairs, which we would like to have as close as possible to St David's day on 1 March; and one on International Women's Day, which we would like to have as close as possible to 8 March. May I have some undertakings from the Leader of the House on this?

Chris Grayling: I am very much aware of the requests for the last two debates. We are discussing that and will seek to find the best way of making sure it can happen.

As for the business on Tuesday week, there should be plenty of time available. We have consideration of two sets of Lords amendments, but I am confident that there would be time for a debate to take place on that day. Looking back at the experience of the past few weeks, it has tended to work okay, but I continue to keep the matter under review.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Today, the report of the Joint Committee on the Draft Investigatory Powers Bill was published, and the Intelligence and Security Committee published a report on the Bill earlier this week. There is a lot of public interest in the matter. Will the Leader of the House ensure that sufficient parliamentary time is allotted to consideration of what the Prime Minister has described as the "most important" Bill of this Parliament, so that the matter can be properly explored and debated?

Chris Grayling: I express the Government's thanks to all who have been involved in scrutinising the draft Bill. My hon. Friend is right to say that the House must have appropriate time to scrutinise and debate the legislation. It will come before the House shortly, and we want to make sure that people have the opportunity to deal fully with the issues that it contains.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): The Prime Minister makes great play of the fact that as part of his European negotiations, he will strengthen the role of national Parliaments. Is the Leader of the House not therefore a little bit embarrassed about the fact that the debate on European affairs will be after the Prime Minister has negotiated, and that the Government have not given Parliament a proper day's debate to consider what the Prime Minister should negotiate on?

Chris Grayling: I do not think that anyone in the House has been short of opportunities in recent months to make their views on the matter known. We have had extended statements and extended opportunities for questions. As the Prime Minister has conducted the negotiations, I do not think that he has been under any illusion about the different views that exist in this House.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I know that the Leader of the House will not tell us today the date of the forthcoming debate and vote on the Trident Successor submarines, but will he at least tell the House whether the Government have made up their mind to hold that debate soon, or whether they are determined to spin things out until the Labour party conference in October?

Chris Grayling: As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear yesterday, he will bring forward the matter for debate at an appropriate moment. In the meantime, perhaps we can have a debate on where the mysterious underwater drones that will render Trident redundant will come from.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Mr Islam al-Beheiry is an Egyptian television presenter and researcher who hosted a religious talk show. In June 2015, he was convicted of contempt of religion under article 98 of the penal code and sentenced to five years in prison with hard labour. On 2 February 2016, a court upheld his sentence. The TV show that he hosted was a way to debate Islamic interpretations, and that comes under

freedom of religion or belief. Egypt has signed the international covenant on civil and political rights, so by upholding al-Beheiry's sentence the country has violated its legal obligations to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement on the diplomatic steps that the Government have taken to call for the release of Islam al-Beheiry?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I will make sure that his concerns are drawn to the Foreign Secretary's attention. The Foreign Secretary will be before the House on Tuesday week, when the hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to put that question to him.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Few things upset my constituents more than the potential impact of new housing development on their doctors' surgeries, schools and local infrastructure. The Minister for Housing and Planning emphasised during proceedings on the Housing and Planning Bill the importance of local councils giving due consideration to impacts on infrastructure. Will the Leader of the House secure a written statement from the Housing and Planning Minister to give local councils proper guidance on how to apply that principle?

Chris Grayling: That is an important point. We need more housing in this country, but it is essential that the resources are made available through development schemes and smart local planning to establish the appropriate infrastructure. I will make sure that Ministers are aware of the concerns that my hon. Friend has raised.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): In the '70s and '80s, at least eight young boys in my constituency were sexually abused in homes in north Wales. Lady Macur's report has been on Ministers' desks for at least the last two months. We understand that some of it may be redacted. If the report is truly independent, why are the Government sitting on it?

Chris Grayling: I do not know the reasons for the timing of the report, which I was instrumental in setting up when I was Justice Secretary. I pay tribute to Lady Justice Macur, who is a distinguished judge and who will have done the job as effectively as possible. I will make sure that the right hon. Lady's concern is passed to my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary. Clearly, we want to do right by the victims.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will be delighted to know that, at 10.15 this morning, my petition to save the hedgehog went live. It can be found at <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/121264>. May I ask my right hon. Friend to urge fellow Members of the House to help gather signatures to ensure that we have a further debate on saving the hedgehog?

Chris Grayling: I am sure everyone in the House today will commend my hon. Friend for his determination to pursue the cause of ensuring the protection of a noble species. I congratulate him on what he is doing. The hedgehog is an integral part of our country's wildlife. *[Interruption.]* Despite what the shadow Leader of the House says, it is a very noble species and a very important part of our national heritage. I commend my hon. Friend for the work he is doing. I have no doubt

whatever that when he comes forward with a successful petition, as I am sure he will, the Petitions Committee will make time available for such a debate.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): My constituent Mr K has received two fixed penalty notices—one for exiting a car park from the wrong exit, and another for parking in a business permit bay—and, as a result, he was told that he had failed the good character requirement for British citizenship. May we have a debate on proportionate decision making in the Home Office?

Chris Grayling: It is difficult for me to comment on the individual case. Clearly, we want people who apply for citizenship to be of good character. However, I accept the hon. Gentleman's point that if the system has gone badly wrong, somebody should do something about it. The Home Secretary will be in the Chamber for oral questions on Monday week and I suggest that the hon. Gentleman puts that question to Ministers, who I am sure will want to take it up on his behalf.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust on the opening of its new dialysis unit in Kettering? This state-of-the-art, first-class, ultra-modern, world-standard kidney dialysis unit is located in Trafalgar Road, Kettering, near the centre of the town. May we have a statement from the Department of Health listing all the new infrastructure investments in our NHS, which will make a world of difference to the patients who need them?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I am sure that this investment was a little bit helped on its way by the effective way in which he represents the town of Kettering. He highlights the very real new investments that are taking place in the national health service—new treatments, new equipment—all as a result of the extra funding we are putting into the national health service. The party now in opposition did not want to do that, and the Labour party in power in Wales is not doing it.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent Coreen McClusker is a single mother of a nine-year-old girl. She suffers from depression, and she has been diagnosed with dyslexia. She has had no benefits money since July, and she is at risk of eviction, having been sanctioned no fewer than five times. She has not been informed of her rights by the Department for Work and Pensions. Will the Leader of the Heath help me to ensure that she gets a full investigation of this issue by Work and Pensions Ministers?

Chris Grayling: It is very difficult for me to comment on the individual case, but if the hon. Lady writes to me with the details, I will make sure that it is passed on to Work and Pensions Ministers so that they can look into it.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): One of the challenges we will face in the coming years is the need to address our skills gap, not least in engineering. May we have a debate on the provision of high-quality careers advice in our schools and colleges?

Chris Grayling: I know that this is a matter of great importance to the Education Secretary and that she is working on it at the moment. My hon. Friend makes an important point, because ensuring a smooth transition from school or college into work is an essential part of securing this country's economic future. One thing we are trying to do to strengthen that is to increase the number of apprenticeships and to make it absolutely clear to young people that the apprenticeship route can be a very powerful and successful way into work.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): May we have Government time for a debate on the consultation by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills on tips and gratuities? The consultation closed at the start of last November, but the Minister for Skills confirmed in a written answer this morning that no Government response is imminent. Just this week, Unite the union has exposed another scandalous practice in which the Melia Hotel International chain appears to take a 15% cut from tips and uses it to top up senior managers' pay, which it describes as standard industry practice. Will the Leader of the House join me in saying that this is totally unacceptable, and urge his colleagues to move from consultation to action?

Chris Grayling: I have always taken the view that if someone is given a tip, either they should keep it or it should be pooled with their fellow members of staff. I know that the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills takes this issue seriously and I will make sure that the specific concerns raised by the hon. Lady are passed to him.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Marsden football club in my constituency, which was established in 1900, is fighting for survival. Many matches have been postponed because of a flooded pitch and the clubhouse has been raided. That comes at the same time as a record TV deal for the premier league and discussions about ticket pricing in the premier league. May we have a debate on finances in football to ensure that not only fans but community football clubs get a good deal?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Local football clubs are an essential part of local communities. That is certainly the case in his constituency. I will certainly make sure that the point he makes is passed to the Sports Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) and those in the club who are working to raise charitable funds for the air ambulance service. That suggests to me that they are a really engaged group of people who are trying to do the right thing for the local community.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Today, the Ministry of Justice will publish a written statement that may close more than 80 courts in Wales and England, including the Crown, magistrates and family courts in Carmarthen. Surely a statement of that magnitude must be made on the Floor of the House so that Ministers are held to account. May we have an oral statement on this issue following the recess?

Chris Grayling: This matter has been under consideration for some time. The Secretary of State for Justice has been here on several occasions and the matter has been discussed and debated in this House. It is right and proper that the Government bring forward their conclusions to end the uncertainty.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The year of the monkey started this week and I hear that this brings out a mischievous streak in people. I am not sure if you are aware, Mr Speaker, but you are a rabbit. Some of your traits are being gentle, elegant, alert, quick and kind. The Leader of the House is a tiger, which is known for being over-indulged, but also for its bravery. Well, one has to be brave to go up against someone as diligent, dependable and full of strength and determination as our ox, the shadow Leader of the House. Members may or may not know that the Chancellor is a pig—quite literally, he is a pig! I will leave it there and simply ask the Leader of the House to join me in wishing my Chinese community, whose celebrations I will join this weekend, a happy Chinese new year.

Chris Grayling: All of us join the hon. Lady in wishing every member of the Chinese community in this country a very happy and successful Chinese new year. I hope that the celebrations over the next few days go well. I have to say that, on balance, I would rather be a tiger than an ox.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Yesterday from the Vote Office I collected the central Government supply estimates, 2015-16 edition, which, despite running to 700 pages, describes itself as a "booklet". Can the Leader of the House tell me what opportunities I will have, as a Member from Scotland, to debate and amend the specifics in this booklet if I feel that they may have Barnett consequential through EVEL legislation, and what the deadline is for tabling those amendments?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Gentleman knows, that is a matter for the Liaison Committee. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who is sitting next to him, is on the Liaison Committee, so I am the wrong person to ask.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Every day, we see tragic pictures of people fleeing the horror of Aleppo. We see the anxiety building as they are refused entry into Turkey and there is the fear that they will make their way across the Mediterranean into Europe. May we have a whole day's debate on the international crisis facing the world that is flooding out of Syria and on how we can take responsibility for that crisis, which has largely been created by the Assad regime and Russia?

Chris Grayling: We all view what is happening in Aleppo with enormous distress, and we desperately want peace in that country. As the hon. Lady knows, the International Development Secretary addressed that issue in the House at the start of the week, and we will continue to put substantial amounts of aid into Syria and the surrounding areas. She will know that the recent Syria conference in London raised more money in one day than any previous event of its kind, and I assure her that as far as is possible, this country will do everything

it can to facilitate peace in Syria, the reconstruction of that country, and the opportunity of those people to return to their homes.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House will recall that many of us were critical of the World Health Organisation for its slowness in getting to grips with the Ebola disaster in west Africa. Another crisis is emerging from Brazil, and the Zika virus is spreading throughout South America and beyond. May we have an urgent debate on that virus and the impact that it will have on the rest of the world, and can we urge the WHO, and the great charities that stepped into the breach on Ebola, to act quickly and act now?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Gentleman says, this is a matter of great international concern. The tales of tragedy that are coming from South America, and the impact of the Zika virus on pregnant women and babies, are enormously distressing. The Government will do everything they can to play a role internationally in tackling the crisis, and I have no doubt that my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the International Development Secretary will do everything they can to work with the WHO to ensure an appropriate international response.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): During last week's successful debate on the role of men in preventing violence against women, and the urgent question on the Return of Kings, the Minister answered questions on the delay in ratifying the Istanbul convention on women's rights, and indicated that the Government are keen to do so but need the primary legislation. Is the Leader of the House aware of any plans to bring legislation on that matter before the House before the summer recess? If not, will he ask his right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to make a statement on why that is?

Chris Grayling: The Government will certainly consider that issue. The hon. Gentleman will understand that I cannot make any announcements at this stage about the contents of the upcoming Queen's Speech, which will put forward a programme of legislation that is designed to address the issues faced by this country, but I will ensure that Ministers are aware of his concern.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The British Retail Consortium's crime report for 2014-15 found that there were 41 incidents of violence and abuse per 1,000 retail employees, which is up from 32 incidents per 1,000 employees in the previous year. Three million people work in our retail industry, and I do not need to say how important their work is to our local and national economies. May we have an urgent debate about that unacceptable level of violence against our retail workers?

Chris Grayling: Any violence against a retail worker is unacceptable, as are the levels of violence that the hon. Lady describes. The police have many powers to deal with that and to charge and prosecute people, and I hope they will always view that as an important area in which to take action. The Home Secretary will come before the House on Monday week, so perhaps the hon. Lady will raise the issue with her then.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will probably be aware that within very short order, two separate debates in Westminster Hall have raised serious allegations of the deliberate undervaluing and downgrading of assets, forced bankruptcy and seizure of assets, and further allegations of collusion between banks, receivers and intermediaries. For my constituent, Alun Richards, that involved Alder King and Lloyds, but other banks and intermediaries were involved in cases considered by many other MPs. More than 10 cross-party MPs have written to the Chair of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee to ask him to investigate the matter urgently, and I have written to the director of the Serious Fraud Office to ask for a meeting. Is it time for a debate on the Floor of the House on that matter, and for the Serious Fraud Office to investigate those serious allegations?

Chris Grayling: I am not aware of the individual cases that the hon. Gentleman raises, but this is a serious matter and I hope that he will successfully secure an investigation from the Committee, which should respond to substantial and widespread concerns raised by Members. I will ensure that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is aware of the matter.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): When can we debate the warning given by a senior Japanese industrialist to the Foreign Secretary that the continuing financial fiasco of Hinkley Point is damaging the reputation of Britain internationally, and threatening further investment? Can we not recognise that the problems at Hinkley Point are terminal, and change to the practical technology of tidal power which is clean, British, free and eternal?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government's policy is not to put all eggs in one basket. We have probably done more than any previous Government in pursuing renewable energy in this country, be it wind, solar or tidal, but we believe that we need a mix of generation for the future, and that will include nuclear.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I wish to make a similar point to one made by the shadow Leader of the House. Do the Government intend to make a statement or hold a debate in Government time on the contradictory statements they are making on their anti-Trade Union Bill? I am of course referring to the aforementioned letter dated 26 January from the Minister for Skills, which is in stark contrast to the oral answer he provided to me on 2 February, when he said there would be no concessions on facility time and check-off. In the absence of any statement, will the Leader of the House tell us what his answer was to that letter of 26 January? Or is that also the exclusive property of the *Socialist Worker* newspaper?

Chris Grayling: These matters will be and are being debated in the other place, and they will be debated in this House again. Honourable Members will have to wait until those moments to discuss and debate them.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): If I can show I am related to the Prime Minister, will I get money for my libraries and Sure Start centres in Walsall? The shadow Leader of the House is right to say that we need

[Valerie Vaz]

a debate on good governance, because we need to know whether Ministers took into account relevant considerations and we need to know the reasons for the decisions for that settlement.

Chris Grayling: In a society that is free and able to express individual views, none of us seeks to gag our relatives, even when they disagree with us.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): May we have a debate about the operation of the child maintenance regulations? I have a constituent with a very difficult case, whose 17-year-old daughter has moved out of the family home into a third party adult property, against the will of the family. They have now received a claim for child maintenance from that third party. This does not seem to be within the spirit of the law, which is surely to ensure that children continue to be supported in the event of family breakdown.

Chris Grayling: This is an immensely complex area, and most of us who have been in this House for a long time will have had extensive experience of it, and frustrations and difficulties with it. Of course we all seek to bring individual cases to the Department and to the relevant authorities, and we will continue to do so. I am confident that Ministers will do their best to ensure that the regime in place will deal with the challenges and operational difficulties faced in the tragic situations around family breakdown.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On 21 January, I enlisted the help of the Leader of the House to arrange the meeting that the Prime Minister had promised with my constituent Mike and Tina Trowhill in order to discuss the national baby ashes scandal. The Leader of the House said he would come back to me, but I have not heard anything. I also asked the Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice, the hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage)

on 26 January whether she would help me, but I have not heard from her either. Politicians need to keep their promises and I hope I will get that meeting with the Prime Minister, which he promised to my constituents.

Chris Grayling: I checked on this and the hon. Lady has perhaps misinterpreted the wording of the Prime Minister's response, but I have tried to ensure that she receives a ministerial meeting. If that has not come through yet, I will follow it up today.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The floods in York were devastating for so many because so many could not afford any insurance. They need every bit of help they can get, yet the Government still have not applied for the EU solidarity fund. May we have an urgent statement on why that has not happened and on what progress is being made?

Chris Grayling: The Government's approach has been to try get finance to those who need it quickly and not to worry about complicated bidding processes, so that we ensure we provide help immediately to those who need it. If people look at the amounts of money that have been provided to the areas affected, they will see that we have done the right thing.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Last Saturday marked the 126th anniversary of the Llanerch colliery disaster in my constituency, in which 176 men and boys lost their lives in an explosion that devastated the local community. May we have a debate on the sacrifices made by miners, their families and their communities over many generations?

Chris Grayling: There is no doubt that mining communities played a huge role in this country. They provided the energy that kept this country and its economy going for decades. I am glad that in today's world we can provide energy sources from a variety of different routes, which means that we do not perhaps have to subject those who did such sterling work in the past to those conditions today.

Junior Doctors Contracts

11.54 am

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):

Nearly three years ago to the day, the Government first sat down with the British Medical Association to negotiate a new contract for junior doctors. Both sides agreed that the current arrangements, drawn up in 1999, were not fit for purpose and that the system of paying for unsocial hours in particular was unfair. Under the existing contract, doctors can receive the same pay for working quite different amounts of unsocial hours; doctors not working nights can be paid the same as those who do; and if one doctor works just one hour over the maximum shift length, it can trigger a 66% pay rise for all doctors on that rota.

Despite the patent unfairness of the contract, progress in reforming it has been slow, with the BMA walking away from discussions without notice before the general election. Following the election, which the Government won with a clear manifesto commitment to a seven-day NHS, the BMA junior doctors committee refused point blank to discuss reforms, instead choosing to ballot for industrial action. Talks finally started—under the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service process—in November, but since then we have had two damaging strikes, which have resulted in about 6,000 operations being cancelled.

In January, I asked Sir David Dalton, chief executive of Salford Royal, to lead the negotiating team for the Government. Under his outstanding leadership, for which the whole House will be immensely grateful, progress has been made on almost 100 different points of discussion, with agreement secured with the BMA on approximately 90% of them. Sadly, despite this progress and willingness from the Government to be flexible on the crucial issue of Saturday pay, Sir David wrote to me yesterday advising that a negotiated solution was not realistically possible. Along with other senior NHS leaders and supported by NHS Employers, NHS England, NHS Improvement, the NHS Confederation and NHS Providers, Sir David has asked me to end the uncertainty for the service by proceeding with the introduction of a new contract that he and his colleagues consider both safer for patients and fair and reasonable for junior doctors. I have therefore today decided to do that.

Tired doctors risk patient safety, so in the new contract the maximum number of hours that can be worked in one week will be reduced from 91 to 72; the maximum number of consecutive nights doctors can be asked to work will be reduced from seven to four; the maximum number of consecutive long days will be reduced from seven to five; and no doctor will ever be rostered consecutive weekends. Sir David believes that these changes will bring substantial improvements to both patient safety and doctor wellbeing. We will also introduce a new guardian role within every trust. These guardians will have the authority to impose fines for breaches to agreed working hours based on excess hours worked. These fines will be invested in educational resources and facilities for trainees.

The new contract will give additional pay to those working Saturday evenings from 5 pm, nights from 9 pm to 7 am and all day on Sunday, and plain time hours will now be extended from 7 am to 5 pm on Saturdays. However, I said that the Government were willing to be flexible on Saturday premium pay, and we

have been: those working one in four or more Saturdays will receive a pay premium of 30%. That is higher on average than that available to nurses, midwives, paramedics and most other clinical staff, and also higher than that available to fire officers, police officers and those in many other walks of life.

None the less, the changes represent a reduction compared with current rates, but that is necessary to ensure that hospitals can afford additional weekend rostering, and because we do not want take-home pay to go down for junior doctors, after updated modelling, I can tell the House that these changes will allow an increase in basic salary not of 11%, as previously thought, but of 13.5%. Three quarters of doctors will see a take-home pay rise, and no trainee working within contracted hours will have their pay cut.

Our strong preference was always for a negotiated solution. Our door remained open for three years, and we demonstrated time and again our willingness to negotiate with the BMA on the concerns it raised. However, the definition of negotiation is a discussion where both sides demonstrate flexibility and compromise on their original objectives. The BMA ultimately proved unwilling to do this.

In such a situation, any Government must do what is right for both patients and doctors. We have now had eight independent studies in the last five years identifying higher mortality rates at weekends as a key challenge to be addressed. Six of these say staffing levels are a factor that needs to be investigated. Professor Sir Bruce Keogh describes the status quo as

“an avoidable weekend effect which if addressed could save lives”, and has set out the 10 clinical standards necessary to remedy this. Today, we are taking one important step necessary to make this possible.

While I understand that this process has generated considerable dismay amongst junior doctors, I believe that the new contract we are introducing, shaped by Sir David Dalton, and with over 90% of the measures agreed by the BMA through negotiation, is one that in time can command the confidence of both the workforce and their employers. I do believe, however, that the process of negotiation has uncovered some wider and more deep-seated issues relating to junior doctors' morale, wellbeing and quality of life that need to be addressed.

These issues include inflexibility around leave; lack of notice about placements that can be a long way from home; separation from spouses and families; and sometimes inadequate support from employers, professional bodies and senior clinicians. I have therefore asked Professor Dame Sue Bailey, president of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, alongside other senior clinicians, to lead a review into measures outside the contract that can be taken to improve the morale of the junior doctor workforce. Further details of this review will be set out soon.

No Government or Health Secretary could responsibly ignore the evidence that hospital mortality rates are higher at the weekend or the overwhelming consensus that the standard of weekend services is too low, with insufficient senior clinical decision makers. The lessons of Mid Staffs, Morecambe Bay and Basildon in the last decade are that patients suffer when Governments drag their feet on high hospital mortality rates, and this Government are determined that our NHS should offer the safest, highest-quality care in the world.

[Mr Jeremy Hunt]

We have committed an extra £10 billion to the NHS this Parliament, but with that extra funding must come reform to deliver safer services across all seven days. This is not just about changing doctors contracts. We also need better weekend support services such as physiotherapy, pharmacy and diagnostic scans; better seven-day social care services to facilitate weekend discharging; and better primary care access to help tackle avoidable weekend admissions. Today, we are taking a decisive step forward to help deliver our manifesto commitment, and I commend this statement to the House.

12.2 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. It would have been good to have previewed this exchange during the urgent question on Monday, but we all know that the Secretary of State could not be bothered to turn up. You might also think, Mr Speaker, that the Health Secretary would do me the courtesy of responding to the two letters I have sent to him in the last week, but you would be wrong. So much for a seven-day health service! A five-day-a-week Health Secretary would be nice.

This whole dispute could have been handled so differently. The Health Secretary's failure to listen to junior doctors, his deeply dubious misrepresentation of research about care at weekends and his desire to make these contract negotiations into a symbolic fight for delivery of seven-day services has led to a situation that has been unprecedented in my lifetime. Everyone, including the BMA, agrees with the need to reform the current contract, but hardly anyone thinks the need to do that is so urgent that it justifies imposition, and all the chaos that will bring.

The Health Secretary said NHS leaders had asked him to "end the uncertainty", but can he confirm that that means they support "imposing" a new contract? One hospital chief executive, who the Secretary of State claims is supporting him, tweeted this morning:

"I have supported the view that the offer made is reasonable...I have not supported contract imposition".

For the purpose of clarity, can the Secretary of State say categorically that all the NHS leaders whom he mentioned fully support his actions? Can he not see that imposing a new contract that does not enjoy the confidence of junior doctors will destroy morale, which is already at rock bottom? Does he not realise that this decision could lead to a protracted period of industrial action that would be distressing for everyone—patients, doctors, and everyone else who works in or depends on the NHS? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. Let me say this to Members on both sides of the House who are shouting: do it again, and you will not be called. It is as simple as that. If Members cannot exercise the self-restraint to be quiet while the Front Benchers are speaking, they have no business taking part in the exchanges.

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker.

What impact does the Secretary of State honestly think an imposed contract will have on recruitment and retention? Earlier this week, a poll found that nearly 90% of junior doctors would be prepared to leave the NHS if a contract were imposed. How does the Secretary

of State propose to deliver seven-day services with one tenth of the current junior doctor workforce? How can it possibly be right for us to be training junior doctors and the consultants of tomorrow, only to export them en masse to the southern hemisphere? The Secretary of State needs to stop behaving like a recruiting agent for Australian hospitals, and start acting like the Secretary of State for our NHS.

What advice did the Secretary of State take before making this decision? He may not want to respond to my letters, but what does he say to the Royal College of Surgeons, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, all of which have urged him not to impose a contract? What legal advice has he taken about how an imposed contract would work in practice? What employment rights do junior doctors have in this context, and what will happen if they simply refuse to sign?

The Secretary of State has been keen to present a new junior doctors contract as the key that will unlock the delivery of seven-day services, but that is a massive over-simplification, and he knows it. Although research shows that there is a higher mortality rate among patients who are admitted to hospital at weekends, there is absolutely no evidence to show that it is specifically caused by a lack of junior doctors. Will the right hon. Gentleman state, for the record, that he accepts that?

One of the real barriers to more consistent seven-day services is the consultants contract. Until now, at least, the BMA and the Government were making progress in those negotiations. Could not a decision to impose a new junior doctors contract put the consultant negotiations at risk, and make the delivery of seven-day services even harder? Will the Secretary of State also make it clear how the definition of unsocial hours will need to change in other contracts in order for seven-day services to be delivered, and which groups of staff that will apply to?

What we heard from the Secretary of State today could amount to the biggest gamble with patient safety that the House has ever seen. He has failed to win the trust of the very people who keep our hospitals running, and he has failed to convince the public of his grounds for change. Imposing a contract is a sign of failure, and it is about time the Secretary of State realised that.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) has made a number of incorrect statements with which I shall deal with later, but what the country will notice about her response is more straightforward. When we have a seven-day NHS, in a few years' time, people will say that it was obviously necessary and the right thing to do. They will remember that it was not easy to get there, and they will also remember—sadly—the big call that she made today for short-term political advantage to be placed ahead of the long-term interests of patients.

Previous reforming Labour Governments might have done what we are doing today. Let me say to the hon. Lady that she has vulnerable constituents—we all have vulnerable constituents—who need a true seven-day NHS, and those are precisely the people that the NHS should be there for. Sorting this out should not be a party issue; it should be something that unites the whole House, and she will come to regret the line that she has taken today.

Let me address some of the hon. Lady's particular points. She has said today and on other occasions that this has been badly handled. If she wants to know who has handled contract negotiations badly, it was the party that gave consultants the right to opt out from weekend work in 2003 and that gave GPs the right to opt out of out-of-hours care in 2004. Is it difficult to sort out those problems? Yes. Are we going to be lectured by the people who caused them? No, we are not.

The hon. Lady also questioned whether there was support for imposition. Let me just read her exactly what the letter that I got from Sir David Dalton says. He states that, on the basis of the stalemate,

"I therefore advise the government to do whatever it deems necessary to end uncertainty for the service and to make sure that a new contract is in place which is as close as possible to the final position put forward to the BMA yesterday."

And what does Simon Stevens, chief executive of NHS England, say?

"Under these highly regrettable and entirely avoidable circumstances, hospitals are rightly calling for an end to the uncertainty, and the implementation of the compromise package the Dalton team are recommending."

The hon. Lady talked about the impact on morale. Perhaps she would like to look at the hospitals that have implemented seven-day care, including Salford Royal, Northumbria and one or two others. They have some of the highest morale in the NHS, because morale for doctors is higher when they are giving better care for patients. She also says that we should not impose the contract, but what she is actually saying is that if the BMA refuses point blank to negotiate on seven-day care, we should give up looking after and doing the right thing for vulnerable patients. What an extraordinary thing for a Labour shadow Health Secretary to say. She also said that we were conflating the junior doctors contract with seven-day working. Well, let us look at what the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges said in 2012. It said:

"The weekend effect is very likely attributable to deficiencies in care processes linked to the absence of skilled and empowered senior staff".

Most medical royal colleges say that junior doctors with experience qualify as senior staff.

The NHS has made great strides in improving the quality of care. Since I have been Health Secretary, avoidable harm in hospitals has nearly halved, nearly 20% of acute hospitals have been put into a new special measures regime—and we are turning them round—and record numbers of members of the public say that their care is safe and that they are treated with dignity and respect. The seven-day NHS is not just a manifesto commitment; we are doing this because we are willing to fight to make the NHS the safest, highest quality healthcare system in the world. Today we have seen that the Labour party is not prepared to have that fight. Does not this prove to the country that it is the Conservatives who are now the true party of the NHS?

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on taking this clear and correct decision, because it is quite obvious that after three years, the BMA was prepared to let the whole thing drag on with talks and days of action until he either abandoned the seven-day service or gave the junior doctors an enormous pay settlement in order to buy their agreement to do it. In future discussions, will he keep concentrating, as he has, on the essential public interest, which is to meet the rising and remorseless demand

on the service resulting from an ageing population and clinical advance? Will he also use the extra resources that the NHS is getting at the moment to deliver a better service to patients and not allow it to be taken away, as so often happened in the past—including a little more than 10 years ago in 2003—by very large pay claims by the various staff unions, as that would lessen his ability to give us the modern NHS that he is talking about?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. and learned Friend speaks with great wisdom and also great experience. Many Members will remember how, when he was Health Secretary, the BMA put posters of him up all over the country saying "What do you call a man who ignores medical advice?", and there he was, smoking his cigar. I am sure that there have been Labour Health Secretaries who have had similar treatment. He makes an important point, however. Under the new Labour Administration of Tony Blair, huge amounts of extra resources were put into the NHS but, unfortunately, because of the impact of contract changes in 1999, 2003 and 2004, weekend care actually became less effective, not more effective. Now, thanks to the tough decisions we have taken on public spending and turning the economy around, we have been able to give the NHS a funding settlement next year that is the sixth biggest in its entire nearly 70-year history. We are absolutely determined that, if we are putting that extra money into the NHS, it should come with reform that leads to better care for patients. That is the Conservative way, and we will not be deflected from it.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I should like to pick the Secretary of State up on some aspects of his statement. On Monday, I challenged the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer) to step away from the term "weekend deaths". The Freemantle paper does not show that; it shows increased 30-day mortality in people admitted at the weekend, and there is actually a lower mortality rate at weekends. The junior Minister said that the Secretary of State was really careful, but he has made that suggestion twice in his statement today, and I think that that is very misleading.

What should have come from the Freemantle paper and others is an attempt to understand why these things happen. The only study that gives a clear answer and backs up the Francis report is the Bray paper on 103 stroke units, which showed that the single most important factor was the ratio of registered nurses. We should know what the problem is before we try to fix it. The one group of staff that is there, along with the nurses, is the junior doctors. They are not the barrier to achieving the 10 standards.

I welcome the progress that has been made since last November. In a debate in this Chamber in October, the Secretary of State seemed relatively unwilling to go to ACAS, but progress has been made since the negotiations started, and particularly since Sir David Dalton became involved in the past month. I therefore found it incredible to see on the BBC this morning that, having achieved 90% agreement and following a tweet at 4 minutes past 8 saying that we should now get both sides back to the table, the Secretary of State was going to impose the contract.

The problem with the recognition of unsocial hours might increase the difficulty that we already have in recruiting people to the acute specialties: A&E, maternity and acute medicine. They are already struggling, and this

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

might well make things worse. I also still have concerns about the role of the guardian. The problem is that a junior doctor at the bottom of a hierarchy will have to go and complain, and we can imagine how difficult that might be in a hierarchical system and how easily that doctor could be labelled a troublemaker. So there are still things to be dealt with. I welcome the progress that has been made in the last month, but this is absolutely not the time to pour petrol on the fire and then throw in the towel.

Mr Hunt: I welcome the tone of the hon. Lady's comments. I do not agree with everything that she has said, and I shall explain why, but they were immensely more constructive than the comments that we have heard from other Opposition spokesmen. She is right to say that the studies talk about mortality rates for people admitted at weekends. There have been eight studies in the past five years, or 15 since 2010 if we include international studies. She is right to say that we need to look at why we have these problems.

The clinical standards state that when someone is admitted, they should be seen by a senior decision-maker within 14 hours of admission. They will be seen by a doctor before then, but they should be seen by someone senior within 14 hours. The standards also state that vulnerable people should be checked twice a day by a senior doctor. Now, across the seven days of the week, the first of those standards is being met in only one in eight of our hospitals and the second in only one in 20. That is why it is important that junior doctors should be part of the group of people who constitute those senior decision-makers—consultants are also part of it—and that is why contract reform is essential.

The hon. Lady is right to say that this is also about nurse presence, and the terms that we are offering today for junior doctors are better on average than those for the nurses working in the very same hospitals, and better than those for the midwives and the paramedics. That is why Sir David Dalton and many others say that this is a fair and reasonable offer.

With respect to A&E recruitment, the impact of the contract change we are proposing is that people who regularly work nights and weekends will actually see their pay go up, relatively, compared to the current contract. These are the people who are delivering a seven-day NHS and we must support them every step of the way.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I know colleagues across the House will want to join me in thanking junior doctors for the valuable work they do for patients across the NHS. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I hope that they will look very carefully at the improvements in the offer, with a 13.5% increase in the basic rate and the very important safeguard that will discourage over-rostering at weekends by giving them premium rates if they have to work more than, or including, one in four weekends. I hope the BMA will also recognise and welcome the very important appointment of Professor Dame Sue Bailey to lead an inquiry into all the other aspects that lead to discontent with junior doctors. I wonder if the Secretary of State agrees that what we now need is to move forward in a positive spirit that brings this dispute to an end, takes the temperature down and recognises that we all want the same thing: safety for patients.

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for her very constructive comments. She is right. A 13.5% increase in basic pay is very significant, because, unlike overtime and premium pay, it is pensionable. It will help when applying for a mortgage and will mean more money on maternity leave. I think it will be much better for junior doctors.

The review that Dame Sue Bailey is doing, which was much-derided by the Opposition when I mentioned it in my statement, is actually very significant. One of the things that has gone wrong in training is that since the implementation of the European working time directive, we have moved away from the old "firm" system, which would mean that junior doctors were assigned to a consultant, who they would see on a regular basis and who was able to coach them on a continuous basis over weeks and months. That has been lost and many people think that that has led to much lower morale. We want to see what we can do to sort that out.

Finally, I want to echo what my hon. Friend said about going forward in a positive and constructive spirit. When, as a Government, we took the decision to proceed with implementing new contracts, we had the choice of many different routes, because, essentially, we can decide exactly what to choose. We have chosen to implement the contract recommended by NHS chief executives as being fair and reasonable. That is different from our original position. We have moved a considerable distance on most of the major issues, but it is what the NHS thinks is a fair and reasonable contract and we need to move forward.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The Secretary of State, I am sure, has the grace to acknowledge that the application rate for specialty training has fallen since the Government put forward their proposals last year, but does he have the logic to accept that if he gets fewer junior doctors the problem he is trying to solve will only get worse?

Mr Hunt: We now have 10,600 more doctors working in the NHS than we did five years ago and we are investing record amounts going forward. There has been a lot of smoke and mirrors about what is actually in our contract proposals. I hope all trainees and medical students will look at the proposals and see that independent people have looked over them and believe they are fair and reasonable—actually better—for junior doctors, and that we will continue to be able to recruit more doctors into the NHS.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): As one, like myself, gets a bit older—some might say clapped out—one relies on the NHS more and more. People like me—I have just had an operation and might have another coming up—get worried about strikes. I hope the Secretary of State will try, from now on, to build the morale of junior doctors. Surely the NHS is not for the Conservative party, the Labour party, doctors or nurses, but for the people? Why should people like me, who are admitted to hospital on a Saturday, have a greater chance of dying? He has to take on the vested interests and stand up for the people.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, if we look at the change happening in global healthcare, the big movement is towards putting patients in the driving seat of their own healthcare. If we want the NHS to be

the best in the world, we have to be confident that we are giving patients the best care in the world. That is why I completely agree with him and why I said in my statement that there is no reason why this could not be something the whole House can unite behind. What we cannot do, however, is look at eight studies in five years and say that we will act on this just as soon as we can get a consensus in the medical profession. We have been trying to get that consensus now for over three years. There comes a time when you have to say, "Enough is enough" and do the right thing for patients.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I know the Secretary of State does not usually listen to people with a bit of experience, but, as somebody who has spent 40 years dealing with trade disputes and their aftermath, may I ask him how he expects industrial relations to improve when he has imposed a contract, accused the negotiators of lying, and effectively said that the members were fooled by their own negotiators? He has now told us today that he will build into the contract a differential between the antisocial payments paid to these professionals and those paid to other professionals working next to them. That is a recipe for disaster. Will he put in the Library a full list of what he believes are the so-called lies that were told by the leaders of the BMA? Will he explain how he expects to get things back on an even keel, something that was asked for by the Chair of the Health Committee?

Mr Hunt: As someone who I fully concede may have more experience of industrial relation disputes than me, let me just say this: it is very clear that we are able to progress when there is give and take from both sides; when both sides are prepared to negotiate and come to a deal that is in the interests of the service and in the interests of the people working in the service. That was not possible. It is not me who is saying that; that is what Sir David Dalton, a highly respected independent chief executive, said in the letter he wrote to me last night.

Some of the things that the BMA put out about the offer—for example, it put up on its website a pay calculator saying that junior doctors were going to have their pay cut by 30% to 50%—caused a huge amount of upset, anger and dismay, and were completely wrong. I do not think it would be very constructive for me to put in the House of Commons Library a list of all those things, when what I want to try to do is build trust and confidence. The differential between doctors and other workers in hospitals is what the BMA was seeking to protect. It still exists, but we have reduced it from what it was before because we think it is fairer that way and better for junior doctors.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I add to what my long-time comrade, my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said by delving into a bit of history? In 1977, I was knocked off a motorcycle by a careless driver on a Sunday. Because staff were not in the hospital, the wound could not be cleaned until it was x-rayed and because the wound could not be cleaned, I got an infection. This is not just about increased mortality rates; it is about the prolongation and exacerbation of small or routine episodes and injuries. Will the Secretary of State, in his calm and measured way, say again to the House that when we look back on this episode people will be very surprised that it took nearly 40 years—from my accident—to bring about this long-overdue reform?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. He talks about x-rays, which illustrates the point that this is not just about doctor presence but the presence of those who are able to do x-rays, MRI scans, CT scans, get results back from laboratories and so on. A whole suite of things are necessary for seven-day care. He is also right to point out that there are huge savings if we get this right. For example, if someone gets an avoidable pressure ulcer because they have not had the care that they should have received over a weekend, they are likely to have to stay in hospital for over 10 days longer. That will cost the NHS several thousand pounds more and that is why, in the end, this is the right thing to do economically as well as ethically.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): There are huge pressures everywhere in the NHS. For instance, GP out-of-hours services are under an incredible strain and cover is very limited in some parts of the country. What is the Secretary of State doing about those pressures and the additional strain that could be triggered by an exodus of doctors, following the imposition of the doctors' contract? Will he entertain the idea of a commission, as advocated by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and by others on both sides of the House, to find a long-term consensual solution to the growing health and care challenges that we face?

Mr Hunt: The trouble with commissions is that they tend to take rather a long time to come up with their conclusions, and we need to sort out these problems now. That is why the Chancellor promised an extra £3.8 billion for the NHS next year, and why we said that we want 5,000 more GPs working in general practice, which will help out-of-hours services. We have a five-year plan that the NHS has the funding to implement, and that will transform out-of-hospital services. I hope that those developments will address the right hon. Gentleman's concerns.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his patience and resolution in bringing this matter to a conclusion. Does he share the real sadness that so many of us feel that these wonderful young people who come into the health service to be doctors with such high ideals are caught up in this terribly debilitating and damaging dispute? I ask him to reinforce his efforts to engage and speak directly with junior doctors and the medical profession as a whole and not allow the disruptive behaviour of the British Medical Association to destroy the relationship that we need to have with our doctors.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right. There was absolutely no reason to have this dispute, because the things that we are trying to sort out—seven-day care and safer care for patients—are what every doctor wants to happen. Indeed, they choose medicine as a profession from the highest of ethical motives, and we want to support them. I share his sadness that it has come to this, but given that the counter-party in the situation is not willing to budge, we have to take action to remove uncertainty and to do the right for patients and for doctors. I will certainly continue to engage. The new commission headed up by Professor Dame Sue Bailey will also look at wider issues of morale, which will make a big difference.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I must advise the House that, so far, we have got through eight questioners in 14 minutes, which, by the standards of the House operating at its best, is poor, so we need to do better. That means shorter questions and, frankly, rather pithier answers.

Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I had a further email on this subject from a doctor in my constituency this morning. He thanked me for forwarding replies from the Department, although he did say that they were disappointing. He said that the BMA had proposed a contract that met the Government's cost-neutral requirements, but that it had been rejected. Is that true?

Mr Hunt: I will be pithy, Mr Speaker. This is not just about cost-neutrality, but about dealing with weekend care, which is why that proposal was not accepted.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on always having at the forefront patient care and the wellbeing of young doctors? Did it not give the game away when the BMA said that this was a blow against austerity? Will he remind the House how much extra money has gone into the NHS, by contrast to what happened under the Labour party?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am afraid that, regrettably, there are some political elements inside the BMA. The great irony is that, without the austerity measures that those same people opposed in the previous Parliament, we would not have been able to give the NHS its sixth biggest funding increase ever.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): When I watched the Secretary of State on the TV on Sunday, two things struck me: first, he got paler as the letters from junior doctors were read out; and secondly, he made it clear that it was the senior doctors not being present that was the barrier to a full seven-day NHS. Why is it then that he is picking a fight with junior doctors?

Mr Hunt: We need senior decision-makers to be present. They are the most important people when it comes to delivering seven-day care. Most of the medical royal colleges accept that a junior doctor who has had a substantial amount of training does qualify as a senior decision-maker, which is why we need them more.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The BMA has taken the oversubscribed political speciality of spin doctoring to a whole new level. May I express my admiration for the Secretary of State for his ability to keep his cool under the sort of provocation that he has had, and ask how a 13.5% increase in pensionable pay could possibly lead to problems with recruitment and retention?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend speaks with personal knowledge. One of the things that has been wrong with junior doctors' contracts for many years is that basic pay is too low. They therefore feel under huge pressure to boost basic pay by premium working, and that has led to some of the distortions that we see. So, yes, it is a significant increase in basic pay, which will be a very big step forward.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I have spent 30 years in the world of work, representing employees, conducting negotiations and solving disputes. I have seldom seen a sense of grievance so grotesquely mishandled, insulting the intelligence of junior doctors by telling them that they do not understand what is on offer. Does the Secretary of State not feel a sense of shame that his handling of this dispute should have so poisoned relationships with junior doctors, who are the backbone of the national health service?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman can do a lot better than that. We have been willing to negotiate since June. It was not me who refused to sit round the table and talk until December; it was the BMA, which, before even talking to the Government, balloted for industrial action. What totally irresponsible behaviour that is. If Labour were responsible, it would be condemning it as well.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement today and for all the work that he is doing to deliver a truly seven-day-a-week NHS, which we all really want for our constituents. Will he confirm that the BMA, the royal colleges, the Government and the wider NHS are all now agreed on the need to improve weekend care, which, as Professor Sir Bruce Keogh has said, is both a clinical and a moral cause?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a huge amount of support for doing the right thing for patients, which is why it is so extraordinary that the BMA has chosen to defend the indefensible, not to sit round and talk about how we can do this, as any reasonable doctor would have done and—to go back to the earlier question—to put out deeply misleading comments to its own members that have inflamed the situation and made it far worse than it needed to be.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The Royal College of General Practitioners has reacted to the decision to impose the contract by saying that it is shocked and dismayed. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has said that the decision will exacerbate the recruitment and retention issues that the NHS currently faces. Why does the Health Secretary ignore the concerns of those two royal colleges?

Mr Hunt: When those colleges have had a chance to look carefully at our proposal, they will find much that they can commend. For both psychiatrists and GPs, we are putting in a premium to attract more people into those specialties, which will be immensely important both for them and for the NHS.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Will the Secretary of State draw to the shadow Secretary of State's attention the research in the Netherlands that has shown that seven-day working has dramatically cut stillbirth rates—by 6.8% in the Netherlands—and has the potential to have a real impact on survival rates for young babies?

Mr Hunt: I commend my hon. Friend for her campaigning on that issue. She could not be more right. Just before Christmas, a report by Professor Paul Aylin

said that the mortality rates for neonatal children were 7% higher at weekends, which underlines just how important it is to get this right.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On 5 December 2011, the Government tried to cut unsocial hours for “Agenda for Change” staff. At a time when morale right across the NHS is so low, will the Secretary of State guarantee that he will not bring forward cuts, because the reason behind the unsocial hours cut that I mentioned was to introduce seven-day working?

Mr Hunt: We have no plans to do so, but I cannot be drawn any further, except to say that we do have to deliver our manifesto commitments. The specific issues that we have identified with respect to seven-day working relate to consultant and junior doctor presence, and that is what we are focused on putting right.

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the very clear way in which he has kept the House up to date on the progress of all this. It is very important not only that we free up beds in hospitals, most certainly at weekends, but that we should be making much greater use of our pharmacies to deliver better healthcare within the community. Will he explain how that might happen?

Mr Hunt: I believe my right hon. Friend the Minister of State is with the pharmacists now discussing that precise issue. My hon. Friend raises this issue regularly and rightly: pharmacists have a very important part in the future of the NHS.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): On Sunday, I witnessed the seven-day working at a Welsh hospital, where a clinic was held in Nevill Hall for the convenience of patients and to get maximum use of an expensive gamma camera. The Secretary of State constantly denigrates the work of the Welsh health service, but will he pause to congratulate the Welsh and Scottish Governments, who avoided the misery of the strike and will also avoid the poisonous legacy of resentment that he will face from junior doctors?

Mr Hunt: The Welsh and Scottish Governments may have avoided the difficult decision that we are taking in the NHS in England, but the longer they go on avoiding the issue, the longer they will have higher mortality rates at weekends, which we are determined to do something about.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. If we do not have enough junior doctors, patient safety cannot be guaranteed. In his statement, he referred to reducing the number of hours, nights, days and rostered weekends for doctors. Does he believe that that will ensure that there will be no strike? What safeguards are in place for patients, nurses and senior doctors if an agreement cannot be reached?

Mr Hunt: It is because an agreement cannot be reached that we have to take the measures that we are taking today. The bits of the new contract to which the hon. Gentleman draws attention are the bits that will have the biggest impact on the morale of junior doctors, because we are saying that we do not think it is right for hospitals to ask them to work five nights in a row or to

work six or seven long days in a row. We are putting that right in the new contract. That will lead to less tired doctors and better care for patients.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I met a large group of junior doctors in my constituency to discuss the new contract. They were highly professional and totally committed to the NHS, but for the first time some of them were considering working abroad. One of them told me that, although she loved her job, she would never let her daughter train as a junior doctor now. Does that not demonstrate that the low morale—the despair, frankly—and the likely flight of junior doctors as a consequence of imposition is a huge threat to the future of our NHS?

Mr Hunt: The biggest threat to morale for doctors is not being able to deliver the care that they came into the profession to deliver. That is why we are sorting out a proper seven-day NHS, particularly for junior doctors who work in A&E departments at weekends, where they often do not have the support they would get during the week and do not have as many consultants around as there would normally be. That is what we are trying to put right. I appreciate that it is very difficult when the counter-party in the dispute does not want to negotiate, but in the end Governments have to decide what is right for patients and what is right for the service, as well as what is right for doctors.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Hull has traditionally struggled to recruit doctors in specialties such as A&E, general practice and psychiatry. I am concerned about the royal colleges’ warning that the imposition of the contract will have a detrimental effect on staff morale and staff retention in the NHS. Will this not make things even more difficult for areas such as Hull, which struggle to recruit in the first place?

Mr Hunt: We want more doctors and more nurses in the NHS, but in the end, if we are putting extra money in to recruit these extra doctors and nurses, it is fair to the public who are paying for their salaries to have reforms that mean their care gets better. That will apply to the hon. Lady’s constituents in Hull, who want a seven-day NHS, just as my constituents in Surrey do.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Health Secretary repeatedly accuses the BMA of misleading junior doctors, yet 98% of them voted for industrial action. Without exception, every doctor I have spoken to said that the last thing they wanted to do was to go out on strike. Doctors are some of the brightest and most intelligent people we have in our country. Does the right hon. Gentleman really believe that they cannot make up their minds for themselves?

Mr Hunt: It is interesting that when that vote was held, the BMA had not sat down and talked to the Government, despite repeated invitations. I personally met Johann Malawana, the leader of the junior doctors committee, and invited him to talks. Despite those repeated invitations, they refused to talk; they decided to ballot for industrial action. How serious are people about reaching a negotiated settlement if that is what they do?

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State clarify something in his statement for me? He says that “those working one in four Saturdays or more will receive a pay premium of 30%. That is higher on average than that available to nurses, midwives, paramedics and most other clinical staff”. The staff he cites will be employed on bands 4 to 9 under “Agenda for Change” terms and conditions. If they work Saturdays, they receive plain time plus 30% for working then, so can the Secretary of State tell me how he has calculated an average? I do not understand his mathematics.

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that. The contract that we are going to implement gives junior doctors who work more than one in four Saturdays—so one in three Saturdays—a higher premium of 50%, so when taken on average, it is a higher premium for working on a Saturday.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): As has been pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), there were no strikes in Wales yesterday. However, on the point made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), there was an increase of 10% in the budget, equivalent to 135 places for nurse training, which is so critical for cover. That may be what led to a communication that I received from a junior doctor in England who said, “Could we have your Minister for Wales, please?” What does it say about morale in the NHS in England when, in football and rugby parlance, the Minister has lost the confidence of the changing room?

Mr Hunt: I think that is the first time in living memory in this House that a Welsh MP has got up and said that they think things are better in the Welsh NHS. Just look at the waiting times that people face for basic operations on the NHS in Wales—far, far longer than in England. We will take no lectures about how to run the NHS from Labour in Wales.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I represent three fine hospitals and one great medical school, and I spend a lot of time listening to junior doctors and medical students. The Secretary of State talks about the crisis in morale in the NHS among junior doctors. Does he not recognise that his handling of the dispute has done so much to enhance that crisis, and that today’s announcement will make it so much worse?

Mr Hunt: Not at all. The choice I had was to do something about mortality rates at weekends or to duck the issue. Under the Conservatives, we do not duck issues about mortality rates. We do the right thing for patients. After Labour’s record, I should have thought the hon. Gentleman would be a little more circumspect.

Points of Order

12.47 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In an earlier exchange in Energy and Climate Change questions, the Secretary of State said, in response to a question that I posed to her, that large-scale solar is already subsidy-free. I think she may have inadvertently misled the House. As I understand it, under the Government’s banding review, they are proposing a subsidy of £34 per megawatt-hour. How can I get the Secretary of State to correct her statement?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I was not here during DECC questions but, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, Ministers take responsibility for their own statements. He has put the matter on the record.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier in business questions, I raised the case of my constituents, Mike and Tina Trowhill. I had raised the matter in Prime Minister’s questions on 4 November and the Prime Minister had promised a meeting with my constituents. I raised it with the Leader of the House because it is now the middle of February and it has proved very difficult to arrange that meeting. The Leader of the House said that I had misinterpreted the response from the Prime Minister. I have checked *Hansard* for 4 November. I said:

“Will the Prime Minister agree to meet Mike and Tina to discuss why we need national and local inquiries into what happened to baby ashes in such cases?”

His response was:

“I am happy to arrange that meeting.”—[*Official Report*, 4 November 2015; Vol. 601, c. 964.]

I do not understand how I have misinterpreted that and, more to the point, how my constituents, who have now been waiting three months for a meeting with the Prime Minister, could have misinterpreted it? Can you assist me in how I should take the matter forward?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady has already taken the matter forward by putting it on the record. No doubt, the Minister on the Treasury Bench will take it further. Perhaps the hon. Lady will be written to, at least.

Housing Associations and the Right to Buy

SELECT COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): We come now to two Select Committee statements. Mr Clive Betts will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and I will call Mr Clive Betts to respond to those in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Front-Bench Members may take part in questioning. The same procedure will be followed for the second Select Committee statement. I call the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee, Clive Betts.

12.49 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I would like to thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to present our report on housing associations and the right to buy. I would also like to thank Craig Bowdery, our Committee specialist; Professor Christine Whitehead, our specialist adviser; and Professor Ian Cole and his research colleagues at Sheffield Hallam University for their help in producing the report.

There is clearly a housing crisis in this country, so the Committee wanted to look in greater detail at one of the Government's key policies: extending the right to buy to tenants of housing associations. That was a Conservative manifesto commitment, so the Committee did not question whether it should be implemented. As is appropriate for Select Committees, however, we scrutinised how it was being implemented. We also looked at other Government policies, such as the 1% reduction in social rents, pay to stay and starter homes, which will all have an impact on the provision of social housing and on housing associations.

We had a large response to our request for evidence, with more than 175 written submissions, and we heard from a range of witnesses, including housing association chiefs from across England, Scotland and Wales, council leaders and representatives of tenants and mortgage lenders.

Throughout our investigations, we found a great deal of uncertainty—that was a key point—and a lack of detail. The robustness of the funding model for the right to buy is extremely questionable, and we call on the Government to cost the programmes fully as a matter of urgency.

Shortly after our investigations began, a deal to implement the extended right to buy voluntarily was reached between the Government and the National Housing Federation. We recognise that a voluntary deal is a way of delivering a key policy from the Government's manifesto while maintaining the independence of housing associations, and that, in the circumstances, it is the best way forward for both. However, there remains much uncertainty in the wording of the agreement. A minority of associations voted against it, and some abstained, and we do not yet know how the right to buy will be imposed on them and how binding the terms of a voluntary agreement can be.

Another issue is exactly how much discretion each association will have to decline sales. Can they, for example, choose not sell any of their homes in a certain area, or will they sell them on a case-by-case basis? Similarly, what is the appeal process for tenants who are refused the right to buy?

The extended right to buy is designed to increase home ownership and housing supply. We support those aspirations and the principle of giving people the opportunity to own their own home, provided that the homes sold under the right to buy are replaced on a one-for-one basis and that housing continues to be delivered across all tenures to meet the country's housing needs. We feel there are unresolved issues, and we remain concerned that the Government's policies could have a detrimental effect on the provision of accessible and affordable housing across all tenures, particularly on affordable rented homes.

We looked particularly at houses in rural areas, where there is often high demand. Limited land availability means that it can be challenging to build new homes to replace those sold through the right to buy. For our rural communities to thrive, it is important that young people and those on lower incomes can afford to live in them. The terms of the voluntary agreement included the ability of housing associations to offer a portable discount in place of selling a home. Given that rural areas such as national parks can be large, it remains to be seen how that will work in practice.

We are concerned that the extended right to buy could hinder the provision of specialist and supported housing schemes. Homes in such schemes are expensive to build and can be harder to replace, but they provide essential services to those living in them. We also believe that to avoid confusion or possible legal challenges, restrictive covenants on specific sites and properties built using charitable funds should be explicitly exempt from the extended right to buy.

We found that large numbers of homes sold through the statutory right to buy to council tenants had become rental properties in the private sector in a relatively short time. That is a concern because the private rented sector is often more expensive than social housing, and the quality of homes can, in some cases, be lower. Selling much needed social assets at a discount, only for them to become more expensive in the private rented sector, is therefore a significant concern for the Committee.

Measures to restrict homes sold through the right to buy from ending up in the private rented sector need to be explored. We suggest that those might include a provision that any right-to-buy homes resold within 10 years should first be offered to local housing associations or the local council, which could choose to buy them at market price. They might also include a restrictive covenant requiring a minimum period of owner-occupation. Those are matters for exploration.

The Government propose to fund the extended right to buy with the proceeds from the sale of high-value council homes. The definition of "high value" has not yet been announced, and it is long overdue. The precise mechanism by which this policy will be funded contains too many unknowns and unclear definitions. However, we observe that public policies should usually be funded by the Government, rather than through a levy on local authorities. If only those councils that have retained some housing stock are required to make the payment to fund

[*Mr Clive Betts*]

the right-to-buy discounts, the effect on communities, and the financial risk for local authorities, will be greater in some areas than in others. That is another reason for our belief that a national policy should be funded nationally.

We received much evidence on the proposed funding, and we are concerned that the sums do not add up. We cannot be sure that the proceeds from selling council homes will cover the costs of providing right-to-buy discounts, the costs of building replacement council homes and the brownfield regeneration fund. We urge the Government to publish their figures and to clarify the funding mechanism as soon as possible.

The success of the extended right to buy largely depends on the homes that are sold being replaced and on the housing supply being maintained. We appreciate the size of the challenge of building more homes to meet demand, but we seek more details from the Government on how they will meet their objective of achieving at least one-for-one replacement of the homes sold. They must take steps to ensure that the homes built to offset right-to-buy and council home sales meet the needs of local communities and have a tenure mix that reflects local circumstances.

Another policy that could impact on housing associations and the provision of rented housing is the new legal duty on councils to ensure the provision of 200,000 new starter homes across all reasonably sized sites. It is important that homes for affordable rent are also built where the need exists, particularly because starter homes now count towards satisfying the affordable housing allocation in section 106 agreements. Starter homes should not be built at the expense of other forms of tenure; it is vital that homes for affordable rent are built to reflect local needs. To put that in context, about 250,000 housing association rented homes have been built in the last 10 years through section 106 agreements.

Another policy change is that housing associations have been required to adapt to the fact that the Government are reducing social rents by 1% a year for four years. That reduction in housing association's income is significant and could impact on the pastoral services provided. It could also impact on associations' development capacity and the viability of supported housing schemes. It will affect different housing associations in different ways. We welcome the recent announcement that supported housing rents will be exempt from the 1% reduction for a year while the Government review the situation.

Before the 2016 autumn statement, the Government should provide some certainty over rent levels post-2020, to assist long-term business planning and increase investor confidence. We support their efforts to deregulate housing associations, and we argue that giving them the freedom to set their own rent levels is the next logical step.

It is clear that the housing association sector is undergoing a substantial change. We encourage the regulator to adopt a framework that is based on risk, rather than factors such as size, and that recognises the sector's diversity. Regardless of how housing associations might change in future, it is vital that they remain mindful of their social mission and philanthropic purpose.

The Government have ambitious plans to address the severe housing shortage, and they are seeking to do so by prioritising affordable home ownership. None the

less, rented housing at full market rents and sub-market rents will continue to be essential to meet the needs of many in our society and should exist alongside other forms of housing.

Finally, I thank all members of the Committee for working assiduously and collectively to produce this unanimously agreed report.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his statement, and him and his Committee on its report? I was interested in conclusion 96, which says:

“It is important that housing associations which generate surpluses apply them to delivering new housing.”

In his report, the hon. Gentleman highlights the fact that the department has identified

“that the housing association sector had a surplus of £2.4 billion”, which it could make use of. Does he share my concern that there is tremendous scope for more efficiencies in housing associations? Is he as concerned as I am that some chief executives of housing associations receive very large salaries indeed?

Mr Betts: That was an issue the Committee was mindful of. That wording in the report is very clear. Where there are large surpluses, and there are housing shortages to be met, housing associations should look to make sure those surpluses are spent in a way that delivers more homes.

It is also important that housing association boards look at how their resources can be managed to the maximum efficiency. The public sector as a whole has had to have an eye on efficiency in the last few years. The housing associations are deliberately not in the public sector, and the Government have taken steps to deal with that issue. Nevertheless, they receive public funding, and they should make sure they spend that public money as efficiently as possible.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I welcome this unanimous cross-party report, which reinforces criticism and opposition already voiced by Conservative Members and by the Conservative-led Local Government Association about the huge loss of affordable homes in rural and urban areas alike as a result of the Housing and Planning Bill. The other place is set to examine the Bill's provisions on housing associations' right to buy and the forced sale of council homes on 3 March, so what steps will my hon. Friend take to make sure that peers know all about this important report before then?

Mr Betts: I would have thought that making this statement today was a start to that process and give the report some publicity. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be sending messages to his colleagues in the other place where he wants to draw particular aspects to their attention. A key issue is how the right-to-buy scheme should be funded. I think it would be very helpful for their lordships if the Government were to produce the calculations on how the sale of high-value council assets in relation to right-to-buy discounts, the replacement of the sold-off council homes, and the brownfield regeneration fund—which I think we can all support as a very good principle—can all be funded. We need to see the Government's figures given that we had evidence from the Chartered Institute of Housing that

the maximum amount raised from the levy would be about £2.2 billion a year, which would not cover the three costs that need to be covered to meet the Government's intentions.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome the statement from the Chair of the Select Committee, on which I am pleased to serve. I can confirm that this report was, helpfully, agreed on a cross-party basis. I commend him for his diligent work in ensuring that we did come to such an agreement even though it was quite difficult at times. Does he agree that it is important to increase not only the supply but the mixture of tenure? One of the key concerns that the Government have addressed, thanks to an amendment to the Bill, is that social rented homes sold will be replaced on a two-for-one basis. I think that is warmly welcomed. We also need to make sure that the homes that are sold are for owner-occupation and do not end up in the private rented sector market, because that denies people the right to own their own home.

Mr Betts: When a home is bought under the right to buy and the Government then continue with their policy of selling a council home to pay for it, if both those homes could be replaced with properties that meet the needs of those communities, I think everyone would feel a lot more comfortable about the direction of travel. As I understand it, the two-for-one replacement is a London-only commitment at this stage, and it is not precisely clear what the tenure of the two-homes replacement would be. That is one of the unanswered questions. Another is that we do not yet know how the levy raised on councils would be distributed around the country. Presumably the specific requirement for London means that some sort of regional ring-fencing will be in place, but we do not know precisely what that will be until the Government say so.

Yes, there is a concern about homes being bought under the right to buy and then becoming homes in the private rented sector. We can all see why that is. When people have bought their council homes, we see the front doors and front windows appearing in those newly bought homes, and a few years later we go back and probably see the roofs that have not been repaired, indicating that those homes have been passed on to the private rented sector. That is a challenge the Committee identified, and I hope that the Government will work with the National Housing Federation to explore how it might be dealt with.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, thank the Chair of the Select Committee for bringing forward this report. I have always supported the right to buy. This is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, but I still want to ask a question. In Northern Ireland, we have changed the tenancy arrangements such that a tenant has to stay for an extra five years before they can have a right to purchase. Another change is that tenants have no right to buy a bungalow or adapted disabled accommodation

because of constituents' insatiable demand for such housing. Has the Chair given any consideration to those two conditions in Northern Ireland? Did any discussions take place with the Northern Ireland Assembly or with other devolved regional Administrations to gauge their opinion on what they do? That would perhaps allow us to have a uniform set of rules or criteria across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Mr Betts: We had witnesses from England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, so we did look across the board. We did not look specifically at extending the qualifying period for the right to buy, but we did look in some detail at supported housing. We thought that the discount should not be eligible in relation to the right to buy. The problem is that in some cases where a property cannot be sold, a portable discount can be given to another property, but if a person needs supported housing, then saying to them, "You can't buy that house but you can have a portable discount to another supported housing unit somewhere else" does not really add up. We need clarification on that because we were very concerned about the prospect of losing supported housing in this way.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): First, I apologise to the Chairman and members of the Select Committee for not being here earlier; I have been serving on a Bill Committee. I hope they will appreciate that I whizzed down as soon as we finished the sitting.

I thank the Chairman and the entire team who worked on this report, and everybody who gave evidence, for their time and effort. It is a deep report that we will look at with interest. I am sure that members of the Committee and the Chairman himself will appreciate that there may be things that we do not entirely agree with; we have that debate from time to time. Through the voluntary agreement, our policies in the Housing and Planning Bill and our housing policies in general, we have been very clear that we support, and will continue to do all we can to support, the aspiration of home ownership, and the right to buy plays an important part in that. I welcome the time and effort that the Committee put into the report, and look forward to the debates on these issues in the period ahead.

Mr Betts: I would probably be disappointed if the Minister did agree with everything in the report. The Committee members were absolutely at one on this. We support the aspiration of home ownership—how could we not when we are homeowners ourselves? People would look at us askance if we came to a different view. We did not say that we were against the right to buy; rather, we raised a number of fundamental questions about how it could be funded. We would like the Minister to provide in response the information, the evidence and the facts and figures to back up the Government's policy so that we can have a better view as to how it will work in practice.

Future of the Union: English Votes for English Laws

SELECT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Select Committee statement

1.7 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to introduce PACAC's latest report to the House. Our main conclusion is that while there is evidence that the principle behind EVEL commands popular support, we have significant doubts that the current Standing Orders are the right answer or that they represent a sustainable solution to the English question. They may be unlikely to survive the election of a Government who cannot command a double majority of English and UK MPs. The Government should use the remainder of the 12-month period in the run-up to their promised review of the Standing Orders to rethink the issue and to develop proposals that are more comprehensible, more likely to command the confidence of all political parties represented in the House of Commons, and therefore likely to be constitutionally durable.

On complexity, we note with concern the comments of a former Clerk of the House, Sir William McKay, who described the new Standing Orders as

"a forest in which I lose myself".

That former Clerks of the House of Commons—individuals steeped in decades of learning about the law of Parliament and parliamentary procedure—should have difficulty in discerning what these Standing Orders mean should raise serious doubts about them.

It is regrettable that the new Standing Orders have been drafted, like legislation, by Government parliamentary draftsmen. Never again should Standing Orders be drafted by the Government, rather than by our own Clerks. Revisions made to Standing Orders to make them more coherent and transparent should be made by the House, for the House, as a matter of principle.

On sustainability, our report notes the stridency of the opposition to the new Standing Orders from those on the Opposition Benches—all those on the Opposition Benches—which underlines their vulnerability. Only the Conservative party voted in favour of the new arrangements. The Standing Orders therefore face a high risk of being overridden as soon as there is a non-Conservative majority in the House of Commons.

The shadow Leader of the House noted in his evidence to the Committee:

"It is certainly feasible, if not probable"

that a future Labour Administration would revoke the new Standing Orders. That the Standing Orders have attracted such hostility and can be removed on the basis of a simple majority must raise doubts about whether they can ever be regarded as anything more than a temporary expedient. Currently, they cannot be considered to be part of a stable constitutional settlement that will endure.

It is too soon to say what the constitutional implications of the new Standing Orders might be, but we note the difficulties raised by trying to reconcile EVEL with the

continued operation of the Barnett formula. It is increasingly perverse that decisions made about spending in England determine what is spent in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Alternative schemes of territorial funding will have to be examined.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has described the devolution test used for the certification of English only, or English and Welsh-only, issues as "a very simple test." It is difficult to see how a neat, one-size-fits-all test can be applied to a highly complex, political and asymmetrical set of devolution dispensations. We note that it is highly likely that interested parties from inside and outside the House will want to make representations to the Speaker on how he adjudicates this test. We agree with the Procedure Committee that there is a case for the Speaker to establish and publish a procedure for how he would handle such representations.

Above all—this is of most importance—our report points out that the ad hoc approach to change in the constitution of the Union, which dates back only to the devolution reforms initiated by the Labour Government in 1997, and which has treated Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and, indeed, England in different ways at different times, has been characteristic of constitutional reform since the 1990s. The Government must abandon this ad hoc approach and explore a comprehensive approach for the future of relationships between the Westminster Parliament and the component parts of the United Kingdom. That will be the subject of our continuing inquiry into the future of the Union, and of our subsequent reports on the subject. We are pursuing this by developing conversations, in private and in public, with an open mind to build up trust and understanding between all the Parliaments and Assemblies of the United Kingdom and among all political parties. We have had a successful visit to the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff, and we will visit Holyrood in March. We will issue further reports to the House in due course on the progress of those conversations.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The report is most welcome, and I thank the Committee for its efforts. The report makes it clear that EVEL, in its current guise, is not coherent, transparent or sustainable. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we now need the wider constitutional convention that Labour has called for since before the election? Does he agree that the Government should support expert views such as that of the McKay commission, which set out an effective system to replace the current bureaucratic mess? We are willing to work with the Government to find a better system to strengthen English voices in Parliament, but it cannot be right that some Members in this place have a veto when others do not. Does he agree that the Government should heed the report and, during their review of EVEL proceedings, return to the drawing board to find a fairer solution that we can all support?

Mr Jenkin: I agree in part with the hon. Lady, and I am grateful for her remarks. The McKay commission was as unsatisfactory, in many ways, as the present proposals. It is in the nature of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly that English MPs have no say over the laws that they make, so the veto to which she refers is merely a quid pro quo. Interestingly—and I stress this point—the principle behind English votes for English laws seemed to have quite a lot of popular support, even in Scotland,

although that view is controversial and not entirely shared by the Scottish National party member of the Committee. As for the constitutional convention, we have not taken evidence on the matter. I do not think that there is an appetite for reopening the entire British constitution to an interminable process that would take years. We need a quicker solution.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and the Committee on the report. It is plain from the report and what he has just told the House that EVEL is yet another step in the endless and unbalanced process of devolution in the UK that has gone on for some time. Does he really believe that we are now within reach of a settlement that has some chance of holding in the next Parliament? Will it be possible to introduce proposals that command universal consent and put this endless constitutional debate finally to bed?

Mr Jenkin: I do not think that we are within reach of such a settlement. I think we are a very long way from such a settlement, such is the chaos inflicted by these piecemeal and bitty reforms. Many of them, such as the Scottish Parliament, we now accept as permanent parts of the constitution, but we are a long way from a common understanding of how everything should be knitted together again to preserve something like the United Kingdom. We are even a long way from agreeing, with an open mind, on the kind of relationship that the four parts of the United Kingdom should have with each other. We are just starting those conversations. We are talking in terms, and with openness, to people of whom we have been implacable opponents. That fresh approach will lead to renewed trust and understanding, on which we might eventually frame a new settlement of some kind, but I think we are a long way from that.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): In the SNP, we have never objected in principle to the concept of English votes for English laws, not least because it is a logical consequence of independence for Scotland. However, the Committee's report confirms, as we have said all along, that the current Standing Order procedure is a guddle, a bürach and, in short, a complete mess. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the system is further complicated by the complete lack of transparency in the estimates process, as confirmed today by the Leader of the House, which effectively means that Scottish MPs will have no real say on how Barnett consequentials play out in Scotland, and therefore the entire system of EVEL must be urgently reviewed?

Mr Jenkin: Our report does not use the kind of language that the hon. Gentleman adopted, and I think that we are in danger of getting trapped in conversations that will not get us anywhere. That is why we are trying to have a different sort of conversation with Members of the SNP, north of the border as well as down here. That is the future direction in which we would go. One problem that he and I will have to wrestle with is the nonsense that the spending of the Holyrood Parliament and the Scottish Executive is determined by what we decide for ourselves in England. The Barnett formula was designed for a different United Kingdom, and it is not fit for purpose for the United Kingdom that we have or for the hon. Gentleman who, if he gets the full fiscal autonomy that he wants, will be deeply out of pocket as we will not be paying anything.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his chairmanship of the Committee. Its consideration of the future of the Union is an extremely useful piece of work. The report sets out some useful background to where we are now, and explains what has led to the imposition of EVEL through Standing Orders. The problem dates back to the West Lothian question, which was well rehearsed but which, the Committee concluded—albeit on a divided vote—was given insufficient attention in 1997 when the legislation was considered. Does my hon. Friend agree that if there is one further lesson we can learn from the report, it is that in all matters constitutional, we should hurry slowly?

Mr Jenkin: In my speech in the Chamber on Second Reading of the Scotland Bill, I said that we might rue the day we passed the legislation. Even the then Prime Minister has rued the day that he passed it. Now is not the time for regrets, however; now is the time to learn from experience. There is some urgency to resolve the very serious anomalies that now exist in our constitutional arrangements—for example, they exploded during the general election, as we remark in our report, and perhaps even determined its outcome—in order to provide stability. We should tread carefully, but with some urgency.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): This is a worthwhile report. It identifies EVEL as a foolish piece of legislation that will, perversely, live up to its acronym and accelerate the process of the break-up of the United Kingdom by putting up barriers between the four countries. It has already created great resentment by creating four classes of MPs.

Does the hon. Gentleman rather regret following the addiction, which has become an incurable one in his party, of blaming Labour Governments for everything that has ever gone wrong? The suggestion is that the Labour Government of 1997 was remiss in not taking account of the West Lothian question—the expression was coined in 1977 by Enoch Powell, after a speech by Tam Dalyell—but no party has tried to come to grips with it. It really is an imaginative rewriting of history, trying to get some kind of retrospective justification, to suggest that it was a live issue in 1997, when it was not. Have we not followed a large number of ad hoc, piecemeal decisions by this House by making another, even more piecemeal, decision?

Mr Jenkin: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, to all members of the Committee who have contributed to the report. It is a pleasure to work with them. I do not entirely share his view that this is a “foolish piece of legislation”, because we do not use the word “foolish” in the report and it is not legislation. We do not blame the Labour Government for everything, but I did just point out that the former Labour Prime Minister has expressed such a regret.

The fundamental point is that we must end this ad hoc approach to constitutional reform. We must take a much more comprehensive approach. I agree with the hon. Gentleman on that point.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I sit on the Procedure Committee, which has done an exhaustive study on this matter, but I am speaking for myself. I must say that my problem with all this—both my hon. Friend and I are romantic Unionists, who think the Union is more important than anything else—is that we

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

are inflaming opinion in Scotland and Wales, but our current arrangements will not change the result of a single part of a single Bill throughout this Parliament, because we have an overall majority. If we do not have an overall majority next time, the other political parties, given that every other political party in the House is dead set against it, will simply cancel the Standing Orders on a wet, rainy afternoon, and no one will care because it would have been on page 20 of the manifesto.

Is not the solution to all this still to try to work towards some form of consensus? Surely it should be possible for those on the two Front Benches to work out something that actually solves this problem, and if it is not possible, we should at least try. Otherwise, what are we doing, apart from inflaming opinion against the Union in Scotland?

Mr Jenkin: I am acutely aware of that. We have argued about this, and I agree with my hon. Friend much more than I used to about the danger of inflaming opinion in Scotland. It has to be said, however, that having produced this report today—I did one interview on “Good Morning Scotland”—there has not been a huge reaction to it. It is a very Westminster village, techie subject, but the problem is that it has the potential to create deep political grievances.

It was a fatal error for the 1997 Parliament to consider this issue too boring for words and to ignore it. We will rue that day. To base a constitutional reform on the complete absence of consensus is extremely dangerous, but that is what we have done with these Standing Orders. That is why I agree with my hon. Friend that we should be working towards some form of consensus. That may be impossible: in putting in place these structures, we may have created a constitutional Gordian knot that cannot now be undone or resolved. In that case, I hope that the conversations we are beginning to open up with all parts of the United Kingdom will lead us towards an altogether different kind of debate about how to settle the future of the four countries that compose the United Kingdom.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): I would contradict the hon. Gentleman because this issue is headline news in Scotland. It is a really big deal and it is newsworthy. Where I agree with him, however, is that he is quite correct to point to the asymmetric nature of devolution. Devolution took decades, and we are not finished forming it yet—I hope there is only one destination that devolution can reach—but these proposals were rushed through extremely quickly and I quite agree that they need to be binned. We must think again about how to make this work, and we must achieve consensus with the Scottish National party. I hope he agrees that if there is an opportunity to sit down and thrash out the proposals, we can do so.

Mr Jenkin: The proposals only become an issue in Scotland if they are misrepresented—but they are capable of being misrepresented, and that is why they are unsatisfactory.

I cannot vote on matters devolved to the Scottish Parliament in relation to the hon. Gentleman’s constituency,

and all this is trying to do is to make sure that there is a measure of restraint on how he votes on the same matters in relation to my constituency. That is perfectly logical. The problem is that what is resolved for Scotland in the form of the Scottish Parliament is resolved for England in a completely different and almost incomprehensible way. The lack of consensus on that leaves us in a very difficult situation.

However, I urge the hon. Gentleman not to go around stirring up a false grievance in his constituency, which would be quite difficult, on the basis that he should somehow be able to vote about schools, hospitals or even tax rates in Harwich, when he cannot vote on those matters in respect of his own constituents. The Scottish Parliament will vary the rate of Scottish income tax; that is not something on which he can vote in this House. These matters are very complicated.

This is my advice to the House. Let us approach this in a different way. Let us have a more frank and open conversation. Perhaps we should have more conversations in private so that we can befriend and learn to trust each other and make progress on that basis.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for his statement, and he and his Committee for their excellent report. Pages 25 to 27 are packed with juicy soundbites. One is:

“It is highly regrettable that the 1997 Parliament voted to proceed with devolution...without proper consideration being given to the well-rehearsed West Lothian Question.”

I say, “Hear, hear” to that. The report goes on to say that

“we have significant doubts that the current Standing Orders are the right answer or that they represent a sustainable solution.”

It also states that it is up to the Government to be “working towards a new and durable constitutional settlement for the United Kingdom”.

He has entitled his report “part one” and I understand that further parts are to follow. How many volumes does he think his Committee will produce? In which volume will he come up with the answer to this thorny question?

Mr Jenkin: I cannot answer either of the last two questions, but I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks and for reading out to the House some of the report. This may be a long journey, but I think we must approach it with an open mind. We must be prepared to think what we thought we would never think. We must be prepared to sit down with people we have implacably opposed in the past. I hope, in that spirit, that the House will accept the report and that it will support the Committee’s work on future inquiries and reports.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it right that the Government should slip out just before the recess a written parliamentary statement about the closure of 86 family courts in England, which will restrict access to justice? Given that there has been so much interest in the House about that, it would have been so much better if the Minister had come to the House and talked to us directly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): The hon. Gentleman has put that point on the record, and I thank him for doing so.

Backbench Business

Equitable Life

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Before I call Bob Blackman to move the motion, I must tell the House that we have two very heavily subscribed Back-Bench debates. In the first debate, we will start with a time limit of five minutes, and in the second one, the limit will be four minutes. With that in mind, I call Bob Blackman.

1.29 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House congratulates the Government on providing a scheme to compensate victims of the Equitable Life scandal; welcomes the Government's acceptance of the Parliamentary Ombudsman's findings in full; notes that the Parliamentary Ombudsman recommended that policyholders should be put back in the position they would have been in had maladministration not occurred; further notes that most victims have only received partial compensation compared to the confirmed losses and that the compensation scheme is now closed to new applicants; and calls on the Government to ensure that the entire existing budget allocated for compensation to date is paid to eligible policyholders and to make a further commitment to provide full compensation for relative losses to all victims of this scandal.

I draw Members' attention to the fact that I am the co-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for justice for Equitable Life policyholders. I share that honour with the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), who regrettably has to be in another debate, otherwise he would have been here. I hope that he will be able to get here and put his point of view before we conclude. The all-party parliamentary group is one of the largest groups in Parliament, if not the largest group, with 195 members drawn from all political parties.

When I was elected in May 2010, I signed only a limited number of pledges. One that I was very happy to sign, having investigated the matter fully, was a pledge to seek justice for Equitable Life policyholders. There is no doubt that this has been an outrageous scandal in respect of the length of time it has lasted and the repeated failure of Governments of all persuasions adequately to compensate people who were the victims of a scam. These were hard-working people who invested their life savings in a pension scheme that they believed was secure.

We all know that when one invests on the stock market or in such schemes, the market can go up or down. The difference between this scam and other such schemes is that Equitable Life went round inducing people to put their life savings into it, promising huge bonuses and payouts. It swept up enormous amounts of money and numbers of people who thought that it was a great scheme. In reality, the scheme could not finance itself. It could never meet the commitments that it had made. That was very dangerous, but the regulator knew that it was going on, as did the Government and the Treasury. They conspired to prevent it becoming public knowledge so that people carried on investing their money and losing money.

To make matters worse, it took not only court action, but the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman to bring to the attention of the public that this was maladministration of the worst kind. The last parliamentary

ombudsman made it clear in her excellent report that Equitable Life policyholders who had suffered a relative loss should be put back in the position they would have been in had they not suffered as a result of this scam. I seek to ensure in this Parliament, as we did in the last, that all Equitable Life policyholders are given the compensation they are due.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): After all the debates, the truth is that 95% of Equitable Life with-profits policyholders have received just 22% of their relative losses. That is the bottom line, is it not? The Government have a responsibility, given the maladministration that clearly happened, to help the many elderly people who have faced such appalling losses.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that clear statement.

There are three sets of policyholders: the pre-1992 trapped annuitants, who were to get not a single penny under the compensation scheme; the with-profits annuitants, who were to get 100% compensation; and the pension holders, who got 22.4% of their relative losses, as my hon. Friend said. The coalition Government set up a compensation scheme, which I was pleased to support. However, it is a scandal that if someone purchased their policy on 31 August 1992, they got nothing, but if they purchased it on 1 September 1992, they got 100%. The rationale was that if the pre-1992 trapped annuitants had looked at the regulated accounts, they could have seen that there was a problem and that it was a scam. The reality is that when people sign up to such schemes, they do not expect to have to do that. I applaud the Government for taking steps, following the legislation, to partly compensate the pre-1992 trapped annuitants.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): My hon. Friend has done great work with the other members of the all-party parliamentary group. I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the fact that, as you know, for a number of reasons I will not be able to stay for the whole debate. Many of my constituents were victims of this scam. Does he agree that when there has been a failure of regulation, as there was in this case, the Government essentially stand behind the regulator, so the moral responsibility ultimately falls on the Government, regardless of party? Although the coalition did something, the financial constraints that enabled it to argue that it was not able to do as much as we would have wished at that time are beginning to ease. Do not decency, honesty and equity demand that we revisit the amount of compensation that is due to these people, who saved and did the right thing, and who, frankly, have been let down by Government agencies as much as by Equitable Life?

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that clear conclusion.

The Government allocated £1.5 billion of compensation to policyholders who had lost money. Some £45 million was then promised and delivered to the pre-1992 trapped annuitants. The Chancellor accepted at the Dispatch Box in November 2010 that the total loss was some £4.1 billion, so the shortfall in compensation is £2.6 billion.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this issue forward for debate in the Chamber. I am sure that,

[Mr Adrian Bailey]

like me, he has received representations from elderly decent people who have done the right thing throughout their life and who invested in Equitable Life in order, they thought, that they had a secure pension in the long term. The Government need to foster a savings culture and promote pensions. Does he not think that the failure to compensate people in full for what they did responsibly and in good faith risks undermining the culture that we need to develop for the future of this country?

Bob Blackman: When people make an investment decision, they understand that the market can go up or down. What made this scheme different from other investment choices was that it was a scam, and we should recognise it as such. It was a scandal. There is a moral duty, as hon. Members have said, on the Government to provide full compensation.

What has changed is that the Government set a time limit for the submission of new applications for compensation and said that they had to be in by 31 December 2015. Therefore, we now know the total number of people who are due compensation and can look at how the compensation scheme is operating. I have no doubt that the Minister will outline the progress that has been made in compensating individual policyholders.

I want to draw attention to two elements. A contingency fund of £100 million was deliberately set aside because, at that time, it was not known how many policyholders would need to be compensated. Also, because it has not been possible to trace a large number of policyholders—I think it is about 110,000—there has been an underspend of some £39 million. My first ask of the Minister is that that £139 million goes to the people who have suffered loss. That would not cost the Treasury anything because it has already allocated that money.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. This is an important matter for my constituents, particularly those who worked at the carriage works in York, which has closed, many of whom have suffered from mesothelioma. For some of them, it is too late. Is not expediency an important criterion for the Government to consider so that the survivors have the opportunity to receive compensation?

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention.

Because of the different categories of policyholder, the pre-1992 trapped annuitants—of which 9,000 are still alive—have a minimum age of 88, and most are in their late 80s or early 90s. They are coming to the end of their lives, and it is right that they should seek and receive compensation. It is wrong and reprehensible that some of those individuals who invested their money have had to exist on pension credit, when they expected to have a proper pension scheme. Those 9,000 people should receive the £100 million contingency fund, which would lead roughly—I will leave the Minister to consider the detail—to an average of about £12,000 compensation each. That would be a dramatic change for those individuals who are coming to the end of their lives.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate on a matter that affects a number of my constituents. The Government have cited affordability constraints as a reason for not bridging the gap and providing full compensation. Given that we are now in 2016, and the Chancellor constantly tells us that the economy is in a far stronger position, should we urge him to look again at the issue, so that those who have been so badly affected and who have worked all their lives and invested in a prudent fashion, should be compensated?

Bob Blackman: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Lady. We now know how many victims there are, and what the payouts have been. For with-profit annuitants, 38,135 victims have received £336 million, and those payments will continue over the next few years. However, 890,472 victims have received only 22.4%, and it has been difficult for members of the scheme to understand the basis on which that has been delivered. As has been mentioned, the Government said that they could not afford all that money to pay people out, but people who are in that position will need compensation over several years. They do not need all the money to be put into the scheme upfront; they need it to be spread over a number of years while they are pensioners. As the economy recovers, the Government should supply additional funds, as the Treasury can afford it, to top up the scheme and ensure that those who suffered relative loss receive the full compensation package due.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): My hon. Friend mentions the hundreds of thousands of people who are waiting for full compensation. How much additional money does he feel that the Government will have to come up with over that compensation period?

Bob Blackman: We must find a further £2.6 billion to meet the commitment that all of us signed up to. Those of us who made that pledge said that we wanted full and fair compensation, and the Chancellor made it clear at the Dispatch Box that that was the figure, although he was only able to come up with £1.5 billion at the time. The shortfall is now £2.6 billion. I could go through a whole list of other things that the Chancellor has found money for but that have perhaps less merit than the plight of those elderly people who invested their money.

I do not expect the Minister suddenly to say, “Don’t worry, we’re going to provide all the money. Here it is”—it would be good if he did—but the Chancellor will be at the Dispatch Box on 16 March to deliver the Budget, and I hope that he will announce further compensation for the pre-1992 trapped annuitants so that they receive full compensation. I also hope he will confirm that none of the money that has already been pledged will be clawed back at the end of the scheme, and that further moneys will be made available as and when that is allowed in the Treasury forecast.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all his work on behalf of the victims of the Equitable Life saga. It surprises me that the Treasury has not yet conceded that it will have to spend the £139 million that it has in its coffers on this compensation, as it expected to, rather than take it as a windfall. Surely that is the starting point.

Bob Blackman: I completely agree with my hon. Friend—that is the starting point, but to be fair to the Treasury, we expected and hoped that the agency would be able to trace more victims of the scandal so that they could receive the compensation due. Tracing has taken place over an extended period, and I applaud the Government for using many different means to try to trace those individuals. Some people will have died, some have moved multiple times, and some were in all sorts of pension schemes that then moved on. Some people had small pension policies and may not have seen any point in requesting compensation. However, we now know exactly how many victims there are, and there is no excuse for retaining the contingency or the underspend.

I know that a number of Members wish to speak, so in conclusion, this is all about justice for people who have suffered loss. Indeed, not only did they suffer that loss, but it was avoidable. The Government, the company and the regulator knew that the scam was going on, but it was too big to fail because had it done so, the Government would have had to come up with all the compensation straightaway. This is a matter of justice, and on behalf of the all-party group for justice for equitable life policyholders, I pay tribute to the Equitable Members Action Group for its wonderful work over the years in bringing the plight of those people to light in both the public eye and in Parliament. The fight will go on until every single policyholder who suffered relative loss is receiving full compensation. I invite the Minister to receive comments from across the House, and to do the right thing by people who have suffered injustice.

1.47 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I have been contacted by a number of constituents who were affected by the collapse of Equitable Life. One woman wrote to me to say:

“I myself have lost over £40,000, and have only received £12,000 in compensation. Does this sound fair to you?”

Successive Governments have failed to appreciate the anger that this issue has caused people. A couple who contacted me asked why the Treasury had provided 100% compensation to Icelandic bank depositors, when they had received only a fifth of the sum that they were due and had planned their retirement around. They said:

“In the years prior to our retirement we actually took money from our own savings to top up our pension payments and feel that we have lost twice over. We would have been better off being irresponsible and spent every penny we had and then relied on the State. It seems the government departments are hoping that we will die and the problem will go away.”

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Library briefing points out that there is a ticking time bomb because the beneficiaries of the scheme are elderly. Like my hon. Friend, I have received representations from many constituents. Has she heard the same sentiment that I heard expressed by Brian Watkins, who faces losing up to £40,000 and thinks that the Government are waiting until policyholders die, so that they do not have to deal with them? Surely, we should reassure those people, and the Chancellor should find that money down the back of the sofa.

Melanie Onn: I agree, and our constituents in London and the north of the country clearly share the view that this is a significant issue. People feel seriously let down by the Government's failure to act on this matter in a

timely fashion. I wonder whether the Minister is confident that the current regulations are strong enough to prevent any repeat of what happened. Future investors will be particularly keen to know that they are not going to fall into a similar trap and that if a similar situation were to come to light in the future, the Government would engage with the victims and allow their voices to be heard when trying to devise a solution.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point about victims feeling that their voices are not being heard; that is the message that has come across loud and clear from my constituents, who have also been affected and have found themselves re-mortgaging their homes in their old age just to make ends meet. Does she share my concerns on that?

Melanie Onn: It must be a significant concern to people to find themselves at retirement age without the money they were expecting, having prudently invested. The example I gave was of people taking money out of their savings to top up their pensions, and they would have expected to have some security in their older years.

It is welcome that the Government do step in where regulation has failed; but unfortunately, the delivery is too often lacking. We know about this in Grimsby, because there has also been appalling maladministration of the fishermen's pensions and the fishermen's compensation scheme. Despite it being 30 years since those were due to pay out, a constituent of mine is still waiting and has not received the £3,000 that he is due, simply because of poor record keeping. The Government must understand that when compensation packages are devised, the mechanism to deliver them must be properly put in place and all the calculations must be done appropriately, and where money is promised, it must be delivered. The Government need to ensure that the regulation of these industries is robust and they need to be quicker to compensate those who lose out in the future.

1.51 pm

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): Much of what I wanted to say has been mentioned already by other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who has been a fierce and consistent champion for Equitable Life policyholders. I wish to make very clear my continued support for the Equitable Life policyholders in my constituency, and I believe the best way to do that would be to resurrect some comments I made in a speech in this House almost six years ago. That speech was one of my first after being elected in 2010, and it brings into sharp relief just how long some of us have been trying to get justice for those of our constituents affected by the collapse of Equitable Life, some of whom lost thousands of pounds.

I pointed out the following in that speech:

“Several hon. Members have suggested today that the Equitable Life scandal—and a scandal it was—is complicated, but for me it is actually quite simple. It is about fairness to a group of people who were badly let down by the regulatory failures of their Government. I went into the recent general election supporting a Conservative manifesto that made a promise to Equitable Life policyholders in my constituency. It said:

“We must not let the mis-selling of financial products put people off saving. We will implement the Ombudsman's

[Gordon Henderson]

recommendation to make fair and transparent payments to Equitable Life policy holders, through an independent payment scheme, for their relative loss as a consequence of regulatory failure.”

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): My hon. Friend refers to that manifesto commitment in 2010. May I tell him that in the previous Parliament I helped to set up the all-party group and that we interviewed the then shadow Ministers at that juncture and they promised they would do everything to help the people affected? My constituent, Mr Meinertzhagen has lost half his pension as a result of this terrible tragedy.

Gordon Henderson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing that to my attention.

I continued that speech by saying:

“I wish to take this opportunity to assure policyholders in my constituency that I for one do not intend to go back on that election pledge.

Most people accept that Equitable Life policyholders were the subject of Government maladministration, and that is certainly the view of the ombudsman, Ann Abraham. There is some dispute on all sides, however, about the level of compensation that should be paid to policyholders. Sir John Chadwick’s report established that the relative loss suffered by Equitable Life amounted to between £4 billion and £4.8 billion, and the Financial Secretary, in his statement to the House this July, supported that figure. However, Sir John then used a series of convoluted calculations and speculative assumptions that allowed him to suggest a cap on the total amount of compensation that should be paid. He then went on to reduce that cap figure to just 10% of the relative loss figure that he himself originally calculated.

One of Sir John’s most telling assumptions was that the majority of policyholders would have invested in Equitable Life irrespective of maladministration. That is a very big assumption that cannot be proved or disproved...

Like many Members, I have been in touch with many of those policyholders, and all they want is fairness, because they are fair-minded people. However, they are not stupid people, and they recognise that in these times of austerity even they must shoulder some of the burden needed to bring down the country’s massive debt mountain.”—[*Official Report*, 14 September 2010; Vol. 515, c. 834-35.]

That was my position in 2010 and that position has not changed.

The Government went some way towards compensating those who lost money in the Equitable Life scandal, but that compensation met only part of the loss, so the Equitable Life investors in my constituency received partial justice. In truth, partial justice is no justice at all, and I urge the Government to give people justice now.

1.56 pm

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): It is a somewhat novel experience for me, as a Scottish National party Member, to stand up to support a motion that starts by saying “this House congratulates the Government”.

However, I do so because this matter has been dragging on for a large number of years. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) said that he had been dealing with this for six years. I was first elected to this House in 2001, and I have been talking about it for coming up to 15 years now. This all started when the policyholders won their case before the House of Lords in 2000, so they have been fighting this for 16 years. Many Administrations refused to take it seriously, but I give the coalition Government credit

for finally grasping the nettle and introducing a scheme. We may not agree with all the terms of the scheme, but that Government did do something about this. I see from a note I received from the Library that it appears that, when the scheme closed on 31 December, some 125,000 policyholders had not come forward to submit a claim. That is a large number of people who have not even got any money out of the existing scheme.

It took a report from the ombudsman to get the ball rolling on compensation, and I suppose the reason we are still debating it today was her conclusion:

“the diversion of scarce public resources is a relevant consideration which should be taken into account and weighed in the balance along with other relevant considerations”.

In introducing this debate, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said that the agreed sum outstanding was some £2.5 billion, but it is not entirely straightforward to see exactly what sum is required to put the policyholders back to where they would have been in terms of the relative loss. I have seen figures of up to £5 billion and as low as £500 million in this regard. First, we have to be clear exactly what the figure is. The Government, policyholders and the Equitable Members Action Group must agree what the figure is, because at the moment a large range of figures are being talked about.

The action group has consistently campaigned for full compensation. It is a disgrace that people have got less than a quarter of what they should have received, all because of the Treasury. That is where I disagree slightly with the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), who said that the Government stand behind the regulator, as in this case the Treasury was the regulator for the relevant period during the 1990s. The Government have a direct responsibility for what went wrong in this case, which is why compensation is due. As has been pointed out, many policyholders have received compensation amounting to only about 22% of the losses.

Over the years, like many Members, constituents, many of them elderly, have come to me about this matter. Sadly, time has whittled down their numbers. One constituent, a Mrs Smith from Arbroath, told me the other week that she did everything she should have done. She made provision for what she expected to be a relatively good retirement not reliant on Government funds, but she was robbed of it because of a regulatory failure. Equitable Life was touted as a long-established, steady company. I used to be a practising solicitor and remember it well—not that I ever put any money into it, thankfully—but no one then realised the problem lurking below the surface.

The Government need to grasp the point about what happens from hereon in. We are now asking people to make greater provision for their own pensions, but that will work only if people are confident they will get the pension they are investing in. Equitable Life and other such scandals have greatly undermined that confidence. We need to show that when something goes wrong, through the fault of the Government, compensation will be available to put people in the position they would have been in. If we do not, the danger is that people will not be convinced to invest in the new pension landscape. In the future, the Government might face a much higher bill, because if we do not encourage people to invest in their own pensions, the state will inevitably have to step in. I urge the Minister to reconsider, given the confusion about the figure.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Quite a few people have not turned up whose names were on the list, so I am revising the speech limit up to seven minutes.

2.1 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I can reassure Members that I probably will not take up seven minutes.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) not just on securing this important debate, but on his tireless work on Equitable Life since he entered this place in 2010. This sorry saga has been extremely long running. The hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir) indicated that he had been speaking about Equitable Life in this place for 15 years. I know from EMAG, which has also worked very hard and diligently provided information to Members, that every constituency has roughly 2,000 people affected by Equitable Life. I wanted to highlight that figure.

When I was first elected in 2010, I could reliably expect about 20 or 30 people to contact me about Equitable Life every time it was raised in the House. Ahead of today's debate, the number of constituents who either emailed or came to see me in my surgery dwindled to just half a dozen. I found that interesting but also incredibly sad. There are many reasons why our constituents are no longer contacting us. First and foremost, there is the sad truth that many have passed away, and some are too frail to make contact. They might not have easy access to email. They might be in care homes or reliant on family or carers. For them, it is not simply a case of popping off a quick email. In many ways, however, the saddest cases are those who have simply given up and no longer see the value in contacting us because they do not expect anything to change. Those who were once optimistic they would recover their losses now no longer come to our surgeries because they do not expect to get anything.

Those who remain in contact, however, are forceful in their arguments. One reason they feel so aggrieved is that, as we have heard repeatedly, they acted responsibly and did the right thing—or thought they had. They made provision for their retirement and took out policies they expected to provide them with a comfortable old age and the means to support themselves in their retirement. The Government need to encourage and incentivise people to do exactly that. Equitable Life was a very sorry saga indeed, and one that has left a legacy of suspicion and mistrust. Those who invested bitterly regret their decision, but it has longer tentacles than that. Even today people point to Equitable Life as a reason not to bother saving for their future. We must not allow that to happen.

I do not intend to repeat the comments of the chair of the APPG or other hon. Members. They have already set out the case in the motion. Instead, I want to highlight the difficult circumstances of some of my constituents—good decent people saving for their retirement. For them, a foreign holiday is now out of the question. They are reliant on public transport in an area that has little of it, because they cannot afford to run a car. They expected their retirement to be comfortable; they did not expect still to be working—in many cases, well into

their 70s. Eight years after the ombudsman's report, they remain of the view that the compensation they have received is not adequate.

I know what my hon. Friend the Minister will say: he will highlight the element of the ombudsman's report emphasising that the Government had to recognise fairness to the taxpayer as well policyholders. I do not regard £1.5 billion as “diddy squat”, as one of my constituents described it. It is an enormous sum, and I welcome the Government's efforts to identify and compensate policyholders. My one request is that, for the sake of the Equitable pensioners, he keep the situation under review. I know the scheme is closed, but should public finances permit it, he should consider reopening it.

2.6 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I declare an interest: I invested in Equitable Life while a special adviser. I cheerfully put 17.5% of my salary into an Equitable Life scheme over four years, when I worked for Malcolm Rifkind, and then watched, after I was elected to this place, as the whole Equitable debacle developed over the next decade or so. But at least I was sharing the pain of many of my constituents—well north of 3,000, according to an estimate given to me. The situation that my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) laid out is exactly my experience. To start with, there was a substantial lobby, but that dwindled, although there remain some persistent people—I have their letters—who lost hundreds of thousands of pounds, and they come from all classes of annuitants and policyholders.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I welcome this debate. Does my hon. Friend agree that some people, like him and my father, did at least have time to make up the shortfall, but that others, including many of my constituents, simply did not have that time? Will he mention the fact that some people did not have the opportunity to recover their losses?

Crispin Blunt: My hon. Friend makes an extremely pertinent point.

On being returned in 2010, I found myself a member of the Government and obliged, at one level, to support their decision to limit the compensation to £1.5 billion. At the time, as the Prisons Minister, and the prisons budget being rather less than the total compensation required, I could understand, in the circumstances, why they decided to limit the overall compensation. I resolved, however, to speak in this debate and to re-examine the letters I sent out defending the Government's position, and to re-evaluate my position to see whether it was reasonable.

I was much taken with the comments from the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), the former Chairman of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. This is about confidence in the entire savings system. I can remember Labour's first Budget in 1997 and the consequences—unreported from the Dispatch Box—of IR35, which saw £5 billion cheerfully lifted from investors in pension funds through a tax on dividends. If a £5 billion change can be made in a Budget, announced not in the House of Commons but by press release, we need to be aware that we are dealing with vast numbers when it comes to pension policy. I tell the Economic

[Crispin Blunt]

Secretary, who is replying to the debate, that I believe we are on the verge of a substantial—and, for me, very welcome—change in pension policy. As part of that, we need to acknowledge the point made by the hon. Member for West Bromwich West that this issue is about confidence in the system as well as fundamental fairness to our constituents.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who introduced the debate so effectively, on securing it. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on setting up the all-party group in 2006-07 to reinforce the efforts that were already under way. He attempted to corral those efforts, make them more effective and secure from the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats an undertaking that the issue would be addressed in their manifestos leading into the 2010 election. It is important to highlight that as a simple issue of fairness we need to revisit the sum of £1.5 billion and decide whether or not we have discharged our duty.

Daniel Kawczynski: I just wanted to remind my hon. Friend of my constituent Mr Meinertzhagen, whose living standards are suffering. He is now worried about the consequences for his wife when he departs from this world. It is a real struggle for him, and I hope my hon. Friend will join me in urging the Economic Secretary to find money and set it aside to help these people in desperate situations.

Crispin Blunt: My hon. Friend is entirely right. This is why these artificial divisions—between 31 August 1992 and 1 September 1992—are so unfair on the people involved. My constituent Derek Burton estimates his losses at around £175,000 as a consequence of his having invested before the cut-off date in 1992. That shows the impact on him of the changes that were subsequently made. These are enormous sums of money that have destroyed the planned retirements of thousands of my constituents—an average of 2,000 of every Member's constituents have been affected.

Frankly, we have to grasp this problem and address it. I hope it can be done through the Budget and through further substantial and welcome changes to pension policy, on which the Chancellor absolutely deserves our support. By those means, he can address this lingering unfairness so that people can be given the confidence to invest in pensions again. The lesson I took from my little episode with Equitable Life was that I was simply not going to undertake any extra investment in pension schemes thereafter.

On the figures, I do not know whether we will get an answer from the Minister on whether £2.7 billion remains the sum required to put this right. In trying to do the mathematics, that figure does not seem to work out precisely to me, given that about £1 billion went to 890,472 policyholders who received only 22.4%. Provision should now be made for us to address this issue.

Maladministration was recognised and a clear recommendation was eventually made by Ann Abraham in her report, after various other people had looked at the problem. I have a lingering sympathy for some of the Equitable Life administrators at the time. The original legal challenge to their policies always struck me as

ludicrous. It lost at every conceivable stage until the last one, when there was no possible course of appeal. Provision had not been made, as it should have been, for the possibility that they might lose the action. That was how the maladministration came to be identified in all the reports.

If we—the system—have overseen people not doing their job properly and not protected people who were wholly innocent, including those who were investors before 31 August 1992, it is right that we do our duty—out of fairness to them and to restore confidence in the whole pension system. If people find that they have invested resources other than their house in the biggest single asset they are going to invest in, and encountered circumstances utterly beyond their control, or utterly beyond any reasonable duty of care they would have taken to find out about what they were investing in; and given that Equitable Life was the most reputable pension provider around at that time, we need to put things right. We are now able to afford to compensate these people, and we should be able to do so by continuing significant pension reform to put this right properly and fully.

2.16 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I pay tribute to my predecessor, Stephen O'Brien, who fought tirelessly on behalf of Equitable Life policyholders in my constituency. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this debate.

The Minister may be surprised to know that some of my constituents who have received support from the compensation scheme have recognised the role of the coalition Government and want me to pass on their thanks to that Government for setting up the compensation scheme that has allowed them to salvage a little from the shipwreck that Equitable Life has in effect been. They fully recognise the good intentions of the last coalition Government in attempting to do something, when nothing had been done previously. I want to put that on the record.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the dignified yet forceful way in which EMAG has conducted itself—Mr David Wakerley in my constituency has been involved—shows the realistic view it has taken of what has been done so far, but this in no way addresses the needs of those left behind?

Antoinette Sandbach: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. A constituent of mine who wrote to me has lost 75% of his life savings. He is living on a pittance by contrast with the position he would have been in if Equitable Life had not gone under. There is a broad recognition among Equitable Life policyholders of the stresses and strains that the last coalition Government faced, particularly with a severe economic crisis and a ballooning deficit.

Of course, we are now seeing the impact of the long-term economic plan. When the Government were in difficulties and faced stark choices, I believe that my constituents recognised that and were grateful that the Government were willing to act. Now they can see that circumstances are changing, they are asking the Minister to keep this matter under review, as my hon. Friend the

Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) suggested. We are in a different economic situation from that when this fund was originally set up.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point, as indeed have others. I do not wish to be pedantic, but when we talk about “keeping the matter under review”, we must remember that pension holders are dying, which makes the matter very urgent. My hon. Friend is right to say that the economy has improved to the extent that the Government can afford to pay full compensation, but beyond that I think there is a moral duty. There was regulatory failure, so whether or not they can realistically afford it today or tomorrow, do the Government not have a duty to pay this money?

Antoinette Sandbach: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention, because his point about regulatory failure is absolutely key. Had the regulator been doing its job properly and effectively, we would not be in this situation. That is what lies behind the requests for fairness, justice and equity for the policyholders, who were entitled to believe that proper, appropriate and fit regulation was in place and would keep their policies safe. That is the inherent injustice about which those policyholders are rightly aggrieved. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has said, it is unarguable that the unspent £139 million must be distributed among the pre-1992 policyholders.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I am listening carefully to the hon. Lady’s argument. I think that all Members want to find a constructive, positive approach. It occurs to me that a number of those who are not eligible for compensation might be falling on social security benefits, which, of course, is a cost to the taxpayer. Perhaps this is too difficult for us as individual Members, but I wonder whether it would be possible to do some modelling in order to see whether that accruing cost to the taxpayer would justify changing the compensation profile at this early stage. If we are trying to find ways to find money to improve the compensation offer, perhaps that would be an option.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am sure that the Exchequer Secretary has listened to the hon. Gentleman’s submission and I have no doubt that he will pay due regard to it. The Government have announced that payments to non-profit annuity policyholders who are on pension credit will be doubled, so some action has been taken, but we will not get to the heart of the unfairness until the regulatory failure has been properly addressed. That is what I am arguing for on behalf of my constituents.

We know that there are difficult spending decisions to be made, but these people trusted the system and paid in, in good faith, over many years, only to find that there has been consistent, repeated and unwarranted failure of regulation, and that it was so bad that there was found to be maladministration. In such circumstances, our constituents should not be having to pay the price for the failure of Government.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): My hon. Friend has mentioned difficult spending decisions—which is true, to an extent—and the £139 million, which has already been voted through by Parliament. It would be

completely wrong for that not to be used for additional policyholders, if they can be found. Indeed, if it were not used for that purpose, it would represent a windfall for the Treasury in this fiscal year, which cannot be the right answer. I am as interested as my hon. Friend is to hear the Exchequer Secretary explain the plans for that £139 million.

Antoinette Sandbach: The Exchequer Secretary would be in danger of undoing all the good work the coalition Government did in setting up the fund in the first place if he were seen to be mealy-mouthed, if I may put it that way—I know he most certainly is not—and were to withhold those funds and to seek to bring them back into the Treasury, given the huge injustice suffered by the policyholders.

I am not going to take up much more time, Minister, because I know that you have other Members to hear from. I urge you please to look at the settlement and at what you can do to support those who are in desperate straits, including constituents of mine, and to do the right thing.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the next speaker, may I remind Members that they are speaking through the Chair, so when the hon. Lady says “you”, she is speaking directly to the Chair?

2.24 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this incredibly important debate. In common with Members on both sides of the House, I have received a considerable amount of correspondence on the issue and met people in my surgeries who have been affected by it.

Other Members have mentioned this, but I want to pay particular tribute to the Equitable Members Action Group, which has done extraordinary work to highlight the issue and to represent members who have suffered as a result of the unfairness. The group members are persistent, dogged and effective campaigners and lobbyists. I have had the pleasure of meeting the EMAG chairman who covers the whole of the south-west. He is an extraordinarily effective campaigner.

As many Members have said, this is an issue of fairness. Policyholders who were doing the right thing and saving for the future have found themselves in an awful position. We need to take account of that. They have our sympathy, without doubt. Whatever solution we find, however, we also have to keep it in mind that we need to be fair to taxpayers as a whole. Although £2.6 billion is a considerable amount of money that would plug the gap and ensure that those who lost out are compensated in full for their losses, it does, none the less, place a burden—it is a big ask—on the taxpayer and the Treasury to find it. We need to be aware of that.

I am glad that the Treasury has responded to a number of letters from me. There has been a considerable amount of correspondence back and forth. I am particularly happy to have received a letter from a Treasury Minister, which addresses the need and, indeed, the desire to keep

[*Peter Heaton-Jones*]

the matter under review. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) says, time is short, so I urge the Treasury not only to keep the matter under review, but to bear it in mind that, sadly, the passage of time means that it needs to be addressed quickly. The letter, which I received in response to a letter I wrote on behalf of the chairman of EMAG in the south-west, makes it clear that the Treasury welcomes submissions and ideas for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to include in the Budget statement. I am sure that the Treasury is taking account of all those submissions.

It is worth bearing in mind that the Chancellor has already announced—and I am sure he will announce more—extremely welcome changes and reforms to the pension system. I hope we can look at the issue as part of that wider package of reforms.

Tom Tugendhat: As the Treasury looks at that wider package, may I urge it to ensure that helping the EMAG pensioners is very much part of setting the conditions for other people to save? If people feel that their savings will go unrewarded, that undermines the tone that the Chancellor and the Economic Secretary have rightly set in the various pension arrangements they have made, helping people to realise that pensions are worthwhile and will help them in the future.

Peter Heaton-Jones: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. That is, indeed, the tone of the pension package reforms that the Chancellor and the Treasury have made and will continue to introduce. The Equitable Life policyholders need to be part of that wider package.

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

Crispin Blunt *rose*—

Peter Heaton-Jones: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker).

Mr Robin Walker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) for rising at the same time. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) is absolutely right to say that this is part of a wider package relating not just to pensions, but to the savings culture more generally. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Exchequer Secretary has done fantastic things to support savers, particularly small savers, in his championing of the credit union movement? Any move in the direction of further support for Equitable Life savers would take that legacy further.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I entirely agree. The Government have done a great deal to support savers and to support and encourage those who invest for the future, and have done a great deal for pensioners as well. That is undeniable. I hope that, as part of the package, there will be some movement on the issue, and that it will be kept under careful consideration.

The letter that the Treasury Minister wrote to me in response to the letter that I wrote on behalf of the EMAG representatives in my constituency contains the welcome information that she is open to submissions in relation to the Budget. She also points out that the Parliamentary Ombudsman's report was published in 2008, and that—as

we heard from the hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir)—it is only since the Conservative-led coalition Government came to office in 2010 that any compensation has been paid. It is important to remember that this Government started the ball rolling.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): I appreciate everything that the hon. Gentleman is saying, but there is clearly a difference between banks that have been mis-selling having to pay up for their misdeeds, and the Treasury, regardless of party—and the state, regardless of who are the Government of the day—paying for a regulatory failure. It is not a question of charity from a Government to the individuals who have suffered under Equitable Life. People suffer as a result of a regulatory failure, and therefore it is the Treasury's duty to pay full compensation, just as it is the banks' duty to pay full compensation to those who have suffered as a result of mis-selling.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I take the hon. Gentleman's point, but let me return to a point that I made earlier. He refers to the Treasury paying compensation. The Treasury has no money; it is all taxpayers' money. We need to strike a careful balance. There must be fairness, not only to Equitable Life policyholders but to taxpayers in general, because it is they who will ultimately have to foot the bill for any compensation.

Crispin Blunt: May I briefly make the point that there is a taxpayer interest here? If the savings culture is undermined, the taxpayers' interests are absolutely at stake. We need people to invest in pensions to ensure that they are not dependent on the taxpayer in their retirement.

Peter Heaton-Jones: That is a good point, and I do not think that it is wholly at odds with the point that I was seeking to make.

I shall not delay the House for much longer. We all recognise that Equitable Life policyholders have found themselves in an impossible position—and, again, I pay tribute to all the work that they have done—but it should also be recognised that asking the taxpayer to provide £2.6 billion of compensation, if that is indeed the figure, is a big ask. Let me say to the Minister that that I acknowledge that balance, and I hope that we can find a way along what is a difficult path. I welcome the Treasury's assurance that it will entertain all submissions from Members of Parliament, members of EMAG and members of the public, and will keep the matter under careful consideration so that we can resolve it in a way that will satisfy both Equitable Life policyholders and the interests of the wider taxpayer.

2.33 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for initiating the debate, and I have been asked by my constituents to thank him for everything that he has done on their behalf over the years.

In 2010, when standing for election in North East Derbyshire, I engaged with many Equitable Life policyholders. They were your constituents, Madam Deputy Speaker, and they were full of praise for the work that you had done on their behalf. I added that to a lengthy list of reasons why you were returned and I

was not. Having served my apprenticeship, I put some of those best practices to good effect when I was selected for the constituency of Bexhill and Battle, and was subsequently elected.

All the constituents with whom I have interacted have put their positions with clarity and with understanding of the economic challenges that the Government face in balancing the books. Given that those people had planned to save so sensibly for their own retirement, it is clear that prudence and budget-planning were second nature to them. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who has responded to my numerous items of correspondence on this subject both in person and in writing. Her explanations, and the time that she has given to explaining, have helped me to communicate with my impacted constituents, and for that I am very grateful.

As I interpret a recent letter from the Treasury, prompted by one of my constituents, I understand that the Government have closed the scheme to new compensation claims, and will reallocate unclaimed moneys remaining in the pool to policyholders who are receiving pension credit. I had understood the words

“I am sorry to say that no changes to the funds allocated to the Scheme are planned”

to mean that no new moneys would be added to the pool, and that the £1.5 billion paid out would be the final payment, in the light of the Parliamentary Ombudsman’s direction that the Government should have regard to the impact on public finances. However, one of my more eagle-eyed constituent policyholders has read those words to mean that, while the manner in which the funds within the pool are to be allocated is fixed, that does not expressly rule out the possibility that new funds could be added to the pool, and go towards the £2.6 billion shortfall, during the current term.

I should be grateful if the Minister made it clear whether any further funds for the pool are expressly ruled out for this term, so that I can pass on that clarification to my constituents. It may sound perverse, but many of them would accept that position, because they have reached a stage at which they would like to have absolute finality, and to know whether it makes sense for them to continue funding the fight.

I also want to say something about the stated position for with-profits policyholders. The letter that I received from the Treasury states that they were compensated in full. I understand that the proxy value of the pensions of pre-1995 with-profits policyholders was calculated by virtue of a benchmark from the Prudential, which was considered to be a similar proxy for their own policies. However, I understand that in the case of post-1995 with-profits policyholders, the proxy value was calculated by the benchmarking of not only Prudential, but Scottish Widows. The appropriateness of the latter as a benchmark was disputed by some of my constituents on the grounds that it was a poorly performing policy. Those policyholders dispute the claim that they have received full value, and have drawn distinctions between their own policy and that of the Prudential, and the policy of Scottish Widows. I should like the Minister to tell me whether my understanding is correct. Perhaps he will also comment on why the Scottish Widows policy was seen as a fair benchmark for this exercise, if my contention is indeed along the right lines.

I should add that I empathise hugely with all the policyholders who have been impacted by the losses to their policies. However, I am also conscious that this matter was determined before my election, and that I was elected on a manifesto which promised to deliver a budget surplus. Adding a further £2.6 billion would mean that other constituents of mine would have to provide for it. I have explained that difficult concept in person to my impacted constituents, because I believe in being direct when a resolution is unlikely to be arrived at, and I am indebted to them for the manner in which they have responded to my direct approach.

George Kerevan: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he prefers delivering a budget surplus to delivering justice?

Huw Merriman: I was elected on the basis that there would indeed be a budget surplus. I think that it would be wrong of me to stand up and try to proclaim—this was mentioned earlier—that £2.6 billion could be found down the back of the sofa. If only it were that easy. I also believe in being direct and straight with my constituents, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman thinks that I am doing so now.

I support the Government in their approach to this difficult issue. Let me end by asking the Minister, on behalf of my constituents, whether the funding of the scheme is indeed final for this term, and whether the use of the Scottish Widows policy benchmark was justifiable.

2.39 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to sum up the debate. I warmly thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and those who signed the motion. As has been pointed out, the wide-ranging all-party parliamentary group has 195 members from all parties, which demonstrates the interest hon. Members take in this matter. It was also said in the debate that, in each of our constituencies, there are around about 2,000 Equitable Life policyholders, which shows the scale of the problem we face and why we must take the matter seriously. I am delighted that we are having this debate today.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the outrageous scandal, which is exactly the point. He went on to talk about the perceptions of market risk—markets going up and down—and the promises that were given to Equitable Life policyholders. However, in the main, we are not only talking about promises, because Equitable Life gave guarantees to its policyholders. We ought to reflect on that point, particularly in the light of what he said in the debate about who knew within the company, the regulator and the Government. Ultimately, the Government must stand behind the regulator when there is market failure of the degree that took place with Equitable Life. That is their responsibility.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) spoke at the tail-end of the debate. I say to him that everybody understands that all parties want a balanced budget, but we also have a moral and ethical responsibility to protect the consumer interest. That is what we are talking about today. I ask the Minister to reflect on what was said by the hon. Member for Harrow East and others on looking for those who have pre-1992 annuities and considering what can be done for them.

[*Ian Blackford*]

Two broad themes have been mentioned time and again in the debate: fairness, which was mentioned by the hon. Members for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) and for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones); and regulatory failure, which goes back to the Government's ultimate responsibility, and which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach).

The hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) made the point about the 2,000 members and the fact that all hon. Members are still getting letters from constituents. Many of my SNP colleagues have had them in the past few weeks.

One of the most important points was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Mike Weir) and others. We must have confidence in the financial markets. If we are not going to stand behind the policyholders in this case, that undermines the savings culture that we want. We want people to invest in pensions and know that there is consumer confidence problem. We must tackle that.

I want to put this debate in the context of the good debate we had just a couple of weeks ago on the Financial Conduct Authority. One much-discussed theme was the importance of consumer protection and trust. On the back of scandals such as those involving Equitable Life policyholders, it is clear that many consumers are concerned about whether they can trust the providers of financial services products, whether they can trust the regulatory regime to protect them, and whether the Government will discharge their obligations to protect the consumer interest. The significance of that cannot be overstated.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Given that the regulator was there to protect consumers and that the Government were standing behind the regulator, does my hon. Friend agree that, when that regulator failed to protect the consumer, the Government had a moral obligation to step in and protect policyholders?

Ian Blackford: I strongly agree. I can hear my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) commenting in the background—he made that same point in the debate, as did the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt). There is unity in the House on wanting a savings culture. We want people to retire with decent pensionable income, but we will create that confidence only if we show that we are prepared to stand behind the Equitable Life consumers. They were let down by the company and the regulator, and the Government have that moral and ethical responsibility to step in. That should not be underestimated.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is partly about building intergenerational confidence? We want people to start saving for pensions in their late 20s and their 30s. They need to have confidence that that money will still be there in a pot in future, and that there is a proper system of regulation. This is about building confidence for those who will save in future, and not just about the Equitable Life policyholders who have been affected in this instance.

Ian Blackford: I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman and am happy to associate myself with his comments. It is about creating that long-term stability in the financial services industry and ensuring that we have the right

regulatory regime. We must have the right architecture for both private and public pension provision in this country. I hope all in the House have a shared interest in doing that. That is why the debate is so important, and why the Government must respond in the correct manner. How we deal with the long-running saga of Equitable Life is important in the context of his intervention.

Let us remind ourselves of the background. Equitable Life was a major provider of with-profits pension plans. A minority of policyholders invested in policies that offered a guaranteed annuity rate. That rate was set below the normal historical rates, but towards the end of the 1980s, that “normal” changed. Increasingly, the guaranteed annuity rate was over-generous and ultimately unaffordable to Equitable Life in the long run. In response, Equitable stopped sales and reduced the capital value of the pension pots by reducing discretionary bonuses. Guaranteed annuity rates were thus maintained only because the capital sum was far lower than had been expected.

Ultimately, GAR holders took legal action to stop Equitable from rigging pension payouts and won in the House of Lords in 2000, as my hon. Friend the Member for Angus mentioned in his speech. That judgment increased the financial burden on Equitable by about £1.5 billion, a sum that threatened its solvency. Equitable Life hoped to fill that gap by suspending distributions to policyholders and by selling the business, but it was unable to find a buyer. It ceased all further business and became a closed fund. It also had to reduce policy bonuses, and hence the ongoing pensions of investors. Pensions reductions of up to a third were common. It was a perfect storm.

Policyholders have long tried for compensation. Two ombudsman reports concluded that there had been maladministration and that injustice had been suffered. We should remind ourselves of what was said in the second ombudsman report. The conclusion stated:

“the Government should establish and fund a compensation scheme, with a view to assessing the individual cases of those who have been affected by the events covered in this report and providing appropriate compensation.”

I emphasise “appropriate compensation”.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I want to highlight the case of my constituent, Mary, an ex-machinist, and her husband, an ex-electrician's mate. They worked all their lives contributing to our society and economy for decades and opted to invest a substantial amount of money in a scheme—an Equitable Life scheme. Due to years of negligence by the company and different Governments, the money was snatched away. Sadly, Mary's husband passed away last year and she was given only a small amount of compensation. Her husband is not here to see justice being served. Surely we must act for Mary and other Marys across the UK?

Ian Blackford: I wholly concur with my hon. Friend and her constituent. Other Members have made the point that there is a sense that the Government must act quickly because the policyholders are dying. We have a responsibility to deal with the problem in a timely manner.

I am conscious of time, so I will try to wrap up quickly. The 2008 report also stated that regulation was not implemented properly, meaning

“consistently, fairly, and with proper regard to the interests of those directly affected”.

We understand that that involved previous Governments—the Minister will be pleased to hear that not even I would blame the current Government for this one—but we do have a responsibility to reflect on what has been said and what actions we should take as a consequence.

All the parties involved accepted the ombudsman’s second report and accepted the case for compensation. During the inquiry, EMAG told the ombudsman that it had calculated the loss for those investing after 1990 at £3.2 billion if they remained with Equitable as against £4.6 billion if they had invested elsewhere. The final conclusion from the ombudsman states:

“The government should establish and fund a compensation scheme. The aim of such a scheme would be to put those who have suffered a relative loss back into the position that they would have been in had maladministration not occurred.”

We have all reflected on what the Government did with the £1.5 billion, but it is the issue of fairness that we keep coming back to.

This has already been mentioned, but it is worth stating again that before the 2010 election, the main Equitable Life policyholders’ action group, EMAG, lobbied MPs to seek support for compensation for its members. Perhaps as a result, the 2010 Conservative manifesto included this brief comment:

“We must not let the mis-selling of financial products put people off saving. We will implement the Ombudsman’s recommendation to make fair and transparent payments to Equitable Life policy holders, through an independent payment scheme, for their relative loss as a consequence of regulatory failure.”

It has been said today that the Government could not go beyond the £1.5 billion because of the financial circumstances at the time. Let us take this opportunity today to right that wrong and to plug some of that gap. I appeal to the Government to listen to all the points that have been made across the Chamber today and to do the right thing for the policyholders of Equitable Life.

2.50 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this important debate today and on the articulate way in which he described the events that many of our constituents have faced. He touched on many of the issues that I will highlight in my speech. And of course it is always a pleasure to stand opposite the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds).

I would also like to thank the various Members who have spoken today. I will not go through them one by one as I know we are pushed for time, but there were several emotional contributions that I would like to highlight. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) told the story of the lady in her constituency who lost £40,000 and got only £12,000 back. The hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) said that she had noticed a decline in the number of constituents visiting her to discuss this issue and that, sadly, it was because many of them had either passed away or given up hope.

The fate of Equitable Life and those who invested in it has been debated in this House for more than 15 years by Members on both sides. I commend the work of the Equitable Members Action Group, which I will call EMAG for the sake of expediency. I would also like to thank the many Members of this House who have campaigned tirelessly on behalf of their constituents to ensure that this issue is not kicked into the long grass. It is difficult not to sympathise with the anguish and worry that many of those investors have experienced. Many have seen their nest eggs disintegrate, and they feel cheated. Over the years, it has become clear that, despite all the efforts to review the issue, there is no one universally agreed strategy to compensate them. It has therefore been difficult to establish a course of action that will truly put the matter to bed.

Along with many other Members, I appreciate the action that the Government have taken to compensate those who were disproportionately affected by this sorry affair. However, as we have heard today, concerns remain about the management and assessment of compensation payments. More than 90% of Conservative Members in the last Parliament signed the following pledge:

“I pledge to the voters of this constituency that if I am elected to Parliament at the next general election, I will support and vote for proper compensation for the victims of the Equitable Life scandal and I will support and vote to set up a swift, simple, transparent and fair payment scheme—independent of government, as recommended by the Parliamentary Ombudsman.”

The Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury signed that pledge to provide proper compensation for those affected by the events at Equitable Life. It would be helpful to ascertain whether the Minister feels that the pledge has been fully met today.

The assessment of compensation payments—and the amount allocated by the Government—is not a simple matter. At the time of the second ombudsman’s report, EMAG estimated the losses incurred by policyholders investing after 1990 at £3.2 billion if they remained with Equitable Life and at £4.6 billion if they had invested elsewhere. In comparison, the 2010 Chadwick report assessed the loss at £500 million on the basis of assessing maladministration. There is therefore a clear difference between the principles used to calculate the EMAG estimates and those used to calculate the Chadwick estimates. All those figures are of course different from the £1.5 billion and the subsequent £500 million top-up offered by the Government. EMAG states that, according to its own calculations, the outstanding figure is between £2.6 billion and £2.8 billion.

I should also like to address the administration of the scheme generally. The National Audit Office reported in 2013 that the scheme had faced a number of administrative issues. The NAO appreciated, as do I, that the task of setting up the scheme was a difficult challenge. It was a complex operation undertaken in quite a short period of time. However, it noted that the scheme had significant issues with tracing the identity of some policyholders, as the data provided by Equitable Life were out of date. Following the publication of the findings, the Public Accounts Committee undertook its own report into the administration of the scheme and concluded that the Treasury had

“not used all information available to trace as many policyholders as possible”.

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

In April 2013, the NAO reported that only 35% of payments had been made and the PAC quoted that the Treasury estimated that it may not trace 17% to 20% of policyholders. As of 30 December 2015, the scheme had issued payments to 915,453 policyholders, representing 88% of those eligible—only a slight improvement since the PAC's critical findings. Given that the scheme closed for new claims on 31 December 2015, will the Minister tell us how many of the remaining 12% of eligible policyholders were found? At the time, it was also recommended that the Treasury and National Savings and Investments would

“work with the Equitable Members' Action Group to explore options for utilising data to contact policyholders who have not yet received payment”.

Will the Minister confirm, therefore, that the recommendations of the PAC with regard to that were acted on and that all reasonable steps were taken to contact eligible policyholders?

The NAO and the PAC also found that some policyholders were dissatisfied with the responses to their queries and complaints. They included policyholders receiving duplicate requests for the same information and generic responses in relation to specific queries. Will the Minister outline what steps were taken to ensure that customer service has improved since the reports and that it will remain at an adequate level for those policyholders who are still in receipt of annuity payments from the scheme?

The next concern I wish to raise with the Minister is the amount of money it has cost to administer the payment scheme. National Savings and Investments, an executive agency of the Treasury, was tasked with operating the scheme. It originally outsourced to Siemens, whose contract was then bought by Atos. The PAC expressed concern in 2013 that the Treasury was not achieving value for money in the contract with Atos to deliver the scheme. The contract was based on time and materials, and it is argued that there was a vast amount of waste of taxpayers' money as a result. The total budget for administering the scheme was set at £57 million. In 2013, National Savings and Investments estimated that the cost would go £4 million over budget. Will the Minister confirm whether the payment scheme was delivered on budget, and, if not, by how much it overspent?

Finally, the PAC recommended that the Treasury undertake a lessons-learned exercise, as it felt the failures of previous Government compensation schemes had not been addressed when setting up the Equitable Life payment scheme. The Government accepted that recommendation and confirmed that they would produce two reports: one in November 2013; and a final report, to be shared with the PAC, the NAO and the Major Projects Authority in early 2016. Will the Minister take this opportunity to update the House on the progress of the second lessons-learned report?

On the subject of lessons learned, it is, above all, incumbent on us to ensure that future such scandals do not take place. Will the Minister tell us, therefore, what measures the Government have put in place to stop this happening again? In particular, pension fund providers and their fund managers continue to resist calls for transparency of costs and performance, so are the Government taking any steps to ensure that they inform

pension scheme members of the true costs of investing? What plans do the Government have to review the governance arrangements for pension funds? Will he confirm that governance committees are currently without a fiduciary duty to their members in contract-based pensions and have they given any consideration to changing that?

It is clear that that although some progress has been made to address the anguish and loss caused by this matter, a number of questions remain. I look forward to the Minister's response.

2.59 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): This is an extremely important subject, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing the debate and bringing it to the Floor of the House today. His tireless work and that of other colleagues has been of great importance to many of our constituents. There are many human stories, and we have heard a number of them today from colleagues across the House. I am grateful to have the opportunity both to set out what this Government have done to address this long-standing issue and to set the record straight on some of the background.

Equitable Life has been a very sorry tale, and we all share sympathy for those affected by it. As the motion notes, this Government have taken action to resolve the long-standing issue, which is something that previous Governments failed to do, as noted by my hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones).

Although Equitable Life remains a going concern and continues to trade, its problems in the 1990s and at the turn of the century caused a great many of its policyholders to suffer financial and emotional distress. Many different factors contributed to the losses suffered by policyholders. The ombudsman's 2008 report established the part played by the then Government.

When we came to government, we committed to implement the ombudsman's recommendation that the Government should make payments to Equitable Life policyholders in recognition of the part that was played by the Government at the time. We took swift action, introducing the Equitable Life (Payments) Bill in 2010, with payments starting to be made to policyholders in June 2011, six months after the Bill received Royal Assent.

Mr Charles Walker: My hon. Friend knows that the thrust of this afternoon's debate is a request for additional money to be made available on top of the money that has already been earmarked for compensation to Equitable Life policyholders. Will the Government be able to find additional money?

Damian Hinds: I will have to disappoint my hon. Friend, because the public finances remain in a very difficult state. Although the economy and our public finances have improved compared with where they were, money is still extremely tight.

We established a set of rules for the payments, based on the Government's full acceptance of the parliamentary ombudsman's findings. The scheme was based on the assumption that all policyholders considered the incorrect

regulatory returns when making their investment and would have decided not to invest in Equitable Life had those returns been correct. Obviously, those are quite conservative assumptions. The Government used the ombudsman's findings to calculate the resulting individual loss by assessing the Equitable Life returns against those of comparator companies. That led to an assessment of the loss from Government maladministration of £4.1 billion.

Despite the constraints facing the public purse, the 2010 spending review announced that up to £1.5 billion would be made available for payment to eligible policyholders. Out of that sum, following consultation, we decided to pay the with-profits, or trapped, annuitants in full. As a result, this group of policyholders will receive an annual payment for life, and the actuarial assessment of those payments is that the Government will be making payments to this group well into the next decade and probably beyond.

The total cost of those payments is assessed to be around £625 million—though that is dependent on how long policyholders live. Importantly, the £100 million contingency fund, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East referred, is an accounting provision to provide a safety net in case the annuitants live longer than the central forecast. The remaining £775 million of available funding was distributed pro-rata to other policyholders on the advice of an independent commission, and that resulted in a figure of 22.4 pence in the pound of their relative loss.

Of course I know that that was deeply disappointing to many, but these were difficult decisions that were taken in the light of the position of the public finances. As I said just now in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), public finances remain in a very difficult position, and we have to take decisions in the interests of overall fairness to all taxpayers.

Margaret Ferrier *rose*—

Damian Hinds: I hope that the hon. Lady will forgive me, but I will make some progress, as time is short.

Margaret Ferrier: On that very point—

Damian Hinds: I will take the point.

Margaret Ferrier: With the Government preparing to usher in the successor to the Trident nuclear weapon system, which is estimated to cost £167 billion, I call into question the Cabinet's priorities. If the Government can find money for that, they can find money to pay Equitable Life policyholders.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady's definition of "on that very point" has a degree of elastic in it.

The motion notes that the ombudsman recommended in her report that policyholders should be put back in the position that they would have been in, had Government maladministration not occurred. What the ombudsman went on to say just after this recommendation, however, is that it was appropriate also to take into account the impact on the public purse when considering the funding of payments.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Damian Hinds: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I must make progress. I know there is another debate to follow and I am time-limited.

The ombudsman has written to the all-party parliamentary group on the funding and said that the Government's decisions on affordability and eligibility cannot be said to be incompatible with her report.

As announced in the summer Budget, and following more than four years of operation, the scheme closed to new claims on 31 December. As part of that closure, we did find a way to double the payments received by investors who had previously received the 22.4% of their losses, but who were also in receipt of pension credit. These further payments started just before Christmas and will be completed shortly.

There have been many representations regarding the group of policyholders known as the pre-92 annuitants. Although they were not included in the payment scheme for well-established reasons that have been debated in this House, the Government recognised that they were not receiving the income they expected from their annuities. Although that is not due to Government maladministration, in late 2013, those policyholders received a payment of £5,000, or £10,000 for those in receipt of pension credit.

The Government have also received representations about the fact that, as the economy improves, further funding should be made available to the payment scheme. The improvements our economy has made since 2010 are greatly to be welcomed and show that the Government's long-term economic plan is working, but the plan is not complete and we have some way to go to fully restore the public finances. Based on latest outturn data, the deficit was £89.1 billion last year. That is why we have no plans to reopen the payment scheme after more than four years of operation. So apart from the ongoing payments to annuitants, which will continue for many years to come, our focus now is to complete the orderly wind-down of the scheme by summer this year.

We do not yet know what the final picture will be, but we expect that by the summer, close to 950,000 policyholders will have been paid around £1.1 billion by the scheme. That is a considerable achievement, given the issues that the payment scheme faced in tracing policyholders, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), who speaks for the Opposition, and exceeds the expectations set out in the National Audit Office report of 2013, to which she referred.

I will respond briefly to a couple of points made during the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East asked for a progress report on payments. As I said, we will know the final position on that by the summer and a report will then be published. We do not yet know the final position on the cash figures, but we expect the difference at the end to be lower than the £39 million that my hon. Friend referred to. The £100 million that I mentioned earlier, the contingency on the actuarial projections, is in a different category.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) asked for clarity, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne in an intervention, on whether more money would be forthcoming. I wish I could say that was the case, but because of the condition of the public finances, that is not possible. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle also asked

[*Damian Hinds*]

about the Scottish Widows benchmark. This is a complicated issue, but the core concept in the scheme was the concept of relative loss, which has to take a view of the investment's performance, compared with similar investments available elsewhere. The Scottish Widows fund that he referred to was not available to invest in, I understand, before 1995, whereas the Prudential investment was.

The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles asked whether the Treasury had taken all reasonable steps to trace policyholders. There was national advertising and various other tracing methods, including through the Department for Work and Pensions, and also a data list that came from EMAG with members' details to help trace them. In terms of the spend on administering the scheme, our forecast outturn is within about 3% of the original budget.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) alluded to the contrast with savers in the Icelandic banks. Of course, that was a very different situation, where ex gratia payments were made to UK depositors in those banks. That was done as a result of a decision by the previous Government to guarantee all qualifying deposits when there was a danger of not having financial stability in the UK. However, the Financial Services Compensation Scheme was loaned the money to facilitate those payments, in the expectation that the money paid to UK depositors would come back from those banks eventually.

A number of hon. Members have raised the issue of general confidence in financial institutions and encouragement to save. That is very important to the Government, who have helped more than 5 million people to save for retirement for the first time, or to save more, through automatic enrolment. Individuals now also have the freedom to access their pension from the age of 55 if they wish.

The Government have also acted strongly on reforming financial regulation to ensure that it is fit for purpose in future. The Financial Services Act 2012 dismantled the failed tripartite system and created a new architecture and approach for financial regulation. I am confident that our actions have provided a robust framework for the authorities to work within.

I reiterate my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and other colleagues for securing the debate, which has given us another opportunity to discuss these important issues. I also recognise the hard work the all-party group has done.

I appreciate that many policyholders are not receiving the income they expected, but by paying more than £1 billion to more than 900,000 policyholders, we have taken action to resolve the Government's part in the Equitable Life issue. We have been able to pay in full the losses of the most trapped policyholders and to double the payments to vulnerable non-annuitant policyholders, as well as providing a one-off payment to the pre-1992 annuitants, who, though unaffected by the

maladministration, were recognised by the Government to be suffering as a result of their declining annuity income. In doing that, we have balanced the needs of policyholders against the need to reduce the deficit and repair the public finances.

3.12 pm

Bob Blackman: I thank hon. Members and all three Front-Bench speakers for the constructive and fair way in which the debate has been conducted. Almost 2% of the population have been affected by this scandal, and we have a duty to ensure that they are given full compensation for the loss they have suffered.

I thank the Minister for laying out his argument, and I thank those who have contributed on the personal views of different constituents. I listened carefully to the Minister, and the Treasury accepts that the compensation bill for Equitable Life policyholders is £4.1 billion. Of that, £1.5 billion has been paid out, which leaves a balance of £2.6 billion.

The Minister rightly said that compensation payments will be made well into the next decade for those who have suffered loss. It therefore seems reasonable to me and, I think, to Members across the House—the Chancellor will no doubt be listening to this—that as the economy recovers, our long-term economic plan comes to fruition and we reach a position where the budget is in balance, those who have saved for their retirement are given full and proper compensation.

As the economy recovers, therefore, the Government can top up the scheme if they choose to, and I urge the Chancellor to pledge to do that in his Budget speech on 16 March. As we reform pensions in other ways, we can then send out the signal to young—and not so young—people that it is right to save for the future and for retirement and that if such a scandal were ever to happen again, the Government would step in to protect the retirement incomes of those who do the right thing and save for their old age.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House congratulates the Government on providing a scheme to compensate victims of the Equitable Life scandal; welcomes the Government's acceptance of the Parliamentary Ombudsman's findings in full; notes that the Parliamentary Ombudsman recommended that policyholders should be put back in the position they would have been in had maladministration not occurred; further notes that most victims have only received partial compensation compared to the confirmed losses and that the compensation scheme is now closed to new applicants; and calls on the Government to ensure that the entire existing budget allocated for compensation to date is paid to eligible policyholders and to make a further commitment to provide full compensation for relative losses to all victims of this scandal.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before we come on to the next debate, I inform Members that I am going to raise the speech limit on Back-Bench contributions to seven minutes, in order that they are aware that they have a little more time than is shown on the annunciator.

Recreational Sea Bass Fishing

3.15 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House believes that the recent EU restrictions on recreational sea bass fishing are unfair and fail to address the real threat to the future viability of UK sea bass stocks; and calls on the Government to make representations within the Council of the EU on the reconsideration of the imposition of those restrictions.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this very important debate. Let me place my cards firmly on the table: I am a recreational angler, and a very passionate one. I have cast from many a beach in Cornwall. I have fished with plugs and lures from rigid-hulled inflatable boats. I have regularly fished and ledgered on the Camel estuary and taken great pleasure in digging my own lugworms—big long trenches of lugworms—and ragworms. It is great to be on the coast looking out over Daymer bay and Padstow with the sun going down, the tide coming in and the lines dipping into the sea, waiting for that bite.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Am I right in thinking that my hon. Friend enjoys visiting The Art of Fishing in Wadebridge—one of the best tackle shops in the country, let alone Cornwall?

Scott Mann: That is a shameless plug, but it is a fantastic fishing shop, I have to say. The chap there has some very good fishing rods and tackle that can be purchased at very reasonable rates.

I have set the scene for my fishing expeditions on the Camel. However, the situation this year is very different from that in previous years. For the first six months of this year, if I, as a recreational angler, caught a bass that was of legal size, I would not be allowed to keep it—I would have return it to the estuary—yet a commercial fishing boat that was netting on the estuary would be able to claim that fish and take it for the table.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that he has to differentiate with regard to commercial fishing nets, because driftnet fishermen are banned from landing any bass whatsoever?

Scott Mann: I will come on to some of the different elements of the fishing industry when I talk about the Cornwall inshore fisheries and conservation authority.

I am here today not just to speak for myself as a recreational angler but to speak up for the 900,000 recreational sea anglers in the UK. There are many parts of the fishing industry, as my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) pointed out. When I served on the Cornwall sea fisheries committee, we saw people with beam trawlers, people from the under-10-metre fleet, rod-and-line anglers, and many others who made a living out of fishing. There needs to be a properly managed inshore fleet so that we can have a sustainable future for our fishing industry.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): As another MP with a coastline, may I ask my hon. Friend to acknowledge that not only are some 10,400 jobs dependent on sea angling, but there is a whole lot of leisure industry business that supports sea anglers—accommodation and everything else—with sea bass fishing

being, of course, the most popular form of sea angling? An enormous business worth over £1.2 billion, it is estimated, lies behind this.

Scott Mann: My hon. Friend makes an exceptionally good point, and I fully agree. I will go on to talk about some of the tourism benefits. We have seen some great uplifts in places such as Ireland and the USA, where there have been big recreational fisheries for a long time.

The crux of my argument is that it is grossly unfair to penalise rod-and-line anglers for the first six months of the year while commercial boats are allowed to operate in that period.

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recognise that there is a real need to have some data to support any action that is taken? Otherwise, it will be very difficult for us to work out a strategy as to what we should be doing.

Scott Mann: I agree with my hon. Friend that it is important to have data. The issue is that the data recently presented to the EU show that the bass fishery is in decline and needs to be managed effectively.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and on being so generous with his time. He mentioned Ireland. My understanding is that following the depletion of sea bass stocks in the '60s and '70s, Ireland banned commercial fishing and concentrated on the recreational side, which has expanded its tourism base. Despite the expansion and re-strengthening of the stock of sea bass, Ireland continues to ban commercial fishing.

Scott Mann: The hon. Gentleman is correct. I believe that Ireland relies solely on the recreational sector, but that has been of huge benefit to the tourism industry. In the spirit of the Opposition, I will read not from Jeff or Rosie but from Paul. Paul is a sea angler in north Cornwall who wrote to me:

“After enjoying free and unfettered access to the inshore bass fishery for countless generations, it is understandable that many anglers feel aggrieved that they are suddenly having the right to take fish for the table so severely limited that in effect for many it will equate to zero.

What is not in doubt is that bass stocks are in serious decline and most anglers agree that steps should be taken to...reverse this situation. Despite the assertion that the cause of the decline has little or nothing to do with angling pressure, most anglers are content to accept reasonable reductions in the number of fish they can retain. Hence the widespread, uncomplaining acceptance of the three fish ‘bag limit’ introduced for recreational sea anglers in September 2015.

However, within the RSA community it was naively believed that the commercial sector would have been asked to make similar reductions in catch effort. No such drastic reduction in commercial effort was achieved. At this stage, many RSAs were both angry and perplexed”—

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my hon. Friend accept that the current proposals ban pelagic midwater trawling and impose a 1% bycatch limit on all mixed fisheries, including for fishermen who fish commercially from my hon. Friend’s constituency?

Scott Mann: I am aware of those regulations, but I am also aware that gillnetting and commercial fishing are still permitted in bass nursery areas.

Paul continued in his letter:

“The results of the negotiations are well known and in effect fall a long way short of the scientific recommendation... We call for an immediate review of the regulations in respect of the daily ‘bag limit’ for RSAs and a prompt correction of ill-judged legislation. It belies the intelligence of the EU commissioners not to recognise how illogical the rule is in its present form.”

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I want to make two points. First, the Commission has proposed the measures but does not decide on them. Those decisions are made by Ministers of national Governments, including our own fisheries Minister. Secondly, is the hon. Gentleman aware that last year, Labour MEPs, having received representations from recreational sea anglers, called for a multi-annual management plan for sea bass stocks that made specific reference to the importance of recreational fisheries, but UKIP and the Tories voted against it?

Scott Mann: I was not aware of that, and I thank the hon. Lady for making those points. I want to talk about some of the EU changes. I welcome the ban on French pair trawlers between January and April. They account for about a third of the bass taken in British waters, and many of the bass that they catch are spawning fish. Taking large spawning fish out of the ecosystem means there are no smaller fish to grow and become bigger fish. In the EU changes, we should be talking about reclaiming our territorial waters. The EU holds the common fisheries policy up as a shining example of joined-up thinking, but I am yet to find a commercial fisherman or a recreational sea angler who believes that the CFP is a good thing.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): I am delighted to be drawn into intervening by the hon. Gentleman. May I draw his attention to a 3-inch piece in a right-hand column in *The Times* about six months ago—a tiny little thing—which reported that the long-running battle to replenish cod in the North sea was being won? Cod stocks are growing bigger, as we can read in the press again today. North sea cod has been replenished because instead of cod wars we have agreements based on science to replenish the stocks. Those agreements are working.

Scott Mann: I will try to check out that column in *The Times*. It is not my regular newspaper—I normally read *The Telegraph* and *The Sun*—but I will go back and check it. Such agreements may be fine in other waters, but we should have an understanding that our territorial waters inside the 6-mile limit should be protected for our fisheries and our people.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a splendid speech, which I know will be much supported by Christchurch fishermen. Does he agree that Iceland decided to take control of its own fisheries and that those fisheries are a fantastic success?

Scott Mann: I welcome my hon. Friend’s intervention. I agree that many fisheries people feel that that is the case.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that the huge decline in cod stocks was initially caused by the highly discredited common fisheries policy implemented by the European Union?

Scott Mann: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I recently read a book about the Bering sea and the mass stocks that it used to have. No fishery can be managed properly unless it is looked after effectively. We used to see huge shoals and salmon and sea trout regularly running the Camel, but such stocks no longer materialise.

Melanie Onn: The hon. Gentleman is being incredibly generous in giving way. One of the very significant reasons for the depletion of stocks is the advancement of technology in trawlers. The fact that deep-sea trawlers can go further using technologically very advanced sonar is one of the principal causes of depletion, not the common fisheries policy, as has been erroneously suggested.

Scott Mann: If our fishing boats have to go outside the 6-mile limit to catch fish, that surely shows that the fish are not actually within that limit and that fish stocks have been depleted over the years.

Recreational sea anglers fully accept that fishery resources are finite and that there should be controls on their activities—minimum landing sizes, bag limits, seasonal closures—to protect this public resource from over-exploitation. The Council of Minister’s recent decision to prevent recreational fishers from taking any bass for the first six months of 2016, while sanctioning commercial fishing for bass for the first four months, is irrational. The decision is a symptom of a fisheries management regime that is broken and a common fisheries policy that is unfit for purpose. The EU has displayed utter contempt for our recreational sea anglers and those whose livelihoods depend on recreational sea angling.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Scott Mann: I will give way one more time, and then I will make some progress.

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Does he agree that, as those of us with coastal constituencies know, there is real anger about this interference? Does he also agree that we need to send a message from this House that we want locally line-caught sea bass back on our menus?

Scott Mann: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Locally caught sea bass has a premium price. It can be sold in local restaurants, and local businesses can make a profit from it.

I want to point out the madness of the current situation. Recreational sea anglers are members of the public who equip themselves with the tackle and knowledge necessary to access and enjoy public fishery resources. They selectively retain some fish for their own consumption, just as other members of the public enjoy Dartmoor, the New Forest or the Forest of Dean to forage for wild mushrooms, nuts and so on for their personal use. I believe that the EU is preventing our UK anglers from exercising their right—the right of our ancestors—to claim fish for the table, which is very wrong.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) made an interesting point about tourism, something I want to comment on. The Invest in Fish project, which was funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, was launched in 2004 and ran until 2007. It was a multi-stakeholder steering group that included fishermen, restaurants, fishing producers, merchants, recreational anglers and a number of other organisations. The objective was to examine ways in which fish stocks might be restored. In the south-west, it covered Bristol, Cornwall, Weymouth and Dorset.

The project involved numerous work packages, one of which was a study of the demographics and economic impacts of recreational sea angling. I will give some of the figures. The south-west has 240,000 recreational anglers, who cumulatively spend £110 million on their pursuit. In addition, some 750,000 days are spent at sea and the visitor spend is about £55 million. Recreational sea angling across the south-west therefore generates a total of £165 million of expenditure on bait, clothes, charter boats, boat ownership, fees, travel and accommodation.

Some places have recreational angling only, and I want to outline the benefits that that has brought. In the USA, the striped bass recreational fishery attracts anglers from all over the world and makes an estimated economic contribution to the country in excess of \$2.5 billion. We must learn from the good practice in the USA and elsewhere, which delivers agreed resource sharing by species in line with fishery management advice, the best scientific evidence and economic objectives, as was said earlier.

There are jurisdictions in the British Isles, such as Ireland, that have fishery management policies that operate in favour of the most sustainable forms of bass fishing and the conservation of stocks. Bass has been a recreation-only species since the 1990s in Ireland, as was illustrated by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards). That delivers an estimated €71 million to the Irish economy annually and supports 1,200 jobs. The Isle of Man is about to change the legislation covering sea bass to include a ban on all commercial bass fishing within 12 miles of the coast. Changes are happening around the world and we seem a bit slow to keep up.

Many of the fishing ports of north Cornwall used to be utilised regularly for fishing. In Padstow, back in the '80s and '90s, many people used to sit around rodding and lining off the pier. We do not tend to see that as much nowadays.

There are huge economic benefits to recreational angling. There are almost 900,000 recreational anglers in the UK and they pump £1.23 billion into the economy. There are almost 11,000 full-time jobs in sea angling alone. The "Sea Angling 2012" report found that the direct expenditure of sea anglers, after deductions, was £831 million. English anglers pay as much into the Treasury as the entire value of English fish landings, but receive no consideration in the reallocation of resources.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does he agree that we must consider not just the direct value of angling, but the wider impact on the economy? For example, those who come to Torbay for the sea angling will not only stay in a hotel, but buy a scone done in the correct way.

Scott Mann: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point.

I will give two accounts from different parts of the sector before I wind up. The first is from a tour guide in the west country, who writes:

"About to start the new fishing season with a great deal of concern and trepidation for the future of recreational angling and how it may affect my business. Prior to the new rulings regarding Bass, I had a full diary for the year ahead, due to the uncertainty of our weather patterns in this country, this has proved to be an economic necessity as we lose so many days.

Now I find myself shielding daily emails from booked customers asking if the new rulings will apply to them, and would I consider turning a blind eye to the odd fish for the table as opposed to a cancellation!!!!"

I do not want anglers to be criminalised—that seems ridiculous. He continues:

"I consider myself as indeed are most of my customers to be conservation minded, but find these new rulings to be extremely harsh, especially when you consider that commercial fishing with rod and line and indeed netting will be allowed to continue within my 'low pressure sector'. It is highly possible that I will be forcing anglers to return a fish right in front of a commercial line drifter", which could then keep the fish that has been returned. He went on:

"There is also the wider picture to consider, local cafes, tackle shops, bed and breakfasts"

and all the people who rely on that sector.

TV fisherman and bass guide Henry Gilbey—one of my personal favourite fishermen—stated:

"I am a full time fishing writer and photographer with a ridiculous obsession for bass fishing. I live within walking distance of the sea in south east Cornwall yet I spend more than two months each year in Ireland. Why? Because the bass fishing is better. I run guided bass fishing trips and I need as many photographs of bass fishing as I can get, and I would love to be promoting bass fishing in Cornwall. But I can't. My local bass fishing isn't good enough. The fact is that to access really good bass fishing I need to travel away from my home in Cornwall and help promote Ireland as a sport fishing destination. We could have bass fishing like they have in Ireland though...but we don't. We need more and bigger bass for anglers to catch, and this can only come about via better management of the stocks. Bass are the king of our saltwater species and anglers want to catch them." They are simply being denied.

Melanie Onn: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Scott Mann: I will not give way because I want to make progress.

To conclude I will quote from John Buchan who said:

"The charm of fishing is that it is the pursuit of what is elusive but attainable, a perpetual series of occasions for hope."

I do not want to take that hope away from our recreational sea angling community, and I urge the Government to do a few things. First, will they review this decision and reverse the unnecessary catch-and-release policy for recreational sea anglers? Will DEFRA consider making a study of how much benefit rod-and-line angling produces for British tourism industries, and will it consider a complete ban of gillnetting in bass nursery areas? I look forward to hearing the views of other hon. Members, and I hope to sum up the debate at the end.

3.37 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), who made a brilliant speech, and I congratulate him on securing this debate. I also

[Jon Cruddas]

welcome him to the all-party group on angling, which is chaired by the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker). I look forward to some pleasant days out.

I am a terrible fisherman, so restraints such as the 42 cm landing size, the one-fish-per-day limit, or the moratorium will not affect me because I do not actually catch anything. However, I have great affection for the recreational angling community, and this is a great opportunity to debate the issue. I do not think we have discussed recreational fishing since December 2014, when the hon. Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery) secured an Adjournment debate on bass fishing. After that debate we were optimistic about the future direction of travel of Government policy, but I am afraid we stand here today pretty disappointed about where we have got to.

Angling is one of the highest participant recreational sports across Havering, Barking and Dagenham, and in the country at large. If we joined conversations in recreational angling chatrooms, and talked to people from the Angling Trust and the Bass Anglers Sportfishing Society, we would quickly appreciate the concerns across the country. Anglers are desperate to help to rebuild bass stocks in a fair, efficient and proportionate way, and we were looking forward to making real progress at the December Council of Ministers meeting.

The basic problem now is that the recreational angler feels singled out and that EU fishing Ministers have unfairly targeted them in the new six-month moratorium. That moratorium risks criminalising thousands of law-abiding people, and it will be difficult to enforce without the active support of angling clubs, anglers and the Angling Trust.

Evidence suggests that charter boat bookings are already down, which will impact on tourism revenues and potentially put some operators out of business. Anglers fishing from April to June will have to return all their bass, yet a commercial boat can come alongside and catch and kill the same fish. Ministers have boasted that these supposed conservation measures will have little effect on commercial inshore bass fishing, while also claiming that they have secured a good deal for bass stocks. Those statements cannot both be true. We therefore need to find out what the Government's actual position is.

DEFRA's own "Sea Angling 2012" report shows that there are 884,000 sea anglers in England, who directly pump some £1.23 billion per annum into our economy. As the hon. Member for North Cornwall mentioned, bass are the most popular recreational species, and bass angling is worth some £200 million in England alone. Let us cut to the chase: for the past decade and a half, recreational sea anglers have been led to believe that their most popular sporting fish would be managed sustainably and be acknowledged as a valued recreational species. Why is that? It is because politicians of all parties have told them so.

In 2002, the Prime Minister's strategy unit commissioned a report on the benefits of recreational sea angling. That report, "Net Benefits", was eventually published in 2004, and it said:

"Fisheries management policy should recognise that sea angling may...provide a better return on the use of some resources than commercial exploitation."

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee report on "Net Benefits" said:

"We support the re-designation of certain species for recreational use and recognise the benefits that this can bring from both a conservation and economic point of view."

In the 2014 debate, the hon. Member for Meon Valley, who is now a Minister, concluded his speech by saying this:

"does the Minister agree that the development of sea bass fishing as a recreational activity is the best long-term solution to both the ecological and the economic sustainability of the fishery, as proved by the Irish sea bass experience, the striped bass fishery of the north-east coast of the US and many other examples?"—[*Official Report*, 3 December 2014; Vol. 589, c. 119WH.]

Today, we ask the same question: what is the Government's policy? We ask that as the derogations drive policy in the opposite direction to that argued for by the hon. Gentleman and the Government report in 2004.

Do not get me wrong, I am not attempting to make a party political point about this. For example, under the last Labour Government, the then Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), tried to increase the minimum landing size to 42 cm, but he was replaced by a new Minister who caved in to the commercial lobbying and annulled the statutory instrument that would have delivered this important conservation measure. My right hon. Friend was actively supported in those attempts to introduce that minimum landing size by the then Member for Reading, West, who, sadly, is no longer an MP, even though he is very much active in the Angling Trust and continues to lobby on behalf of recreational anglers.

There is a recurring theme throughout the past 20 years, whereby the ecological case has been consistently put by the recreational side, backed up by Government reports and all-party groups, and this has been accompanied by limited actions of Governments of various persuasions, given pressures from the commercial side. Here we are again today making the same points and trying to give voice to the recreational angling community.

In Ireland, bass has been designated a recreational species since 1990, delivering an estimated €71 million to the Irish economy annually and supporting more than 1,200 jobs. Ireland is also in the EU. The Isle of Man is about to embark on a similar policy. As well as highlighting the ridiculous anomalies with the current situation and the unfair treatment of recreational anglers, this debate today is really about trying to find out the longer-term thinking of the Government, so we do not have to return to this question again and again, whoever is in power.

3.43 pm

Mr Geoffroy Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con): I am not a recreational angler, but I have every intention of taking it up. It sounds an immensely enjoyable pastime and one in which all Members of Parliament should partake. I do, however, have an inshore fishing fleet to speak up for, and I have to say that one thing I am depressed about as a result of reading some of the briefings for this debate is the tone that is taken towards decent inshore commercial fishermen. These are men and women who have families to support. They are not large concerns. Having clung to a traditional fishing industry, in places such as Appledore, Bideford and Clovelly, they have found the rug gradually pulled out from under their feet.

I agree with my hon. Friends and the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas). We are dealing here with an insane, illogical, irrational, fatuous policy. It is absolutely crazy that anglers cannot take two or three fish home for the table, when, at the same time, the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), has obtained derogations that allow netting to continue. Of course on the face of it, if we take the one, it is strange we do not take the other, but I propose a reason to the House. Ministers know, when negotiating in Brussels with their counterparts in other countries, that if they take away bass from the inshore fishing fleet, they will have nothing left to catch. In the north Devon industry, which I represent, they cannot catch spurdog; there is no cod, plaice or sole; no thornback ray; no blonde ray; and now there is a ban on small-eyed ray, which represents 40% of the take for the northern Devon fishing industry. Fishermen say to me, "What do we catch?"

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that the ban is pitting the recreational fishermen against the under-10 metre fleet? I and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) met our Sussex inshore fisheries and conservation authority last week and found out that, as a direct result of the ban on sea bass, there are now restrictions on shellfish.

Mr Cox: I do agree. The policy is crazy, and Ministers know it. They wrestle with their consciences, they feel guilty and they try to push the envelope for the inshore fleet, but they know that the situation is untenable. They know that decent men and women with livelihoods to protect cannot go to sea for more than a few days a year and cannot cover their costs. I sympathise with my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann). Of course the position is crazy. It is an insane policy.

Of course the rod-and-line sea anglers must feel a sense of injustice. It is a direct and perverse consequence of a failed policy. That is the difficulty. How do I go back to Bideford and Appledore and say to my fishermen, "There's nothing for you to catch"? Catching small-eyed ray, the last thing on which they depended, was banned in December. Why do we think my hon. Friend the Minister came back with derogations for gillnetting? It was because he knew that the small-eyed ray was banned, which meant 40% of the northern Devon fishing industry cut at a slice. Was there any consultation on that ban? No. Was there any warning? No.

The real injustice is the whole failed policy. It is time we got out of it. The people of this country will have the chance to withdraw us from it in just a few months. Then we can have a properly managed fishery in which the rod-and-line men and the sea anglers can be treated properly, and the inshore fleet, on which traditional coastal communities depend, can breathe again when we introduce common sense back into the counsels of our fishing policy.

Huw Irranca-Davies *rose—*

Mr Cox: No, I am not listening to a former Minister who presided over this policy and went cap in hand to Brussels begging for scraps. It is time we took back our fisheries policy. That will bring justice to the people my

hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall spoke for and to the decent men and women who have nothing to fish for in the north Devon fishery.

3.49 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! What are the Government doing risking Europe's sea bass for their foolish, unfair, ineffective and fishy decision on sea bass fishing? Members might ask what I am doing here out of my darkened room—it is nothing to do with defence; I do not eat fish; and I am not an angler. Thanks to 40 years of living with an ecologist, however, I know an environmental disaster when I see one.

I have constituents who are sea anglers who came to my surgery and asked me to take an interest in sea bass fishing. Unfortunately for me, I happen to know the former Member for Reading, and when someone knows the former Member for Reading, it is very dangerous to ask him, "What is the issue about sea bass fishing?" because he will tell them.

Huw Irranca-Davies: You shouldn't have done that!

Mrs Moon: I appreciate the comment from my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmere (Huw Irranca-Davies)—I should never have done it, but my constituents wanted to know, so I wanted to know, and thus I am here today. I am also a Member who has a coastal resort, in which sea bass fishing was a very popular activity, so I started looking at the facts.

Everywhere I looked, it was very clear that there was an urgent need to rebuild bass stocks—and nobody seems to dispute that. It is the core bottom line. It is an environmental and economic imperative, and everybody will agree on that. We know this because in 2014, the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas recommended an 80% cut in bass mortality across the EU area for 2015, following a rise in bass landings from 772 tonnes to 1,004 tonnes. We were taking more out of the sea than was sustainable. The bass stock in the North Atlantic fishery is 527 tonnes—well below the trigger point of concern for the exploration of the seas, which was set at 8,000 tonnes. Future regenerations of sea bass stocks are now in danger.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): This is just a small point, but I think the hon. Lady meant to say 5,250 tonnes.

Mrs Moon: I thank the Minister for the correction; he is absolutely right.

In December 2015, the EU Fisheries and Agricultural Council met to formulate a package of measures and regulations, but the agreement that was reached was both unfair, ineffective and, quite honestly, unbelievable. The regulation of recreational and commercial bass fishing, which came out of that December meeting, has exposed a rotten relationship between the industry and Government, both in the UK and across the EU.

Antoinette Sandbach: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Moon: No, I would like to make some progress.

During the run-up to the December meeting, the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Camborne and

[Mrs Moon]

Redruth (George Eustice) who is responsible for farming, food and the marine environment, was lobbied from all sides, but from everything I have seen and all the evidence sent to me, preference seems to have been given to commercial lobbyists. I am told that recreational anglers were granted a 30-minute telephone conference call with the Minister, whereas commercial lobbyists seem to have been in contact with UK Ministers and officials throughout the negotiations. Members will be aware that if we are going to carry out a consultation, it needs to be open, honest and not biased towards an already decided outcome.

I believe that the initial proposals were well received by all sides, but particularly by recreational anglers. There was to be a complete ban on recreational and commercial fishing, including catch and release, in the first half of 2016; then, in the second half of 2016, a monthly 1-tonne catch limit for vessels targeting sea bass and a one fish per day limit for recreational anglers and the reintroduction of catch and release.

Antoinette Sandbach *rose*—

Mrs Moon: I have already said no.

After lengthy conversations with the commercial sector throughout the negotiation period, EU Fisheries Ministers granted a surprise, namely a four-month exemption for commercial hook-and-line bass gillnet fishing, which accounts for 50% of bass fishing. The strict ban on recreational fishing will remain in place, and the monthly catch limit for commercial vessels has been increased from 1 tonne to 1.3 tonnes. Those outside this place who have never had the joy of seeing a gillnet should be made aware that it leads to the violation of EU fish-size regulations by allowing for the catch of undersized fish, which are then thrown overboard dead. They do not help conserve fish stocks, because the undersized fish—the next generation of fish—are thrown back dead.

I do not usually quote Christopher Booker of *The Sunday Telegraph*, but I agree with him that the EU is using a

“sledgehammer to miss a nut.”

Yet the regulation is endorsed and supported by this Government.

I may not be an angler, but I know nonsense when I hear it. The EU Fisheries Ministers, in conjunction with UK Ministers, are talking nonsense when they try to spin this fix-up as a considered and environmentally sound policy. They falsely claim that bass gillnet fishing has a minimal environmental impact; that the measures are beneficial both for the commercial fishing sector and for bass stocks; that, because drift netting has been caught by the moratorium, bass stocks will increase; and that drifting accounts for 90% of all bass fishing.

We need to know where the Minister got that 90% statistic from, because it is misleading and contradicts data published by the Government's own Marine Management Organisation, which in 2014 stated that netting constitutes 62% of all commercial bass catches, with drifting responsible for only 20%.

How can this Government possibly justify increasing conservation-damaging gillnetting, yet ban recreational angling? I had thought that the Minister had mistyped the policy and that he in fact intended to ban gillnetting

and to increase angling, but that was not the case. Recreational angling represents the sustainable future of bass fishing and it should not be banned.

The Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I call Charles Walker.

3.57 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Government negotiated a stunningly bad deal. I cannot think of a worse deal that they could have come back with for recreational bass fishermen in this country. It is no good beating around the bush.

I make no apology for enjoying visiting the website of the Art of Fishing in Wadebridge. I have never visited the shop, but I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) will send the team my regards when he sees them this or some future weekend.

Why was the Government's deal so stunningly bad? They have come back and trumpeted a six-month closure. That sounds like pretty good news, until we realise that they have negotiated a four-month derogation for gillnets and hook and liners. Over the next 10 months, each of the boats will be allowed to take up to 1.3 tonnes a month—in other words, 1,300 fish a month, or 13,000 fish a year. Indeed, it is a 1 tonne increase on what they could take last year.

Let us be clear: anglers account for less than 10% of the bass killed and taken out of this country's waters, yet the value of recreational bass fishing is estimated to be £200 million to the economy, while the figure for bass stocks landed by commercial fishermen is an estimated £7 million.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman not acknowledge that, according to the European Commission, recreational sea anglers take 25% of the total stock caught, and that the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas has increased that figure to 30%?

Mr Walker: Only in the strange world of the European Union can a few thousand blokes with fishing rods—well, a hundred thousand-plus blokes—

Melanie Onn: Blokes?

Mr Walker: And ladies—account for 25% or 30% of all the hundreds of thousands, the millions, of bass that are taken. There they are, those recreational anglers, filling up their wheelbarrows and taking them down the high streets of our fishing communities! What a load of rubbish that is. It defies belief that organisations that pretend to be serious expect us to swallow such utter nonsense.

Let us be clear about this. The value of a bass on the dock is about £3.50. The value of that same bass to recreational angling is about £100. It is worth 28 times more to recreational anglers than it is dead on the slab, going to market.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good case for getting out of Europe. Does he feel, as I do, and as many other Members in the Chamber do, that it is about time we had control of our

fishing grounds around the shores and in the seas of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? We make the decisions, and let us do it ourselves.

Mr Walker: Of course I agree that we should have control of our fishing grounds, which is why I shall be voting to leave the European Union, but that is an argument for another time. I do not want to stand here and attack commercial fishermen who fish for bass, because I think that there is a golden opportunity here. As was pointed out by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox), there are very few fish left in the sea for inshore commercial fishermen to target.

Oliver Colville: I thank my hon. Friend—my very good hon. Friend, whom I have known for many years—for giving way. Do we not need to ensure that a bass stock is available? That is key, because if there are no bass, there will be nothing for anyone to fish for.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend has made an excellent point, although I do not think that the proposals that were negotiated, or agreed to, by the Government take us any nearer to that stage.

As I was saying, there are very few fish left in the sea for inshore commercial fishermen to target, and once they have finished with the bass, there will be nothing left. So here is the opportunity: let us create a recreational bass fishery that is the envy of the western world. In 1984, it was decided in the United States, on the east-coast Atlantic seaboard, that the inshore striped bass fishery would be recreational only. That fishery is now worth \$2.5 billion to the economy, as people from around the world travel there, booking charters and staying in hotels in order to go out and catch those wonderful fish.

This is the opportunity that remains open to our coastal communities. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall said, it has been seized in Ireland, and that recreational fishery is now worth £71 million a year to the entire Irish economy.

Mr Cox: Does my hon. Friend agree that the fishing tackle industry, and the supply of fishing tackle, are vital to all these crucial areas? May I commend to him the Summerlands fishing tackle shop in Westward Ho!? It is a superb exponent of that particular art, and I hope that he will go and see it and buy something from it.

Mr Walker: I think that, during his speech, my hon. and learned Friend unwittingly invited my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall and me to join him for a bit of fishing. We shall be able to introduce him to the delights of recreational angling, and that fishing shop will be the first place that we visit after breakfast, at 9.30 in the morning.

But I want to be serious about this. There is a huge opportunity here. As I have said, the value of recreational fishing—bass fishing—to the Republic of Ireland's economy is £71 million. The value of the entire commercial catch of bass in this country is £7 million. I put to my hon. Friends representing fishing communities that the real prize, the real money and the real future for their inshore commercial bass fishermen is being at the forefront of creating recreational fisheries. There is a laboratory—a live case study. We can forget Ireland and the USA because they are established and thriving. The Isle of

Man has decided to pursue that route to create jobs for charter captains and fishing guides, and jobs in hotels and restaurants. That is the opportunity that presents itself.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): On the words expressed earlier about the Europe and the CFP, does the hon. Gentleman find it remiss of the Prime Minister that he did not prioritise fisheries in any part of his negotiations with Europe?

Mr Walker: I wish the Prime Minister would be more bullish when he comes to defend fishing interests. I remember fishing with the hon. Gentleman in Shetland. He was sitting on the side of a beautiful loch as it neared midnight on about 8 July. He said, "Charles, why are you using a fly and not a worm?" I leave him to justify his position in that matter with his own constituents.

Let us not make this a row between recreational fishermen and inshore fishermen, who have also had a pretty rough deal. Without threatening jobs, could we start to think collectively about creating a new opportunity for what remains of our inshore fleet to thrive and prosper, and about having a sustainable fishery and not one that is here today, gone tomorrow? As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon made clear, many fisheries around his coast have been here today and gone tomorrow, and they are now in the last chance saloon.

I have spoken for longer than I thought I would, and I took a couple of interventions, which I greatly enjoyed, but be in no doubt that the Government will continue to be harried and harassed on this matter, because there is no other word to describe their dealings in the European Union but failure.

4.7 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) and thank the Backbench Business Committee for the debate.

Bass tastes great served at a dinner party or a simple supper. My mother had a very special way of cooking bass that was caught with a rod and line at Queener Point off Rame Head near my home. Bass has always been a highly prized fish. Some people dream of winning the lottery. My late husband Neil—my late, fantastic commercial fisherman—dreamt of catching a bag of bass.

I am here to talk about all fishermen, not just recreational sea anglers and not just commercial men. In addition to recreational sea anglers, two other groups are affected by such terrible measures: trip boats that work out of Looe and Polperro, taking groups of anglers out to sea with fish with rods and lines; and commercial fishermen who trawl or net for a living. Recreational sea anglers spend their leisure time fishing for hours, and it is only right that, when they get a bite and reel in their catch of bass, they can take it home for their supper. Recreational fishing is a very popular pastime for locals and visitors alike. Contrary to what my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) said, it is estimated that landings of recreational bass account for about 25% of the total. I have heard that the European Commission is challenging the UK because it is not recording the landings of bass in a reasonable way.

[Mrs Sheryll Murray]

Cornish mackerel handline vessels often use charter trips as a way of ensuring that they have an economically sustainable business. Commercial vessels from the south-west rely on bass in the winter months. To presume that they can make up the economic loss with other species shows a complete lack of understanding of the commercial fishing industry and its seasonal nature. It is essential to have joined-up fisheries management for all fishermen, and restrictions must look at the socioeconomic impact on coastal communities. Recreational fishermen provide support for tourism, and commercial vessels provide support for harbour repairs and local infrastructure.

In 2006, the Labour Government announced that the minimum landing size for bass would be increased from 36 cm to 45 cm. This was to apply only to UK vessels operating within the 12-mile limit. Labour reconsidered, however, and announced in October 2007 that the minimum landing size for bass would remain at 36 cm. The December 2014 Fisheries Council could not agree on bass conservation measures. The Angling Trust expressed its disappointment and called for domestic measures in UK waters, including raising the minimum landing size to 45 cm, strengthening the UK's network of bass nursery areas, moving away from netting towards line-caught methods and limiting the catch per commercial boat. There was no mention of bag limits, I hasten to add. The Angling Trust should be careful what it wishes for when the European Commission is involved.

I am sure that the UK's request for emergency measures on 19 December 2014 was made for genuine reasons, and all fishermen accepted that some conservation measures were necessary. Those emergency measures included a three-fish bag limit for anglers, and 18 kg a day limit for demersal boats—which was workable—and a ban on mid-water trawls until the end of April, which was accepted because that was the time at which the fish were spawning. In September 2015, the minimum landing size was increased to 42 cm, which was a sensible conservation measure. The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea published advice on 30 June 2015, before an assessment of those emergency measures. Its paper acknowledges that there were uncertainties in the assessment due to inaccuracies in historical landings.

To maintain a sustainable fishing industry—I include recreational sea angling in that description—I propose that in the short term our Minister immediately asks the European Commission to revert to those emergency measures, so that we can make a real assessment of the bass stock. I also propose that the bycatch for demersal trawlers should be increased from 1% to a workable 5%, because discarded bass do not survive. What is the point of throwing this stock back into the sea dead when it is not covered by the European landing obligation? Discarded bass would have a very low survival rate.

Mr Charles Walker: Does my hon. Friend agree that the great advantage of commercial hook-and-line fishing is that there is a greater chance of returning undersized bass or bass over a certain size that we might want to release for breeding?

Mrs Murray: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, but my point is that some commercial vessels rely on catches of bass and it is too costly for them suddenly to

change their gear. Believe you me, I know about this because I spent 24 and a half years married to one such fisherman. Preventing drift netters from bass fishing is vindictive. They cannot catch any other species during their seasonal fishing, although they could of course simply add weights to their nets, fix them to the seabed and carry on.

Maria Caulfield: I completely agree with my hon. Friend on that point. There are fishermen in Newhaven in my constituency who invested in new nets just before Christmas. Because there was no notice of the ban, they had no way of planning for it, and this has decimated the fishing industry in Newhaven.

Mrs Murray: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I have seen how the industry and fishermen are affected by changes to the rules, and to introduce such a measure so quickly when it costs a lot of money to invest in gear is simply nonsensical.

I acknowledge that the Minister may need to ask the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to write to me on this matter, but will he please reveal why the ban on drift netting was not announced until after the Council meeting, and not at the end of the debrief with the industry? I am sure he did not intend to allow fishing representatives to believe that all static net fishing had an exemption.

This is a clear example of how the common fisheries policy has destroyed fishermen. The draconian CFP has caused fishermen from Looe and elsewhere to fish alongside French boats in the south-west 12-mile limit, and see those boats land about 10 times more haddock. Our fishermen have sent me images of their charts showing French fishing vessels inside our six-mile limit, while their path and speed suggests that they were actually fishing. To take this forward to prosecution under the CFP, the UK would need evidence of the gear in the water or confirmation from the fishery protection vessel.

I understand that the 2016 herring quota has been exhausted already and we are only in February. Sprat and Cornish pilchard boats cannot avoid catching herring and they are subject to the pelagic landing obligation. Will the Minister meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) to talk about that, because it is really important to our fishing industry?

Enough is enough. Fishermen are fed up. The UK has to get control of our 200-mile median line, so that our Fisheries Minister is able to make the rules without going cap in hand to the European Commission.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I have to reduce the time limit to five minutes, because we are running out of time.

4.16 pm

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): I will try to be quick so that others can speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope Members will understand if I do not take interventions. I have been tempted into making some points. There have been some very good speeches by Members who know a lot more about the fishing industry than I do, but my opening point is that the Europe issue is a red herring.

Even if we had control of our own waters, we would have to have the right conservation measures to balance conservation with the survival of fisheries. We would have to do that come what may. I alluded earlier to North sea cod. Even if we had not been part of the common fisheries policy, and even if I had not been the Minister who started the trend for bringing back devolution of decision making on the North sea alongside Scottish colleagues and others, we would still have had to have made that decision for the good of our fisheries in the long term. We need the focus to be on the conservation of stocks, which is, ultimately, good for recreational fishermen and commercial fisheries.

The Minister has a very difficult task. When he goes to Brussels, he argues for the UK—it is not as though we do not have a voice, and he is there alongside colleagues from Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland—and he has to do a difficult thing: he has to represent fishing communities while taking account of the science. Yes, I understand that that is difficult, but my question to the Minister is why is the decision on bass such a departure from the science? That is the fundamental question. I understand the difficulties he has when he goes to Europe, but there is such a difference between what ICES and the science clearly says—science is never perfect, but it is pretty good to go on—and what the Government have come up with. That is what we need to hear today. This issue is not between recreational anglers and commercial fisheries—or it should not be, although sometimes it seems to descend into that—but about the balance between using the science effectively in negotiations and keeping the fisheries alive.

The fundamental question in my very short contribution is this: why is there a chasm between the science and the final outcome of the December fisheries negotiations on bass? The joy of the North sea cod result was that we had to strike a balance for more than a decade and we did it. Yes, fishermen were not happy, but they are a lot happier now that the cod is recovering and that they have bigger fish to land in their vessels. We need to do the same with bass and all other species as well.

The question that I leave the Minister is this: why is there such a gap? I have experienced the difficulties of fisheries negotiations, but he must understand that there is a chasm between what the science was telling him and the outcome. Is it because there was a huge pressure from the fisheries communities and the Minister gave way? I have certainly been faced with the situation in which we almost had to close fisheries off the west of Scotland and off north-east Ireland. We managed to pull away from that, but it was difficult. There is such a chasm now that I must ask whether the Minister has just dispelled the science and let rip.

4.20 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Cheshire is not known for its coastal communities, largely because it has none. However, it does have some very keen recreational fishermen. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) who said that the policy is crazy and that it is absolutely insane to criminalise recreational anglers for removing one or two fish from the sea while allowing commercial fisheries to behave in the way that has been described. It simply does not make sense. Speaking as someone who comes from the other side of

the European debate to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne, I can say that this is exactly the kind of insane EU policy making that discredits the whole European Union.

I was slightly surprised by the sentiments expressed by the hon. Members for Ogmere (Huw Irranca-Davies) and for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), as of course there is a large degree of subsidiarity involved here whereby both the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament have an ability to regulate their inshore fleet, to designate their own conservation zones and to apply their own conservation criteria. If those communities do not agree with the policy, the decision making over the inshore fleet is devolved, and, effectively, changes can be made.

The answer to this is not simply to leave the EU, because the reality is that there are many treaties between EU and non-EU countries that regulate the fisheries but that are not in the common fisheries policy. Those pre-existing treaties are one reason why the CFP has historically failed over so many years. They have caused many, many problems and undermined attempts at an EU level to try to resolve things. I have, however, considerable sympathy with my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) who talked about French boats landing three times the amount of haddock as her local fleet. It is a real problem and it is inherently unfair. It just seems to me that this whole area needs to be looked at again.

The real point is that if we do not protect sea bass, we will not have any fish to fish. ICES said that, on a scientific basis, no more than 541 tonnes of sea bass should be fished in the central and south North sea, Irish sea, English channel, Bristol channel and the Celtic sea. In the past year alone, the UK has landed 1,000 tonnes. That seems wrong.

We need to consider the time that it takes for sea bass to mature. It takes from four to seven years for them to reach a size to spawn. If the UK is landing virtually double the tonnage that has been recommended on a scientific basis for the whole region, is it any wonder that we are in crisis? If there is that opportunity for recreational angling to reinvigorate coastal communities in a different way and to boost tourism and provide that extra pound that circulates in the local economy with all the benefit that that brings, surely we need to look first at line-caught sea bass, rather than allowing netting or drift fisheries. The common fisheries policy causes a great credibility gap for the EU. My recreational anglers in Eddisbury see that hypocrisy and do not like being criminalised.

4.25 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I shall be brief. It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Being on the Backbench Business Committee, I learned a lot about sea bass reproduction, when my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) regaled us all with the reasons why we should have this debate.

I am grateful to my constituent Chris Packer who wrote to me yesterday setting out the impact in Torbay, where there are about 3,000 recreational anglers. My constituency, like that of my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), is one of the most beautiful coastal parts of the whole country and has a thriving seafood industry, as well as a commercial fishery. I have the waters of Brixham harbour in my constituency,

[Kevin Foster]

and my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) has the harbour itself in hers, so there is a strong interest.

I agree with the hon. Member for Ogmere (Huw Irranca-Davies) that the question whether this is a “leave” or “remain” debate is a red herring. Whatever our position in relation to the European Union, we will need to have an agreement with other nations.

Mrs Sheryll Murray *rose*—

Kevin Foster: I apologise to my hon. Friend. Her intervention will have to be very brief, and I will not take the extra minute.

Mrs Murray: If the UK were not part of the CFP, our UK Minister could make the rules that apply to our waters.

Kevin Foster: We would still almost certainly end up having to co-operate with the countries that border the channel and the North sea to ensure that we had a coherent fisheries policy.

There should be no distinction between recreational and commercial fishing. Instead, we should focus on the science and the methods. In my constituency the rod-and-line commercial fishermen came to lobby me. They catch relatively small numbers, and do so in a way that allows them easily to check the size of the catch they are landing and return to the sea immediately any fish that do not meet the requirements, meaning that they are likely to survive. If we debate whether this is commercial or recreational, we get into the position outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall. In theory, a recreational boat could go out and have to return, whereas a commercial rod-and-line boat could be beside it, using the same method for catching. That is bizarre.

I welcome the debate. The importance of the industry should be recognised, not just on account of those who participate directly in it, but as part of wider tourism and visitor attractions, particularly for constituencies in Devon and Cornwall, and certainly for my own. I welcome the contributions we have heard so far. There are real concerns about the system currently in place and they have been well explained during the debate. Whatever system we have, we will end up with some restrictions. Nobody here today is suggesting that we should not preserve the stocks and build them up, but we need to do that on the basis of science and evidence. There has been a slightly false division between commercial and recreational fishing, when the important issue is what we are taking out and what methods we are using to do that, based on clear science.

4.28 pm

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I speak on behalf of the small-scale coastal fishing community in my constituency, based on the River Hamble in Warsash, which has been fishing the Solent for centuries. Records from 1235 show that herring, cod, plaice, sole and bass were once in plentiful supply. The Prior of Hamble used to send 20,000 oysters to the monks at Winchester every year.

Today the local fishermen own small inshore fishing vessels, which I recently visited. They use a rod and line, and long lines to catch bass. Their families have been fishing the Solent for generations, but life is hard for them. They do not fish for recreation, but to earn a living. However, after taking account of their running expenses and the hours they work, they do not even earn the minimum wage. Now, they face destruction as a result of the six-month ban on bass fishing, the changes to quota sizes and the increase in the minimum landing size. They are a community on the verge of total collapse.

How did we get here? The quotas at the heart of the common fisheries policy have excessively affected British fishermen. Why our Fisheries Department ever allocated 96% of all quotas, no one can understand. The small-scale under and over-10-metre vessels received only a derisory 4% of the quota.

The common fisheries policy has caused the absurdity of discards. Healthy fish are thrown back into the sea, skewing the natural relationship between man and sea. For all of time, man has harvested the riches of the ocean harmoniously and intuitively. Then, the European Commission constructed a system so bizarre that it gave rise to the problem we face today: depleting stocks of fish. Instead of enabling the natural equilibrium, we have now imposed artificial, heavy-handed management measures and quotas. These have been in place for the whole of my life, and they are now causing our fishermen to catch and throw back fish that could otherwise feed people.

Let us consider cod stock. Once it was a staple of the British diet, but it was nigh on driven to annihilation. The huge total allowable catch reductions and the savage days-at-sea restrictions were big mistakes. At worst that meant that in the North sea, one cod would be discarded for every cod retained on board. That is at odds with all we do by experience, and it is injurious to the health of our oceans.

The common fisheries policy, for that is what I am describing, is one example of how pan-European interference can change—no, distort—what was previously a perfectly healthy model. The policy has been driven by a Commission addicted to drastic measures characterised by clumsy and blundering legislation. Bass now faces the same fate as cod stock. This knee-jerk moratorium on fishing for bass will kill off the fishing community in my constituency.

Set in the local context, the ban is too stringent. The Solent already has many restrictions as a result of UK and European protection designations. In Southampton Water, we have one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes, with fish stock nurseries and other obstacles for fishermen to navigate. That has made it impossible for them to fish alternatives, such as mullet and sole, which might otherwise make up quotas if bass is limited.

This small-scale, sustainable industry is suffering as a result of attempts to prevent overfishing by large-scale industry trawlers further out to sea in the channel. Those in the industry are receiving no compensation for their loss of income or to buy new equipment. They have nowhere else to turn.

It is not easy to reach agreement on matters to do with the European Union—something we are all very aware of at the moment. Although I will not stray into

wider EU issues now, I can say that the way the Warsash fishermen will vote in the EU referendum is clear for all to see.

Lastly, I do not profess to match the expertise of those of my constituents who live, breathe and work in the sector, but I ask whether extra measures can be taken to protect them from being annihilated by this deal. That would avert massive unemployment. Declining fish stocks will destroy our fishing industry. That will cost us fish and fishermen. As the precious stone set in the silver sea, Britain deserves more.

4.33 pm

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I am glad to be able to say a few words in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on his entertaining and energetic opening speech. He is clearly an enthusiastic angler. I have to say that although my late father was an angler, I have never cast a rod in anger myself. However, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's advertising for *The Art of Fishing in Wadebridge*—he was egged on by the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker)—will stand him in good stead with his local communities.

As many Members have said, it is unfortunate that we have got to a stage where there is a dispute between recreational and commercial fishing, because that is in nobody's interest. We must remember that this has happened because of the scientific evidence on depletion of the stocks. The situation is not new. It goes back to 2013, when ICES advised a 36% cut and was ignored, and then, in June 2014, recommended an 80% cut in bass mortality for that year. As a result, the stock has been in decline, and now these draconian measures are being brought in.

Sea bass is an important stock for recreational and commercial interests in Scotland. As the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) rightly said, the reformed common fisheries policy now has a regionalisation element, and the Scottish Government do have some powers in this regard. In fact, they are now putting in place conservation areas, and they have introduced the Wild Fisheries (Scotland) Bill, which is currently going through the Scottish Parliament. We have a great many interests in angling and deeper-sea fishing. On the estuary at Montrose in my constituency, there is salmon fishing, which is also relevant. There are disputes between the commercial salmon fishers at the estuary mouth and those who angle further up the river for these important fish. We have fishing in many of our rivers—the Tay, the Spey and many others. That brings in a great deal of tourism, and thus a great deal of money to the Scottish economy. It is calculated that while fishing brings about £500 million to our economy, aquaculture overall brings in about £1.86 billion, so it is a very important aspect.

Antoinette Sandbach *rose*—

Mike Weir: If the hon. Lady does not mind, I really want to get on.

It is important that we do not get into a dispute between the two sides. I appreciate that anglers are very angry about some things, but we must also think of the needs of the commercial fishermen—the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) made an excellent point about that. It is about balancing these needs to get to a stage where both sets of interests are represented. I am sure that we can do that, but it needs a bit less

megaphone diplomacy between the two sides and a bit more getting together and seeing how we can co-operate to ensure that we are not destroying our inshore fishing fleets.

The issue of pulling out of the EU is perhaps a red herring—no pun intended. The Minister will still have to make these difficult decisions, whether within the confines of reform of the common fisheries policy or in the context of UK-only policy. It is no easier either way when he has to look at the scientific evidence. The EU argument should not be relied on in this.

I grew up in the town of Arbroath, which had a very good fishing industry when I was young, but it has basically gone now. There is some crustacean—lobster and crab—fishing, and there are trip boats that take anglers out to fish in the North sea, but the large-scale fishing industry has gone. It is fair to say that in the past the Scots have had their difficulties with the common fisheries policy, but we are making progress with a new regime. It has meant that Scottish fishermen have made great sacrifices, but the fishing stocks are now beginning to improve, and we do not want to throw that away. There are difficult decisions to be taken all round, but let us not fall out about it—let us get the two sides together and see what we can do so that both can enjoy their fishing.

4.39 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing the debate and putting the case of recreational sea bass anglers so strongly. He spoke with great passion about his fondness for fishing, and he showed particular enthusiasm when he got on to the subject of lugworms. Several hon. Members have highlighted the need not only to conserve sea bass stocks but to restore them to sustainable levels. Hon. Members spoke about what the hon. Gentleman described as the “madness” of the situation in which recreational anglers are treated differently from the commercial industry. Questions have been raised about the extent to which the Government have caved in to the demands of the commercial fishing lobby and the long-term consequences of failing to take tough action. The hon. and learned Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) described the policy as insane, illogical and fatuous. My hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas), who is a keen angler, said that the ecological case has been consistently put by the recreational side, but has not been listened to by the Government under pressure from the commercial fishing lobby.

Bass stocks across Europe are in trouble, and urgent action is needed to conserve and rebuild the remaining spawning populations. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) made clear, she can recognise an environmental disaster when she sees one. The decline is largely the result of commercial overfishing over the last 30 years, rather than of recreational sea angling. Increased fishing effort, targeting of spawning aggregations and juvenile fish, and loss of nursery habitat in estuaries are also factors.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kerry McCarthy: No. As has been noted, it is only in fairly recent times that sea bass has been commercially fished. The 2004 “Net Benefits” report by the Cabinet

[Kerry McCarthy]

Office recommended that fisheries departments consider making bass a recreational-only species, although that was not carried through.

In 2014, ICES recommended an 80% cut in bass mortality across the EU for 2015, having previously recommended a 36% cut for 2014, which was not implemented. Bass landings by UK vessels rose by 30% in 2014, from 772 tonnes to 1,004 tonnes. That was yet another example of expert scientific advice being ignored, with predictable consequences. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies), who has a great deal of experience of the matter as a former DEFRA Minister, said, it is important that we show that we can work with the science. He questioned why there was such a chasm between the science and the policy that was adopted. For 2016, ICES recommended a 90% cut, and some expect that its next advice, due in June this year, will be to recommend a complete moratorium lasting several years. That is what happens when early warnings are not heeded and action is not taken.

The Marine Conservation Society recommends a full six-month moratorium, followed by more stringent monthly catch limits and a range of avoidance and selectivity measures. As the MCS says, current measures

“have not come close to the reductions in fishing mortality needed to allow the stock to recover to levels capable of sustainable exploitation”.

The hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) has argued that commercial fishermen cannot easily change gear. I have sympathy for that view, but they are in this situation because sea bass stocks have dropped to such a low level. The hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes) made a similar point. I entirely accept her argument, but we are at the stage that if drastic action is not taken, the fish will simply not be there for people to catch.

The UK led in Europe on introducing the 2015 package of emergency measures to protect bass stocks, but it is estimated that these have reduced catches by only 36%. The European Commission accepts that the measures did not go far enough, but its 2016 proposals were watered down by Ministers at the EU Fisheries Council, with commercial sea bass fishing being closed for only two months of the year rather than the six-month moratorium during the spawning period that was proposed by the Commission. As the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) said, it was a stunningly bad deal.

Other Members have questioned the accuracy of the figures and assumptions used; why gillnetting is still being allowed; and the treatment of recreational anglers, who, somewhat perversely, will have to return all bass caught from April to June, but a commercial boat could come alongside and catch and kill the same fish.

It is clear that the current watered-down proposals will not do enough to protect sea bass stocks. The approach of making somewhat ad hoc, year-on-year decisions, which take on board ICES advice to some extent, but in some cases ignore it, is not a prescription for achieving a sensible long-term policy. It risks ignoring the lessons of previous stock collapses and forcing the introduction of a complete moratorium on all forms of bass fishing.

Does the Minister accept that the measures to date have not achieved the desired outcome, and that further action is now needed at EU level? Does he agree that over-fishing inevitably has consequences, and that the faster that depleted stocks can recover, the better? Did the UK support the Commission's call for a six-month moratorium, or were we party to watering down the proposals in the Council of Ministers? If so, does he now think that that was the wrong thing to do? Does he agree that it is important to take national action to tackle illegal, unregulated and unreported landings?

I understand that the UK has been sent an infringement letter about the poor quality of its commercial landing records. We hear reports of huge numbers of unrecorded landings, a thriving market in black fish, netting rules that are regularly flouted, and a buyers and sellers exemption that allows unlimited, unrecorded sales of 30 kg transactions from licensed vessels to consumers. I hope the Minister can tell us what he plans to do about that, as well as about what the UK can now do to secure a sustainable future for sea bass.

4.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): As someone who is not the fisheries Minister and whose constituency is stuck on the top of a mountain, I feel I am being drawn from my native rivers and well out from the pelagic realms into very deep water. My main responsibility has been to listen very carefully to this highly intelligent and serious debate. I will communicate all the arguments that have been made to the fisheries Minister and I will make sure that DEFRA takes them into account, responds to them in detail and takes action.

In the seven minutes I have left, it will not be possible for me to do full justice to all the speeches and interventions. May I say, however, that it is a great pleasure to take part in this debate? One of the most striking things about it, as one can see in the Chamber, is the great strength, good humour and, indeed, good looks of anglers. I have been very struck by the sense of generally energetic, tanned men, such as the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), who is looking cheerful and bouncy. I have a general sense that this sport brings out a stress-free, cheerful life, and that it is to be praised. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) also contributed to the debate in an intervention.

As someone who is new to the debate about sea bass, it is striking that it is bringing to the surface the very serious tension between EU fisheries policy and UK policy, and between the interests of anglers and the interests of commercial fishermen. Navigating our way through that is quite tough. Very strong statements were made by my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), who particularly stressed her family connection with commercial fishing, my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes), who took us all the way back to medieval abbots, and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox), whose speech was perhaps more suitable for mobilising a brigade for war than for a technical discussion of maximum sustainable yields.

The hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir) made us think about the role of aquaculture in relation to sea bass. One reason why sea bass is a very striking fish is that it is, or so it seems to an outsider, the next salmon—the next great challenge we face in the debate in the United Kingdom. It is clearly an unusual fish, as people found when they developed aquaculture in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It struggles to get out of the microscopic eggs, it produces juveniles that have difficulty in tracking down their prey, and it has to create its air sack by rising to the surface and filling it with an oxygen bubble. In fact, the species suffered what was essentially an extinction event in the Mediterranean. We are now talking about the north-east Atlantic, but the Mediterranean sea bass was in effect eliminated during the 1960s and 1970s. Most of its presence there now appears to be related to farmed sea bass that have escaped.

That is why the challenge that the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) made to us to focus hard on the science is so important. The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) focused on biomass, particularly breeding or spawning biomass, and my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) focused on landings. The shadow Secretary of State pointed to the issues around tonnage and black fish, particularly the landing of 1,100 tonnes in 2014.

This is a serious subject and the science is at the core of the debate. It does not matter whether we are talking to commercial fishermen or the angling community: the question is: what is the state of sea bass? Of course, sea bass has been on an extraordinary rollercoaster since the early 1980s. We went from minimal tonnage to a single spike year in the 1980s in which we hit nearly 13 million tonnes of biomass. Very warm conditions seem to have created an enormous number of sea bass. Along with changes in our eating patterns, that created the phenomenon, which did not really exist before the 1980s, of commercial fleets going into the Atlantic after sea bass to feed these new tastes. A series of cold winters from 2009 onwards appear to have led to a serious problem in new juvenile production, when combined with the large levels of catching, as the shadow Secretary of State pointed out.

The best analysis that we can currently reach on the subject comes from ICES. We believe that we are catching about 5,000 tonnes and that that is about 30% of an 18,000 tonne biomass. However, if we look at breeding biomass, the figures appear to be lower. I see the hon. Member for Ogmore is looking at a piece of paper. Does he want me to give way briefly?

Huw Irranca-Davies: I thank the Minister for a very detailed answer, which is focused on the science. The ICES evidence points to the necessity of an 80% cutback in the year ahead and a 90% cutback after that. Those cuts are massive and stringent. Will the Minister respond to the suggestion that we will actually be looking at about 20%? Is that accurate?

Rory Stewart: I notice that since the emergency of Daesh, people have really struggled to pronounce ICES. It is causing more and more of a problem. Foreign affairs and defence appear to be entering into fishing debates.

To answer the hon. Gentleman, the 80% reduction is a reduction from a current maximum sustainable yield, which we believe to be about 13%—that is the best

science—from the current catch rates and landings, which seem to be striking at about 30%. The question clearly is whether the measures taken in December Council will achieve those targets. I will come on to that now.

The key thing is that most of us in this Chamber agree that we need a solution—in fact, everybody in the Chamber probably agrees that we need a solution—that achieves a healthy bass stock. Again, I am very much not speaking as an expert, as this is outside my field. The measures that were taken at the Council were, broadly speaking, steps in the right direction. I think hon. Members would agree with that. The most important actions that were taken—this relates to the question from the hon. Member for Ogmore about the 80% reduction—were those that related to the pelagic fleet. In particular, the measures on drift netting—not on fixed gillnets, but on drift netting in general—were important, especially in relation to pair trawlers.

One debate in this House is about what kind of impact those measures will have. Will they reduce by 70% or even more the amount that is caught, as one would hope, or does more need to be done? I think that we would also embrace the move from 36 cm to 42 cm. The reason for that, which I do not need to point out to the House, is that we will get more spawning stock because the animals will get to a greater age.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my hon. Friend agree that in 2005, the UK fisheries Minister wanted to impose that increase just on UK fishermen? Now, it will at least be imposed on anybody who goes out from any member state to fish for bass.

Rory Stewart: That is a very good point, but it is important to remember that one reason why the EU dimension matters is that these fish are very widely distributed. I have talked about the Mediterranean variety, but they exist all the way from the Mediterranean right up to the north Atlantic. About 70% of the catches—it is hard to put a figure on this, but certainly the majority of the catches—in the north Atlantic come from French boats. It is extremely important, therefore, to the UK fisheries that an agreement is reached at the European level if we are to create a sustainable biomass and a maximum sustainable yield on catching.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), in a characteristically energetic, cheerful and engaged speech, attacked the specific conclusions that were reached in relation to fixed gillnets and, in particular, the 1.3 tonne limit and the two-month closure.

Let me move to a conclusion. There seems to be a consensus in the House that there is more to do and that we must consider our next steps, several of which have emerged from the debate. First, we must all agree that the huge achievement in the Council—I am sorry that more people have not pointed this out—was to get all member states to agree on the figure for the maximum sustainable yield. That is absolutely vital. By getting them to agree on a 13% take, we have a target for 2017-18 that we can use to leverage in exactly the kind of arguments made by my hon. Friend about the tonnage catch for individual boats. We must have those conversations throughout the summer and the rest of the year, and keep relentlessly focused on that target.

[Rory Stewart]

Secondly, the hon. Member for Angus made a powerful point about ensuring that, through the regional advisory council network, we have people in a room who are seriously focused on an agreed target of meeting that maximum sustainable yield—as my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall pointed out, that also extends to commercial fishing. The 25-year environment plan that DEFRA is introducing will provide us with an opportunity to lead a pathfinder that will focus on a marine area. Hopefully that will allow us to explore the kind of ideas that my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall focused on in relation to striped bass and the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham focused on in relation to Ireland, namely the potential social and economic benefit that can come from developing a sustainable bass angling industry.

This has been an impressive debate given the level of science, detail and constituency commitments involved. In defence of the deals that are being struck, we have achieved an enormous amount in addressing the biggest problem, which was the pelagic large drift and pair trawlers, and that is a big achievement. We have also achieved an enormous amount in getting agreement at European Council on the maximum sustainable yield, and that target will be vital. We have done that in a way that has attempted to respect the interests of commercial fishermen, and also to engage anglers. If we can achieve that target by 2017-18—and it will be tough—a lot of these issues can be revisited. If we do not achieve the right path towards that target in the coming year, we will have to revisit the catch for commercial fishermen. I call on the patience and understanding of the House as we address an issue that is important not just to this country, and that is the preservation of a unique iconic species: the branzino, the spigola, the lavráki, or for us, the bass.

4.57 pm

Scott Mann: I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this exceptionally good debate. I am pleased that the 900,000 sea anglers have had their voices heard today, and that we have had the opportunity to express their concerns. The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) made some interesting points about ecology, and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) spoke eloquently about the benefits of coming out of the EU, and how we might be able to control our own inshore fishing fleet. My hon. Friend

the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) always speaks eloquently about her inshore fleet, and I invite the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) and my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) to partake in a charter boat catch-and-release opportunity with Bass Go Deeper, a bass fishing company that works out of Cornwall.

What has come out of this debate is that we must follow the science, because without fish in the water there will be no recreational or commercial fishing. I thank the Minister for his response and for his idea of exploring how tourism could benefit from recreational angling. I urge him to consider the views expressed by hon. Members, as well as those of the angling community, and to fight as hard as he can in future weeks, months and years for the recreational angling community.

Question put and agreed to,

Resolved,

That this House believes that the recent EU restrictions on recreational sea bass fishing are unfair and fail to address the real threat to the future viability of UK sea bass stocks; and calls on the Government to make representations within the Council of the EU on the reconsideration of the imposition of those restrictions.

Heidi Alexander: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During today's oral statement on the junior doctor contract, the Secretary of State for Health said, "Along with other senior NHS leaders... Sir David has asked me to end the uncertainty for the service by proceeding with the introduction of a new contract". The *Health Service Journal* has this afternoon contacted the 20 senior NHS leaders the Health Secretary referred to in his statement, and at least five have replied to say that they do not support his decision to impose a new contract. I am concerned that in making this claim the Health Secretary may have inadvertently misled the House. Can you advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how best the Secretary of State can correct the record?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, but she will appreciate, as the House will, that it is not a point of order for the Chair. She has a point that she wishes to draw to the attention of the House, and she has used this mechanism so to do. I am quite sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what she has said and that her concerns will be conveyed to the Secretary of State. Whatever the Secretary of State says in this House is a matter for him and not a matter for the Chair.

Poppi Worthington

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Sarah Newton.)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Before I call the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), I should inform the House that as the coroner has now decided that the inquest into the death of Poppi Worthington should be resumed, the subject of this debate may, to some extent, be sub judice. Having carefully considered the matter and the public interest in it, Mr Speaker has decided to exercise the discretion allowed to the Chair to waive the usual restrictions on references to matters sub judice. However, I urge the hon. Gentleman and other Members present to be very careful in what they say and to take due account both of the resumed inquest and of the continuing possibility of a prosecution. I am quite sure that the hon. Gentleman will bear that in mind in dealing with such a very sensitive subject, as will the rest of the House.

5.2 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will heed your very appropriate warning on these matters. Indeed, the precise nature of what can and cannot, and should and should not, be disclosed is an important issue in this debate, as I will go on to discuss. I want to thank colleagues who have been right behind the push to try to salvage some justice after the death of Poppi Worthington and to press for the changes that this investigation clearly must lead to, both in the way the police operate in these matters and in social services. I am grateful to the Minister for her time today in the meeting, and it is good to be able to follow on so directly with this public debate.

Poppi Worthington died in December 2012, when she was 13 months old. We are now in February 2016, so more than three years later I am still having to come to this House for answers. Indeed, it has been only weeks since it has been possible to discuss this matter in public, because of the extensive, deeply surprising and in many ways concerning injunction that was placed upon reporting this matter. That was only partially lifted by Mr Justice Jackson's ruling last month.

I will briefly go through some of the key facts, before moving on to the questions I hope the Minister will answer. On 11 December 2012, Poppi Worthington was put to bed by her mother a perfectly healthy child. Eight hours later, she was brought downstairs by her father lifeless and with troubling injuries, including significant bleeding from her anus. She was just 13 months old when she died. It then took until June 2013 for the full post mortem to declare the cause of death as "unascertained".

In August 2013—eight months after Poppi's death—Paul Worthington, her father, was brought in for questioning. That was the first time he had been questioned by police. He had twice before been questioned in relation to different child sexual abuse allegations. Critical evidence, such as Poppi's clothes and last nappy, had been lost or never gathered by police. The media have reported that Mr Worthington's laptop was not requested by police at the time, and by the time they eventually asked for it, the device had apparently been sold and sold again and so was unavailable to the police's store of evidence.

In March 2014, a fact-finding report was delivered in private in a family court. Court records dated 18 December 2014 make it clear that lawyers acting for Cumbria County Council originally applied for a 15-year ban on the disclosure even of Poppi's name. In the judge's words, their case for secrecy included the claim that

"disclosure of alleged shortcomings by agencies might be unfair to the agencies".

The coroner's inquest in Barrow town hall took just seven minutes to declare her death as "unexplained". That is less than a quarter of the time we have for this debate.

It took legal action from a variety of media organisations to force a second inquest, after the first was declared insufficient and therefore unlawful. I pay tribute to several people in the media who have pushed for this tirelessly, particularly Clare Fallon of "BBC North West Tonight" and the *North West Evening Mail*, whose Justice for Poppi campaign is still gathering signatures on the Downing Street website for the full and independent investigation that I believe is necessary, given the scale and breadth of the failings.

It then took until July 2015 for the High Court to order the second inquest. In November, Mr Justice Jackson in the family court released part of his original fact-finding judgment from the March before. This revealed that Cumbria police conducted "no real investigation" into Poppi's death for nine months, despite a senior pathologist at the time raising concerns that Poppi might have suffered a serious sexual assault. It then took until this January—just last month—for Mr Justice Jackson to give his final, very clear verdict: based on medical evidence, he believed that Poppi had suffered a penetrative sexual assault before her death. It was only after this judgment that the second coroner's inquest could get off the ground. It had been requested in January 2015 and confirmed in July.

We heard earlier this week that the second inquest would commence in March and that we would find out the timetable soon. Worryingly, the senior coroner has indicated that it might not even be concluded this year. Meanwhile, the Independent Police Complaints Commission has put together a report into failings by Cumbria police that names several officers. The report was finished last March—nearly a full 12 months ago—and leaked to the BBC, but the IPCC is currently still refusing to publish it. Similarly, a serious case review by Cumbria Local Safeguarding Children Board is being withheld, despite the Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice, the hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage) making it clear that the publication of neither of these reports could prejudice the coroner's second inquest.

In addition, the Crown Prosecution Service is reviewing the evidence to see if a criminal prosecution is possible. The fact that it is in doubt is surely largely the result of the astounding failures by the police in their handling of this case. The clear question to the police, which must now be taken up, is why they did not act immediately after a pathologist raised the prospect of a serious sexual assault. Why did they not keep hold of vital evidence from the scene?

Those questions demand serious action from the force itself and from the Government. That brings me to the following serious issues: the nature of and justification

[John Woodcock]

for the refusal by the IPCC to publish its completed report; and the appointment and continued tenure of acting Chief Constable Michelle Skeer.

We are told that lessons have been learnt by the force, but we cannot judge because we are not permitted even to see the IPCC report into what went wrong. We do not know exactly why these failures occurred. We do not know if those responsible have been held properly accountable. Most importantly of all, we do not know if new systems have been put in place to stop this happening again.

I have written to the IPCC to ask for the release of its report. It refused on the grounds that it could prejudice the second inquest, the disciplinary processes that have yet to be fully undergone or a future criminal investigation. My case to the Minister today is that none of those three potential justifications holds any water.

Let me deal first with the idea that the report could prejudice the second inquest. The inquest, by definition of course, looks at the cause of death. It looks at the period of time up to death occurring. The IPCC report is concerned exclusively with the police investigation into that death, so there is zero overlap between those two periods of time. One cannot logically prejudice the other. While I understand that the Minister cannot command the IPCC, as it is currently constituted, to do anything—it is an independent body for justifiable reasons—I urge her to comment on her view of the logic of that case.

Neither is it legally possible to prejudice disciplinary proceedings, which are yet to get under way. That is my clear legal understanding based on evidence I have seen provided to the BBC. I would like the Minister to confirm that. The key failure we face is whether there is the prospect of mounting any criminal investigation at all.

When I was first able to question the Minister a couple of weeks ago after Mr Speaker granted me an urgent question on this matter, I called for a separate force to be brought in, given the manifest failures of the original investigation. I wanted a separate force to be brought in to take over this investigation. The Minister and I have been able to discuss this outside the Chamber and I understand that she does not yet have the necessary information to make a judgment on that, but part of the necessary information will be the IPCC report that is currently being withheld. Every day that goes by, the evidence trail gets colder, and every day without justice for Poppi is a day in which her killer, if she was unlawfully killed, is able to walk free.

Will the Minister confirm that she wants to see the report as quickly as possible, preferably through full and open publication? If that is not possible, is she prepared to ask for a private copy like that provided to the police and crime commissioner, who has confirmed that, although he is not allowed to refer to it publicly, he is able to use it to make judgments?

It has become apparent that the police and crime commissioner, Mr Richard Rhodes, had not received the report when he endorsed the temporary promotion of Michelle Skeer from deputy chief constable to acting chief constable after Chief Constable Jerry Graham was forced to stand down temporarily on the grounds of ill health. Regulations state that the PCC should be

given an unpublished report only if it relates to the chief constable, but he was not made aware of the contents of this report, even though he was required to endorse the temporary promotion of a woman—this is clear, because the report has been leaked to and reported on by the BBC, and it has been shown to me—whom it directly names and criticises for her actions in this case. She is now overseeing the force's path of improvement from the case, despite the fact that she was directly implicated in it.

Is the Minister as troubled as I am by this situation, and will she agree to re-examine the regulations and procedures, to ensure that this kind of thing cannot happen again? If a report relates to someone who may be promoted to the position of chief constable, the police and crime commissioner should automatically be given sight of that important evidence.

I have come to the conclusion that it is unsustainable for Michelle Skeer to continue in the post of acting chief constable, because that is to the detriment of restoring confidence in the police force and the process of change that it now needs to carry out. She was named in the report from which the police force needs to recover, and the manner of her appointment was flawed. The Minister will probably say that that judgment is not for her, but for the PCC to make. However, if the PCC reaches that view, will the Minister at least pledge to give him her Department's assistance in finding an alternative acting chief constable while the permanent chief constable returns to health?

These are incredibly difficult and distressing matters. No professional intentionally allows such horrific cases to go without justice. Police officers go to work to prevent and to solve crimes, and social workers go to work to protect children, but that has not happened in this case. Although this is a difficult and complex issue, the Government face a binary choice: either they must be prepared to step in and do all they can to increase transparency and to remove the logjam and the cloud of secrecy hanging over the case, or they will end up being part of a system that perpetuates that secrecy.

5.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) on securing the debate, and thank him for the points that he, along with others, has raised about this deeply sad and troubling matter today and previously. He is an excellent constituency Member, and I know how hard he works for his constituents. The fact that he is continuing to campaign on this deeply troubling matter is a credit to him, and a credit to the constituents who elected him. I also thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the advice that you gave at the beginning of the debate. I shall bear your words in mind.

The circumstances surrounding the death of Poppi Worthington are extremely distressing and disturbing. I am sure that other Members who have read the press reports and court findings have found them as profoundly upsetting and moving as I have, and I am sure that we share a determination to try and discover what happened in Poppi's case. Any failings in the police response, or the response of any other agency involved, must be identified, and action must be taken to ensure that they are never repeated.

However, as I made clear in my comments to the House during a debate on this matter on 20 January, I cannot comment on this case in detail. Indeed, it has become even more crucial for me to maintain that position since the announcement on Tuesday by senior coroner David Llewelyn Roberts that the inquest into Poppi's death will reopen on 18 March. I know that Members will share my primary concern that, in discussing this case, we should not inadvertently prejudice a much-needed judicial process. The House will understand that, to that end—whatever my personal views may be on the terrible nature of Poppi's death—I am constrained by the ongoing proceedings, and am therefore unable to make any detailed comment today. I urge others, in the Chamber and outside, to consider and take heed of that approach.

Members will be aware of the allegations of police failings in the original criminal investigation of Poppi's death in 2012, which have been investigated by the Independent Police Complaints Commission. The IPCC looked into whether that specific investigation had been conducted thoroughly and appropriately, and whether investigative opportunities to obtain key evidence had been identified and acted on appropriately. It is, of course, the role of Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary to assess the overall functioning of the force.

The IPCC's subsequent investigation report was given to Cumbria constabulary on 1 April last year, so that it could consider the report and determine what action to take. I should point out that HMIC will have regard to the force's response to the IPCC report in the course of its inspections. All forces are inspected annually on their overall effectiveness, and, in addition, HMIC has a rolling national child protection inspection programme which looks specifically at each force's child protection arrangements.

I fully understand the level of public interest in Poppi's death, and I fully understand why there have been calls by, among others, the hon. Gentleman for the IPCC report to be published immediately. I know that the IPCC has written to the hon. Gentleman to explain its position, offering to meet him to discuss the matter further. I have met IPCC officials to discuss the matter, and I understand its position. I appreciate that we must balance the interest of the public in these matters with the wider public interest in ensuring that the integrity of ongoing and any future proceedings is not jeopardised. The IPCC has made it clear to me that it will not release the report while disciplinary proceedings are ongoing. It has also told me that the second inquest may be a jury inquest, and that it does not wish to release the report until there is certainty about whether that is the case, because otherwise there might be prejudice in regard to the inquest.

John Woodcock: The Minister and I know that that is the justification, but does she at least understand my bafflement, given the entirely different timeframes that are being discussed, as I set out?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman and I discussed that point earlier. I sympathise with his position, but that is the IPCC's position and its guidance. I should make the point that I want to see justice done and to uncover the failings. As long as the people who are able to find that out and make those decisions have all the

information available to them, that is my priority. I do not want anything to jeopardise that and I do not want anything that means that justice is not done. As long as the people who make those decisions and who can get to the bottom of the situation know what happened, that is the priority.

John Woodcock: I thank the Minister once again for giving way—this will be the last time I intervene. I hear what she says on that point, but if she were to see the report in private would that be useful to her in making a judgment on whether another force ought to be brought in? Surely it would be useful for her to see that information in private.

Karen Bradley: I met the IPCC this week. It does not give reports out and has to wait for the appropriate moment. There is not a process by which a Minister can see those reports. It would not be appropriate for Ministers to see reports before it is appropriate for them to be released to the public.

In response to the hon. Gentleman's point, I should explain that there is no obligation for the IPCC to provide an investigation report to the police and crime commissioner as part of any due diligence exercise on a potential promotion candidate within a force. The IPCC's obligation to provide that report to the police and crime commissioner applies only when it relates to the alleged misconduct of a chief officer for whom the PCC has a statutory responsibility. However, the hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the PCC having full sight of all information when an appointment is made. I have asked officials to look at whether anything can be done, because it could involve somebody going to a different force—they do not have to be within the same force—and it is important that PCCs who are considering a candidate for a chief officer role have all the information pertinent to the appointment when they make the decision. The hon. Gentleman asked about advice that can be given by the Home Office to the PCCs who are looking for new recruits. I assure him that any PCC who approaches the Home Office for advice on recruiting a new chief officer will receive that advice.

I stand with those who urgently want to understand what has happened in this case, but I also want to see justice served and the truth to be established. We must be careful in our haste to see justice done that we do not inadvertently prevent it from being done. In addition to the inquest into Poppi's death and the ongoing disciplinary proceedings at Cumbria constabulary, the Crown Prosecution Service is reviewing the file on Poppi's case to decide whether to launch a criminal prosecution. To avoid prejudice in any of those cases, the IPCC intends to publish its report after the conclusion of all the proceedings I have mentioned. That may disappoint some, but we must recognise the rationale for that decision.

The IPCC has investigated allegations of police failings in relation to Poppi's death, but the criminal investigation remains a matter for Cumbria constabulary. I know there have been calls for that investigation to be reopened and for a fresh one to commence. It is of course open to the police to review the investigation, but that is an operational decision for the force that will need to be considered in the light of what, if anything, a review could realistically achieve. It is for the chief constable of Cumbria to consider whether the investigation should

[Karen Bradley]

be reopened and whether another force should take on the investigation in order to maintain public confidence. Whatever my personal convictions, it would not be appropriate for the Home Office to intervene in this situation.

I once again thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue and extend the offer of continued dialogue and meetings. We all want to get to the bottom

of what happened and to see justice done. I acknowledge that many questions have still to be answered in this terrible case. Like other Members, I want to see the outcome of those proceedings. I look to the outcome with interest, but I want them dealt with as speedily as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 11 February 2016

[MR ANDREW TURNER *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Persecution of Religious Minorities: Pakistan

1.30 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims and other religious minorities in Pakistan.

The cornerstone of the Ahmadiyya Muslim faith is its belief in peace and religious tolerance for everyone. Its motto is:

“Love for all, hatred for none.”

However, as we speak, that very same peaceful community continues to be persecuted on a daily basis in Pakistan and elsewhere. It is the only religious community to be targeted by the state on the grounds of faith. In Pakistan, Ahmadis cannot call themselves Muslims and are prohibited by law from voting as Muslims. That state-sponsored persecution has been enshrined in the country’s constitution since 1974. On top of that, Ahmadis are openly declared as “deserving to be killed”, with neither the state nor civic society willing to stand up for them against extremists. Perpetrators are given free rein to attack Ahmadis, safe in the knowledge that they will not be prosecuted for their actions.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. I take this opportunity to praise Mohammed Salim and other members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Association who do so much for our community in Warwick and Leamington.

Does the hon. Lady agree that if Pakistan expects to grow its economy exponentially, it needs to address these serious humanitarian concerns and, in particular, the Pakistani Government’s failure to legally recognise the Ahmadiyya Muslim community?

Mr Andrew Turner (in the Chair): That intervention went on a bit long. Let’s get them a bit shorter.

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree with the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White). It is a thriving, well-educated community that has much to give Pakistan, and it will do so if given the freedom and opportunity.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Although the debate is rightly focusing on the persecution of the Ahmadis in Pakistan, will my hon. Friend find a way to raise with the Minister the concerns that the Ahmadiyya community has about the way it is treated in Bulgaria and Indonesia, where similar problems exist, albeit not on the same scale as in Pakistan?

Siobhain McDonagh: I agree with my hon. Friend. I will talk about Indonesia, but not about Bulgaria. It is surprising that that country should have an issue of this sort.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank my constituency neighbour for giving way for a third time. I am pleased to hear that she will come on to the subject of Indonesia, particularly given what has happened in Bangka in recent days. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the Ahmadiyya Muslim community for its work in relation to the floods. Ahmadis have gone up in large numbers to support the communities affected.

Siobhain McDonagh: The community activities of the Ahmadiyya community in the UK are extensive, and I am sure that every Member here will have a different example of something that it has done for their own and other communities.

In the past few years, hundreds of Ahmadis have been murdered on the grounds of their faith. Eleven were murdered in 2014 alone. This year, a vigilante mob targeted an Ahmadi family in Gujranwala, setting their home alight and killing three family members: a grandmother and her two little grandchildren. No arrests have been made, and Pakistani news channels refused to air bulletins about the incident. It is quite shocking to think that the persecution the community faces is enshrined in Pakistani law.

It is a criminal offence for an Ahmadi to call themselves Muslim, refer to their faith as Islam, call their place of worship a mosque, or say the Islamic greeting, “Peace be upon you”. That is punishable by imprisonment, a fine or even death. Those laws are a clear denial of basic human rights for Ahmadi Muslims freely to profess and practise their faith without state interference or persecution. The laws specifically against Ahmadiyya Muslims also undermine the constitutional right of Pakistani citizens to practice freedom of religion. The state’s laws have emboldened other states and extremists to harass, attack and kill Ahmadis. The persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims operates in many complex ways, as does the persecution of other religious minorities, which I hope we will explore in this debate.

Ahmadiis are denied the right to vote—they are disfranchised unless they declare themselves non-Muslims. They remain the only disfranchised group in Pakistan. Indeed, the Electoral Commission of Pakistan has further institutionalised the disenfranchisement. It has decided that Ahmadis can be permitted to vote only under a separate register, and by self-identifying as a non-Muslim minority and therefore by denying their faith. While Ahmadis are registered on a separate electoral register, all other communities—whether Muslim, Sikh, Hindu or Christian—are listed on a unified joint register. The requirement of Ahmadis to deny their faith in order to vote has caused their disfranchisement from Pakistani politics for more than 30 years. Worse still, the separate Ahmadiyya electoral register is publicly available, making it much easier for extremists to target Ahmadis.

Ahmadiis are also denied the basic right to a fair trial. The vast majority of the terrible offences committed against Ahmadis go unpunished. It is crucial to note that no prosecutions have been brought for any of the killings of Ahmadiyya Muslims. On top of that, Ahmadis are increasingly being charged and tried for terrorism

[*Siobhain McDonagh*]

offences. Take the elderly Ahmadi optician from Rabwah, Mr Abdul Shakoor. Mr Shakoor has been tried and convicted, and imprisoned for five years, under Pakistan's anti-terrorism act, on false charges alleging the sale of an Ahmadiyya commentary on the Holy Koran. Pakistan's anti-terrorism legislation was introduced to curb the rise of extreme sectarian violence in the country. It is extremely distressing to learn that that same legislation has been used to convict a 70-year-old member of one of Pakistan's most peaceful religious communities.

Another example is Mr Tahir Mehdi Imtiaz, who is an editor of an Ahmadiyya monthly publication. Mr Imtiaz was arrested by police in March 2015 on false charges. This time, it was under Pakistan's infamous blasphemy laws. Although the prosecution was unable to provide evidence that Mr Imtiaz had included blasphemous materials in his publications, judges in the Supreme Court of Pakistan rejected his pleas for bail prior to trial. That was because the judiciary still fear being viewed as being lenient on Ahmadis—anti-Ahmadi sentiment pervades society. To this day, almost a year since his arrest, Mr Imtiaz is still incarcerated with no prospect of bail or a trial date in sight.

Both those Ahmadi men have been arrested and imprisoned on false grounds as a result of the discrimination that is entrenched in Pakistan's justice system. I am sure that Members will join me in hoping that the UK Government will call on the Pakistani Government to release Mr Imtiaz and Mr Shakoor immediately. Will the Minister outline what the FCO is doing on those two cases?

Mr Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend rightly draws attention to the immediate responsibilities of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but given that the aid budget to Pakistan from the Department for International Development is heavy, and that DFID has many opportunities for influence too, does she not agree that there needs to be a co-ordinated, cross-Government démarche to the various levels of the Pakistani Government, both at state and federal level?

Siobhain McDonagh: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. I was having just that discussion the other day with the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), who expressed his concern that aid is being given to Pakistan but the issues of the Ahmadiyya community are not being resolved.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I am listening with interest to the point she is making. The coalition Government set up an advisory group on freedom of religion and belief in the Foreign Office, which was a welcome initiative. Does she share my disappointment that that group has not been re-established since the general election, and that it seems it is no longer a priority?

Siobhain McDonagh: I am sure my right hon. Friend had a great input into that initiative. Perhaps the Minister will address the issue of re-forming that group under this Government in his speech.

The Ahmadiyya community is also denied the right to religious freedom and expression in Pakistan. On orders from the united religious clerics board, all works by that religious group are now banned in the region of Punjab. That includes books, CDs, periodicals and newspapers, and it means that hundreds of thousands of law-abiding Ahmadi Muslims in Punjab face police searches, criminal charges and up to five years in prison. Those texts are all religious, and their censorship is totally unjustified.

In contrast, the "Tohfa Qadianiat", written by an anti-Ahmadi cleric, instructs readers not to leave a single Ahmadi alive on earth. That publication is freely available; it seems censorship does not apply to vehemently anti-Ahmadi texts. Sadly, Ahmadis are also the target of several religious extremist groups, the foremost of which is the Khatme Nabuwat, whose sole purpose is to eradicate Ahmadi Muslims. Last year, it declared that

"it is Jihad to shoot Ahmadis in the open".

I am sure hon. Members will share my shock that this organisation is a registered charity in the UK, despite the fact that its Pakistan counterpart has clear links with violence. I hope that the Minister will address that issue later this afternoon.

In addition, preachers of anti-Ahmadi hate are spreading their repellent messages within our own UK borders via satellite TV and the internet. Ofcom has already fined several TV channels, including the Ummah Channel, Takbeer TV and DM Digital, for broadcasting anti-Ahmadi hatred. Such an overspill of anti-Ahmadi sentiments is extremely concerning, because it is very difficult to police the incitement of hatred and violence against Ahmadis online and across borders. The situation needs continuous monitoring here, and the UK Government need to be mindful of anti-Ahmadi hatred pervading their own borders. We do not want vile anti-Ahmadi messages to spread within the UK.

Tom Brake: Work is being done by a Government unit to tackle Daesh propaganda. Perhaps any lessons learnt could be applied to tackling abusive material in relation to the Ahmadi community.

Siobhain McDonagh: That is a very good suggestion. The situation here needs continuous monitoring, and the UK Government need to be mindful of anti-Ahmadi hatred pervading our borders.

Many Ahmadi Muslim mosques across Pakistan have been sealed, and minarets have been demolished by police under pressure from extremists. Indeed, in May last year, the district court in Chakwal ordered the minarets and arch of the local Ahmadi mosque to be destroyed. Ahmadis are even denied dignity in death. Their graves are frequently vandalised, with any reference to Islam removed.

Anti-Ahmadi sentiment also pervades Pakistan's civic society. The Pakistani Urdu press continues to publish fabricated stories that incite violence towards Ahmadis. This propagates the idea that Ahmadis are the root cause of problems in Pakistan. In 2014 alone, at least 2,000 such reports were published. I do not need to remind hon. Members how such publications and stories entrench and normalise discrimination. Meanwhile, Ahmadi students face systematic discrimination in schools and educational institutions. This discrimination even extends

to the literature that students use. For instance, one Sindh textbook teaches children that Ahmadi Muslims are evil and suggests that anyone who is or becomes Ahmadi is worthy of being killed. The effect of these examples means that anti-Ahmadi discrimination is entrenched beyond generations.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and I congratulate her on securing the debate today. She mentions textbooks. The Department for International Development places great emphasis on educating children in Pakistan. Perhaps the influence of the UK Government could be brought to bear on the aid that is given specifically to education?

Siobhain McDonagh: That is certainly something that DFID should look at. I am aware of grants being threatened because textbooks that contain difficult and discriminatory messages are used.

The situation in Pakistan overflows its borders and has resulted in many Ahmadis fleeing to seek refuge. Many have fled to countries such as Thailand, where they live in extremely difficult conditions to escape the persecution that they face in Pakistan. However, the community is being let down in Thailand, too. Just last month, the Thai Government arrested and arbitrarily detained more than 45 Ahmadis and are now seeking to deport them back to Pakistan, where they will inevitably face persecution and even violence. This group includes women and very young children, some of whom have been recognised as refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. They are being detained in terrible conditions. This is despite the fact that Thailand has responsibilities under UN conventions. But it seems that the Thai Government have forgotten the extreme dangers that Ahmadis face if they are returned to Pakistan, a country they have fled in fear of their lives. I look forward to the Minister addressing this point and outlining what the UK Government are doing to urge Thai authorities to permit Ahmadi refugees to stay until the UNHCR completes its due process.

Within our own borders, the situation is similarly bleak. Despite overwhelming evidence demonstrating the persecution and targeted violence faced by this community in Pakistan, the UK is currently in the process of deporting Ahmadi asylum seekers. This contravenes the UK's own guidance issued just last year. I am sure hon. Members will join me in being absolutely appalled by the Home Office seemingly accepting the terrible risks faced by Ahmadis who openly practise their faith in Pakistan. I hope that the Minister will agree that this position urgently needs to change.

At the same time as the Ahmadi community flees persecution in Pakistan, it faces more and more persecution in other nations, as the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) mentioned, in places such as Bangka, Indonesia. Just last Friday, Ahmadis in this region were forcibly evicted from their homes by the police and military authorities as a result of extremists putting pressure on local authorities. Ahmadis were given an ultimatum to either renounce their faith or be forced to leave, and the objections made by the Indonesian Home Minister against the evictions were ignored. Ahmadi families were evicted while mobs who were delighted to see them go cheered. Not only is this example distressing

in itself but it is likely to trigger other such forced evictions, increasingly making Indonesian Ahmadis refugees in their own countries.

So what can be done about the terrible persecution faced by this peaceful community? In Pakistan, the situation sadly remains bleak. Despite the many ongoing human rights abuses, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif stated last month,

"I am the Prime Minister of all of you...And it is my duty to help everyone. If anyone is a victim of brutality, no matter what religion or what sect he belongs to, my duty is to help him."

Meanwhile, article 20 of Pakistan's constitution guarantees freedom of religion. The country is also a signatory to the UN charter of human rights, which makes it obligatory for the Government to safeguard the fundamental rights of all without any discrimination, whether it is based on religion, faith or belief, but it is clear that Pakistan is systematically failing to uphold the human rights of all its citizens.

The ongoing persecution of Ahmadi citizens undermines Pakistan's progress and its development, and stores up huge problems for the future stability of the country. Furthermore, the state's policies allow extremism to flourish, which threatens the security of Pakistan itself, the UK, and of course the rest of the world. What is also clear is that the international community has a moral responsibility to act and apply pressure on Pakistan to abide by international conventions and treaties in order to uphold the human rights of all.

I hope that this debate will inspire the Minister to reflect on the UK's stance on those issues. The Government must raise the issues of corruption and anti-Ahmadi laws, which allow extremists to target and murder Ahmadis. They should put pressure on Pakistan to rid itself of its discriminatory anti-Ahmadi laws, and encourage the Pakistani Government to grant the peaceful Ahmadi community the right to worship, the right to justice and a fair trial, and the right to practise their religion without fear of persecution, discrimination or violence.

Mr Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend is rightly focusing on the difficulties relating to the Ahmadis' human rights in Pakistan, but many other religious minorities in Pakistan are under the same pressure. Christians, Hindus and other Islamic groups also face persecution, which is clearly tolerated at the federal state level, where the Pakistani authorities also need to take action.

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree, and I hope that other hon. Members will talk about the problems that other religious groups in Pakistan face.

The Government should be vocal in addressing the situation of the Ahmadi communities in Thailand and Indonesia. They should think about how to guarantee that UK taxpayers' money will not be used to promote intolerance and extremism in Pakistan. Finally, they should look closely at the UK's borders and the unfairness of our asylum processes, which are failing Ahmadi asylum seekers who have fled violence and persecution and forcing them back to Pakistan.

Ahmadi Muslims are peaceful and peace-loving, and they give so much to their communities. I am proud that the Borough of Merton is the UK and worldwide headquarters of the Ahmadi Muslim community, which makes an incredible contribution to the richness and diversity of our area. The Baitul Futuh mosque in

[*Siobhain McDonagh*]

Morden is the largest mosque in western Europe. The community's impact on this country is inestimable. It has raised more than £2 million for British charities and makes regular collections for the Royal British Legion's poppy appeal. It uses its mosques as blood donation centres and has raised 1,000 units of blood in the past year. It feeds 30,000 homeless people each year and has distributed the peaceful teachings of Islam to 5 million UK homes.

Hon. Members should be proud to represent constituencies with an Ahmadi population. We in this House have a responsibility to do all we can do to give the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims the international visibility it deserves. I hope this debate will inspire the Minister to take meaningful action to ensure that the UK plays its part in promoting freedom of religion in Pakistan and across the world.

1.53 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (*Siobhain McDonagh*), who made an excellent speech.

The Ahmadis have suffered greatly and have been subject to numerous attacks, even during Friday prayers. The vicious brutality of those attacks is magnified by the Ahmadis' belief in love for all and hatred for none. How can we ensure that Pakistan's beleaguered minorities receive the help they desperately need? One way is for Members to read and send to those in authority the report that the all-party group on international religious freedom or belief will publish shortly.

Just a few weeks ago, the APPG took evidence in a number of hearings that revealed the systematic and widespread persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan. It heard harrowing personal accounts from Christians, Ahmadis and others who have watched loved ones murdered in a culture of impunity. It heard the story of Pakistan's last remaining Jew and was moved by the bravery and courage of so many in the minority communities. Lord Alton of Liverpool, who chaired those hearings, said:

"We hope that the Report which will emerge from this evidence will force our policy makers, along with those of other Governments, to reassess the way in which we engage with Pakistan."

The report, which will collate the evidence gathered in those hearings, will be launched in Parliament shortly and sent to the relevant Government bodies, parliamentarians and members of the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief, which now operates in nearly 60 countries. Recommendations will be sent to the Home Office officials in charge of setting country guidance—I am glad to say that they attended the hearings—and those who look at options for asylum seekers. We hope the report will bring about tangible change in the UNHCR and to the Home Office's approach to the minorities that face persecution in Pakistan and seek asylum. The report will show that, in today's Pakistan, minorities—including Ahmadis, Sikhs, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims from the Shi'a tradition—face relentless violence, profound discrimination and, in some cases, outright persecution.

Hon. Members may be interested, and I hope touched, to know that the brother of Shahbaz Bhatti—Pakistan's outstanding Minister for minorities, who was murdered

four years ago—spoke in this very room on this subject, only a few weeks ago. Dr Paul Bhatti, a medical doctor, said,

"Since almost the last two decades Pakistan has been facing a series of challenges with religious discrimination and persecution, sectarian violence, economic crisis, political instability and terrorism. Despite anti-terrorism reforms, promotion of religious freedom, support of the international community, and precious sacrifices that have been made"—

not least by his brother, who spent 28 years of his life promoting interfaith community relations—

"we still face the cruel and harsh realities of violence against the weak and voiceless people of our community... We want this Pakistan, without any discrimination among people of diverse faiths, where weak and oppressed feel safe and respected: as the father of our nation Muhammad Ali Jinnah said, we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state. This is the path we are following indicated by Shahbaz to see our beloved country where there's no discrimination between Majority and religious minorities (Shiites, Sufi Muslims, Isma'ili, Ahmadis, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Baha'i). Each of us is on a road, a religious path to a spiritual destination, a place of consequences and accountability for our choices and actions."

He is committed, as are many in this place and across the world, to ensuring that Pakistan enjoys peace and stability. He stated in this room:

"I am convinced that religious freedom and education together can be the solution in the actualization of world peace."

Dr Bhatti's brother, a Minister in the Pakistani Government, was gunned down. In the hearings that were held a few weeks ago in this place, Members of Parliament heard of the burning alive of a Christian couple in an industrial kiln by a mob in Pakistan. The mob allegedly broke their legs. Rumours had circulated that they had burned verses from the Koran. An NBC News report states:

"Their legs were also broken so they couldn't run away. 'They picked them up by their arms and legs and held them over the brick furnace until their clothes caught fire... And then they threw them inside the furnace.' Bibi, a mother... was four months pregnant".

Their children were forced to watch. If almost five years after the death of Shahbaz Bhatti the perpetrators have still not been brought to justice, what chance is there that the killers of those two loving parents will be brought to justice? It is right that we cry out in this place today on their behalf and on the behalf of so many others who have suffered.

I turn now to the particular suffering of women of minority faith groups. Much of the rest of my speech will dwell on this topic, because it is important that we, as a Parliament, take note of the issue when the Government proclaim as a priority the promotion of the welfare and wellbeing of women and girls across the globe. It is a genuine priority of the Secretary of State for International Development, and I pay tribute to her personal work in leading the charge to increase support for women and girls in so many countries around the world. Following this debate, I hope that the UK Government and those responsible for disseminating aid in Pakistan will pay particular attention to the plight of women and girls in religious minorities, because they are doubly at risk of discrimination, regardless of the faith they adhere to. They risk systematic abduction, extortion, hijacking, being held for ransom, trafficking, rape, forced marriage, forced conversions, and allegations of blasphemy.

Women and girls face discrimination and marginalisation as it is, but they are subject to further targeting if they are from a minority group. Women are treated as second class, but if they come from a minority group, they are third class citizens. For example, Hindu girls in Sindh and Christian girls in Punjab are abducted, raped, or forced to convert to Islam in the face of extreme pressure, including threats to them and their families. The majority of Christian women in Pakistan are illiterate and hold menial jobs, working in factories or as domestic servants, and face a constant risk of sexual harassment, physical abuse, forced conversion or even death. The Asian Human Rights Commission stated in its report of December 2012 that

“on average some 700 Christian and 300 Hindu girls are forcibly converted to Islam each year...notably in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh provinces.”

It is interesting that an independent survey in Pakistan cited religious extremism as the greatest threat to the country. District minority committees have failed to review matters, such as personal laws and rules, for minority women's rights.

While the police are at times complicit in fulfilling the wishes of the local elite, who may be in collusion with extremists, organisations that submitted evidence to the report stated that police in all provinces are gender-blind in cases of forced conversion and marriage. They can often effectively be complicit in such activities, nullifying women's previous non-Islamic marriages and recognising their forced marriages instead. In cases of sexual assault, rape, and sexual violence, they do not conduct proper investigations and minority women can be re-victimised because police take bribes and do not adequately protect minority women. All of that has been reported to us.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports that Christians do not feel safe going to police stations when they have problems relating to unjust blasphemy charges. In October 2015, three Muslim men broke into a deaf Christian woman's home in Kasur in Pakistan, taking her turns to rape her while the men of the family were at work. Despite such a crime, the lawyer who is defending the woman admits the difficulty of getting the case to court to punish the perpetrators.

The implementation of the Hudood ordinances, laws enacted in 1979 as part of the Islamisation process, has had seriously damaging consequences for all sections of Pakistani society, but women in religious minorities have been particularly targeted and victimised as a result. Notwithstanding the state's commitment to the non-imposition of an exclusively Islamic code on non-Muslims, the ordinances for the most part control the activities of non-Muslims. Religious minorities remain liable to suffer punishments as gross as physical amputations and whipping for various offences such as theft, and whipping or even death for accusations of adultery.

Christian women, like other minorities, face persecution and discrimination simply because of their faith. The real and present dangers faced by women of non-Muslim faith are much direct and substantial. Hindu women also face difficulties, with key concerns being conversion to Islam, sexual abuse and forced marriage. Problems have increased in recent years, and the volunteer group REAL found that between 20 and 25 Hindu girls were forcibly converted every month. The greatest victims are the Dalits who are kidnapped or lured into conversion, sexually exploited and then abandoned. There is no

legal mechanism for the Government to register the marriages of Hindus and Sikhs, causing women difficulties with inheritances, accessing health services, voting, obtaining a passport, and buying or selling property. It is even reported that Sikh families will marry off their daughters at extremely young ages simply to avoid them being abducted, raped or forced to convert.

Considering the risks women and girls from religious minorities face in Pakistan, we must ask what is being done to support them. As I said, they are not just second-class; they are third-class citizens. Taking into account the fact that Pakistan is one of the largest recipients of our bilateral aid, receiving some £1.17 billion in support from the UK between 2011 and 2015, and while recognising that the Secretary of State has given clear priority to support for women and girls across all countries to which the UK provides aid, we must ask whether our aid is being adequately used to support the women and girls who are being persecuted due to their faith. I urge Ministers to review how our aid is distributed in Pakistan to ensure that it does not facilitate further persecution of minority women, and in fact helps to foster an environment of respect, plurality and freedom for women and men of all religious denominations.

2.8 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I offer my sincere appreciation to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this important debate. In welcoming the debate, I must also highlight the welcome that I received from the Ahmadi community; I felt truly humbled at their hospitable and genial reception. In stark contrast, the treatment of Ahmadi Muslims in some other countries is reprehensible.

In Pakistan, the Ahmadi population are not simply treated with disdain; they are systematically subjected to discrimination that is deeply ingrained in Pakistan's laws and culture. When a Pakistani Muslim applies for a passport or other identification, they are asked to sign an oath denouncing the Ahmadi faith. In 2010 Mohammed Hanif, a BBC journalist, reported on that injustice:

“Like millions of other Pakistanis, I have signed this oath several times without giving much thought to exactly what Mr Ahmad stands for...I want my passport, and if I have to sign up to a fatwa to get it, so be it.”

The policy also leads to the disfranchisement of the Ahmadi population. There is an entirely separate electoral register for Ahmadis, and if they wish to vote they must deny their beliefs. Our own history has taught us that the principle of universal adult suffrage is an ideal to be upheld. In Pakistan Ahmadis are subjugated and treated unequally, just as women were in the UK in the past century. We must take care not to impose our values on others, but we cannot stand idly by and watch others denied their right to vote, as set out in article 21 of the universal declaration of human rights.

Although Pakistan has made strides towards ensuring parity of esteem for other religions and denominations, the Ahmadis continue to be singled out and marginalised. They are also endangered by such policies. The separate electoral register not only stigmatises but identifies them. Many Ahmadis have been murdered for their beliefs, so government policies that jeopardise their security are tantamount to the authorities being complicit in those barbarous acts.

[Margaret Ferrier]

To put the situation into perspective, about 250 Ahmadis have been murdered since 1984, yet not a single perpetrator has been prosecuted. What are we doing to address that situation with the Pakistani authorities? What, too, are we doing to address the other persecutions to which Ahmadis are subjected? In Pakistan, Ahmadi Muslims can spend up to three years in prison simply for calling their place of worship a mosque. If their alleged offence is considered blasphemy, they can even face the death penalty.

The law is truly designed to suppress beliefs and to designate Ahmadis as non-Muslims. That flies in the face of Pakistan's obligations as a signatory state of the international covenant on civil and political rights. It committed to freedom of religion for all, but places incomprehensible restrictions on Ahmadis. An example of such repression is that of the publisher of the Ahmadiyya *Ansarullah* magazine, who was arrested on the false allegation of producing blasphemous material. Tahir was refused bail and has now been imprisoned without charge for the past 10 months.

The shock that we might feel about such cases could be attributed to cultural difference, but it is important to point out that such laws appear to contravene even the constitution of Pakistan, which includes an article that affords the "Freedom to profess religion and to manage religious institutions" to citizens. Yet that freedom continues to be denied. There have been reports of graves being desecrated and burial rights being denied. There have been horrendous massacres at two mosques in Lahore leaving 86 dead. There are reports of arson and other attacks by people riled up by extremist rallies. Ahmadis are denied the right to peaceful assembly, but such hate rallies unfortunately do not seem to be subject to the same restrictions.

We cannot stand by and allow that to go on. As the Minister knows, I am a fierce advocate of global human rights, and I wish to see a firm stance taken by the UK Government. The Ahmadi community in the UK makes an enormous contribution to our society. We owe it not only to them but to ourselves to make an effort to right those wrongs.

In summary, will the Minister inform us in his response whether the UK Government have raised the issue of the voting rights of Ahmadi Muslims with the Pakistani authorities? If not, will he undertake to do so and to promote the principles of universal suffrage against discriminatory policies? Will he call on Pakistan to uphold its obligations as a signatory state of the international covenant on civil and political rights, in particular that on freedom of religion for all?

Finally, what assessment have the Government made of the extent of the persecution in Pakistan? How have the UK Government pushed the Pakistani authorities on the matter of religious persecution? How will the Government use their influence to push the Pakistani authorities further? Will the Government call for an end to the destruction of Ahmadi minarets? Furthermore, will the UK Government push the Pakistani Government to provide protection once and for all to the Ahmadi community, whose banner reads:

"Love for all, hatred for none"?

2.14 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner.

I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing the debate. It is a pleasure to serve as vice-chair of the all-party group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community under her chairmanship. It is good that we have been able to raise these issues in the Chamber today.

My constituency abuts Mitcham and Morden, and our shared border is close to the Baitul Futuh mosque, which it has been a pleasure and privilege to visit on a number of occasions. Some of the people I have met are in the Public Gallery today. Everyone there spoke with composure and in a measured way, despite the extreme circumstances of their fellow believers in Pakistan and, as we have heard, around the world. They have suffered and seen adversity closer to home as well. It was terrible to see the recent fire at the Baitul Futuh mosque, but the Ahmadis bounced back fantastically well as a community. They only look forward. My next visit to the mosque was shortly after the Paris atrocities, and it was wonderful and a real privilege to stand shoulder to shoulder with them to demonstrate exactly what they mean by "Love for all, hatred for none".

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is outlining the role of the Ahmadi community here in the UK. Will he join me in condemning those who have been trying to bring persecution of and discrimination against the Ahmadis to the UK? There have been boycotts of some of their shops and harassment of Ahmadis. Should we in this Parliament make it clear that such activity has no place in this country?

Paul Scully: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Hatred and persecution certainly have no place here in the UK. That is why we need to lead from the front and make that case to the Government and other organisations in Pakistan, as well as around the world. The point is well made.

Mr Gareth Thomas: In a spirit of north and south London solidarity, does the hon. Gentleman agree that another thing that the Foreign Office could do is to raise with Bulgaria the discrimination that takes place against Ahmadis there? Bulgaria is a key European Union ally and one with which we ought to have good contacts, so we could discuss the issue repeatedly until progress happens and the discrimination ends.

Mr Andrew Turner (in the Chair): We are getting rather long interventions, which we should not be.

Paul Scully: Bulgaria is an important issue, which has also been raised with me and, I am sure, with the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden when we have visited the mosque in Morden. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) for drawing it to our attention, because it is important to put on record our concern about persecution around the world, especially when it is somewhere quite so close to home.

In addition to visiting the mosque and meeting members of the Ahmadiyya community, I am looking forward to the Jalsa Salana in Alton, which is coming up, as is the peace symposium organised by the UK community.

I can join them and say, "Salaam alaikum", to show respect and knowing that people will be able to respond in kind, freely, because what the UK does particularly well is religious tolerance. We always need to work at it and to ensure that we tackle intolerance wherever it arises in this country, but, on the whole, if we compare ourselves to many other countries, we lead the way. That is to be welcomed.

In Pakistan, as we have heard from hon. Members, the blasphemy laws are poorly designed, being very general and wide. That leads to a broad interpretation, which is used to persecute and oppress the Ahmadiyya community. How can it be that in the 21st century we hear examples of people who want to wipe out the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan?

We have heard about how members of the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan are unable to vote. They have to declare themselves as non-Muslims and the founder of their religion, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, as an apostate and a liar. How can we stand by and let that happen? We have heard numerous terrible examples of violence and arrests as recently as November 2015, when a factory and several homes were burnt down, and January this year, when a man was killed in Rabwah. That is the centre of the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan, so there is no hiding place when there is such wide acceptance of oppression and persecution.

As we have heard, Pakistan is a signatory to the international covenant on civil and political rights, which it ratified in 2010. Two weeks ago, with a number of colleagues, I spent a week in Strasbourg at the Council of Europe, where we talked about human rights closer to home. If discussions about agreements are ever to mean something and it is not to be just a talking shop, it is important that we take a lead and ensure that people who ratify documents adhere to them in everything they do.

We cannot stand by in the 21st century and allow a situation where a simplistic, oppressive set of laws, and the interpretation of those laws, is allowed to affect a community in such a way. I ask the Minister and the Government what the UK can do, alongside the signatories of the ICCPR, to push further on that. What can we do with UK aid to further transparency, and what can we do to use aid for education as leverage to ensure that religion is taught as widely as possible and that we do not have the current situation of textbooks skewed against the Ahmadiyya community, which was mentioned earlier? What can we do to urge Pakistan to restore the right to vote and to repeal blasphemy laws? Finally, can we urge Pakistan to prosecute incitement and hate speech against Ahmadis and religious minorities?

This evening I am travelling to Burma, where I will meet a couple of Rohingya activists. As with any aspect of religion, the Muslim world is complex. When different denominations, sects and groups disagree on fundamental matters such as who was the last prophet and who is the true leader of their faith, it will always be complicated, but that is not to say that we cannot demand and push for greater tolerance so that we can live alongside each other, wherever we are in the world.

2.23 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak on this issue, and I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for bringing

it to Westminster Hall. She has given us an opportunity to participate in a debate on a matter that is close to our hearts and that we wish to express our opinions on. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, and of the APPG on Pakistan minorities. Both groups were started last year and, as an indication of the need for them, the APPG on international freedom of religion or belief has almost 70 members and the APPG on Pakistan minorities has about 20 to 25 members. That indicates the importance of the debate.

We have heard many representations recently. The APPG on international freedom of religion or belief held an inquiry on Pakistan, which illustrated clearly the discrimination against some of the people who are here in the Public Gallery and others whom we represent. The level of discrimination against religious organisations and individuals in Pakistan, such as Ahmadis, Christians, Shi'as, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and Jews, is immense. That was clear to me and to everyone involved in the inquiry. We hope that the final statement on that inquiry will be made by the end of February or the beginning of March.

The state of religious freedom in Pakistan has clearly become completely inconsistent with Muhammad Ali Jinnah's founding vision to make Pakistan a home for all religions and all religious minorities. It is probably pertinent and helpful to hear a few words from his address to the Constituent Assembly in August 1947, when he said:

"You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in the state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed".

What a difference between his speech in August 1947 and the realities of February 2016. The wording of the motion tabled by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden asks us to consider the Ahmadiyyas, and other Members have illustrated the issues for them well.

The clear discrimination against the Ahmadiyyas and Pakistan's blasphemy laws have fostered a climate of religiously motivated violence and persecution focused on those people, who we know well and who the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) referred to as a gentle people, which they are. They reach out to all religions, as we from all religions should all be doing.

Attacks have taken place on the Ahmadiyyas in recent times. On 27 July 2014 a mob of more than 100 people attacked them, setting fire to their homes, and as a result a woman and her two granddaughters died of smoke inhalation and another woman suffered a miscarriage. Police said that they had the names of 420 people, as the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden said, and that charges would be brought against them. Twenty were named, but since then nothing has happened. Therefore people can understand the frustration we feel on behalf of those in Pakistan. The Minister will know that I believe that sometimes we have to be the voice of the voiceless, who need us to speak on their behalf.

From my encounters of what Christians and other minorities experience in Pakistan, we know that the freedoms that Muhammad Ali Jinnah spoke of are not the reality today. There are many cases of church bombings, mob attacks on Christian communities and rape against women and girls, which the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) illustrated clearly. Can we begin to imagine

[*Jim Shannon*]

the horror for those people? There have even been attempts at forced conversion and marriage at ages as early as 12 to 14, when it is impossible to take it in.

I am privileged to be the Member for Strangford, where we have good relationships between those of all religious views. We always have had that, even through the worst times of the troubles. We have a mosque in Newtownards, and whenever there has been a focus on the people there in my constituency, I have made it my business to go and speak to them to reassure them. I met them on a Friday when they were having their service to ensure that they knew their Member of Parliament was going to speak for them, as he should do.

In Pakistan, regardless of which minority faith an individual belongs to, all are subject to similar practices of discrimination or persecution. That is a fact in Pakistan today. The much maligned blasphemy laws have been used as a vehicle for egregious violations of religious freedom against all minorities. The United States commission on international religious freedom says of those laws:

“They inappropriately position governments as arbiters of truth or religious rightness, empowering officials to enforce particular views”.

The Government in Pakistan clearly use that for their own ends. The laws also embolden extremists to commit violent acts against perceived blasphemers. We have seen illustrations in films of people in high positions in some religions violently and aggressively speaking out against other religions. That cannot be allowed to continue. False accusations of blasphemy have served as a pretext to incite violence and permit lynch mobs.

The Shi'a community has experienced a number of attacks as well, one of which left 20 people dead and dozens injured on 13 February 2015. Its mosques have been attacked by militant groups, with a disregard for human life that is of serious concern. More recently, the killing of some 40 Shi'a Muslims in Karachi in May 2015 marked a new low in sectarian violence that has left Pakistan's religious minorities fearing for their lives. There have been many other attacks on churches and mosques across Pakistan, one of which left 60 people dead. The Pakistani authorities must bring to justice the perpetrators of violence committed in the name of religion in those and many previous attacks through fair trials and without recourse to the death penalty—in other words, they must make the perpetrators accountable under the law, which they unfortunately have not been up to now.

The British Pakistani Christian Association estimates that about 50% of blasphemy charges are against religious minorities. Given the population size, that means minorities are 10 times more likely to be targeted with blasphemy charges. That is the reality. Pakistan's National Commission for Justice and Peace estimates that out of 1,060 blasphemy cases over the past 25 years, 450 have been against Muslims, 457 against Ahmadis, 132 against Christians and 21 against Hindus. That clearly illustrates the focus of persecution against religious minorities in Pakistan through blasphemy laws.

Although Pakistan is yet to execute anyone charged with blasphemy, mob violence often ensues against the accused. Their families, local communities and lawyers are also targeted. All too often, the blasphemy laws

have been used as an instrument for revenge in personal vendettas, property disputes, political rivalries, marital disputes and religious differences. Religion is often used in personal vendettas—“We'll get them because it suits our circumstances.” It is used for people's own ends; how can we ever let that happen?

As the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan highlights, other state bodies such as the police are fearful, prejudiced and often—I say this with real respect—incompetent in cases of blasphemy. The police fail to investigate cases properly or follow correct procedures. Incidents have occurred where those accused of blasphemy have been killed by the police or prison guards. Where can we be safe if we are not safe from our attackers in prison, and if we are not safe from the police? That is the reality of life in Pakistan today. That is why this Westminster Hall debate is so important, and why we are so grateful to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden for securing it and giving us the chance to speak on this issue.

I would like to make some comments about the persecution of Christians in Pakistan. The hon. Member for Congleton outlined some examples, and I would like to add to them. There was the case of the Christian road sweeper from Lahore who was sentenced to death by hanging after accusations of blasphemy following an argument among friends. He has not been hanged but has been fined 200,000 rupees. There was the case of the woman sentenced to death on 8 November 2010 under section 295C of Pakistan's penal code for allegedly insulting the Prophet Mohammed during an argument with a Muslim lady. A price was put on her head.

There was the case of attacks on churches in Lahore that left 14 people killed and another 70 injured. There was the attack on a church in Peshawar, where some 80 people were killed. All those things are added to our other concerns, such as the fact that young Christian and Hindu girls are forced into marriage at the earliest age. There was also the case of the late Punjab governor, Salmaan Taseer, who was killed by his own official police guard for criticising blasphemy laws. The killer was revered by thousands around Pakistan. What is wrong when that can happen?

With the rise of mobile communication technology, individuals' photographs can be easily obtained and shared with affiliate extremist groups where perceived blasphemers are suspected to have fled, so there is often no safe haven whatever within Pakistan. Pakistan's continuing refusal to reform or repeal the blasphemy laws creates an environment of persistent vulnerability for minority communities, placing all members of such communities in real risk.

One of the most brutal spates of violence, to which the hon. Member for Congleton referred, was against a Pakistani couple on 14 November 2014. Shama Bibi and Shahzad Masih were lynched and burned to death in a brick kiln by a crowd of some 1,200, who were incited to violence by a false rumour—and it was false—that they had committed blasphemy by burning pages of the Koran. Although there were some arrests, most of the mob got away, and there is a strong suspicion that those who were arrested and charged will be acquitted free of charge, as is usually the case. The couple's children were left orphans and watched the butchery and horror of what happened to their parents.

That is the reality for Christians and other minorities in Pakistan. Discrimination and persecution are at times facilitated by the inaction of police and are sometimes even instigated by them. There is discrimination in education, in employment, in health, in politics and at every level of society. As a Christian, I find it particularly worrying that Pakistan is currently ranked sixth on Open Doors' world watch list of the worst persecutors of Christians. Its score of 79 out of 100 gives it a classification of "extreme persecution". That is not a score we would want to have.

The USCIRF has consistently deemed Pakistan a country of particular concern, which again underlines this issue. According to Aid to the Church in Need, Christians in Pakistan find themselves at the centre of a "crisis", suffering

"some of the bloodiest persecution in the country's history"

and facing ever more calls to abandon their faith, discrimination at work and at home and attacks on their livelihood. In practice, without the right to freely express their religion in words or actions, some Christians feel the Government are failing to provide Christians with the right to be Pakistani.

I conclude by asking the Minister three questions. What support are the UK Government providing Pakistani authorities to ensure the protection of religious minorities across Pakistan? Will the UK Government put pressure on the Pakistani authorities to reform the blasphemy laws as a matter of urgency, to provide effective safeguards against their abuse, and to investigate and prosecute for attacks on religious minorities in a thorough and transparent manner?

We in this House are charged with being the voice for the voiceless. We must speak out for those who have no voice and cannot speak for themselves. Today, this House has done that, and we look forward to the Minister's response.

2.37 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): As we have heard, Ahmadis are peace-loving Muslims and yet, like other peace-loving people in our own history of Christianity and even today, they are persecuted in many parts of the world—especially in Pakistan—for no other reason than their beliefs.

Almost 40 years ago, the constitution of Pakistan was amended to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslims—to denounce them, effectively, as heretics not allowed to refer to their places of worship as mosques or quote publicly from the Koran. In this country, we rightly celebrate the courage of a young woman from Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai, for standing up to gunmen determined to persecute her and other young women for seeking an education. However, in the town of Rabwah, to which the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) referred, young Ahmadi women are forced to suffer in silence as they are often denied opportunities to pursue their studies and even prevented from living in local dormitories.

Unsurprisingly, as we have heard, in the face of that persecution many Ahmadis choose to flee to other countries. Many of them have settled in Thailand, where, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) said, a large number have found themselves subject to arbitrary arrest and

imprisonment. In Indonesia, a similar pattern of persecution is developing against a community that has lived there peacefully since 1925. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) pointed out, even in Bulgaria, which is a member of the EU and the Council of Europe, and is therefore required to respect religious freedom and human rights, we see Ahmadis being prevented from registering as a religious organisation.

If anyone wants to know more about the positive contribution of the Ahmadiyya faith, I recommend that they look at the international charitable trust, Humanity First, which works across the globe alongside bodies such as the Red Cross, Oxfam and Save the Children, offering disaster relief, emergency medical services, water for life projects in west Africa and orphan care in places such as Indonesia and Burkina Faso. While some Governments tolerate terrorists and persecute Ahmadis, the Ahmadiyya community offers love and help to people across the globe.

I have seen the effort and dedication of this community in this country. In Birmingham several years ago, my good friend, Dr Mubashar Saleem, took me to an old, derelict school building in Tilton road. The Ahmadis lovingly restored it and converted it into the Darul Barakaat mosque, a place where all faiths are welcome and members of the local community are regularly invited to events. From there they organise charity fundraising events such as Ride4Peace, joint faith seminars and sessions for people to donate blood, as well as pursuing their religious worship.

However, even in Birmingham, the standing advisory council on religious education permits Ahmadis to participate in the council, providing that they do not refer to themselves as Muslims lest they offend other Muslim groups, thus perpetuating the religious intolerance that forms the basis of the persecution that we have been hearing about in Pakistan. We need to do more to respect the rights of this religious minority and make it clear that both in this country and in our relations with countries abroad, and especially in Pakistan, we are going to stand up to those who persecute this group.

2.42 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this debate, the importance of which is demonstrated by the number of people here to take part on both sides of the Chamber.

As hon. Friends from across the House have said, the Ahmadis are a faith group that makes a huge contribution in this country and internationally. I am very blessed to have an Ahmadi community in Scunthorpe. Although it is relatively small, it has been involved in a lot of good work on various things in the community, to the benefit of everybody. I take the opportunity to thank them for that today. I also had the privilege and pleasure of joining the Jalsa Salana in 2014. Everybody could see and feel the way in which the Ahmadiyya people live, with the "Love for all, hatred for none" belief that is central to their way of life.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) just pointed out, the international work done through Humanity First is an example of

[*Nic Dakin*]

the way in which Ahmadis are not only working locally and nationally, but internationally on behalf of all of us. They should be commended for that, and the fact that they suffer in the way they do, in Pakistan in particular, is to be condemned.

Mr Muzaffar Ahmad, from the local Ahmadiyya community in my constituency, said to me recently that the

“persecution of any religious group should be taken seriously and dealt with. If this is not addressed at the source it can proliferate and reach our country as well.”

He went on to say that, sadly, there have been examples of discrimination closer to home. In a democratic, tolerant society such as the United Kingdom, we address those examples of discrimination and worse, and deal with them effectively in our own way. Sadly however, in Pakistan, the Ahmadi Muslim community is the only religious community to be targeted by the Pakistan state on grounds of faith. Ahmadis have been denied basic rights—the rights to life, to vote, to freedom of faith and to dignity after death.

On paper, the constitution of Pakistan does not permit discrimination for school admissions on the sole basis of religion, and as many colleagues have indicated, the Pakistani Government has signed the international covenant on civil and political rights, which—as hon. Members know—guarantees a variety of religious freedoms. However, I want to focus particularly on access to education.

To attend school in Pakistan, students must disclose their faith when applying to schools. That is a hindrance to the ability of Ahmadi Muslims to gain access to education. As I hope everyone in this Chamber and beyond knows, education can absolutely transform young people’s lives, and to be given a lesser education based on religion is nothing less than appalling.

As the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) pointed out, women and girls have been particularly discriminated against by the Pakistan state. They are particularly affected by discrimination because the style of their hijab is distinctive, which prevents them from participating fully in educational and professional settings, potentially furthering gender inequality in Pakistan.

Furthermore, Ahmadi children can be bullied in schools because of their faith. There is evidence that schools with a large number of Ahmadi students are generally assigned teachers who are less effective. All those things affect the quality of education received by Ahmadi students.

I will give a couple of examples to illustrate that discrimination in action. The case of the students in District Layyah serves as a worrisome reminder of how unfounded allegations can result in children being arrested and held in jail for months with no regard for their right to education or welfare. On 28 January 2009, in Kot Sultan, four children and one adult were accused of blasphemy and arrested under section 295-C of Pakistan’s penal code which carries the death penalty. The police arrested the accused without establishing a credible *prima facie* case, charging them without evidence and before conducting any investigation. The children were accused of graffiti which defiled the name of the Prophet Mohammed on the toilet walls of a local non-Ahmadi mosque.

The inspector of the case admitted that

“the police do not know of any substantial evidence that links the four students with the crime”

and there was no evidence that anything had even been written in the first place. The accused children were later moved to the DG Khan prison, which is located a long distance from their home town, making visiting difficult for relatives.

Despite the arrests, many speeches and protests were made to boycott the Ahmadis. Looting and threats of violence took place, to the extent that Ahmadi Muslims feared for their lives and were forced to move their families out of the area. All that took place despite the fact that the two men who were the prime movers in the accusation did not bring forward anything of any quality. The children remained unlawfully detained for six months before finally being granted bail. This is just one example of the sort of thing that has been and is going on, and that we should condemn.

The second example is the removal of Ahmadi Muslim public figures from educational syllabuses. Obviously, the people who are included in syllabuses become role models for achievement and so on. No educational syllabuses include major Ahmadi Muslim public figures who shaped the history of the country. Ahmadi Muslims contributed to the establishment of Pakistan in 1947 and, prior to the anti-Ahmadi laws, served the country with distinction in every sphere of life. A number of such leading figures are also known internationally for their distinctive service and contribution, including two prominent Pakistani Ahmadi Muslims. Sir Muhammad Zafarullah Khan was instrumental in deciding the Pakistani boundary before partition. He was also Pakistan’s first Foreign Minister, representative at the UN and President of the International Court of Justice at The Hague—a significant figure. Another prominent and yet easily erased figure in history is Professor Abdus Salam, a ground-breaking scientist, famous for his work in the field of physics, who was awarded the first Nobel prize in Pakistani history. People of all faiths in Pakistan can be proud of them and they should be included in the literature, syllabuses and curriculum followed in that country.

I could detail many more examples of discrimination and prevention of access to education, but I will not because I want to be brief. It is important to use our leadership role to encourage Pakistan and ensure that it allows fair access for people of all faiths to education in their country. To be denied that is to be denied a central human right.

Some hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), have pointed out the importance of the Department for International Development’s budget and the significant amount that goes to Pakistan. We should ensure that it does not go without a commitment by that state to tackle these deep-seated issues, to allow all young people, wherever they are from, to have proper access to education and to ensure that the Ahmadis are no longer restricted in that access as they are currently.

Will the Minister indicate what steps the Government are taking to ensure that aid is not being misused by the Pakistani Government to promote religious intolerance and discrimination, and how the aid is being used as

encouragement and a lever to ensure that the sort of practices that have too often come to our attention cease and that proper access is given? Will he also say what steps the Government are taking to ensure universities in the United Kingdom do not become partners with universities in Pakistan that promote religious hatred and discrimination in their educational material and their recruitment and admissions procedures?

2.52 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I reiterate what my colleagues have said in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing the debate.

[MR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

Let me start with the words of Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the founding father of the nation, in his first presidential address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 11 August 1947:

“You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed”.

He then spoke about the history of religious sectarianism, relating it to Catholicism and what had gone on in England. He said:

“Thank God, we are not starting in those days. We are starting in the days where there is no discrimination, no distinction between one community and another, no discrimination between one caste or creed and another. We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State.”

I want to ask the people in this Chamber, the nation and the people of Pakistan a question: 68 years have passed since Pakistan’s independence and since Muhammad Ali Jinnah made that speech, but where have those freedoms for all the people of Pakistan gone? Where did we start, and where we have we gone? A nation consisting of 191 million people, according to the latest UN estimate, is seeing huge human rights violations and abhorrent discrimination targeting 4% of its minority community.

I have spoken in the House against the rise of Islamophobia in Europe and the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, I stand here today as someone from a minority community, as a proud Member of Parliament and as a Muslim. I can easily go to my mosque, and in fact to any mosque belonging to any sectarian denomination, with no threat to my life or religious freedom. I am deeply saddened that while I, a member of a minority community, have all these freedoms, minorities in Pakistan, such as Ahmadis, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus and others, do not have the religious freedom that Muhammad Ali Jinnah once advocated, but instead face religious persecution.

That religious persecution has led over the years to thousands of vile crimes being committed against minority communities. According to a report by the United States commission on international religious freedom, between January and June 2013—just six months—there were 108 attacks on minorities, leading to 82 deaths. Of those killed, 22 were Ahmadis, 11 were Christians, two were Hindus, one was a Sikh and 16 were from other minority groups. It must be made clear that the fight against the war on terror in Pakistan, the rise in extremism

and the questionable implications of outside actors funding that extremism through the teaching systems in some madrassahs have intensified the persecution against minority communities.

The Shi’a community is a Muslim minority community recognised by the Pakistan state, yet sectarianism and extremism have led to heinous crimes being committed against it. The south Asian terrorism portal found that between 2002 and 2013, 2,086 Shia’s were killed. What is more worrying is the fact that in 2002 and 2003, six and two Shia’s respectively were killed in sectarian hate crimes, whereas 399 Shia’s were killed in 2012 and 410 in 2013.

The rising level of hate is clear, but one of the biggest concerns is that the rising level of extremism is leading to further extremist groups declaring the Shi’a community as non-Muslim and heretics—they are recognised by the state as Muslims—thus validating them for “*wajibul katal*”: deserving to be killed. If that is the level of persecution of a community recognised by the state, one can only imagine the fear and terror that other minority communities in Pakistan are living in today.

This week, there have been many events throughout Parliament and across the country involving my Pakistani brothers and sisters, following an official holiday in Pakistan in solidarity with the Kashmiris. I have spoken at many of those events, and I reiterate that if we are to stand against persecution and for the freedom of the Kashmiris, we must also stand against the persecution of any minority. Everyone who is on the side of justice, whether they are religious or of no religion, and of whatever colour, gender, race, caste or creed, must speak against persecution.

The state of Pakistan has faced challenges, especially in tackling terrorism and extremism, which the armed forces and the people of Pakistan have sacrificed thousands of lives in fighting. Nevertheless, we must all stand together against all forms of hate and persecution. I would welcome and encourage Pakistan holding a religious minority conference with hundreds of world scholars, similar to the one that took place in Marrakech a few weeks ago.

Finally, as a member of a minority community who is benefiting from all the religious freedoms in my homeland, I cannot stand by and watch minorities have their freedoms discriminated against in my motherland. Pakistan is an Islamic state, so for the second time in this Chamber I will use my religion and quote verse or ayah 256 of Surat Al-Baqarah of the Koran:

“There is no compulsion in religion”.

2.59 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady, and to welcome you to the Chair, with Mr Turner having departed.

It is a pleasure to be able to speak in this debate, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing it. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), who spoke passionately and knowledgeably about this issue.

I am delighted to have an Ahmadiyya community in my constituency at the Baitur Rahman mosque in Yorkhill. The community there are a model in the work that they

[*Alison Thewliss*]

do in reaching out to the wider community. They do regular community clean-ups, and they hold events to raise funds for Yorkhill Children's Charity. Indeed, one of my first invitations as an MP was to start, and run in, the 5 km race that they held in Kelvingrove park. It was an absolute pleasure to run alongside them and to help at that event. They also hold dinners to celebrate and to invite in their neighbours, of all faiths and none, for discussions and to talk about peace. They even once provided pakora for my campaign team when we had set up our stall nearby, so they definitely have a place in my heart. They could not be more welcoming. I was also pleased and honoured to be asked to visit their Jalsa Salana event at Alton over the summer, at which I found out a good deal more about the Ahmadiyya community around the world and the humanitarian and education work in which they are involved. That very impressive event reflected the way they reach out to other faiths and bring other people in to find out more about what they do.

What I have also found out about, on that visit and in my continued dealings with the Ahmadiyya community, is the severe persecution that it faces. Despite adhering to many of the core tenets of the Islamic faith, including the five pillars of Islam and the six articles of belief, Ahmadiyya Muslims have been subject to persecution across the globe. I am particularly disturbed by the scale of that in Pakistan, a country with which the UK and Scotland have many close links. In Pakistan, as has been said, Ahmadiyya Muslims are not recognised as Muslims by the country's constitution and are therefore denied their fundamental rights, such as the right to vote and freedom of religion. They have been persecuted, but the state has also enabled that persecution by not protecting Ahmadi Muslims under the law, in clear violation of international human rights obligations.

I want to discuss access to justice in particular. In Pakistan, since 1974, Ahmadi Muslims have not been recognised by the constitution, and since 1984 the penal code has made it a crime for Ahmadis to self-identify as Muslims. That means in practice that should an Ahmadi Muslim face a religiously motivated attack, they would be incriminating themselves even by reporting it. Specifically, section 298-C of the Pakistan penal code states that any "person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves 'Ahmadis' or by any other name), who directly or indirectly, poses...as a Muslim"

can face up to three years' imprisonment and a fine. For most such offences, bail is granted only at the discretion of the court, and they can be pursued by the police without the need for an arrest warrant.

In its November 2015 report, entitled "On Trial: The Implementation of Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws", the International Commission of Jurists challenged the vague and unfair nature of those laws, picking up on the impact that they have on various religious communities, including the Ahmadiyya community. I will quote directly from the report:

"The vague wording of section 295-C has particularly affected members of the Ahmadiyya community. In some cases, judges have interpreted the expression of religious beliefs by Ahmadis, as understood by the court, as a form of blasphemy."

The report mentions several cases, but most disturbingly of all it states:

"Justice (r) Mian Nazir Akhtar, who is reported to have made public statements calling for the killing of 'blasphemers', was a member of the Bench."

He was dispensing justice while having those beliefs, and having encouraged people to kill those found to be "blaspheming". Those views are absolutely appalling and should have no place in any justice system in the world.

According to a campaign website that the Ahmadiyya community have set up, stopthepersecution.org, Ahmadi Muslims have been attacked and buildings and monuments have been desecrated and destroyed since the criminalisation of the faith in 1984. That includes several hundred people being killed or assaulted, 65 Ahmadi Muslims being denied burial in a Muslim cemetery, 83 mosques being destroyed, sealed or forcibly occupied, the banning of the construction of 52 mosques and, distressingly, 39 Ahmadi bodies being exhumed after burial. Such incidents go largely unpunished in Pakistan's legal system. It is clear that those who perpetrate such acts can do so with the tacit agreement of the state.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden mentioned the family whose home was burnt down while they were inside it and the lady, Mubashara Jarra, who survived the attack but lost the baby she was carrying and her two nieces, and whose mother died of smoke inhalation. The incident that triggered that is claimed to have been a blasphemous Facebook post by an Ahmadi youth. It seems absolutely incredible that someone making a comment on social media could result in the burning down of people's homes and the attacking of a community, but that is just a picture of the discrimination that this community faces in Pakistan. It is said that during the attack the police did very little to intervene, and there has not been much justice since then, either. It is a desperately worrying situation.

Several hon. Members mentioned Mr Tahir Mehdi Imtiaz, who has been detained for almost a year without charge for allegedly publishing blasphemous material. Again, that is a violation of article 9 of the universal declaration of human rights, which sets out that there should not be arbitrary detention or arrest without charge. My understanding from what I have read is that he has not yet been bailed or a trial date set.

The anti-blasphemy laws in Pakistan allow for wide-ranging complaints against persons, and it is reported that they are often used against the Ahmadiyya community as well as other religious minorities in the country. The UK Government, I hope, would agree with me that that is unacceptable. I would like them to use the influence that we have from our long-standing relationship with Pakistan in many different ways to challenge the Government of Pakistan to change their position and scrap that unfair, unjust and discriminatory law. Pakistan ostensibly supports the universal declaration of human rights, so it must remove the anti-Ahmadi laws from its constitution.

3.6 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. May I take this opportunity to welcome the members of the Ahmadiyya community who are here for the debate? You are most welcome. I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing the debate. I declare an interest, along with

my friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as a member of the APPG on international freedom of religion or belief.

I was going to start with a quote from Muhammad Ali Jinnah, but as usual the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) has stolen my thunder before I have even begun. I will make reference to her speech later in my remarks.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden talked about a number of specific cases that are of great interest in relation to human rights issues in Pakistan—voting, the blasphemy laws and the right to religious freedom—and called on the UK Government to seek the immediate release of Mr Imtiaz and Mr Shakoor. We are hoping to hear from the Minister in that respect.

An excellent point was made in relation to the use of the DFID budget in Pakistan. I was in Pakistan just last year and attended a number of meetings with Ministers there. I can assure all those here today and beyond that issues to do with the persecution of people of minority faith and minority religions and communities were brought up at every single meeting. It is important—I look forward to hearing from the Minister about this—to ensure that the DFID budget can be used to greater effect in that respect. The hon. Lady mentioned Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's remarks about being the Prime Minister for all of Pakistan. Again, I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how those words can be brought more to bear in a practical sense.

We then heard from the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who spoke about the brother of the Minister for minorities in Pakistan, who was here recently and spoke about his brother and also quoted Muhammad Ali Jinnah—a much quoted person. The hon. Lady also spoke of the plight of minority women. As always, women are disproportionately affected by such issues.

We then heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), who thanked the Ahmadi community, with which she has been engaging in her constituency. She, too, spoke about issues to do with the electoral register that are resulting in the disfranchisement of people, which we should be working hard to guard against.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) made a number of excellent points. I pay tribute to his pronunciation of “As-salaam alaikum”, which was one of the best that I have heard. He spoke of the wide interpretation of blasphemy laws, which always contributes to persecution. He also referred to being a member of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe, which I enjoy with him. It is an important forum for raising issues of human rights. I speak on behalf of the whole delegation in assuring all those here and beyond that we will ensure that human rights are central to all that we do.

We heard from the hon. Member for Strangford, who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief. I have spoken in a number of the same debates as him. He is a passionate advocate of religious freedom and spoke of the importance of all of us reaching out to all religions. An important term he used was “the voice of the voiceless”.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) spoke of the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community beyond Pakistan in Indonesia and Bulgaria,

about which we look forward to hearing from the Minister. The hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) referred to women and young girls facing discrimination due to the style of hijab they wear, which distinguishes them and leaves them open to further opportunities for persecution.

The hon. Member for Bradford West quoted Muhammad Ali Jinnah. There is one more quote about women that is important as we speak of the father of the nation of Pakistan. He said that

“no nation can ever be worthy of its existence that cannot take its women along with the men. No struggle can ever succeed without women participating side by side with men. There are two powers in the world; one is the sword and the other is the pen. There is a great competition and rivalry between the two. There is a third power stronger than both, that of the women.”

I implore the Government of Pakistan to remember the words of the founding father of the nation and to put them into practice in relation to women and minority communities across Pakistan. The hon. Member for Bradford West said that if we believe in justice, we must speak for all who face injustice. That is an excellent point, to which I would add that no one equality is more important or more virtuous than another, and that should be at the forefront of our thinking.

Finally we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who is engaging very actively with members of the Ahmadiyya community by running races and the like, which is very impressive indeed. It is a demonstration that when we engage with our minority communities, we get back so much more than we give, and we must continue to do so.

A number of questions on the promotion of religious tolerance have been asked of the Department for International Development. An answer from the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Mr Swayne), is welcome because it states:

“DFID supports the rights of all groups to follow their religious faith and to live safe lives”,

and that wherever possible our programmes in Pakistan seek to ensure that that is the case.

I welcome the fact that the head of DFID Pakistan raised the issue in October as part of the bilateral assistance talks. I am keen that that type of engagement continues, because it is necessary. Will the Minister let us know what level and proportion of the UK's development funding in Pakistan is invested in such projects?

I asked a parliamentary question about the make-up of the community engagement forum, which was set up a little while ago in relation to community cohesion across these islands. The Home Office confirmed that members of the Ahmadiyya community—Fareed Ahmad, from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Association and Farooq Aftab, the general secretary of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Association—were represented on the Prime Minister's community engagement forum. Those are welcome appointments.

The debate pack produced by the House of Commons Library is extensive and details a number of parliamentary questions and answers on similar topics to those raised in today's debate. However, none of those answers contain any evidence that the pressure brought to bear by the UK Government in Pakistan on issues relating to

[Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh]

the persecution of religious minorities has had any positive effect. I hope that the Minister will offer some words of encouragement to those of us who have participated in the debate and, indeed, to members of the Ahmadiyya community who are listening.

The Scottish National party is opposed to religious persecution. Religious freedoms are a fundamental human right, and we are disappointed that the Pakistan Government continue to condone and conduct religiously motivated attacks. We call upon the Foreign Secretary to press the Government of Pakistan to take action against all religious persecution. Pakistan should—this point was raised when we there with the British Council—reform its blasphemy laws, which are incompatible with the international covenant on civil and political rights, which it has signed. We also call on the Foreign Secretary to take further steps to stop the death penalty in Pakistan.

3.15 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. It does not seem very long ago that I was sitting on your side of the Table. It was also a pleasure to serve under the chairmanship of Mr Turner, who has now left. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for introducing this important debate. Religious intolerance and persecution should have no place anywhere in the world today, but unfortunately, as we have heard so clearly this afternoon, it does. It is a matter of huge regret that countries, especially Pakistan, continue to persecute minorities—not just the Ahmadiyya Muslims but other minorities as well.

As well as the powerful opening speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden, we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)—I hope I can call her my hon. Friend—with whom I served recently on the International Development Committee. She always stands up for the rights of Christians and minorities in other countries of the world, and draws our attention to the plight of women and girls, who so often suffer when minorities are persecuted.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) made a powerful and well-researched speech. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) is clearly an expert and has a great interest in matters of persecution and religious freedom. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is a champion for the rights not only of Christians here and in other countries in which they are a minority but of other minority religious communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) always speaks so well on any issue related to home affairs, especially discrimination. My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and I have worked closely on many issues to do with the persecution of minorities—not only religious ones. Indeed, we have travelled to India together to see the plight of the Tibetan Buddhist community there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah)—my near neighbour, as I am an MP for Leeds—spoke powerfully from personal knowledge and understanding about the persecution of Ahmadiyya

Muslims and the state of Pakistan today. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) spoke about the communities that she is proud to represent and which suffer the kind of persecution that we have heard so much about. Finally, the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) made a very good summing-up speech.

There were some relevant interventions from my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (Mr Spellar), my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) and the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White), all of whom are no longer in their place.

In Pakistan, religious freedom is consistently trampled upon by state laws, and sectarian violence arises from that. There have been calls by United States Government agencies, such as the United States Commission on International Freedom, to designate Pakistan a country of concern, with the possibility of the USA removing its aid to Pakistan. In the UK, the Home Office and civil society groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented persistent and increasing sectarian violence against religious minorities in Pakistan. The *Washington Post* in April 2013 stated:

“Pakistan tops worst list for religious freedom”.

Ahmadiyya Muslims are particularly targeted for persecution; laws restricting the practice of their religion are used often to threaten and harass them. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden stated that it is shocking that the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community is enshrined in law. It certainly is shocking to all of us who are democrats and believe in religious freedom.

Approximately 95% of the population of Pakistan are Muslim—70% Sunni and 25% Shi’a—with Christians making about 1.5%, Hindus about 2% and, according to some statistics, Ahmadis approximately 0.2%. However, the exact number of Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan is disputed. It is estimated to be between 600,000 and 2 million. We have heard this afternoon that Pakistan has repressive blasphemy laws and has enshrined in law and the constitution amendments that specifically target the Ahmadis; but the Pakistani Government have failed to take up their Supreme Court’s recommendations in 2014 in relation to violence against religious minorities, and the proposal to form a special police force to monitor sectarian violence. The Pakistani Government have also failed to amend or repeal blasphemy law provisions that give the pretext for violence. Militant groups continue to attack religious minorities. Human Rights Watch stated in 2015 that

“the failure to prosecute or imprison suspects of religious violence is in part due to the sympathy for some groups within the security forces”.

We have heard that Hindu women are victims of forced conversions and forced marriages because Pakistani law does not recognize Hindu marriages. The main justification for state action against religious minorities and the vigilante justification for sectarian violence are those blasphemy laws enshrined in Pakistani law. Blasphemy is considered by the state, and by many Pakistanis, as the defiling of the Prophet Mohammed and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe said, section 295-C of the penal code of Pakistan states:

“Use of derogatory remarks etc. in respect of the Holy Prophet: Whether by words, either spoken or written by visible representations, or by imputation, innuendo or insinuation, directly or indirectly,

defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) shall be punishable with death, imprisonment for life, and shall be liable to fine”.

In 1986, the blasphemy laws were reformulated and capital punishment was prescribed as the maximum punishment. However, no one, thank goodness, has yet been executed for blasphemy.

Blasphemy allegations are often false, as we have heard, and are often used to promote violence against religious minorities. In 2015 the Home Office said:

“There is clear evidence that the legislation is used by non-state actors to threaten and harass Ahmadis”.

Victims of attacks by non-state actors are unable to seek effective state protection from authorities. The Pakistani Government have consistently failed to repeal the blasphemy laws that provide a pretext for violence against religious minorities. In 2014 there were a record 1,400 cases of people being arrested for blasphemy in Pakistan. In 2015 17 people were convicted of blasphemy, and they are now on death row; 19 others are serving life sentences.

Blasphemy laws have nothing to do with blasphemy and are often used to settle petty disputes and personal vendettas. Accusations of blasphemy are usually the only pretence needed for vigilante groups to attack religious minorities in Pakistan. Saima Baig, a Karachi-based environmentalist, wrote in the Huffington Post recently on a case that we have already heard about in the debate:

“A man named Abdus Salam, who was an Ahmadi, won the Nobel prize in Physics in 1979. The anti-Ahmadi sentiment is so inherent that Pakistan even refuses to acknowledge its only other Nobel Laureate”.

The other one is Malala Yusufzai, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak mentioned.

“His persecution led to him leaving the country. And we rewarded him by desecrating his grave”.

In a separate article on religious persecution in Pakistan Saima Baig said:

“The State of Pakistan must really think about whether it wants to join the rest of the world in the current century and promulgate and implement laws that provide security and safety to its citizens. This is the responsibility of the State and it must not be allowed to shirk it in the name of religion. Pakistan must do away with instituting 7th century laws that have no basis in today’s society. It is not hard to do so.”

Deutsche Welle reported on an attack in November last year:

“On Saturday, November 21, an angry mob in the eastern Punjab province set ablaze a factory owned by the Ahmadis, after one of its employees was accused of desecrating the Koran.

‘The incident took place after we arrested the head of security at the factory, Qamar Ahmed Tahir, for complaints that he ordered the burning of Korans,’ Adnan Malik, a senior police official in the Jhelum city, told the media.

‘We registered a blasphemy case against Tahir, who is Ahmadi by faith, and arrested him after confiscating the burnt material, which also included copies of the Koran,’ Malik said.

According to local media, after the arrests hundreds of people descended on the factory, setting it on fire.

A spokesman for the local Ahmadi community said three of their members were detained by the police on blasphemy charges.

A day later on Sunday, Muslim protesters attacked and occupied an Ahmadi mosque in a town near Jhelum, as an act of ‘revenge’ for the factory incident.

‘A mob attacked our mosque in Kala Gujran, an area in Jhelum, took out its furniture and set it on fire. Then, they

washed the mosque and later offered evening prayers in the mosque,’ Amir Mehmood, a member of the Ahmadi community, said.

Rights activists say that a cleric of a Muslim mosque in the area had urged the people to ‘punish’ the ‘blasphemers.’ They also accuse the local administration and the police of not preventing both attacks on the minority group.”

Labour believes, as I am sure do Members throughout the House, in freedom of religion, not just in the United Kingdom but throughout the world—the freedom to worship without fear or persecution. There is not a Member in this Chamber or the House who would oppose that.

I want in closing to pay tribute to Muhammad Nayyer, the secretary for external affairs of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Association of Leeds. He recently came to the Sinai Synagogue in Roundhay in my constituency to speak to the Leeds Jewish community about his and his community’s experience in Pakistan. After his speech I was privileged to be presented with a copy of the holy Koran by Mr Nayyer. It was the first time he had been to a synagogue, and he remarked how similar it was in many ways to his own mosque.

My final words are a quotation—

“but then eject them forever from this country. For, as we have heard, God’s anger with them is so intense that gentle mercy will only tend to make them worse and worse, while sharp mercy will reform them but little. Therefore, in any case, away with them!”

Martin Luther said that in 1543. He was writing about the Jews; but it could have been said about the Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan.

3.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to work under your chairmanship today, Mr Brady. I confess I have a terrible cold, so my speech will, I think, read better than it will sound. I apologise and hope that hon. Members will bear with me.

I think that this has been a phenomenal debate, and a very important one. I pay tribute to the incredible contributions that have been made, with passion, expertise and the determination to raise an important issue. Many questions have been raised, and I will do my best to respond to a number of themes that have come up. However, as I have pledged and, I hope, done in the past, I will write to hon. Members with more details if I do not have the opportunity to cover everything to the extent they expect.

I will begin as other hon. Members have done, by congratulating the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this worthwhile debate. The standard of that debate reflects what the Labour party spokesman, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) pointed out—the House’s close interest in human rights issues not just in this country but throughout the world. He is right; and this country has a proud reputation for defending the rights of minorities such as the Yazidis of Iraq and Syria; the Baha’i of Iran; and the Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims of Burma. We have stood up for individuals such as Meriam Ibrahim in Sudan. She was raised as a Muslim but chose to follow and marry into the Christian faith, and for that choice she was punished, charged with apostasy and adultery, and imprisoned with her young son while heavily pregnant.

[*Mr Tobias Ellwood*]

Today, with intolerance very much on the rise, we now see reports of anti-Semitic and anti-Christian attacks even here in Europe. It is especially important that we stand up for people's right freely to express their faith, or indeed to have no faith at all. I welcome this opportunity to debate the specific issues of religious minorities in Pakistan, which I do not recall the House discussing during my time as Minister for the middle east, north Africa and south-east Asia.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) and others have mentioned the important contribution of the Pakistani diaspora to this country, which is important to recognise, and I am glad that it has been expressed today. Before going into the details, I say at the outset that we have a strong, powerful and important relationship with Pakistan. We have a historical relationship—Pakistan is a close ally in the Commonwealth—and we have a commercial relationship, too. Bilateral trade with Pakistan is moving towards £3 billion. We have shared security interests in the region and, as I have mentioned, we have a massive diaspora relationship, with thousands of people moving backwards and forwards between Pakistan and this country every single month.

As the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) said in her powerful speech, Pakistan is an important country that has made progress over past decades and has gone through a difficult period as it moves from military governance to civilian governance. We should applaud and encourage the continuing path in that direction. It is important to recognise where Pakistan has come from, but our relationship means that we can have frank and important conversations about some of the details that we have discussed today. That is where we are with our relationship. I address some of the challenges that we face knowing that Pakistan is a friend, and friends should be able to say such things on the record as matters of concern.

The all-party parliamentary group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, which is chaired by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden, does a great deal of valuable work to support the beleaguered Ahmadiyya minority in many countries across the world. We are not only dealing with Pakistan; other countries have been mentioned, too. I pay tribute to the group's work. We met to discuss these issues on 20 January—my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a regular at debates on such matters, were also there. I admire and pay tribute to the group's leadership and chairman.

It is important that the all-party parliamentary groups on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and on international freedom of religion or belief work together and continue to bring such matters to the fore and that we debate them in the House. Both groups discharge an invaluable service in reminding us of the importance of the freedom of religion or belief, which we in the UK are lucky enough to take for granted, but some people in other countries cannot, as we have heard today.

Religious minorities suffer more than most, and it is right that we should speak up for them on their behalf if we see evidence that their voices are not being heard and that their rights are being denied. Today's debate, unfortunately, is a sad reminder of the persecution suffered by Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan. As has

been said, the Pakistani constitution discriminates against them. They struggle to exercise their right to vote because they have to state their religion from a list on the ballot paper, and because the religion is not recognised they are denied the ability to vote. The hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) mentioned education, and Ahmadiyya Muslims are denied education for the same reasons. They face arbitrary detention, their literature is banned, their mosques are attacked and, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and others have said, their minarets are also destroyed.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh), the spokesman for the Scottish National party, also talked about the lack of justice in Pakistan. Last year's Foreign and Commonwealth Office annual human rights report detailed cases of extremists specifically targeting Ahmadiyya Muslims. The report highlighted the case of an Ahmadiyya man who was shot and killed after a Muslim leader denounced the Ahmadiyya as "enemies of Pakistan" on a popular television show. I am sorry to say that it is not only the Ahmadiyya Muslim community that experiences persecution. Shi'a, Hazara, Christian and other religious communities also face intimidation and violence, forced conversion and marriage, attacks on places of worship and sectarian killings. All those appalling abuses continue to take place.

The misuse of blasphemy laws against Muslims and members of religious minorities, such as Christians, can lead to mob violence and the potential use of the death penalty against victims, which is a particular concern. A stark example is the case of Mrs Asia Bibi, a Christian lady who was accused of blasphemy after drinking water from the same bowl as a Muslim woman. She is facing execution after five years on death row. People in her own village, including religious leaders, have publicly stated that they would kill her if she is released. I continue to follow her appeal process very closely.

The Government deplore violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, wherever they occur. We regularly urge the Government of Pakistan to honour their international commitments and guarantee fully the human rights of all Pakistani citizens. The scale of the challenge facing Pakistan is illustrated in the film "He Named Me Malala," which I saw a couple of months ago. I had the honour of meeting Malala Yousafzai when she spoke at the Syria conference last week, highlighting again the plight of minorities. It was an honour to have her at the conference.

Paul Scully: Does the Minister agree that, especially when we have an unstable world and an unstable region, it is important that we act as a critical friend to Pakistan and work with it to ensure that the country is stable so that it can progress?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I will address the role of the Department for International Development. Pakistan is a country in which we invest an awful lot of money. There have been many questions about whether that funding should be conditional, and I will address those issues. He makes a valid point, and we are a friend of Pakistan. We want to work with the country, which allows us to highlight such areas to ensure that there is progress.

Siobhain McDonagh: I can see that the Minister is in trouble with his cold. I am unclear on whether the governor of Punjab has been to the UK or is about to come to the UK. If he has been, were the Government able to raise the issue of the Ahmadiyya in his region? If he is about to come, will the Minister include it in those discussions?

Mr Ellwood: I met the governor of Punjab—he happens to be the brother of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, so he has access to the powerbase—prior to meeting the APPG, so I did not specifically raise the plight of the Ahmadiyya community, but I did raise other matters. The plan is that I will visit the country in the near future. I, the Foreign Secretary and others have taken many opportunities to raise these issues and the plight of other minorities in Pakistan.

Our high commissioners are being changed over, and this morning I met Tom Drew, our next high commissioner, who is about to depart for Islamabad, and we discussed these very issues. He is aware of the concern and of the fact that this debate is happening today. We have also raised the issue with the Pakistani high commissioner in London, and I assure the hon. Lady that the next time I meet the Chief Minister of Punjab I will raise it with him, too.

Jim Shannon: I understand that the Minister's voice is under some pressure; we can appreciate that. I just gently say to him that there will be a report from the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, which will be the Pakistan inquiry. It might be helpful for him to receive a copy. If he is happy with that, when we get a chance we will ensure that he receives a copy of the report—the inquiry was chaired by Lord Alton of the other place—as it might be helpful when it comes to presenting the case on behalf of all those religious minorities in Pakistan.

Mr Ellwood: I will be very grateful to receive that; I thank the hon. Gentleman very much indeed for the offer.

In addition to the conversations that I have already mentioned, in August last year the Foreign Secretary expressed our concerns about religious freedom and the misuse of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan. The misuse of those laws is at the core of what we are discussing here. Our concern is that sometimes judges are not willing to enforce these blasphemy laws because of concerns about their own safety. We need to encourage and further advance greater maturity of the justice system in Pakistan.

I have also impressed on the Pakistani high commissioner to the UK, Syed Abbas, the importance not only of respecting the rights of religious minorities in Pakistan but the importance of the Ahmadiyya, Shi'a, Hazara and Christian communities, many of which we have referred to in debates here in Westminster Hall and in the main Chamber.

We also work through the European Union to promote human rights overseas. For example, the EU preferential market access scheme has helped to incentivise progress on human rights in Pakistan. This has led to the creation of a cell to help with the implementation of international human rights obligations. Also, Pakistan has submitted overdue UN treaty reports and re-established a Government

ministry specifically to lead on human rights. That is a very important and welcome development. This progress is encouraging, but we cannot be complacent. We recognise the need to maintain the pressure on the Government of Pakistan to honour their commitments to human rights, and we will continue to do that.

I turn now to some of the other matters that have been raised this afternoon. First, there is the issue of international aid. Aid is provided not on a national basis but on a federal basis, so we discuss these matters with the various chief ministers in Pakistan. As hon. Members know, the Foreign Office does not lead on aid, but I promise hon. Members that I will meet the relevant Minister in the Department for International Development to make sure that we can see that aid is being properly distributed in Pakistan.

Hon. Members will be aware that we have a proud legacy of making sure that aid goes to vulnerable people and is not somehow tied up in conditionality. The problem with placing conditions on the aid that we give is that we can end up denying it to the very vulnerable people whom we want to support. So we need to look at cognitive measures that will enhance and encourage change, but also recognise that the DFID contribution to Pakistan is immense. Indeed, I think that it is one of the highest aid contributions in the world.

Fiona Bruce: I fully accept what the Minister is saying about conditionality. The important issue that I ask him to raise with DFID Ministers is the fact that religious discrimination is a root cause of poverty, as we have demonstrated today in this Chamber. However, in my opinion, to date DFID Ministers have not sufficiently addressed this issue as a cause of poverty in the way that other issues have been addressed, for fear of appearing to discriminate. That is a hurdle in thinking that we need to overcome.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the criteria that must be met for aid to be advanced to a country. The development committee that focuses on these issues wrote the rules back in the 1950s, and the guidance on overseas development support was written in the aftermath of the second world war and designed to focus on poverty itself. We know today that instability is also directly linked to the cause of poverty, but the rules have not changed.

I have been encouraging change, and we are slowly moving in that direction. Those rules need to be updated and advanced, to recognise other ways of ensuring that poverty can be tackled, such as by providing stability and improved governance, so that people make better decisions to move their country forward and also alleviate the challenges of poverty.

A number of hon. Members spoke not only about Pakistan but about the wider issues. I think we spoke of those issues when we met the all-party group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. Bulgaria was mentioned as well, which raises eyebrows. This is a country in Europe; it is part of the European Union. Why on earth are we seeing this sort of persecution in Bulgaria as well? I raised this issue with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe, and he is pursuing it from his angle. I will ask him to be in touch with the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden to provide an update of what is going on. However, I am aware that the

[Mr Ellwood]

Grand Mufti of Bulgaria is very influential in these circumstances. We need to work harder, particularly as Bulgaria is essentially part of the European community, to ensure that persecution of the Ahmadiyya community does not happen so close to the UK.

A couple of other countries were also mentioned at that meeting. For example, on Thailand we continue to work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, not only on a wide range of refugee issues but on persecution as well. Again, I will write to hon. Members with more details of what is happening on that front. As I say, Thailand was raised at the all-party group meeting. So, finally, was Indonesia.

Our ambassador in Jakarta has discussed these issues, including the plight of the Ahmadiyya community, with the Minister of Religious Affairs, and has urged him and other community leaders to ensure that the right of individuals to practise freedom of religion and belief is respected, and indeed protected. I understand that a Bill is now going through that is based on the protection of religious and faith communities, and I hope that that will be a major advancement in Indonesia. However, we need to keep the pressure on and keep working on this issue.

To conclude, I once again thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden—

Siobhain McDonagh: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: Of course.

Siobhain McDonagh: I apologise for extending the Minister's time on his feet, but will he address the issue raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) about the religious inter-faith forum? It was set up by the Foreign Office under the coalition Government, but at this time it does not seem to have been re-established.

Mr Ellwood: I had asked for a note on that, to see what had happened. If I may, I will write to the hon. Lady. I am not familiar with where things are at the moment, and it would be wrong for me to place something on the record without knowing the details. However, the importance of this issue has been raised; the hon. Lady's point is on the record, and I will write to her with more details as to what stage that forum is at.

To conclude, Mr Brady, thank you very much indeed for the opportunity to place these important points on the record and to put into context the work that the Government are doing to put pressure on Pakistan, one of our important allies, to advance its views on dealing with the persecution of the Ahmadiyya, and indeed of other religious groups, in Pakistan and in other countries.

I assure hon. Members that we will continue to take every opportunity to raise issues of concern with the government of Pakistan; indeed, when I next meet the Chief Minister of Punjab, I will raise this issue. Our aim is, of course, that one day everyone, everywhere, whatever their faith or belief, will enjoy the rights that we in this country take for granted

3.49 pm

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Brady, and I warmly thank every Member who has contributed to the debate. I think in excess of 16 Members have spoken. When I discovered that we had the Thursday afternoon before recess slot, I thought, "Oh dear." I thought that I would be bringing the Lahore telephone book with me in an effort to fill some time. I am sure that everyone will agree that we have had tremendous and moving contributions from Members representing nearly all the parties in the House, and I thank them for that. I also thank the Ahmadiyya community for encouraging this amount of interest and support. It is a relatively small community in our country. It always punches above its weight—"punches" is probably the wrong word to use for a community that is not violent—and gets involved in its community and its issues at home. I thank all involved.

We have heard about the many dimensions of persecution of the Ahmadiyya community, but also about other religious minorities in Pakistan. I hope that our discussion will mark the beginning, not the end, of the UK Government's consideration of what they can do to end religious persecution in Pakistan. Like many other groups who have sought refuge in the UK, the Ahmadiyya community gives so much back to this country. It is a great champion of charitable causes and promotes peace, cohesion and understanding in our communities, but the Ahmadi are fearful for their families, loved ones, friends and fellow community members back in Pakistan, where their lives remain at risk if they openly practise their faith. As anti-Ahmadi sentiment becomes more pervasive across borders, we are increasingly seeing discrimination in other countries, too. As our debate has demonstrated, the extent to which Ahmadi cannot access justice, enfranchisement or equal treatment in Pakistan cannot be underestimated. The persecution that they face is simply intolerable in this day and age.

The UK is proud to have Pakistan as a close ally—we all commend and celebrate that, but the relationship also requires the UK to make it clear that the freedom for Ahmadi and all religious groups to practise their religion without fear is a fundamental right. The UK Government and this House have a strong moral responsibility to encourage freedom of religion and freedom of speech, not just within our own borders, but internationally. They are not just British values but universal human rights.

I look forward to the Minister and the UK Government taking a more proactive approach in promoting what should be absolutely universal: the Ahmadi message of "Love for all, hatred for none." That message still endures despite the persecution of Ahmadi, and it is a message we can all share.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims and other religious minorities in Pakistan.

3.52 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Steel Industry Action

Thursday 11 February 2016

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Student Loan Repayment Strategy

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): Today we are publishing a new strategy for the collection of student loan repayments. This joint repayment strategy sets out how the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Student Loans Company, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the devolved Administrations of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will work together to ensure the operation of a fair, robust and efficient student loan repayment system.

The Government are committed to maintaining the UK's world-class education system while living within its means. By lifting the cap on student numbers, we are enabling more people to benefit from higher education than ever before. As more loans are issued to new students each year, it is vital that the repayment process is robust, convenient for borrowers and working efficiently to ensure the sustainability of the student finance system and value for money for the taxpayer. Reviews of the student loan repayments system by the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee and the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee during 2013 and 2014 recommended that the Government take further action to improve the repayment process. This new strategy sets out what the Government have done to date to improve the collections process and our approach to improving the student loan repayment system yet further.

The three objectives underpinning the strategy are:

- Strengthened capability to trace borrowers and pursue and recover outstanding student loan debt;

- Enhanced performance management through forecasting of future repayment rates, monitoring and target setting;

- Improved efficiency to drive operational costs down and repayment collection up, while providing a high-quality customer service to borrowers.

The vast majority of borrowers meet their repayment obligations. We will do more to support borrowers who seek to meet their loan repayment obligations, and, in the interests of fairness to both the taxpayer and to borrowers who meet their obligations, we will be tougher on those who do not. We will take stronger action to trace borrowers including those overseas, act to recover loan repayments where it is clear that borrowers are seeking to avoid repayment, consider the use of sanctions against borrowers who breach loan repayment terms and, if necessary, prosecute.

This approach is fair for borrowers and good for the effective management of public money, providing value for the taxpayer and helping to ensure that the student finance system remains on a sustainable footing.

We will keep the strategy under review to ensure that the repayment system continues to meet these objectives, and we will report annually on progress.

A copy of the strategy document will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS524]

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): Ahead of Monday's high-level stakeholder conference on energy intensive industries, which follows on from November's EU extraordinary Competitiveness Council on steel, I wanted to update Parliament on the UK's contribution to EU-level action on steel.

The main area in which the EU can make meaningful change is with regard to unfair trade practices. Given the global scale of the challenge facing the steel industry, the Government, working with UK Steel and other stakeholders, have made every effort to ensure a speedy and effective EU-level response.

The Government have pressed hard for EU action to tackle unfair trade practices, wherever they have seen them. For example, the Government in July and November last year voted in favour of antidumping measures on wire rod and separately on steel pipes. It was also the UK last year that lobbied successfully in support of calls from industry, for an EU investigation into cheap imports of reinforcing steel bar ("rebar").

It was the UK that called for and secured an emergency meeting of the EU Competitiveness Council in November which agreed on the need for swifter action on steel dumping. And, in recognition of the immediate risks posed to EU and UK industry by a surge in imports, the Commission this year has acted swiftly to announce registration of imports on both rebar and cold-rolled steel. To assist industry in bringing forward complaints, we have also intensified our discussions with the steel industry, including at the international comparisons working group chaired by me, to provide help with ongoing and forthcoming individual unfair trade cases.

On 5 February, the UK also sent a joint letter with France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Belgium, and Luxembourg to the European Commission to call for further support for the UK and EU steel industry. This letter has subsequently been endorsed by Spain and Slovakia. It called for:

- making full and timely use of all trade defence instruments to tackle unfair trade;

- ensuring that the upcoming negotiations on the European emissions trading system focus on preventing carbon leakage and the relocation of production and jobs outside the EU; and

- exploring other ways to avoid the downturn of the European steel industry and guarantee its long-term and sustainable development.

The Government are strongly in favour of effective trade defences to tackle unfair trade practices. We have asked the Commission to improve the speed by which anti-dumping and anti-subsidy investigations are conducted, and we have written to DG Trade suggesting areas where investigation timeframes might be shortened. This would enable quicker action where the evidence points to unfair trade practices by international competitors.

The UK has long been a proponent of modernising the EU's trade defence instruments—the rules covering protection for the EU against dumping and subsidised imports and other unfair trade practices—to make them more efficient, effective and transparent. But modernisation must also balance user and producer interests. Certain

proposals brought forward by the Commission in 2012, including the proposal to abolish the lesser duty rule, did not strike this balance.

The lesser duty rule sets the import tariff in anti-dumping cases to the lower of either the level of dumping or the level of actual injury caused. This rule means that the EU imposes duties that are sufficient to protect EU industry from injury or, where the dumping level is lower, to eliminate the dumping. This ensures duties are proportionate to the harm caused, and effectively redress the injury to the producing industry, without inflicting disproportionate costs on importers and consumers.

That said, the Government strongly believe that the tariffs set in individual trade investigations must reflect an accurate estimate of the harm caused. In January the Commission announced provisional anti-dumping duties—ranging from 9.2% to 13%—on reinforcing steel bar (“rebar”). Though welcoming the duties, we shared the concerns of UK industry that these duties were lower than needed to protect them fully from the harm caused by unfair trade, and the Secretary of State raised his concerns with EU Trade Commissioner Malmström. We will continue to work with industry to press its case over the next six months while the Commission carries out its investigation, before confirming the final level of duties by July.

Many of the problems facing the UK and EU steel industries are global ones which, to be addressed, require engagement with the world’s steel producing nations, in particular China. On 29 January, the EU Trade Commissioner wrote to the Chinese Minister of Commerce to urge China to curb overcapacity in its steel industry. While welcoming current plans to cut steel production, EU Commissioner Malmström said that these would need to be translated into concrete action. The UK welcomes this dialogue between the Commissioner and the Chinese and is keen to see it continue. We will also continue to raise these issues bilaterally with the Chinese.

In order to ensure a level playing field across the EU, the Government have asked the Commission to be extremely vigilant and respond quickly wherever there are suspicions of wrong-doing. On 20 January the European Commission opened a formal investigation into Italian Government support for steel producer Ilva, Europe’s largest steel plant. That same day, the European Commission also ordered Belgium to recover €211 million from several steel companies within the Duferco groups, after finding that this distorted competition in breach of state aid rules.

Finally, the Government look forward to Monday’s EU high-level stakeholders’ conference on energy intensive industries. This builds on the outcomes of the November 2015 extraordinary Competitiveness Council meeting on steel. The conference will bring together stakeholders from the steel industry, other energy intensive industries, trade unions, representatives from member state Governments and the EU Commission. The UK has worked closely with stakeholders and the Commission to ensure that discussions will focus on addressing the serious issues facing the steel industry. The UK Government, represented by me, will be speaking alongside European Ministers. We will use this opportunity to maintain the pressure on the Commission to make progress in the areas covered in our joint letter of 5 February.

[HCWS528]

CABINET OFFICE

Political and Constitutional Reform Committee Eighth Report: Government Response

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr Oliver Letwin): I am today presenting to Parliament the Government’s response to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee’s Eighth Report of Session 2014-15: “What next on the redrawing of parliamentary constituency boundaries?”

The Government are grateful to the former Political and Constitutional Reform Committee for its work on this issue. It is essential that the Boundary Commissions have certainty about the rules that will apply for the redistribution of UK parliamentary constituencies for the next boundary review. The Government have no plans at this time to introduce legislation to make major changes to the boundary review framework which was set up in the last Parliament. This has necessarily informed the Government’s consideration of, and response to, the Committee’s recommendations.

[HCWS526]

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council will be held in Brussels on 12 February 2016. Ministers are due to discuss the following items:

Anti-tax avoidance package

The Commission will present proposals for tackling corporate tax avoidance, including implementing the UK Government’s country by country reporting template for multinationals. This will be followed by an exchange of views. The UK has led the way in the OECD and EU in negotiating and implementing tougher international tax rules and transparency measures.

Current legislative proposals

The presidency will update the Council on the state of play of financial services dossiers.

Implementation of the banking union

The Commission will provide a brief update on several dossiers linked to the banking union: the single resolution fund, the bank recovery and resolution directive and the deposit guarantee scheme directive.

Fight against the financing of terrorism

The Commission will present its action plan to reinforce the European framework in the fight against the financing of terrorism. Following an exchange of views, the Council will adopt conclusions on the new measures.

Preparation of the G20 meeting in Shanghai on 25-27 February 2016

The Council will adopt the EU’s terms of reference ahead of the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors in Shanghai.

Discharge to be given to the Commission in respect of the implementation of the budget for 2014

On the basis of a report from the Court of Auditors, the Council will vote on the discharge to be given to the Commission in respect of the implementation of the EU's general budget for the financial year 2014.

Budget guidelines for 2017

Council conclusions will be adopted on the EU budget guidelines for 2017. These will inform the Commission of high-level priorities in preparation of the draft budget.

High-level group on own resources

Mario Monti, the chair of the high-level group on own resources, will provide a state of play update on the EU's financing system.

[HCWS533]

Financial Services

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): I can today confirm that I have laid a Treasury minute informing the House of a reduction in HM Treasury's contingent liabilities to NRAM plc (formerly Northern Rock (Asset Management) plc).

The Treasury minute concerns the guarantee arrangements announced on 8 December 2009 that put in place arrangements in relation to certain borrowings and derivative transactions of, and certain wholesale deposits held in accounts with, NRAM plc. At March 2015 the maximum contingent liability to HM Treasury on this guarantee arrangement was £6.5 billion.

The reduction is a result of the sale announcement on 13 November that UK Asset Resolution (UKAR), the holding company of NRAM (formerly Northern Rock Asset Management) had sold £13 billion of mortgages, consequently HM Treasury's contingent liabilities have reduced as securities associated with the Granite securitisation vehicle have been extinguished. As a result of this the HM Treasury exposure under this guarantee arrangement has fallen to around £270 million.

I will update the House of any further changes to UKAR associated guarantee arrangements as necessary.

If the remaining liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

[HCWS538]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Greg Clark): On 21 January 2016, I announced my intention, after careful consideration of the recommendation of the commissioner team to return certain functions to Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council. The original directions were issued on 26 February 2015, following the Casey report and advice note from Sir Michael Wilshaw, HM chief inspector of education, children's services and skills. Although a number of challenges remain, there has been significant areas of progress nearly a year on, and I believe it is now appropriate to return some functions to the authority.

However it is important to stress that the returned functions do not include functions such as licensing;

children's social care—including all services relating to child sexual exploitation; adult social care; audit; and other functions which still remain high risk.

On 21 January 2016, I invited representations from the authority regarding my intention to return certain functions to them to exercise. I have now considered representations received from the authority, including from the leader and the chief executive, and I am satisfied that the council is now able to exercise the functions identified by the lead commissioner in compliance with the best value duty, and that the people of Rotherham can have confidence that this will be the case. Therefore, today I am exercising my powers under section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999 to return certain service areas, including all associated executive and non-executive functions, to the council to exercise. Handing back these functions will allow some democratic control to be returned and for the authority to take an important first step on the road to recovery.

The functions to be returned are:

Education and schools; education for 14-19 years in all settings; school admissions and appeal system; youth services

Public health

Leisure services; events in parks and green spaces

Customer and cultural services, libraries, arts, customer services and welfare programmes

Housing

Planning and transportation policy; highways maintenance

The council's area assembly system and neighbourhood working; responsibilities under the Equalities Act

Building regulation, drainage, car parking; environmental health; business regulation and enforcement—not including taxi licensing; emergency planning

• ICT; legal and democratic services; corporate communications; corporate policy; procurement; financial services, including benefits and revenues, but not including audit

Budget control in these areas and budget planning

Policy arising from Sheffield city region.

Today, the Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and I have issued new directions that return the above identified service areas to the authority. With effect from 11 February, councillors will be responsible for decision making in these areas. The commissioners will provide oversight of the returned functions to ensure that they are exercised in accordance with the statutory best value duty and also retain powers in the remaining areas and other functions which still remain high risk. The directions and explanatory memorandum that accompany this statement can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-02-11/HCWS539/>.

[HCWS539]

EDUCATION

School Estate

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Sam Gyimah): The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Schools (Lord Nash) has made the following written statement.

Today, I am announcing £1.4 billion of funding allocations to maintain and improve the condition of the education estate. Investing in our school buildings is a key part of the

Government's long-term economic plan to secure Britain's future. It will help to ensure children across the country can learn in schools that are safe and in good condition.

For the financial year 2016-17, the Department for Education is allocating £200 million of devolved formula capital to schools and £1.2 billion to local authorities, voluntary aided partnerships, multi-academy trusts and academy sponsors, to invest in their own condition priorities. This includes funding for the repair and refurbishment of academies and sixth-form colleges through the condition improvement fund, the outcome of which we will announce later this year.

Good investment decisions require some certainty and stability of funding, which is why in February 2015 we announced three-year indicative allocations covering 2015-16 to 2017-18. The allocations we are announcing today, for 2016-17, update those allocations to reflect how the school system has changed, with schools opening and closing and more schools becoming academies. We have implemented these changes with minimal variation to the approach we set out last year. These updated allocations are also indicative of funding for 2017-18.

Details of today's announcement will be published on the gov.uk website. Copies will be placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS529]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): The Agriculture and Fisheries Council will take place on 15 February in Brussels. My hon. friend, the Minister of State for farming, food and marine environment (George Eustice), will represent the UK.

As the provisional agenda stands, the following items will be discussed:

The primary focus will be a first reading proposal on the sustainable management of external fishing fleets.

There will be a presentation by the presidency on the work programme for the Dutch presidency, as well as a presentation by the Commission on international agricultural trade issues.

An exchange of views on animal welfare, as well as a long-term strategy for agricultural research will also take place.

There are currently four confirmed any other business items:

Conference on antimicrobial resistance (tabled by the presidency)

African swine fever (tabled by the Polish delegation)

Difficult situation in milk and pig sectors (tabled by the Polish delegation)

Market situation (tabled by the Spanish delegation).

[HCWS530]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs and General Affairs Councils

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council on 15 February and I will attend the General

Affairs Council on 16 February. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, and the General Affairs Council will be chaired by the Dutch presidency. The meetings will be held in Brussels.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL

The expected agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) will include Bosnia, South Africa, Moldova, Belarus, Libya and climate diplomacy. The Lebanon Foreign Minister will attend lunch where there will be an opportunity to follow up on commitments made at the London Conference on Supporting Syria and the Region 2016 and look at wider regional issues.

Bosnia

HRVP Mogherini will include Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in her introductory remarks, signalling BiH's intention to submit its EU membership application in the margins of the meeting. While the UK Government will wish to welcome BiH's progress on its EU path, we will want to make clear what more needs to be done for the application to proceed—namely more meaningful implementation of the reform agenda, stabilisation and association agreement (SAA) adaptation to take into account Croatia's accession to the EU; and agreement on a co-ordination mechanism to allow BiH to speak with one voice to the EU.

South Africa

Ministers are expected to exchange views on HRVP Mogherini's forthcoming visit to South Africa and the future direction of the EU's strategic partnership with the country. The UK will seek to encourage increased engagement and note the importance of the EU's broad and significant partnership with South Africa.

Moldova

Ministers are expected to exchange views on recent developments in the Republic of Moldova.

Belarus

The FAC will have a discussion on relations between the EU and Belarus. Improving the human rights situation in the country remains a key priority for the EU.

Lebanon

Ministers will be joined for lunch by Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil. As host to over 1.1 million refugees from Syria, Lebanon is on the front line of the humanitarian response to the crisis. At the Supporting Syria and the Region 2016 Conference held in London on 4 February the UK and co-hosts signed an agreement with Lebanon that will see the international community providing long-term support to strengthen the Lebanese economy and create job opportunities for host communities and refugees. Ministers will discuss the implementation of this agreement, the urgent need for Lebanon to elect a President, and security in the region.

Libya

The FAC will focus on the latest developments in the UN-led political process. The UK, along with the UN and international partners continues to urge all parties to resolve the remaining issues quickly. The EU will play an important role in providing immediate support to a Government of National Accord, and we will encourage the EU to develop its options for support in co-ordination with the UN.

Climate diplomacy

Ministers are expected to discuss the outcomes of the Paris climate change agreement and how best to support its implementation. They will exchange views on how the EU and member states should co-ordinate their efforts, including a draft climate diplomacy plan drawn up by the European External Action Service. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change said in her statement to the House on 14 December, this historic new global climate change agreement takes a significant step towards reducing, on a global scale, the emissions that cause climate change. The UK Government welcome the way the EU institutions and member states worked together to deliver the Paris agreement. The Government will continue to engage actively with EU partners and the institutions to support implementation of the agreement.

GENERAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL

The General Affairs Council (GAC) on 16 February is expected to focus on European Council follow up, preparation of the February and March European Councils and the inter-institutional agreement on better regulation.

European Council follow up

The GAC will discuss the implementation of conclusions adopted at the December European Council, with a particular focus on the migration issue.

Preparation of the February European Council

The GAC will prepare the draft conclusions for the 18-19 February European Council, which the Prime Minister will attend. The February European Council agenda covers the UK's EU renegotiation migration and economic issues.

Preparation of the March European Council

The GAC will prepare the agenda for the 17-18 March European Council, which the Prime Minister will attend. The March European Council agenda has not yet been released but we expect it to include migration.

Inter-institutional agreement on better regulation (IIA)

The GAC will receive a further update on the IIA negotiations from the presidency. The Council may also discuss implementation, depending on the progress made ahead of the Council.

[HCWS532]

EU Foreign Ministers (Informal Meeting)

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the informal Foreign Ministers meeting on 5 and 6 February in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

The informal format of the Gymnich allows EU Foreign Ministers to engage in a free-ranging discussion on a number of issues. In contrast to the formal Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), Ministers do not agree written conclusions. The next FAC will be held on 15 February. The Gymnich was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. Discussion centred on the European global strategy, Iran, and migration. The Gymnich also featured a scenario-based exercise.

Elmar Brok MEP, Chairman of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs and Foreign Ministers from EU candidate countries joined EU Ministers for the session on migration. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence and Minister for Reserves (Julian Brazier) represented the UK in the session on the European global strategy.

GYMNICH DISCUSSION

European global strategy

EU Defence and Foreign Ministers met at a joint working lunch to discuss progress in the drafting of the strategy. Ms Mogherini stated her intention to produce a strategy that was broader than just security issues and covered the range of priorities for the EU. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State and Minister for Reserves highlighted the UK's strategic defence and security review (SDSR) and commitment to spend 2% on defence and 0.7% on development. He said it was important that Europe should look first to NATO for its defence.

Iran

The next issue on the agenda was the EU's relationship with Iran. Ms Mogherini said the joint comprehensive plan of action (JCPoA) should be implemented and respected. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs added that the EU needed to take a cautious approach due to Iran's ballistic missile programme and poor human rights.

Scenario-based exercise

At the joint initiative of Ms Mogherini and the Dutch Foreign Minister, Mr Bert Koenders, Ministers took part in a crisis simulation exercise, which involved a fictitious scenario followed by discussion of possible responses to an external threat.

Migration issues

The second day of the informal Gymnich meeting addressed migration with an extended session. EU Foreign Ministers were joined by Ministers from candidate countries and discussed the routes taken by migrants through the western Balkans and Turkey, the challenges ahead and possible solutions. Ms Mogherini intended to focus on implementing measures already in place, such as the Turkey action plan (AP) and work on contingency planning for the western Balkans routes.

The Foreign Secretary highlighted how the stream of legitimate refugees from Syria could worsen and stressed the need for a long-term strategy beyond the current crisis. This included addressing upstream push factors and supporting UN efforts and Syria's neighbours.

[HCWS531]

Ballistic Missiles: North Korea

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): I would like to update the House on the most recent developments on the Korean peninsula and the action the Government are taking in response.

North Korea announced on 7 February that it had launched a satellite that morning. The launch took place at Dongchang-Ri on North Korea's west coast. It was carried out by a satellite launch vehicle which used

ballistic missile technology. As the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), made clear in his public statement on 7 February, this latest provocation by North Korea is a clear and deliberate violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions 1718, 1874, 2087 and 2094.

This provocation took place almost exactly a month after North Korea announced to the media that it had conducted its first hydrogen bomb test on 6 January. The Foreign Secretary updated the House on this issue on 13 January, *Official Report*, columns 21-22WS, and our assessment remains that the size of the seismic event caused by the nuclear test, while indicative of a nuclear explosion, was not indicative of the successful test of a thermonuclear weapon—also known as a hydrogen bomb.

We support the position outlined by the UN Security Council, as expressed in their press statement of 7 February, that this launch, as well as any other launch that uses ballistic missile technology, even if characterised as a satellite or space launch, contributes to North Korea's development of nuclear weapon delivery systems and is a serious violation of Security Council resolutions. We are working with other UN Security Council members to adopt expeditiously a new Security Council resolution in response to these dangerous and serious violations.

I summoned the North Korean ambassador to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 8 February in order to make clear, in the strongest terms, the UK's firm condemnation of this latest action. Our ambassador in Pyongyang has reiterated our condemnation of the nuclear test.

In addition to the Foreign Secretary speaking to the Japanese Foreign Minister on 8 February, we remain in close touch with the US, France, South Korea, China and other partners on our respective approaches towards North Korea.

We remain deeply concerned by North Korea's continued development of nuclear weapons and missile technology in defiance of UN resolutions and international condemnation. Amid reports of widespread hardship and human rights violations, the priority must be the health and welfare of North Korean people.

Our message to North Korea is that this behaviour is unacceptable. Due to the regime's continued flagrant violation of UN Security Council resolutions, it now faces an increasingly robust international response.

[HCWS537]

HEALTH

Ring-fenced Public Health Grants

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): I am today publishing the public health allocations to local authorities in England for 2016-17 along with indicative allocations for 2017-18.

Through the public health grant, we are investing £3.39 billion for public health in 2016-17 and £3.30 billion in 2017-18. I believe this is a fair settlement, which will ensure the long-term sustainability of public health

services. We will be investing over £16 billion over the next five years for public health, in addition to what the NHS spends on preventive interventions such as immunisation and screening.

The indicative allocation for 2017-18 will help local authorities to develop and extend their planning, including initiatives better delivered across more than one year. During 2016 the Government plan to consult on options to fund local authorities' public health spending from retained business rates receipts.

We are asking local authorities to adjust the way they report their spending from the grant on a number of subjects in 2016-17, and for the first time are including public mental health as a separate heading in spending returns.

Full details of the public health grants to local authorities can be found on gov.uk. This information will be communicated to local authorities in a local authority circular.

Attachments can be found online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements>

[HCWS527]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Policing

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): I am pleased to inform Parliament that Her Majesty the Queen has approved a one-year extension to the appointment of Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe QPM, Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.

I recommended this extension to Her Majesty having had regard to a recommendation from the Mayor of London as occupant of the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime. My recommendation recognises the vital work the Commissioner has done in fighting crime and in reforming the Metropolitan Police Service. He has been at the forefront of the vital and important challenge of policing London at a time of heightened security.

This extension to 25 September 2017 provides continuity for the Metropolitan Police Service during a change of political leadership in London, and will give the new Mayor of London the opportunity to take an informed view about any recommendation they may wish to make about the longer-term leadership of the organisation, after they take office in May 2016.

The extension enables Sir Bernard to continue his programme of reform of the Metropolitan Police Service and the vital task of cutting crime and keeping London safe.

[HCWS534]

JUSTICE

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Michael Gove): The Ministry of Justice requires an advance to discharge its commitments, some of which are set out in its supplementary estimate 2015-16, to be published in February 2016. This is a temporary cash advance due to the timing of Royal Assent for the

Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill 2015-16, which will not receive Royal Assent until late in March 2016.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £192,000,000 and additional cash of £268,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Ministry of Justice. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £460,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid upon Royal Assent of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill.

[HCWS535]

Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): The Government are committed to modernising the way in which justice is accessed and delivered. We are investing over £700 million over the next four years to update the court and tribunal estate, installing modern IT systems and making the justice system more efficient and effective for modern users.

Working closely with the judiciary, we have begun installing wi-fi and digital systems in our criminal courts but much more needs to be done. We want to make the entire justice system more accessible to everyone—witnesses, victims, claimants, police and lawyers—by using modern technology including online plea, claims and evidence systems and video conferencing, reducing the need for people to travel to court.

As part of this modernisation, the court and tribunal estate has to be updated. Many of the current 460 court buildings are underused: last year 48% of all courts and tribunals were empty for at least half their available hearing time. These buildings are expensive to maintain yet unsuitable for modern technology.

Court closures are difficult decisions; local communities have strong allegiances to their local courts and I understand their concerns. But changes to the estate are vital if we are to modernise a system which everybody accepts is unwieldy, inefficient, slow, expensive to maintain and unduly bureaucratic.

On 16 July 2015 I therefore announced a consultation on proposals to close 91 courts and tribunals in England and Wales. Over 2,100 separate responses were received, along with 13 petitions containing over 10,000 signatures. I am grateful to all who took the time to provide their views. It is clear from the responses that the service our courts and tribunals provide continues to be highly valued.

Having considered carefully all responses to the consultation, we have decided to close 86 of the 91 courts and tribunals. A total of 64 sites will close as proposed in the consultation. A further 22 closures will take place but with changes to the original proposals. These changes, many suggested by respondents, include the identification of suitable alternative venues, such as local civic buildings; or different venues in the HMCTS estate to those originally proposed. I am very grateful to all those who engaged with the consultation to help us to reach the best solutions.

On average, the 86 courts we are closing are used for just over a third of their available hearing time. That is equivalent to less than two days a week. It will still be the case that after these closures, over 97% of citizens will be able to reach their required court within an hour by car. This represents a change of just 1 percentage points for both criminal and county courts. The proportion able to reach a tribunal within an hour by car will remain unchanged at 83%.

For each proposal in the consultation, we have considered access to justice; value for money; and efficiency. The consultation response, which is being published today, contains details of all the decisions and changes including an indicative timetable for closures, and will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS536]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Universal Credit

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Iain Duncan Smith): The full universal credit service for new claims remains on track to be delivered nationally for all types of claimants from May 2016, completing in summer 2018.

Today, I can announce the jobcentres which will be go live with the full service from May through to the end of 2016. Details of the sites can be found in the table below and on the gov.uk website.

| <i>May 2016</i> | <i>June 2016</i> | <i>July 2016</i> |
|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| <i>October 2016</i> | <i>November 2016</i> | <i>December 2016</i> |
| Rugby | Harrogate | Frome |
| Lowestoft | Richmond | Wells |
| Bath | Ryedale | Lancaster |
| Bridgwater | Hammersmith | Morecombe |
| Newcastle Cathedral Square | Inverness | Widnes |
| | | Runcorn |
| Peckham | Whitehaven | Hartlepool |
| Kennington Park | Workington | Fulham |
| Taunton | Melton Mowbray | Shepherds Bush |
| Northallerton | Daventry | Stratford-Upon-Avon |
| Skipton | Market Harborough | Swindon |
| Minehead | Dingwall | Hastings |
| | Fort William | |
| | Invergordon | |
| | Portree | |
| | Wick | |

This roll-out plan continues the successful delivery approach we have used to date, expanding steadily, safely and securely to ensure the system is resilient and we have the opportunity to learn as we go.

In agreeing this plan my Department has engaged with the local authorities. We will continue to work closely together to finalise and announce the plans for 2017 by July. Details for 2018 and the completion of the roll-out of the full service will be announced by September.

As each jobcentre rolls out all new claims will be on universal credit and it will no longer be possible, in that location, to make a new claim to income-based jobseekers allowance and employment and support allowance, income support, housing benefit or tax credits. By the middle of 2018 this transition will be complete and it will no longer be possible to make a claim for these legacy benefits or tax credits anywhere in Great Britain.

My Department will bring forward the relevant legislation for these sites in due course.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-02-11/HCWS525>

[HCWS525]

Petition

Thursday 11 February 2016

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Park and ride scheme on Bathampton Meadows

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that Bathampton Meadows are an area of cultural and historical importance; further that the proposed park and ride scheme on Bathampton Meadows will negatively affect the local landscape; further that the plans will negatively impact local tourism; and further than an online petition on this matter was signed by over 6,000 petitioners.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Bath and North East Somerset Council to withdraw plans to build a park and ride scheme on Bathampton Meadows.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg, *Official Report*, 6 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 403.]

[P001667]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Jones):

Planning for local transport, including new park and ride facilities, is the responsibility of the Local Transport Authority. When considering new facilities the relevant

local authority must follow planning procedures, seek relevant permissions and carry out public consultation. In this case, the Local Transport Authority is Bath and North East Somerset Council.

The council is currently carrying out a public consultation on a preferred site for a park and ride east of Bath. This is a local process instigated by Bath and North East Somerset Council and is in advance of formal planning procedures. It is not for Government to intervene in these local issues. However, members of the public may make representations to the local authority about their planning proposals, as set out in published guidance.

Bath and North East Somerset Council has identified three potential park and ride sites. In September/October 2015 the council carried out a public consultation process to identify the most appropriate location. The three sites under consideration are land east of the A4/A46 junction, land to the west of Mill Lane and land to the east of Mill Lane. A summary report of this consultation has now been produced and published by Bath and North East Somerset Council. Currently, a preferred option for the park and ride site has not been decided.

Bath and North East Somerset Council's Communities, Transport and Environment Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel will be undertaking an open public scrutiny day on 22 March 2016. It will take place in the Banqueting Room, The Guildhall, Bath from 10:00 am to 4:30 pm. The day will review a park and ride to the East of Bath and also wider integrated transport solutions for the area. Further details about this event may be obtained from Bath and North East Somerset Council.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 11 February 2016

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