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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 22 February 2016

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 18 MAY 2015]

SIXTY-FIFTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 606

ELEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2015-16

House of Commons

Monday 22 February 2016

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Draft Investigatory Powers Bill

1. **Philip Boswell** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What assessment her Department has made of the cost implications for private businesses of compliance with the proposed requirements of the draft Investigatory Powers Bill. [903659]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): The draft Investigatory Powers Bill has been drafted in close consultation with industry, and the estimated cost to the public purse of implementing its provisions will continue to be refined as we hold more detailed discussions with industry on implementation. It would not be appropriate to expect telecommunications companies to meet the costs themselves and, as now, full cost recovery will apply to operational costs, including those associated with new obligations under the Bill.

Philip Boswell: The Select Committee on Science and Technology warned that the Bill risks undermining our strongly performing tech sector because of uncertainty about the costs of complying with the new legislation. Will the Secretary of State assure us that UK businesses will not be placed at a commercial disadvantage compared with overseas competitors?

Mrs May: I can assure the hon. Gentleman of that and, as I said in my answer to his initial question, we will ensure that full cost recovery applies to operational costs for any companies that have, for example, notices issued to them. It is clear that that is what we have done as a Government in the past and what previous Governments have done, and we will continue to do it.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary look carefully at the recommendations from the Joint Committee on the draft Investigatory Powers Bill on the definition of internet connection records? We were very clear that greater clarity is needed on the definition to allow the private sector fully to cost its proposals.

Mrs May: I thank the right hon. Gentleman and the other Members of this House and of the other place who sat on the Committee and did an excellent job of producing a well-thought-through and careful report. We will of course carefully consider the issue of definition. We are looking at all three of the reports from the Science and Technology Committee, the Intelligence and Security Committee and the Joint Committee and we will make revised Bill proposals in due course.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): On the specific issue of private businesses, will the Home Secretary outline what recent discussions she and her Ministers have had on that subject with the devolved Administrations?

Mrs May: Discussions with the devolved Administrations have gone on throughout the preparation of the draft Bill. They have continued and will continue, as will discussions between Ministers and officials with companies and private businesses.

Family Visas

2. **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): If she will make it her policy to reduce the financial threshold for family visas. [903660]

10. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If she will make it her policy to reduce the financial threshold for family visas. [903669]

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): The minimum income threshold of £18,600 for sponsoring a partner under the family immigration rules ensures that couples wishing to establish their family life in the UK do not place burdens on the taxpayer and helps promote integration. It has been considered by the courts and upheld by the Court of Appeal.

Margaret Ferrier: The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants has said that these rules discriminatorily affect women, 55% of whom earn less than £18,600, compared with 27% of men. The rules also disadvantage young people. What action will the Home Secretary take to reduce these unfair rules?

James Brokenshire: The threshold was set as a consequence of advice from the Migration Advisory Committee, which carefully considered the level of income in terms of it not being a burden on the taxpayer. The gross median earnings of all employees in Scotland in 2014 were £21,725—higher than that threshold. Issues of legal challenge have obviously been raised by the Court of Appeal. They were considered carefully and the threshold was upheld.

Martyn Day: The Secretary of State will have seen Amira's story, reported by the BBC this morning. She fled Syria and gave birth to her son in the UK, but under the Government's family visa rules, her husband, a Syrian national, is unable to join them here simply because they cannot afford the visa fees. Will the Secretary of State tell us where this British national should go to enjoy her family life? Her husband's home country of Syria?

James Brokenshire: Various different routes could be available. We have the family reunion route, which might apply in these circumstances. Obviously, I am not familiar with all the issues he highlights but, equally, the Government are under certain duties regarding the protection of the welfare of children. This was considered by the court and upheld.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Although I take the point made so eloquently by my right hon. Friend about the burden on the taxpayer, to what extent do we take into account charges made by other countries to British nationals hoping to emigrate to them?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes the point about different immigration systems in different parts of the world. We have taken considered advice from the Migration Advisory Committee, looking at costs and at those burdens to see that someone does not place a burden on the UK taxpayer. Obviously, it is for other countries to assess what is appropriate in their own systems.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The financial threshold for family visas is causing particular distress to one of my constituents, who cannot work the hours required because she is a carer for her vulnerable child. This means my constituent is living without her husband and the child is living without his father. Does the Minister acknowledge that he is at risk of creating a generation of children whose only contact with one of their parents will be via Skype?

James Brokenshire: No, I do not accept that, and these issues of the welfare of the child are absolutely part of our consideration. This matter was considered by the Court of Appeal and our approach was firmly upheld. When the threshold was set in November 2011, the MAC gave the lower threshold of £18,600 but also advised that the threshold could have been set as high as £25,700. The Government reflected and set the current level, which has been upheld by the courts.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister mentions the Court of Appeal, but of course the matter is not entirely settled because this week the Supreme Court will hear the cases of two British nationals who cannot meet the tough financial rules that would allow their non-European Union spouses to come to live with them. The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) mentioned Skype. According to the Children's Commissioner for England, 15,000 British children are growing up in Skype families, where the only contact they have with one parent is via Skype. How can the Minister justify the stress and anxiety caused to these children by the inflexible and unjust rules?

James Brokenshire: I do not accept the characterisation that the hon. and learned Lady presents—indeed, I do not recognise the number she proffers. This is about ensuring good integration, which is part of the overall requirement in relation to language. This is about not only not imposing a burden on the taxpayer but about promoting integration, and we believe the policy is effective in doing that.

Joanna Cherry: Last year, the Conservative think-tank, Bright Blue, called on the Government to change these rules, noting

“the significant contribution millions of low paid Britons make to our economy and society, as well as the value of having families living together in the same country.”

If the Minister will not listen to the Opposition, will he at least listen to a think-tank from his own party and get rid of these rules, which discriminate against hard-working families?

James Brokenshire: I say again that we do not believe the rules are discriminatory in the way the hon. and learned Lady suggests. The system is in place to ensure good integration. It ensures that people are not a burden on the taxpayer, and I would have thought she recognised that as being a positive aspect of the policy. If people come here, contribute and settle, we welcome that, but the rules have been set in the way they have, this has been upheld by the courts and we will continue to underline those key themes.

Port Security

3. **Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): What resources her Department provides for security measures at UK ports. [903661]

16. **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What resources her Department provides for security measures at UK ports. [903675]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Border Force carries out 100% checks of all arriving passengers on scheduled services. It works closely with other law enforcement organisations to deliver effective and intelligence-led responses to a range of security threats. Officers use high-tech equipment and an array of search techniques to combat immigration crime, and detect banned and restricted goods.

Anna Turley: I thank the Home Secretary for that answer. Last September, seven men and five children were found in a container in Teesport in my constituency, just three weeks after 20 illegal immigrants were found in South Shields. My local Border Force is facing cuts of about a quarter of its front-line staff, so how can she reassure me that these cuts are not damaging the safety and security of ports outside London and the south-east?

Mrs May: I can reassure the hon. Lady about that, because the approach we are taking comes across in a number of ways. We are looking not only to introduce new technology in Border Force but to ensure that it can operate flexibly and base its activities much more on an intelligence-led approach, so that we can target where the staff need to be. This Government have also enhanced our ability to deal with organised immigration crime through the creation of the organised immigration crime taskforce. The National Crime Agency, set up by the last coalition Government, is also taking this issue seriously and is acting on it.

Mike Kane: There are 10 electronic passport gates at Manchester airport in my constituency. The Department is unable to tell me how many people travel through them, how many rejections there have been and how often they malfunction. Does the Home Secretary agree that that is one of the gaps identified by the National Audit Office, which should be looked into?

Mrs May: Increasing the number of e-gates for checking passports was a very good move by this Government, especially as it provides enhanced security at our border.

20. [903679] **David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): I have been trying to find out for a very long time through written questions how many people arrive at UK airports without valid travel documents, and I am very surprised that nobody seems able to give me an answer. Can the Minister give me an answer today, and, if not, will she take action to find out that important information?

Mrs May: I can tell my hon. Friend that 18,000 individuals were refused entry at the border in 2014, and that they included those who were travelling on invalid documentation. When someone comes to the UK border they are subject to a range of checks. Officers at the border are trained to detect forged documents.

Steps are also taken to intercept those who do not have the correct documents before they travel so that they do not actually reach the border in the first place.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I congratulate the Home Secretary on her wise words about the value of EU membership in protecting the safety and security of this country? Even though that is the case—and I agree with her—may we have more specific focus on the quieter ports and airports that are used by smuggling gangs?

Mrs May: As I said in response to the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), Border Force takes a more intelligence-led approach to such issues, which means it can be flexible in deploying staff at different ports. That is precisely because it recognises that we need not only to focus on one or two ports, but to have that flexibility across a range of ports.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): One of the most powerful arguments for the UK remaining in the EU is that we need and rely on a strong EU co-ordinated approach to security, including at our borders and our ports. As the Secretary of State and I know well, we rely 24/7 on EU criminal justice and security measures. In those circumstances, I assume that the Home Office has carried out a risk assessment of the impact of UK withdrawal from the EU on security at UK ports. Where can members of the public who have not yet decided how to vote in the forthcoming referendum access the conclusions of that risk assessment?

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): You mischievous monkey!

Mrs May: I am not sure whether that is parliamentary language for me to repeat in relation to the hon. and learned Gentleman. None the less, he can rest assured that arguments in relation to those matters will be fully set out for people over the coming months. He will know from his involvement in a different capacity before coming to this House one of the arguments that I put regarding issues such as the operation of various justice and home affairs measures. As a Government, we have set out very clearly the benefits of being part of those measures.

Keir Starmer: Tony Smith, interim head of the UK Border Force from 2012 to 2013, said today that a vote to leave the EU would pose significant policy and operational issues for Border Force, which is already under huge pressure, not least because of budget cuts, year on year, for many years. In particular, he highlighted the fact that Border Force staff would have to carry out more stringent checks on EU citizens. Will the Secretary of State confirm today that, far from reducing those levels of concern, Border Force will in fact face even more cuts, year on year, for the foreseeable future?

Mrs May: What I am happy to say to the hon. and learned Gentleman is that anyone who comes to the UK border will be stringently checked. We are doing that on a much more intelligence-led basis in looking at individuals who might be of concern. Yes, he is right: we have interactions with other member states in the European Union through the use of things such as Schengen Information System II to ensure that we are able to identify people of concern who are coming

across the border. Border Force's other operations are not about people but about restricted and illegal goods being brought into the UK. The intelligence-led approach can be particularly helpful in identifying areas of concern and whether action is being taken appropriately.

Police and Crime Commissioners

4. **William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of police and crime commissioners in reducing the level of crime. [903662]

13. **Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of police and crime commissioners in reducing the level of crime. [903672]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Elected police and crime commissioners are providing accountable visible leadership and making a real difference to policing locally. Overall, PCCs have presided over a reduction in crime of more than a quarter since their introduction, according to the independent Crime Survey for England and Wales.

William Wragg: I thank my right hon. Friend for her reply. What assessment has her Department made of the possibility of conflicts of interest arising if police and crime commissioners hold high office in local government, including that of mayor, and what steps have been taken to safeguard against that?

Mrs May: A good scrutiny process is available through police and crime panels to look at potential conflicts of interest. That process is enshrined in law and is undertaken. It is important that when any area looks at the potential for amalgamating roles, such as the amalgamation in the Greater Manchester area of the role of police and crime commissioner with, it is predicted, that of mayor, it is important that there is full discussion and consideration of all aspects to ensure that, whatever role the individual or individuals play, they can continue to do so properly without conflict of interest, and ensure that the best service is delivered.

Alberto Costa: My local Leicestershire police force recently received a positive inspection report from Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary. Will my right hon. Friend join me in praising the work of the Leicestershire chief constable, Simon Cole, and the Conservative police and crime commissioner, Sir Clive Loader, in their efforts to fight crime, specifically the chief constable's national work on the Prevent programme?

Mrs May: I am happy to extend congratulations, as I am sure everyone in the House is, on the excellent work of the police in Leicestershire, under both the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner, Sir Clive Loader, who has done an excellent job but is sadly stepping down at the forthcoming election. I would like to thank him for the work he has done in his first term as police and crime commissioner.

19. [903678] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The main problem that the South Yorkshire police and crime commissioner faces is the shortfall in his budget, which will lead to 250 police jobs being lost in 2016-17 as a result of police cuts, but it is made worse by the

lack of certainty about future budgets, which makes rational planning difficult. Does the Home Secretary agree that PCCs could do their job better if their budget was set for the remainder of this Parliament, and what will she do about it?

Mrs May: The picture that the hon. Gentleman has set out of the South Yorkshire force is not one that I recognise. We have protected, if we take the police precept into account, police budgets across the period of the comprehensive spending review. I should have thought that he welcomed that, given that his Front-Bench team proposed that police budgets could be cut by 10%.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): One type of crime that has not reduced is violence and abuse against retail staff. In fact, a recent report by the British Retail Consortium found that those crimes had gone up by 25%. Any level of violence against retail staff is unacceptable, but what steps will the Home Secretary take to enable police and crime commissioners to act to reduce that?

Mrs May: We are all concerned when we see violent acts of any sort, but for those retail staff who are subject to them that is a matter of serious concern. The operational response to those crimes and to the potential for such crime is for chief constables to look into. As I have seen in my own constituency, a number of retail chains have worked closely with local police to try to ensure that they provide extra support and security for their staff.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): Although I have had my differences at times with Alan Hardwick, the Lincolnshire police and crime commissioner, does my right hon. Friend agree that his record, along with that of Lincolnshire police, in reducing crime is exemplary, and is an example to all?

Mrs May: Again, I extend congratulations and welcome the work of the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner in reducing crime in Lincolnshire. It is not the only area where crime has fallen, but the fall in Lincolnshire is particularly significant.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Given the Home Secretary's reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), has she seen the statement from the Northamptonshire police and crime commissioner to his police and crime panel on 2 February in which he says of the new funding formula:

"It is expected that this will transfer funding from the urban areas to more rural areas and Northamptonshire may benefit"?

Does that reflect Government policy, or is he just letting the cat out of the bag?

Mrs May: As I would have thought the hon. Gentleman would be aware, we have clearly said that the funding formula changes that we were proposing before Christmas are not going ahead. We are pausing that process and looking again at how we can develop a funding formula that reflects needs. If the hon. Gentleman looks at police forces across England and Wales, he will see that everybody—including the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, who is sitting next to him—has been very clear that the funding formula needs to change.

Emergency Services (Duty to Collaborate)

5. **Mr Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of the potential merits of the proposed duty on emergency services to collaborate.
[903663]

9. **Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of the potential merits of the proposed duty on emergency services to collaborate.
[903668]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): There are examples across the country of excellent collaboration between the emergency services, particularly the H3 project in Hampshire, where collaboration between the emergency services has driven efficiencies and a better service for the public. Police and crime commissioners will have a duty to collaborate when the Policing and Crime Bill currently before the House becomes law.

Mr Mak: Hampshire fire service and Hampshire police service share a joint headquarters building, resulting in financial efficiencies and a more joined-up service for my constituents. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating both Hampshire emergency services on taking the lead in collaborative working?

Mike Penning: I had the honour and privilege of being in Hampshire recently and saw for myself the brilliant work being done between the emergency services. That is a result of the collaboration between the chief fire officer and the chief constable, as well as the police and crime commissioner doing excellent work to see that we have the right sort of emergency service for the 21st century.

Damian Green: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that the new generation of police and crime commissioners who will be elected in a couple of months get behind this very important reform? Will he join me in welcoming the commitment of the excellent Conservative PCC candidate in Kent, Matthew Scott, and his strong desire to implement these vital reforms?

Mike Penning: I have seen what Matthew Scott is proposing to do when, as we on the Conservative Benches all hope, he becomes the police and crime commissioner. We need to ensure that we spend taxpayers' money efficiently and well, and collaboration is the best way forward for that.

Mr Speaker: I call Kate Hoey.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Me?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady looks so surprised. She is rarely a shy or retiring soul. If she is, she must overcome her shyness.

Kate Hoey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Minister is well aware that the fire and rescue services collaborate well all over the country, particularly with the ambulance trusts. Why does he consider it necessary for police and crime commissioners to take control of the fire services

under the Bill? Surely the two organisations are so different in so many ways that collaboration is possible without the PCC running our fire services.

Mike Penning: The truth of the matter is that someone duly elected to run the service, as the PCC would be, is better than anybody seconded on to any committee. I am sure we all want efficient emergency services, and the fire service working closely with the ambulance service and the police is the way we would like to do that.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Critical to collaboration between emergency services will be their communications networks. How much will the new emergency service communications network cost, and when will it be in place?

Mike Penning: We are currently going out to contract. There are bids out there, which are confidential. We know that the excellent Airwave system that we have had for many years needs replacing. It was very expensive and the replacement will be cheaper than Airwave.

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): Shortly the police and crime commissioners will be able to put forward a business case to take over the governance of fire and rescue services. My hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr Mak) pointed out what Hampshire already does. At present we have a commercial trading arm which completely pays for the governance of the fire and rescue authority. What business case can a police and crime commissioner put forward that would allow him to run that service?

Mike Penning: The local community may want a more efficient service, which could be the case in Hampshire. I accept that Hampshire is particularly good, but that is not the case all over the country. Even when I was in Hampshire, there were people asking me for more collaboration and more work to be done together, and that request came particularly from the front-line operatives, who are probably the most important people in all this.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Given the funding cuts to the police service and the fire and rescue services already budgeted for by this Government, can the Minister guarantee that placing fire and rescue services under PCC control will not lead to further cuts in the number of front-line firefighters?

Mike Penning: Thank goodness the Chancellor did not listen to Labour Front-Benchers when we looked at police funding to 2020, because they wanted a 10% cut, and there will be no cut. We must make sure that we have an efficient service—the sort of efficient service I would have liked to have had when I was in the fire service—and that will be going forward.

Knife Crime

6. **Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): What assessment she has made of trends in the level of knife crime.
[903664]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): Tackling knife crime is a priority for the Government. Latest police recorded

crime figures show that knife crime is 14% lower than it was in June 2010. However, we recognise that there is more to do, and new actions to tackle knife crime will be set out in the forthcoming modern crime prevention strategy.

Will Quince: In Essex, the number of serious offences involving a knife rose 21% in the last recorded year. What action is my hon. Friend's Department taking to tackle knife crime and address the gang violence that fuels it in so many cases?

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I also congratulate him on the arrival of new baby Quince, in whose delivery I believe he was very involved. I am very aware of the concerns about knife crime in Essex, and I recently had a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns)—I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss precisely this issue. We are taking a range of steps, and earlier this month we supported 13 police forces, including Essex, that undertook co-ordinated action against knife crime.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Knife crime, like much other crime, is best dealt with pre-emptively and at the community and neighbourhood level. In Sussex, crime has gone up 8%, but Government inspectors said today that front-line neighbourhood and local policing is “routinely” being taken away. Will the Minister please look again at the issue of the 1,000 police officers and staff who are being taken from the frontline, which will further impact on neighbourhood policing?

Karen Bradley: May I start by congratulating Katy Bourne, who has been an excellent police and crime commissioner in Sussex? I met her recently, and we discussed the many steps she is taking to deal with crime. Obviously, the deployment of operational resources is a matter for the chief constable, in consultation with the police and crime commissioner. However, the hon. Gentleman should remember his vote in this House to cut police resources by 10%—something that Government Members disagreed with.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): Recently in Derby, a young man lost his life following a fatal stabbing in the city centre. Last year, knife crime rose across the UK for the first time in four years. What steps is the Department taking to tackle the issue and to discourage young individuals from carrying knives?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we need to educate young people and show them that carrying knives is not cool and not something they should be doing. They should understand that it is dangerous and that it can result in the loss of life. That is why we legislated in the last Parliament so that someone caught with a knife twice has a mandatory prison sentence. We are doing more work, and I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the specific issues in Derby, where I know there are concerns.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Has the Minister considered an amnesty? Amnesties have been implemented in the past to invite people to hand in their knives or other weapons, and that was very successful in the west midlands some years ago.

Karen Bradley: That is a matter for chief constables to determine. However, as I said, we have worked with 13 forces, and included in that work were knife amnesties.

Fraud and Cybercrime

7. **Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con):** What recent discussions the Government have had with banks and industry bodies on steps to reduce fraud and cybercrime. [903665]

The Minister for Security (Mr John Hayes): Discussions with banks and industry bodies have led to the recently announced Joint Fraud Taskforce. This is the first time that banks, police and Government have joined together to ensure that the public are aware of, and protected from, fraud. The taskforce's mission is to counter the wicked work of fraudsters.

Sir David Amess: While I absolutely understand the difficulties in effectively policing the internet, financial scams—judging by my own parliamentary account—seem to be completely out of control, and the most vulnerable people are being targeted. Will my right hon. Friend therefore have another look at this issue to see whether there is some way we can bring these criminals to account?

Mr Hayes: Because we have taken a fresh look at this, as my hon. Friend recommends, we have launched the joint taskforce; we are continuing to support the Cyber Streetwise campaign, which makes people more aware of, and therefore more guarded about, fraud; and we invested £90 million on cyber-security in the previous Parliament and will invest £1.9 billion over the next five years. We take this seriously, not least, Mr Speaker, because, as you know, in the cyber-age I am a cyber-Minister—up to the minute, up to the mark and up to the job.

Mr Speaker: We would expect no less of the right hon. Gentleman.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Since the cyber-Minister is up to the mark, may I ask him about the activities of a website called Bestvalid, which was discovered recently selling the stolen bank details of 100,000 British citizens? Can he explain, as an up-to-the-minute cyber-Minister, how it was possible for this website to carry on for six months before being closed down, and how much of the £1.9 billion that he is targeting on cybercrime will be used proactively to close down sites of this kind?

Mr Hayes: The right hon. Gentleman knows, because his Select Committee has drawn attention to this in the past, that it is critically important that the Government work with all other agencies, including banks and private sector organisations, and the taskforce will be missioned to do that. It may be worth saying that this is summed up by the fact that the National Police Chiefs Council has publicly signed up to

“commit our full support to the objectives and actions of the...Taskforce”

to

“work in partnership to...protect the public from becoming victims of fraud and fraud scams, maximising opportunities to stop fraudsters from operating”,

in exactly the way he recommends.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The cyber-Minister will know that people are more likely to be mugged online than in the street, with serious consequences for victims. After five years of the Government saying, “We cut police but we have cut crime”, will he confirm that, when 6 million cybercrimes are included in the statistics, the truth will be told that far from falling, crime is changing, and that our country now faces crime doubling just as this Government continue to cut the number of police officers?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman will be disappointed that I am going to say that he is right to draw attention to the scale of this problem. I remind him that we were the Government who made the decision to publish these statistics and to designate cybercrime in the way that we have, because until we appreciate the scale of the problem, we will not develop the solutions necessary to deal with it. As he will know, we are using some of the extra resource to set up the national cyber centre to co-ordinate work in this area.

Police and Crime Commissioners

8. **Mr Graham Allen** (Nottingham North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to encourage police and crime commissioners to support early intervention programmes; and if she will make a statement. [903666]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): The Government have supported the first police early innovation leadership academy and provided grant funding for the Early Intervention Foundation. This is really interesting work being done to protect young children. Naturally we will help and encourage chief constables and PCCs up and down the country to help to reduce crime, support victims, and closely engage with their partner agencies, such as the foundation.

Mr Allen: The American comedian Eddie Cantor said, “If those currently on the most-wanted list had been the most wanted as children they would no longer be on the most-wanted list.” In that context, will the Minister welcome the work that his Department is doing with the Early Intervention Foundation in creating police leaders’ academies on early intervention, and will he ensure that funding is available so that every police and crime commissioner elected this year can attend such courses, as this is the best crime prevention measure we know?

Mike Penning: I praise the work of the Early Intervention Foundation; the work it does is very important. Other agencies also do really important work. We all know that if we can catch them young we can prevent people from turning into the types of criminals that sadly this society sees too often in our prisons.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Following the Government’s troubled families programme, there can be no doubt that early intervention works—it reduces petty crime, encourages school attendance, and gets people into jobs. However, it has become clear—this is why what the Minister is saying is very welcome—that without the active participation of the police such programmes are somewhat ineffectual, so I hope that we will ensure that every chief constable and every commissioner will regard this as a high priority.

Mike Penning: I am sure that every chief constable, police and crime commissioner and PCC candidate has heard exactly what my right hon. Friend has said. That is why we have put the money into the foundation and why we are doing a review of the early intervention academy for police leaders, so that we can have proof of the outcomes and let the money follow good resources.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Humberside police has 500 fewer officers than five years ago, across north-east Lincolnshire we have had a 38% rise in violent crime, and sexual offences are up 18%. Is it not the reality that early intervention is not a priority for the police on the ground and that it is being pushed on to ill-resourced local authorities?

Mike Penning: I am sure that the Whips Office wrote the hon. Lady’s question, because every single time we hear from the Labour party, it wants more money, and yet its Front Benchers want to cut funding to the police force—[*Interruption.*] That is the reality.

TrackMyCrime Service

11. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What the take-up of the TrackMyCrime service among police forces has been up to date. [903670]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): As I wrote earlier, four police forces currently use TrackMyCrime—Avon and Somerset, Kent, South Yorkshire and Humberside—with more to come. According to Minerva IT consortium, it will be made available to 22 forces, including Northampton.

Tom Pursglove: How successful has TrackMyCrime been in supporting victims of crime and keeping them up to date with investigations?

Mike Penning: I wrote my previous answer earlier, because I did not know what was going to be asked. The truth is that if all victims know exactly what is going on once they have reported a crime, they will have confidence in the criminal justice system. TrackMyCrime will help in that regard.

Psychoactive Substances Act

12. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What progress her Department has made on reviewing the status of poppers within the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016. [903671]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): The evidence-gathering stage of the review has begun. The Government are considering the next steps to ensure that the health and relationship benefits of poppers, and their risks, are fully assessed in an open and transparent manner.

Jeff Smith: Eighteen thousand police officers have been cut in the past five years. Is it really sensible to waste scarce police resources on enforcing a ban on poppers and unnecessarily criminalising users of a relatively harmless substance, particularly when the ban may be revoked in a few months?

Karen Bradley: I hope that the hon. Gentleman welcomed the Psychoactive Substances Act, because we do not know what effect such substances have on young people—they may cause death—so the blanket ban on them is incredibly important. We are committed to reviewing the benefits of poppers against the harms, to see whether they should be included.

Modern Slavery Act

14. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. [903673]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): The Modern Slavery Act received Royal Assent on 26 March 2015. It is too early to make a full assessment of the effectiveness of the Act, but I am pleased that key provisions are already having an impact. The ports have already been using the slavery and trafficking prevention orders to stop offences occurring, and some businesses have already published statements setting out what steps they have taken to prevent modern slavery in their global supply chains.

Jeremy Lefroy: In the “Strategic Plan 2015-2017”, the independent anti-slavery commissioner writes:

“The role that the private sector can play in the fight against slavery should not be underestimated.”

What assessment has the Home Secretary made of the effectiveness of the Act’s transparency and supply chain provisions for companies with turnovers of £36 million or more?

Mrs May: First, the independent anti-slavery commissioner is absolutely right, because this is not just about law enforcement and Government taking action in this area; it is also about working with the private sector and businesses. I am pleased that, although the first set of declarations in relation to supply chains will be compulsory from 31 March, a number of companies have already made those declarations. In a month or so, I will hold an event with companies to share good practice among them so that we can ensure that we are getting the best information out there, and then consumers can make their decisions.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Despite some of the good measures in the Act, child trafficking is still taking place across the European Union, hidden within the scandal that is the migration crisis, which is engulfing the entire continent. What work is the Home Secretary doing with her colleagues across the European Union to make sure that the issue is adequately tackled across all 28 member states?

Mrs May: I am encouraging other member states to take the step that we took with the Modern Slavery Act and introduce new legislation. We and other member states are working on organised immigration crime and human trafficking. We have put resources into that and are working with a number of countries to identify the traffickers and to ensure that proper action is taken. The independent anti-slavery commissioner has made his expertise available to a number of countries across the European Union. That is of enormous benefit, because he is expert in this area.

23. [903682] **Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), will my right hon. Friend set out in more detail the importance of the transparency in supply chains provision in the Modern Slavery Act, and how it will be monitored?

Mr Speaker: Yes, but not too much detail, given the time.

Mrs May: The measure has two important impacts. First, it makes companies think about whether there is slavery in their supply chains. Secondly, their declarations of the action they have taken—or of the fact that they have taken no action—will be available to consumers, who will be able to make choices about which companies to do business with as a result. We are looking at a number of options for ensuring that that information is publicly available in one place.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): May I make the right hon. Lady aware of the excellent work of the Palm Cove Society in Headingley, in my constituency? I was shocked to hear about the extent of modern slavery in this country. Does she think that people are sufficiently aware of that, and what more can she do to highlight it?

Mrs May: We are aware of the work that the Palm Cove Society does. The hon. Gentleman is right; I think that most people are shocked to know that slavery takes place in this country, and they would be even more shocked to see the degree and extent of it. It is up to everybody in this House, not just the Government, to make people aware of that and aware of the action that they can take to stop it.

Daesh Propaganda

15. **Ben Howlett** (Bath) (Con): What assessment the Government has made of the effectiveness of steps to tackle Daesh propaganda. [903674]

The Minister for Security (Mr John Hayes): The Government are removing more than 4,000 pieces of terrorist-related content a month. We are also supporting community-based initiatives that provide credible, positive alternatives and challenge Daesh’s core communications. Those campaigns have generated online viewings of more than 15 million.

Ben Howlett: Daesh commits atrocities every day against Christians, gay people and others who do not agree with its way of life. What are the Government doing to communicate accurately those atrocities across the UK to prevent the spread of extremism, particularly among young people?

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend is right. Yeats said:

“All empty souls tend toward extreme opinions.”

We have to challenge those extreme opinions at every turn. The UK Government’s “UK Against Daesh” Twitter channel highlights the hypocrisies, hyperbole and wicked calumnies of Daesh. We work with the community organisations that I described a moment ago, and 130 community-based projects were delivered in 2015, reaching 25,000 people. More than half those projects were delivered in schools and aimed at the young people whom we need to safeguard.

Mr Speaker: I am glad that even on this most solemn of matters, the right hon. Gentleman has been able, as always, to provide us with a poetical flourish.

Topical Questions

T1. **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities. [903684]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Last week, I was in Washington at the five-country ministerial with my counterparts from the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to discuss the threat we all face from extremism and terrorism—a threat that is real and growing. In 2014, Daesh in Syria and Iraq directed, inspired or enabled some 20 attacks in other countries worldwide. In 2015, there were almost 60 such attacks, as well as more than 200 attacks carried out by Daesh branches including those in Libya and Egypt.

This is a fight that cannot be won by acting in isolation. It is a global threat, which requires a global response. We must be more open to sharing intelligence with our partners and more proactive in offering our expertise. We must work at an international level to counter the twisted narrative peddled by Daesh and other terrorist organisations, and we must organise our own efforts more effectively to support vulnerable states and improve their ability to respond to the threat from terrorism. At the five-country ministerial, we made commitments to strengthen information sharing, enhance efforts to prevent the movement of terrorists and encourage social media companies to work more with Governments. This is the challenge of our generation, and it is one that we will win by working together.

Chris Green: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. Does she agree that the creation of the police and crime commissioner role was a great step in the right direction, and that it ought to change radically in future and take on more responsibilities?

Mrs May: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It was important to create the role of a directly elected individual who is accountable to the public for local policing, but we called such individuals police and crime commissioners precisely because we wanted to see the role evolve. My right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary and I are already in discussion about how the role might evolve in relation to the rest of the criminal justice system.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): May I commend the Home Secretary for her announcement this weekend and for her decision to put the national interest before self-interest, unlike others? When she began as Home Secretary, she took a Eurosceptic stance, opting out of dozens of EU measures, but she has since opted back in to many—most recently, on the sharing of fingerprinting and DNA. Is it fair to say that the realities of office have shown her the value of EU co-operation in tackling crime and terrorism, and changed her mind on Britain's membership of the EU?

Mrs May: I have always been very clear about the value of co-operation when it is in the British national interest. We decided to propose to the House that we

should opt back in to 35 measures in relation to protocol 36—justice and home affairs measures—precisely because we believed that they were in the national interest.

Andy Burnham: I think I will take that as a yes. Yesterday, on the “The Andrew Marr Show”, the Prime Minister was explicitly clear that our membership of the EU helps Britain fight terrorism, but within minutes he was directly contradicted by one of his own Cabinet Ministers, who claimed the UK's EU membership made a Paris-style attack here more likely. This would be bad coming from UKIP, but coming from one of our most senior members of the Cabinet, it is downright irresponsible. Will the Home Secretary take this opportunity to reaffirm Government policy on this crucial issue and condemn this baseless scaremongering?

Mrs May: The Government's position on this issue is very clear. As I have just indicated in answer to the first question the right hon. Gentleman asked me, I am very clear that there are many areas in which co-operation with other member states in the European Union is to our benefit in terms of the national security of this country and dealing with criminal matters. As I indicated in response to earlier questions, we do of course take security at our border very seriously, and that is why we have the checks we do at our border.

T3. [903686] **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): The Government have agreed to work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to create a new initiative to help resettle unaccompanied children from conflict regions. Will the Minister confirm when the initiative will begin and say which organisations the Government will work with to help identify those children?

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): Yes, we are working with the UNHCR on the development of a new initiative to settle unaccompanied children from conflict regions outside the EU. Discussions are ongoing with the UNHCR—we have had a roundtable meeting already with a number of non-governmental organisations—and we will obviously come back to the House shortly, when our consideration has concluded.

T2. [903685] **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): Following on in the trafficking vein, I want to ask a question about a constituent of mine. I cannot name her because of her vulnerability. She was human trafficked from Nigeria to the UK and held in domestic slavery in London, but escaped to my constituency over 10 years ago. She now has a family and a husband—her children were born in Scotland—but she cannot get indefinite leave to remain. The Home Office has not been at its most helpful. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this issue and see what can be done to help this family settle in Scotland?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady has raised what appears to be a very serious individual case. If I may, I will speak to the hon. Lady after this session to obtain more details, and we will obviously respond to her formally.

T4. [903687] **James Heapey** (Wells) (Con): I have met a number of police officers in my constituency who have witnessed extreme trauma while on duty and have been diagnosed as suffering from mental illness or

injury as a result. Yet the arrangements for their sick pay and their medical discharge and pension seem to be strikingly different from that of those who have suffered physical injury in the course of their duties. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, given the Government's pursuit of parity of esteem between mental illness and physical illness, police forces should ensure that all injuries or illnesses attributable to service are supported in the same way?

Mrs May: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Police officers are entitled to exactly the same sick leave and pay arrangements whether they suffer a mental or physical illness. Any requests for ill-health retirement are, similarly, subject to exactly the same test. It is the responsibility of chief constables to provide for that in their local policies. I am pleased to say that in October 2014 the Government allocated £8 million to the blue light programme to support the mental and physical wellbeing of emergency services personnel.

T5. [903688] **Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The Government have always justified their cuts to policing on the basis that crime has not gone up. Since 2010, Greater Manchester police force has lost 1,664 officers, which is more than any other force. Recorded crime in Greater Manchester is now going up, and it is doing so faster than in any other metropolitan area. If crime continues to rise, will the Government reconsider their reductions in the number of front-line police officers, as would be reasonable?

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): Let us go over this again. The Government have not reduced the number of police officers on the frontline. Actually, the percentage on the frontline has gone up. The one party that wanted to cut the police budget at the last election was the Labour party—a group of people we did not listen to.

T7. [903691] **Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that police services continue reforms better to protect the public?

Mrs May: We are taking a number of steps. A piece of work is being undertaken to look at where capabilities would best lie in terms of police reform. I addressed a conference of chief constables and police and crime commissioners earlier this year about this matter. I am happy to say that I have had discussions on precisely this matter with my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith). If he becomes Mayor of London, I am assured that he will continue the reforms in the Metropolitan police.

T6. [903689] **Mr Douglas Carswell** (Clacton) (UKIP): The Europol chief, Rob Wainwright, has warned that up to 5,000 ISIS fighters are already in the EU. How does the Home Secretary feel that being in the EU makes us safer?

Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that what is important for the United Kingdom in this respect is that we can be in the European Union and continue with the border controls that we have, unlike the countries that are in Schengen. We will never be in Schengen. We will maintain security checks at the border, which is the right thing for us to do.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): The Prime Minister has claimed that he has delivered on his promise that

“if an EU jobseeker has not found work within 6 months, they will be required to leave”—

a promise that he made to JCB workers on 28 November 2014. However, in reply to my written question, number 17574, in December last year, the Immigration Minister admitted that EU migrants can

“keep the status of jobseeker for longer than six months”.

Will the Home Secretary clarify who is right—the Prime Minister or the Immigration Minister?

James Brokenshire: I think we can safely say that the Prime Minister is right. In a few moments, my hon. Friend will hear precisely how the Prime Minister has set out the agenda in relation to welfare benefits.

T9. [903693] **Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I was proud to join Housing for Women last week to celebrate the first anniversary of its operating the women's refuge in Merton. It supported 38 women and 45 children in 2015. Unfortunately, not all refuges are in the same position, with 30 closing over the last year and 42% of rape crisis centres not having money beyond next month. Will the Home Secretary do everything she can to ensure that no woman is forced to return home to a violent partner and, possibly, to her death?

Mrs May: I remember the days when the hon. Lady and I served on the council of the London Borough of Merton. She took an interest in domestic violence and support for its victims and survivors then, and she continues to do so now. Of course, the Government have put extra money into refuges and supported various domestic violence services. It is a terrible crime and we need to deal with it.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What assessment has been made of the number of connections police forces have made to the child abuse image database since it launched?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): My hon. Friend raises the very important issue of the child abuse image database, which was introduced by the Government and is leading the world in tackling online indecent images of children. We now have all 43 forces connected to the image database and are starting to see real results in protecting children.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Where police and fire and rescue services decide to amalgamate regionally, will the Secretary of State give a guarantee that she will not in any way, shape or form allow the services they provide to be mutualised or privatised?

Mrs May: The reason for enabling police and crime commissioners to bring together policing and fire and rescue services is to be able to offer enhanced services. In looking at a decision to be taken at a local level, a business case will have to be made for bringing them together.

European Council

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the agreement reached in Brussels last week, but first let me say a word about the migration crisis, which was also discussed at the European Council. We agreed we needed to press ahead with strengthening the EU's external borders to ensure that non-refugees are returned promptly, and to back the new mission to disrupt the criminal gangs working between Greece and Turkey, who are putting so many people's lives at risk. I made it clear that Britain will continue to contribute, and will step up our contribution, in all these areas.

Turning to Britain's place in Europe, I have spent the past nine months setting out the four areas where we need reform, and meeting all the other 27 EU Heads of State and Government to reach an agreement that delivers concrete reforms in all four areas. Let me take each in turn.

First, British jobs and British business depend on being able to trade with Europe on a level playing field, so we wanted: new protections for our economy; to safeguard the pound; to promote our industries, including our financial services industries; to protect British taxpayers from the costs of problems in the eurozone; and to ensure that we have a full say over the rules of the single market while remaining outside the eurozone. We got all those things. We have not just permanently protected the pound and our right to keep it, but ensured that we cannot be discriminated against. Responsibility for supervising the financial stability of the UK will always remain in the hands of the Bank of England. We have ensured that British taxpayers will never be made to bail out countries in the eurozone. We have made sure that the eurozone cannot act as a bloc to undermine the integrity of the free trade single market and we have guaranteed British business will never face any discrimination for being outside the eurozone. So, for example, our financial services firms—our No. 1 services export, employing over a million people—can never be forced to relocate inside the eurozone if they want to undertake complex trades in euros, just because they are based in the UK.

These protections are not just set out in a legally binding agreement. All 28 member states were also clear that the treaties would be changed to incorporate the protections for the UK as an economy inside the EU but outside the eurozone. We also agreed a new mechanism to enable non-eurozone countries to raise issues of concern, and we won the battle to ensure that this could be triggered by one country alone. Of course, none of these protections would be available if we were to leave the EU.

Secondly, we wanted commitments to make Europe more competitive, creating jobs and making British families more financially secure. Again, we got them. Europe will complete the single market in key areas that will really help Britain: in services, making it easier for thousands of UK service-based companies, like IT firms, to trade in Europe; in capital, so UK start-ups can access more sources of finance for their businesses; and in energy, allowing new suppliers into our energy market, meaning lower energy bills for families across the country.

We have secured commitments to complete trade and investment agreements with the fastest growing and most dynamic economies around the world, including the USA, Japan and China, as well as our Commonwealth allies India, New Zealand and Australia. These deals could add billions of pounds and thousands of jobs to our economy every year. And, of course, they build on the deals we already have with 53 countries around the world through which Britain has benefited from the negotiating muscle that comes from being part of the world's largest trading bloc.

Country after country has said to me that of course they could sign trade deals with Britain, but they also said that their priority would be trade deals with the EU. By their nature, these EU deals would be bigger and better, and a deal with Britain would not even be possible until we had settled our position outside the EU. So, for those Members who care about signing new trade deals outside the EU, we would be looking at years and years of delay.

Last but by no means least, on competitiveness one of the biggest frustrations for British business is the red tape and bureaucracy, so we agreed there will now be targets to cut the total burden of EU regulation on business. This builds on the progress we have already made, with the Commission already cutting the number of new initiatives by 80%. It means that the cost of EU red tape will be going down, not up.

Of course, if we were to leave the EU but ultimately achieve a deal with full access to the single market, like Norway, we would still be subject to all of the EU's regulation when selling into Europe—but with no say over the rules. As the former Europe spokesman for the Norwegian Conservative party said:

"If you want to run Europe, you must be in Europe. If you want to be run by Europe, feel free to join Norway in the European Economic Area."

Thirdly, we wanted to reduce the very high level of migration from within the EU by preventing the abuse of free movement and preventing our welfare system from acting as a magnet for people to come to our country. After the hard work of the Home Secretary, we have secured new powers against criminals from other countries, including powers to stop them coming here in the first place, and powers to deport them if they are already here. We agreed longer re-entry bans for fraudsters and people who collude in sham marriages, and an end to the frankly ridiculous situation where EU nationals can avoid British immigration rules when bringing their families from outside the EU.

This agreement broke new ground, with the European Council agreeing to reverse decisions from the European Court of Justice. We have also secured a breakthrough agreement for Britain to reduce the unnatural draw that our benefits system exerts across Europe. We have already made sure that EU migrants cannot claim the new unemployment benefit, universal credit, while looking for work. Those coming from the EU who have not found work within six months can now be required to leave. At this Council, we agreed that EU migrants working in Britain can be prevented from sending child benefit home at UK rates. This will apply first to new claimants, and then to existing claimants from the start of 2020.

We also established a new emergency brake so that EU migrants will have to wait four years until they have full access to our benefits. People said it was impossible

[The Prime Minister]

to achieve real change in this area and that a four-year restriction on benefits was completely out of the question—yet that is what we have done. Once activated, the emergency brake will be in place for seven years. If it begins next year, it will still be operating in 2024 and there will be people who will not get full benefits until 2028. All along, we have said that people should not be able to come here and get access to our benefits system straight away—no more something for nothing, and that is what we have achieved.

I am sure that the discussion about welfare and immigration will be intense, but let me make this point. No country outside the EU has agreed full access to the single market without accepting paying into the EU and accepting free movement. In addition, our new safeguards lapse if we vote to leave the EU, so we might end up with free movement but without these new protections.

The fourth area in which we wanted to make significant changes was to protect our country from further European political integration and to increase powers for our national Parliament. Ever since we joined, Europe has been on the path to something called ever closer union. It means a political union. We have never liked it; we have never wanted it. Now Britain will be permanently and legally excluded from it. The text says that the treaties will be changed to make it clear that “the Treaty references to ever closer union do not apply to the United Kingdom.”

So as a result of this negotiation, Britain can never be part of a European superstate.

The Council also agreed that ever closer union, which has been referred to in previous judgments of the European Court of Justice, does not offer a legal basis for extending the scope of any provisions of the treaties or EU secondary legislation. People used to talk about a multi-speed Europe; now we have a clear agreement that different countries are not only travelling at different speeds but ultimately heading to different destinations. I would argue that is a fundamental change in the way this organisation works.

We have also strengthened the role of this House and all national Parliaments. We have already passed a referendum Act—the European Union Referendum Act 2015—to make sure that no powers can be handed to Brussels without the explicit consent of the British people in a referendum. Now, if Brussels comes up with legislation that we do not want, we can get together with other Parliaments and block it with a red card. We have a new mechanism finally to enforce the principle that, as far as possible, powers should sit here in Westminster, not in Brussels, so now, every year, the European Union must go through the powers that it exercises and work out which are no longer needed and should be returned to nation states.

In recent years, we have seen attempts to bypass our opt-out on justice and home affairs by bringing forward legislation under a different label. For example, attempts to interfere with the way the UK authorities handle fraud were made under the guise of EU budget legislation. The agreement at last week’s Council ensures that that can never happen again.

The reforms that we have secured will be legally binding in international law, and will be deposited as a treaty at the United Nations. They cannot be unpicked

without the agreement of Britain and every other EU country. As I have said, all 28 member states were also clear that the treaties would be changed to incorporate the protections for the UK as an economy outside the eurozone, and our permanent exclusion from ever closer union.

Our special status means that Britain can have the best of both worlds. We will be in the parts of Europe that work for us, influencing the decisions that affect us, in the driving seat of the world’s biggest single market, and with the ability to take action to keep our people safe; but we will be out of the parts of Europe that do not work for us. We will be out of the euro, out of the eurozone bailouts, out of the passport-free, no-borders Schengen area, and permanently and legally protected from ever being part of an ever closer union.

Of course, there is still more to do. I am the first to say that there are still many ways in which this organisation needs to improve, and the task of reforming Europe does not end with last week’s agreement. However, with the special status that this settlement gives us, I do believe the time has come to fulfil another vital commitment that the Government made, and hold a referendum. Today I am commencing the process set out under our European Union Referendum Act to propose that the British people decide our future in Europe through an in/out referendum on Thursday 23 June. The Foreign Secretary has laid in both Houses a report setting out the new settlement that the Government have negotiated. That fulfils the duty to publish information which is set out in section 6 of the European Union Referendum Act. As the Cabinet agreed on Saturday, the Government’s position will be to recommend that Britain remain in a reformed European Union.

This is a vital decision for the future of our country, and I believe we should also be clear that it is a final decision. An idea has been put forward that if the country voted to leave, we could have a second renegotiation and perhaps another referendum. I will not dwell on the irony that some people who want to vote to leave apparently want to use a “leave” vote to remain, but such an approach also ignores more profound points about democracy, diplomacy and legality. This is a straight democratic decision—staying in or leaving—and no Government can ignore that. Having a second renegotiation followed by a second referendum is not on the ballot paper. For a Prime Minister to ignore the express will of the British people to leave the EU would be not just wrong, but undemocratic.

On the diplomacy, the idea that other European countries would be ready to start a second negotiation is for the birds. Many are under pressure for what they have already agreed. Then there is the legality. I want to spell out this point carefully, because it is important. If the British people vote to leave, there is only one way to bring that about, namely to trigger article 50 of the treaties and begin the process of exit, and the British people would rightly expect that to start straight away. Let me be absolutely clear about how this works. It triggers a two-year time period to negotiate the arrangements for exit. At the end of this period, if no agreement is in place, then exit is automatic unless every one of the 27 other EU member states agrees to a delay.

And we should be clear that this process is not an invitation to re-join; it is a process for leaving. Sadly, I have known a number of couples who have begun

divorce proceedings, but I do not know any who have begun divorce proceedings in order to renew their marriage vows.

I want to explain what happens with section 50. We should also be clear about what would happen if that deal to leave was not done within two years. Our current access to the single market would cease immediately after two years were up; our current trade agreements with 53 countries around the world would lapse. This cannot be described as anything other than risk, uncertainty and a leap in the dark that could hurt working people in our country for years to come. This is not some theoretical question; this is a real decision about people's lives. When it comes to people's jobs, it is simply not enough to say that it will be all right on the night and we will work it out, and I believe that in the weeks to come we need properly to face up to the economic consequences of a choice to leave.

I believe that Britain will be stronger, safer and better off by remaining in a reformed European Union: stronger because we can play a leading role in one of the world's largest organisations from within, helping to make the big decisions on trade and security that determine our future; safer because we can work with our European partners to fight cross-border crime and terrorism; and better off because British business will have full access to the free trade single market, bringing jobs, investment and lower prices.

There will be much debate about sovereignty, and rightly so. To me, what matters most is the power to get things done for our people, for our country and for our future. Leaving the EU may briefly make us feel more sovereign, but would it actually give us more power, more influence and a greater ability to get things done? If we leave the EU, will we have the power to stop our businesses being discriminated against? No. Will we have the power to insist that European countries share with us their border information so we know what terrorists and criminals are doing in Europe? No, we won't. Will we have more influence over the decisions that affect the prosperity and security of British families? No we won't.

We are a great country, and whatever choice we make we will still be great. But I believe the choice is between being an even greater Britain inside a reformed EU and a great leap into the unknown. The challenges facing the west today are genuinely threatening: Putin's aggression in the east; Islamist extremism to the south. In my view, this is no time to divide the west. When faced with challenges to our way of life, our values and our freedoms, this is a time for strength in numbers.

And let me end by saying this: I am not standing for re-election; I have no other agenda than what is best for our country. I am standing here today telling you what I think. My responsibility as Prime Minister is to speak plainly about what I believe is right for our country, and that is what I will do every day for the next four months. And I commend this statement to the House.

3.48 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for advance notice of this statement. It obviously took him a long time to write it, because I received it only at eight minutes past 3 this afternoon.

The people of Britain now face an historic choice on 23 June on whether to remain part of the European Union or to leave. We welcome the fact that it is now in the hands of the people of this country to decide that issue. The Labour party and the trade union movement are overwhelmingly for staying in because we believe that the European Union has brought investment, jobs and protection for workers, consumers and the environment, and we are convinced that a vote to remain is in the best interests of the people.

In the 21st century, as a country and as a continent—and, indeed, as a human race—we face some challenging issues: how to tackle climate change; how to address the power of global corporations; how to ensure that they pay fair taxes; how to tackle cybercrime and terrorism; how we trade fairly and protect jobs and pay in an era of globalisation; how we address the causes of the huge refugee movements across the world; and how we adapt to a world where people of all countries move more frequently to live, work and retire. All these issues are serious, pressing and self-evidently can be solved only by international co-operation.

The European Union will be a vital part of how we, as a country, meet those challenges, so it is therefore more than disappointing that the Prime Minister's deal has failed to address a single one of those issues. Last week, like him, I was in Brussels meeting Heads of Government and leaders of European Socialist parties, one of whom said to me—[HON. MEMBERS: "Who are you?"] [*Laughter.*] No. What they said—[*Interruption.*] The Conservative party might care to think for a moment about what is going on. One person said to me, and I thought it was quite profound, "We are discussing the future of a continent and one English Tory has reduced it to the issue of taking away benefits"—from workers and children. The reality is that this entire negotiation has not been about the challenges facing our continent or about the issues facing the people of Britain. Indeed, it has been a theatrical sideshow about trying to appease—or failing to appease—half of the Prime Minister's own Conservative party.

That is not to say that there have not been some worthwhile changes. The red card system to strengthen the hands of national Parliaments is something that we on the Labour Benches have long backed. Indeed, it was in the Labour manifesto for the last general election; it was not in the Conservative manifesto, but we welcome a conversion when it takes place. We also welcome the symbolic amendment on ever-closer union. Britain's long-standing decision not to join the euro or Schengen has been settled and accepted a long time ago. However, we see the influence of Tory party funders on the Prime Minister's special status not for Britain but for City of London interests. It is the same incentive that caused his friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer to rush to Europe with an army of lawyers to oppose any regulation of the grotesque level of bankers' bonuses. It is necessary to protect the rights of non-eurozone states, but not to undermine EU-wide efforts to regulate the financial sector, including the boardroom pocket stuffing in the City of London.

Labour stands for a different approach. That is why our Members of the European Parliament are opposing the dangerous elements of the very secretive Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, which threatened to undermine national sovereignty, push the privatisation

[Jeremy Corbyn]

of public services, and drive down standards for workers, consumers, the environment and public health. Human rights ought to be part of that treaty. Indeed, I believe they should be a feature of all trade treaties.

Then there is the so-called emergency brake. We support the principle of fair contribution to social security, but, the evidence does not back up the claim that in-work benefits are a significant draw for workers who come to Britain from the European Union. The changes that the Prime Minister has secured do nothing to address the real challenges of low pay in Britain and the undercutting of local wage rates and industry-wide pay agreements. They will not put a penny in the pockets of workers in Britain, stop the grotesque exploitation of many migrant workers or reduce inward migration to Britain.

Will the Prime Minister tell us what discussions he had to get European rules in place to protect the going rate and to stop agencies bringing in cheap labour to undercut workers in Britain while exploiting the migrant force? Did he speak to other EU leaders about outlawing the so-called “Swedish derogation” from the agency workers directive, which threatens to undermine one of the key achievements of the last Labour Government by allowing unscrupulous employers to use temporary agency staff to undercut other workers? Those would have been positive and worthwhile discussions to tackle low pay, reduce in-work benefit costs and protect workers. We must, on all sides, be clear that Britain has benefited from migration—from EU workers coming to work in our industry and in our public services to fill gaps. For example, I think of the thousands of doctors and nurses who work in our NHS, saving lives every day they are at work.

The European Union has delivered protection for workers in Britain. It was Labour that made sure that Britain’s EU membership gave workers rights to minimum paid leave; protection on working time; rights for agency workers; paid maternity and paternity leave; equal pay; anti-discrimination laws; and protection for the workforce when companies change ownership. It was Labour, working in partnership with sister parties and unions across Europe, that made sure the Prime Minister’s attempt to diminish workers’ rights was kept off the agenda for these EU negotiations. Labour has supported moves to reduce child benefit to non-resident children as a reasonable amendment, but we also welcome the protection for existing migrants until 2020, so that families have stability of income.

The Prime Minister’s deal includes elements we welcome and others that concern us, but it is largely irrelevant to the choice facing the British people; not one single element has a significant impact on the case we will be making to stay in. We welcome the fact that this theatrical sideshow is over, so that we can now get on with making the real case, which will be put by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson), who will be leading our campaign. Labour believes the EU is a vital framework for European trade and co-operation in the 21st century. A vote to remain is in the interests of people, not only for what the EU delivers today, but as a framework through which we can achieve much more in the future. But to deliver these progressive reforms that I have referred to,

we need to work with our partners in Europe, and therefore we must ensure that Britain remains a member. That is the case we are going to be making—it is for a Europe that is socially cohesive, and a Europe that shares the benefits of wealth and prosperity among all its citizens. That is the case we are making, as the Labour party, as the trade union movement in this country, and we look forward to that public debate.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution. He and I disagree on many, many things—economic policy, social policy, welfare policy and even the approach we should take within Europe, as he has just demonstrated in his response—but we do agree about one thing: Britain should be in there, fighting for a good deal for our country. I worry a little for him because he is going to be accused of all sorts of things, some of them fair, some of them unfair. I fear that if he takes this course, he will be accused of being a member of the establishment, and that would be the unfairest attack of all.

On what the right hon. Gentleman said about the deal, I will make two points about why he should welcome it. The first is that, as far as I can see, it implements almost every pledge on Europe in the Labour manifesto—I am looking at the former Labour leader when I say that. Labour pledged to complete the single market. It pledged “tougher budget discipline”. It said

“we will ensure EU rules protect the interests of non-Euro members.”

That is absolutely right. The manifesto went on to say:

“People coming to Britain from the EU to look for work are expected to contribute to our economy, and to our society. So we will secure reforms to immigration and social security rules”.

I therefore hope Labour will welcome the things in this agreement. [Interruption.] I am just reminding my new friends what they said at the election. They said this:

“We will work to strengthen the influence national parliaments over European legislation, by arguing for a ‘red-card mechanism’ for member states”.

Excellent, that is another thing that has been achieved.

The right hon. Gentleman was unfair when he said that this deal was really all about Britain, and not about anyone else. The Slovakian Prime Minister said, good, “the myth about ever-closer union has fallen.”

The Hungarian Prime Minister said:

“The UK managed to put an end to the practice of ‘creeping power withdrawal’ from national member states.”

Romano Prodi, the former President of the Commission, said this:

“The real consequence of the summit is extraordinarily important: Brussels has officially enshrined a multi-speed Europe.”

That is beneficial to Europe as well as to Britain.

Where I disagree profoundly with the right hon. Gentleman is that I think these trade deals are good for Britain and that the sooner we do the deal with America the better. He is wrong about financial services. There are more people working in financial services in our country outside the City of London than there are inside it. Crucially, what the single market means is that, with one establishment in Britain, we can trade throughout the European Union. If we lose that, we will see jobs going from Britain to other countries.

Let me end on a note of consensus. Labour Governments and Conservative Governments standing here have all had their difficulties with Europe. We have all wanted to get the budget down. We have all wanted to get powers returned. We have all found that, because of our love for this House of Commons and for British democracy, this process can sometimes be trying, but, at the end of the day, we have always known that, when it comes to our economy, prosperity and security, we are better off fighting from the inside.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree—I am sure that he will—in referring to the continental press, that he has demonstrated the influence of a British Prime Minister, as he has forced some concessions that will be quite difficult for fellow Presidents and Prime Ministers to sell to their own political establishments? Does he agree that future generations will benefit from some of those concessions, particularly those on enlarging the single market, guaranteeing our access to parts of it, deregulating, and engaging in major trade deals with outside? Does he also agree that it is not the politics of fear to point out that those who advocate a no vote do not seem to know what a no vote means? They continually imply that all the benefits that flow from Europe in terms of jobs, investment and security will somehow continue to come here when they have swept away the obligations that previous British Government have always accepted.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for what he has said. It has been interesting to see what some of the foreign newspapers have made of this. Let me give one example. A Spanish paper said:

“British exceptionalism reached new heights yesterday. No other country accumulates so many exceptions in Europe.”

I am proud of the fact that we have a different status in Europe and that that status has become more special with the changes that we have made.

The point that my right hon. and learned Friend makes is absolutely right. I recognise that there are disadvantages to being in the European Union. I make no bones about that, but I can look the British people in the eye and say, “This is what it will be like if we stay in. It will be better because of the deal that we have done.” The people who are advising us to leave must spell out the consequences of leaving. The absolute lodestar is this: no country has been able to get full access to the single market without accepting either paying into the EU or accepting free movement. If people do not want to accept those two things, they have to start accepting that they will not get as good a trade and business position as we have today. People who want to leave must start making up their minds: do they want a Norway deal, a Switzerland deal or a Canada deal? Frankly, I do not mind which deal they go for, but they must start telling people because they deserve an answer.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): May I begin by thanking the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement? The referendum choice before the electorate is a huge one and it will define our relationship with the rest of Europe and indeed among the nations of the United Kingdom. Scotland is a European nation and the Scottish National party is a pro-European party. We will campaign positively to remain within the EU. Hopefully, the Prime

Minister can confirm today that he will reject the tactics of project fear and that he will make a positive case for remaining part of a reforming European Union.

It is hugely important to be part of the largest market in the world and be able to influence its rules and laws. It really matters that we can co-operate with our shared challenges, from the environment to crime and security to workers’ and citizens’ rights. We should also never forget the lessons of European history and not turn our backs on our European neighbours who need help at this time to deal with huge challenges, including that of migration.

Public opinion in Scotland, by a majority, supports membership of the European Union. Every single Scottish MP supports our remaining in the EU, as does almost every Member of the Scottish Parliament and all Scottish MEPs bar one. Does the Prime Minister have any idea what the consequences would be if Scotland were taken out of the EU against the wish of the Scottish electorate? I want Scotland and the rest of the UK to remain in the European Union. However, if we are forced out of the EU, I am certain that the public in Scotland will demand a referendum on Scottish independence, and we will protect our place in Europe.

The Prime Minister: First, I can confirm that I will make, as I have done today, a positive case based on Britain being stronger, Britain being safer, and Britain being better off, but this is a choice. It is important that we set out the choice and the alternative to the British people, because this is potentially the most important decision that people will make on a political issue in their lifetime. I do not want anyone to take a step into the dark without thinking the consequences through properly.

I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman about one thing. Although Brussels and the institutions can be frustrating, we should never forget what brought this institution into being in the first place. Even at the most frustrating times in talks, I look round the table and think of how these countries fought one another and killed one another’s people for so long, so the dialogue and action that we take together is positive. As for the vote in Scotland, this is one UK vote.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend has spoken about national Parliaments, democracy and our sovereignty. In his Bloomberg speech, he made it clear that he regarded our national Parliament as the root of our democracy. Yesterday, he referred to the “illusion of sovereignty”. Will he explain and repudiate that statement, specifically in relation to the question now before us, our Parliament, our democracy and the making of our laws, which at this moment in time under the European Communities Act 1972, are made by a majority vote of other countries, are introduced by an unelected Commission, and are enforced by the European Court of Justice? Does he not accept that the only way of getting out of that and returning our democracy is to leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister: First, I have huge respect for my hon. Friend, who has campaigned on this issue for many years, and the one thing he will welcome is the fact that we are now allowing the British people a choice on whether to stay in or leave the European Union. Let me confirm that, yes, this Parliament is sovereign. We have chosen to join the European Union, and we can choose to leave it. Let me explain exactly what I meant when I

[*The Prime Minister*]

said that there would in many cases be the “illusion of sovereignty” by taking one issue. We now have safeguards so that British banks and businesses cannot be discriminated against if we stay in the European Union because we are not in the euro. Were we to leave, we would not have that protection. They could discriminate against us. Frankly, I think they would discriminate against us, so we might feel more sovereign, but it would be an illusion of sovereignty because we would not have the power to protect the businesses that create jobs and livelihoods in our country.

Mr Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): Despite assurances, it is worth remembering that this referendum is about the future of our country, not the future of a divided Conservative party. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is not just about Britain’s place in the European Union but about Britain’s place in the world? President Obama has made it crystal clear that if Britain left the European Union that would weaken, not strengthen, the special relationship. The Indians and Chinese are mystified that we are even risking exit from the European Union. Does the Prime Minister agree that if in future Britain wants to stand tall in New Delhi, Beijing, Washington and other global capitals, it must continue to stand tall in our own European neighbourhood?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right that we should make this decision ourselves as a sovereign nation and a sovereign people, but it is worth listening to our friends and listening to what they think is best for our country. Of all the leaders and politicians I have met around the world, I cannot think of any of our friends—not Australia, not New Zealand, not Canada, not America—who want us to leave the EU. The only person I can think of who might want us to leave the EU is Vladimir Putin. As for what the right hon. Gentleman, my former colleague, said about the need for this referendum, I make the slightly cheeky point that we are implementing the 2010 Lib Dem manifesto by holding it.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to explain to the House and the country in exactly what way this deal returns sovereignty over any field of lawmaking to these Houses of Parliament?

The Prime Minister: This deal brings back some welfare powers, it brings back some immigration powers, it brings back some bail-out powers, but more than that, because it carves us forever out of ever closer union, it means that the ratchet of the European Court taking power away from this country cannot happen in future. For those who worry—and people do worry—that somehow if we vote to remain in, the consequence could be more action in Brussels to try and change the arrangements we have, we have a lock in this House of Commons: no power can be passed from Britain to Brussels without a referendum of the British people. So we have a better deal, we have a special status, and we have a chance to make sure that we build on what we have, protect our people and enhance our prosperity, and that is the choice we should make.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): Let me thank the Prime Minister for quoting and implementing parts of the 2015 Labour manifesto.

I want to go to the big picture question, which is about how we influence things in our national interest. Let me draw the Prime Minister out on the powerful end to his statement. Of course, by being a member of the European Union, we do not always get our own way, but given what he said to the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), on all the major issues, whether it is trade, climate change or terrorism and security—he can tell us, because he has been the Prime Minister—does he believe we have more influence in the European Union or outside? Surely the answer is that we have more influence inside the European Union, not outside. That is why I passionately believe we must remain in the European Union.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for what he says. I cannot promise to implement many other parts of the Labour manifesto, but I am glad to have been of assistance on this occasion. I absolutely agree with him. The big picture is this: when it comes to getting things done in the world that can help keep people safe in our country, or getting a bigger, better deal on climate change, do we get more because we are in the EU? Yes. Making sure we have sanctions against Iran that really work and get Iran to abandon its nuclear programme—do we do that through the EU and other bodies? Yes, absolutely. On making sure we stand up to Russian aggression in Ukraine, we have been the linchpin between the European Union and the United States of America in making those sanctions count. If we had been outside the European Union during that period, we would have been waiting at the end of the phone to find out what the decisions were going to be. Instead, we were making them, we were driving them, between Europe and America. That is how we get things done for our people.

Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): According to the Guido Fawkes website today, there is a letter appearing in *The Times* tomorrow which has been written by a Chris Hopkins on behalf of organisations across the UK supposedly wishing us to remain. Chris Hopkins is apparently a civil servant. Can the Prime Minister tell us who Chris Hopkins is, which Department he works for, and what authority he has as a civil servant to campaign for the remain lobby?

The Prime Minister: I can answer very simply. He is a civil servant working in No. 10 and his authority comes from me. He is doing an excellent job. This is not a free-for-all. The Government have a clear view, which is that we should remain in a reformed European Union, and the civil service is able to support the Government in that role. Members of Parliament, Ministers and Cabinet Ministers are able to make their own decision, but the Government are not holding back or hanging back from this. We have a full-throated view that we should put forward in front of the British people so that they can make their choice.

Alan Johnson (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am tempted to ask whether the Prime Minister thinks blonds have more fun, but I will actually ask whether he remembers the analysis his Government did in 2014 of the European arrest warrant. It concluded that the European arrest warrant acts as a deterrent to offenders coming to this country. Will he point that out to his Work and Pensions Secretary, and will he ask the

Home Secretary to brief the Work and Pensions Secretary on all the other reasons why Britain is safer and more secure in the European Union?

The Prime Minister: The European arrest warrant is a good case in point. All of us who have this concern about sovereignty and the rest of it had our concerns about the arrest warrant, but look at what has happened in practice. When, in 2005, terrorists tried to bomb our city for a second time, one of them escaped and was arrested and returned to Britain within weeks under a European arrest warrant. Before that, it could have taken years. So I think we can all see that the practical application of these changes definitely keeps us more safe.

When it comes to this question of fighting terrorism and cross-border crime, obviously people are going to have different opinions. I would urge people, though, to listen to the head of the Association of Chief Police Officers, to listen to the former director of MI5, to listen to the head of Europol. These are people who know what they speak of, and they are very, very clear: these measures help us to stay safe.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Having spent the best part of the recess in the Arctic circle with the Royal Marines, I am extremely conscious of the need to ensure that every one of our serving military personnel can cast their vote—to leave or to remain—in the forthcoming EU referendum, which the Prime Minister has worked so hard to get on to the statute books for us. Will he please confirm that every serving member of our armed forces, wherever they are in the world, will be entitled to vote? Will he guarantee that they will receive their ballot papers in good time, and will he confirm how we will ensure that everyone is counted?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend clearly had a more entertaining recess than I did—I am rather jealous. There were moments when I wished I was in the Arctic circle, I can tell you. I believe that the arrangements are absolutely the same as for a general election. We have now four months until the referendum, so there is plenty of time to put in place the arrangements that she seeks.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I pay credit to the Prime Minister for delivering a referendum to the British people. I well remember the time he came to this House and argued against a referendum, but I am glad he came round to supporting those of us who believed that holding one was the right thing to do. He will know that we on the Democratic Unionist party Benches are extremely disappointed that we do not have, as a result of his deal, control over our sovereignty, over our borders or over our finances.

The Prime Minister said in his statement that it is “simply not enough” for those on the leave side “to say that it will be all right on the night and we will work it out”—he wants definite facts. When, therefore, will migrants coming to the United Kingdom begin to be eligible for some benefits? He should not tell us he is going to work it out; he should tell us when they will first become eligible for any kind of benefit.

The Prime Minister: What we have is a phased approach, so that, over four years, they get access to benefits. There is no access to benefits to start with, and full access only after four years. That is a huge advance.

Compare that with the lack of certainty that we are being offered from people who want to leave, who cannot tell us whether they favour a model like Norway or Switzerland, or whether they want a trade deal like Canada, or, as some do, just want to reclaim a purely World Trade Organisation position. We need to know the answer to that, because, frankly, it is only when we know that that people can make a proper judgment about the security of staying in and the dangers of getting out.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Last week’s decision requires treaty change to be both irreversible and legally binding. When will the ratification procedure begin?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that my right hon. Friend is not right. It is already legally binding and irreversible, because this is a decision of 28 Governments to reach a legally binding decision that is then deposited as a legal document at the UN, so this could be reversed only if all 28 members, including the UK, were to come to a different decision. But the document sets out very clearly that two specific areas—the changes that we need to the treaty on ever closer union, and safeguards for businesses and countries outside the eurozone—will be put into the treaty as well.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Mayor of London, who has been touted as the leader of the leave campaign, said yesterday that Britain would easily be able to

“negotiate a large number of trade deals at great speed”

because we

“used to run the biggest empire”

the world has ever seen. Will the Prime Minister invite the Mayor to wake up to the 21st century, in which the European economy is six times larger than the British economy and in which it took seven years for Canada to get a trade deal? Does he agree that with so much uncertainty in the world economy, it would be deeply disruptive to increase the risks for British exporters, British manufacturers and British jobs?

The Prime Minister: Where I share the frustration of many of those who are questioning whether we should stay in is that Britain does need trade deals to be signed rapidly, and we do find it frustrating that Europe is not moving faster, because the Korean free trade agreement has been excellent, and we want to push ahead with Japan, with Canada, with America, and with China—and because of this document, all those things are more likely. Where I think the right hon. Lady has a good point is that you cannot sign trade deals with other countries until you have determined the nature of your relationship with the EU from the outside. That would take at least two years, and then you have to think, how long does it take to sign trade deals? The Canada deal is now, I think, in its seventh year and is still not put in place, so I worry that this is a recipe for uncertainty and risk. Businesses literally would not know what the arrangements were for year after year, and British business, British jobs and our country would suffer as a result.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): My 1998 pamphlet calling for us to address the question of our role in the world via a referendum on our EU membership may have escaped the Prime Minister’s attention, but he will understand why I am absolutely delighted that he has

[Crispin Blunt]

now provided us with an opportunity to resolve this question for a generation. Does he agree that if the country votes to remain, we must positively commit to the institutions of the European Union to best ensure its success and to move on from the grudging tone that has so dominated our discourse, and that equally the establishment he leads must positively engage with a potential decision to leave and undertake reasonable contingency planning now?

The Prime Minister: Let me make a couple of points to my hon. Friend. First, one of the things this renegotiation does is to address some of the principal grudges that I think this country has rightly had: too much of a single currency club, too much political union, too much in terms of migration and lack of respect for welfare systems, not enough competitiveness and removing bureaucracy. Having dealt with some of these grudges, yes, it may be possible to make sure that we get more things done that suit us. I would also agree with something that the Mayor of London said, which is that we need to make sure that we have high-quality British officials in every part of the organisation so that we can help to drive its agenda. My hon. Friend is right that this should be done to settle the issue for a generation. He is also right that we will be publishing the alternatives to membership so that people can see what they are and that there are plans that could be made.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Prime Minister said that great reform has been granted in the renegotiation. Why, then, did the French President say that the European Union has not granted the United Kingdom any special dispensations from its rules in the deal that has been struck, and go on to say that the Prime Minister had accepted that the City of London would not have special status compared with Europe's other stock exchanges? Why is there such a difference between what the French President is saying and what the Prime Minister is saying?

The Prime Minister: The French Foreign Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, said:

“The agreement with the British is a recognition that there is a differentiated Europe”.

I have already quoted the Slovakian and Hungarian Prime Ministers and the former Italian Commissioner, and François Hollande said:

“We have recognised Britain's position—not in Schengen, not in the Euro Zone, she does not subscribe to the Charter of Fundamental Rights”.

They are recognising that Britain has a special status in Europe.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Although the referendum decision—in or out—is a matter for the British people, as the leader of an Atlanticist party, does the Prime Minister recognise and acknowledge the concerns of the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department and international players that have already been mentioned that Britain and Europe need to stand together in an unsafe world?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I do not believe that the American view is based simply on, “Well, it's easier to make one phone call rather

than many.” I think it is based on the fact that they believe that Britain will be a stronger partner and more able to get things done and to bend the will of other countries in our and America's direction when it comes to solving great crises. If we ask ourselves how we have managed to massively reduce pirate attacks off Somalia, and how we are going to try to fix the problem of Libya's border, then we see that, yes, we can act unilaterally, and yes, there are valuable partnerships in NATO, but EU partnerships are worth a lot too.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the pound has slid to its lowest level for seven years on the news that the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has joined the leave campaign, are we not just getting a glimpse of the major economic upheaval that could follow if we leave the European Union? Is that not a timely reminder that the long-term best interests of our country should come ahead of party politicking and personal ambition?

The Prime Minister: It is important that we look in detail at the full economic impacts of either staying in or choosing to leave the EU. We will set out that approach in the weeks and months to come so that people can see what the dangers and risks are and what the case is.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Do not the common agricultural, fishing and energy policies do damage to domestic producers and add to the colossal deficit we always run with the rest of the EU while running a trade surplus with the rest of the world? What can we do about those unfairnesses if we stay in the European Union?

The Prime Minister: We have made a lot of progress in recent years. The wine lakes and butter mountains are a thing of the past. We have made big reforms to the common fisheries policy. I know that my right hon. Friend studies these things very closely, but although we have a deficit with the EU on goods, we have a substantial surplus when it comes to services. We have to think about the future and how we safeguard the services industries as well as making sure that our position in the single market is open.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Opening up EU markets in areas such as energy and digital services could create hundreds of thousands of jobs in future. Does the Prime Minister agree that remaining part of the EU would give the UK a strong voice in making sure that the completion of that single market happens, and would get the best deal for British business and jobs?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes an important point, which is that Britain has a strong voice in the EU to get these single markets completed. The declaration on competitiveness from the EU Commission is worth reading. She also points out that, if we were not there, not only would the EU continue to exist and have a very big impact on our lives, but it would probably head in a very different and more protectionist direction, and that would affect us, in many ways quite badly.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): My right hon. Friend will no doubt have been deluged with advice on EU law during his negotiation, so on the subject of ever closer union, can he give us a concrete example of a

single European Court of Justice case that would have had a different outcome if the measures he agreed last week had been in place at the time?

The Prime Minister: Ever closer union has been mentioned in a series of judgments by the European Court of Justice, and there are two things in what we have agreed that I think will have an impact. Obviously, the most eye-catching of those is in paragraph 1 on page 10, which states that the substance of the agreements “will be incorporated into the Treaties at the time of their next revision”

and will

“make it clear that the references to ever closer union do not apply to the United Kingdom.”

That is obviously a carve-out for us, but just as significant—and this is something that many other countries did not want—is the content of the next paragraph, which states:

“The references in the Treaties and their preambles...of creating an ever closer union...do not offer a legal basis for extending the scope of any provision of the Treaties or of EU secondary legislation.”

That redefinition of ever closer union is a fundamental change to the way in which the organisation has worked. One way to think of it is that there have been two threats to our sovereignty. The first came from treaty change passing powers from Britain to Brussels, but that cannot happen now because of our lock. The second is the use of terms such as “ever closer union” to make sure that the EU grows its powers, but that cannot be done now that we have that change. One of the reasons why the deal took 40 hours of all-night negotiations is that not everybody likes it. The deal is not meaningless words; it is words that mean something, that matter and that make a difference. That is why I was so determined to secure it.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): The Prime Minister was elected on 37% of the vote. Even if half those people were to vote in, the referendum can be won only on the basis of people who voted Labour, Scottish National party, Liberal, Plaid Cymru and Green. Is it not a reasonable supposition to make that those people will be more interested in a positive articulation of the case for Europe than in the factional arguments of the Conservative party, entertaining though they are? When will the Prime Minister put forward that positive case for Europe?

The Prime Minister: I do not want to upset the right hon. Gentleman, because I am hoping that he will be supportive. In the speech that I made today, I set out a positive case. Yes, it is the case of someone who is Eurosceptical in the genuine sense: I am sceptical about all organisations and about all engagements. We should always question whether organisations work for us, and we should be doubtful about such things. That is what being sceptical means.

I come at this as someone who has their doubts about Brussels and doubts about the EU, but I have an absolutely clear eye about what is best for Britain. If others want to argue from a more positive stance about the nature of the EU, fine—go for it. It is up to everyone to make their own case, but I am going to make my case in a clear-eyed determination of what is in Britain’s interest, and I think I did that today.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The Prime Minister has centred much of the renegotiation on immigration, so can he tell the House, in his estimation, by how much the welfare changes will reduce immigration from the EU in the coming year?

The Prime Minister: Anyone who knows that, at the moment, someone can come from the EU and get up to £10,000 of in-work welfare benefits in the first year knows that that is a big incentive to come to Britain. Many people said that we would never be able to get changes to in-work benefits, but we have got those changes. If we pass this legislation we will see, in 2017, a seven-year period up to 2024 in which we will be restricting these welfare claims. That, plus all the changes that the Home Secretary helped to secure—in many cases reversing ECJ judgments—will actually restore to our country powers over welfare and powers over immigration that can make a real difference.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Plaid Cymru supports our membership of the EU. We also support further reform, and we will campaign accordingly. Were we to leave, what would happen to measures such as convergence funding, which has provided large amounts of money for the poorer areas of west Wales and the valleys?

The Prime Minister: The short answer is that if we were to leave the EU, we would not be able to get those funds, which have made a big difference in parts of Wales, in parts of England—for instance, in Cornwall—and in other parts of our country. I am someone who wants to keep the EU budget down, and we achieved the historic decision to cut it, but I think we should be frank that some of the work that the EU has done in poorer countries in other parts of the EU has helped those economies to grow. They are all customers of ours, so whether it is Bulgaria, Romania, Greece or wherever, their economic development is in our interests.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): In January, I introduced a Bill to try to protect our children from flammable costumes—to protect children from going up in flames. I pulled the Bill this month after discussions with officials from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, who told me that the matter comes under harmonised legislation. Thousands of directives are spewed out from Brussels every year with which the Government have to comply. We cannot even protect our own children on something so fundamental, because we do not have control without the permission of Brussels.

The Prime Minister: I will look carefully at the case my hon. Friend has mentioned, because I know that such things can be frustrating. In the area of foam-filled furniture and foam-filled mattresses, we have taken steps over and above what other EU countries have done, and that has kept our own people safer. The other thing I would say is that a lot of different figures are bandied about on the matter, but if she looks in the House of Commons Library, she will see that far from the very high figures quoted by some, more like 13%, 14% or 15% of laws come to us from that direction.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): May I commend the Prime Minister for his statement and congratulate him on successfully persuading his European

[Tim Farron]

counterparts to sign up to the renegotiation. He has of course been less successful in persuading half the Conservative party to support him. Will he accept that although his renegotiation may have been successful, it is not central to how most people will make up their minds? When we belong to a European single market that is worth £80 billion a year to this country, the real question is are we better off in or out? When we are facing huge insecurities and dangers in this world, are we better off alongside our friends and neighbours, or outside on our own? When we face huge international challenges, such as climate change and the refugee crisis, are we better off working with others, or isolated on our own? Will he join me in our shared ambition for a Britain in Europe, not the blond ambition behind him?

The Prime Minister: The renegotiation was aimed at dealing with some of the legitimate grievances that we have had in the UK for many years about the way in which the EU works. We felt it was too much of a single currency club and too much of a political union, and was not enough about competitiveness and had not enough protections in terms of welfare and immigration. I believe the renegotiation and agreement go a long way to dealing with each of those problems.

Now is the time, as the hon. Gentleman says, for the even bigger argument about the future of our country and about what sort of country we want to live in for ourselves, and our children and grandchildren. It is a huge issue, and on the points he makes about Britain being strong in the world and able to get things done, I would argue that our membership of NATO matters and our membership of the UN matters, but our membership of the EU also gives us force and power to get things done in the world.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): On these Benches we are rightly proud of our record on the drop in unemployment, the record growth—best in the G7—and the reduction in our deficit. During my right hon. Friend's many meetings, did he find anybody, even a single person, who suggested we might get better terms, on our exit, to achieve even better outside the European community?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. There is good will towards Britain because of the contribution we make to the EU. There is understanding of the problems and difficulties that we have had. Therefore, with a huge amount of diplomacy—travel and meetings and everything else—it has been possible to get, I think, a good agreement for Britain. As I said in my statement, if we were somehow to kick over the table and ask for a second one, I do not think that would be remotely feasible.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I particularly welcome the equalisation of the spouse visa rules, which discriminated unfairly against British citizens? May I also ask the Prime Minister to recognise the work of the Minister for Europe? I managed only two years in the job; he has done six, and he has still retained his sanity—almost.

On the other big issue, the migration crisis, the British head of Europol said today that 5,000 jihadists are now within the European Union area. Many of them have

come in through the external border of the EU. What additional help is being given to Greece and Italy, in particular, to try to deal with protecting the external border, with the support of Frontex?

The Prime Minister: First, let me thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks about the Europe Minister, who was with me in Brussels for this marathon negotiation—I thought his eyes were shutting for a minute there. He has been doing the job for six years, and has done it extremely well.

The point about spousal visas is important. For many years, we argued that this needed to be sorted out, and for many years the EU said back, "Well, if you want to equalise the rules, change your own rules." Now, we have in effect managed to change its rules, so it is a real breakthrough.

In terms of the help that we are giving to Italy and Greece, the discussions in Brussels were very intense because the numbers really have to be reduced, and reduced radically. That is why I strongly support, and Britain will contribute to, the maritime operation—it will have strong NATO support, as well as EU support—to try to bring together Greece and Turkey, with a common information picture or common intelligence about what is happening, so we can stop so many of these criminal gangs operating in the area. Without that, there will not be the right chance of getting this situation under control.

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): For decades, British Ministers who have had involvement with Europe—I include myself in this—have been tempted to exaggerate the influence we bring to bear and conceal our inability to achieve British interests. Is that why it took a freedom of information request to establish that over the last two decades, Britain has voted against 72 measures in the European Council and been defeated 72 times, and that the pace of defeat is accelerating? If we make the mistake of taking the risk of remaining in the EU, how many defeats does the Prime Minister expect over the next two decades?

The Prime Minister: I do not for one minute underestimate the frustrations and challenges of being a member of this organisation. The research that I have seen—perhaps I will write to my right hon. Friend with a copy of it—states that deep analysis of whether a country achieves its position shows that Britain does so in 90% of cases, which even, I think, outranks the Germans. I have seen for myself that when we work hard and form alliances, we can get things done.

The other point I make to my right hon. Friend is that if we are outside the single market, the same countries will write the rules, but without us. We will have to comply with them when we sell into Europe, but will have absolutely no say over what they are. That, to me, is the illusion of sovereignty, rather than real sovereignty.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): I accept the symbolism of removing the phrase "ever closer union", but if we are to believe that it will have legal consequences, the Prime Minister owes it to the House to give at least one or two examples of where that was the sole legal basis for a decision.

The Prime Minister: I am happy to write to the right hon. Lady with the details because those words have been used in a whole series of cases. That is why the point was so hard-fought.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I point out to my right hon. Friend that article 50 did not exist in the treaties until the Lisbon treaty, which he used to oppose and now agrees with? There are many ways of leaving the European Union that might not involve article 50. He does not want to bind himself into the article 50 framework. Will he give this some thought, rather than committing himself to a policy that he obviously does not support?

The Prime Minister: Whether we like it or not—frankly, I do not particularly like it—the treaty on European Union sets out the way in which a country leaves. It is called article 50 and I think people should read it. If you want to leave, leave. If you want to stay, stay. What I find slightly odd is the idea of voting to leave to try and half stay. I do not think the British public would understand it, I do not think our European partners would understand it and I am at a loss to understand it as well. I thought that we wanted to have a referendum and to make a choice.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister think President Putin would rather see a strong Britain staying in a strong Europe or Britain breaking away from the European Union and, potentially, Europe breaking apart?

The Prime Minister: It is certainly true that Vladimir Putin likes to see disunity in the west, whether it is over sanctions, Syria or Russian conduct in other issues. There is no doubt in my mind, having sat at the European Council table, that the alliance between the Baltic states and Poland—which see at first hand the problems being created by Putin—countries such as Britain, which should always stand up to aggression, and the French and Germans has made Europe's position stronger. If we were not there, I do not think we could guarantee that that would be the case. I do not believe that that is an overstatement of the position.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): In October, Lord Rose, the chairman of the pro-EU BSE campaign, said:

“Nothing is going to happen if we come out of Europe in the first five years, probably. There will be absolutely no change.”

I hope that my right hon. Friend finds it reassuring to hear that from the head of the campaign to stay in. Does he agree that it is inevitable that after the public vote to leave, there will be a period of informal discussions before the formal process is triggered?

The Prime Minister: I have great respect for my hon. Friend who is leading the campaign with great vim, vigour and passion, but surely if you want Britain to leave the EU you want things to change rather than not to change. The truth is that article 50 is the only way to leave. It says that you spend two years negotiating your status outside the EU and that if that cannot be agreed at the end of those two years then, unless all 27 other member states agree to extend the process, you leave. On leaving, if you have not got a deal, you do not know what your relationship is with the single market and you do not know what your relationship is with the 53 countries covered by the trading deals. You do not really know very much. My argument is: do not take that risk. Stay in a reformed European Union. What I think the leave campaign will have to do at some stage is explain what it is they want once we have left.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I thank the Prime Minister for his detailed statement. Does he accept that, with Ireland and Britain so closely connected economically and living, as it were, in each other's shadow, a UK exit from the European Union would have particular implications for Ireland, north and south? Indications suggest there may be some initial financial savings for the UK, but that huge losses are likely to follow. We have seen today the impact on sterling. That financial impact would be negative and slow—we would not see the full impact today or tomorrow. Recent polls suggest that 75% of people in Northern Ireland want to stay in the EU. Does the Prime Minister agree that a UK exit from the EU would have a particularly detrimental impact on Northern Ireland's economy, and on its hard-won peace process and stability?

The Prime Minister: First, let me pay tribute and thanks to the Taoiseach, the leader of the Republic, who was probably one of the strongest voices in support of Britain's renegotiation and in making sure we achieved a good settlement. In terms of Northern Ireland, everyone in Northern Ireland will have a vote and every vote counts the same. I urge people to exercise their democratic right. I look forward to going to Northern Ireland, as part of the campaign, to talk directly to people about why I believe we should stay.

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): Acknowledging that some people believe that our European neighbours want to do us down at every turn, is it credible to suppose that if we were to leave, those self-same people could believe that our former partners would fall over themselves to give us free access to the single market, which is the vital foundation for our business and industry to trade across the world?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I feel that very deeply. Having tried to build up the good will for a special status for Britain within the EU, which is what we have achieved, I do not believe that that good will would in any way be there were we to decide to leave. My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. That is why the safe option, the certain option, the option without risk is to stay in the reformed EU, rather than to take this leap in the dark.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): As the Prime Minister outlines the potentially grave consequences for the UK of leaving in terms of our economy and our security, we can perhaps all reflect on the wisdom of the leadership decisions that will lead to us perhaps facing those consequences in a few months' time.

The side that wants to leave has put sovereignty and control at the heart of its argument. Does the Prime Minister agree that if we swap from a position where we are a decision-maker at the top table, we will be moving from a position of being a rule-maker to being a rule-taker, and that that is not sovereignty, it is not control and it is not the best future for the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I do not agree with what the right hon. Gentleman said in the first part of his question. I think it is time for a referendum. Too many treaties have passed through this House with no referendum, whether Maastricht under the Conservatives or Lisbon

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under Labour. I think that sapped people's faith in our democracy and in our accountability. I particularly remember the moment when Tony Blair stood here and said, "Let battle be joined" and all the rest of it. We really thought a referendum was coming and then it was taken away. It is right to have this referendum, and we should not be frightened of asking the people and trusting the people.

I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman that if we want to ask the question of how we can have greater control and greater influence, the answer is to be in there helping to make the rules, rather than outside simply taking the rules.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on securing for Britain the special status he talked about earlier. Does he agree that the problem with the debate so far is that those who want to leave Europe are completely unable to agree on an alternative arrangement for Britain in the EU that would deliver the same sort of economic and security benefits that his renegotiation secures?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Today's discussions have revealed a lack of agreement not only about what Britain's future looks like outside the EU, but about whether we really should leave, as some people want to vote leave in the hope of a different deal. Then there is not really agreement about how we should leave, whether it be via article 50 or through some other process that can be followed. I am absolutely clear that the only way of leaving is through article 50. There is no second renegotiation; there is no second referendum. The choice is in or out. I think we now need to move on to debate what those things really mean.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Can the Prime Minister tell us, beyond the areas specifically addressed in the deal agreed last week, in which way his Government's plans have been constrained by European legislation or regulation?

The Prime Minister: There is no doubt that we do face constraints, because the single market works through a common set of rules that have to be agreed. As has been said, we do not always get our way, although I would argue that we get our way far more often than we do not. There are occasions when we lose a vote and we are constrained by EU regulation or legislation. The question I think we now need to put in a very hard-headed "Realpolitik" sense is this: "If you are outside, does this give you the full control and sovereignty that you seek?" It does not, because we still have to trade with Europe and accept the rules. The only thing achieved is to have removed ourselves from the conversation and taken away our vote.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): The Prime Minister has said that this will settle the issue for a generation. I am blessed with five grandchildren and I believe that it is in their best interests that I vote to remain within the European Union. There is another generation that is a matter of some concern. Thousands of people who have paid UK taxes and national insurance

over the years are now living in other parts of Europe. My right hon. Friend knows that I have sought to represent the interests of those people. They are very frightened indeed. Can he tell them what will happen to them if we leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for deciding to support the case for remaining in the EU. He raises an important point. We often look at free movement in terms of people's decision to come here, but we also need to think about the many British people who have chosen to work, live or retire in other parts of the EU. The short answer to my hon. Friend's question is that I can tell those people what it will be like if we stay, but I cannot be absolutely certain about what would happen if we leave. It would depend on a complex and difficult negotiation, and I think there would be a lot of uncertainty. I would urge all those people, who have the right to vote, to make sure that they exercise it. We should perhaps think particularly about people in Gibraltar who are all able to vote in this referendum.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment in his statement today to speak plainly over the next four months about what he believes is right for our country. As he develops that argument, will he bear it in mind that 9 million people voted Labour at the last general election and that their sympathies and values do not naturally lie with his party so he needs to develop a conversation with them as well?

The Prime Minister: I certainly take on board the right hon. Gentleman's point, but this is not a party political issue. This is an issue for all people and all voters to get involved in. They might vote Conservative at a general election but decide to vote either in or out in the referendum—and the same with Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green or whatever. This should be a giant democratic exercise in accountability. We are asking questions about sovereignty, but this is a huge sovereign decision by the British people. I know I can sometimes upset Labour voters, but I would say to them, "Put aside what you think about this Government or that rule or that law, and think about the future of your country. Think about the big picture and then make the choice."

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Be nice for a change.

The Prime Minister: I'm always nice.

Philip Davies (Shiplay) (Con): The Prime Minister said that crime should be at the forefront of our thoughts when we are voting in the referendum. Can he therefore tell us how many crimes were committed in the UK by other EU nationals in the year before free movement of people came into effect, and how many were committed by other EU nationals last year? How many other EU nationals were in the UK prison system before free movement of people came into operation and how many are there now? I am sure that my right hon. Friend must have that information, given that crime is such a big thing for him. If he has not got it, perhaps he will write to me with that information.

The Prime Minister: I do not have all those figures to hand, but what I can say to my hon. Friend is that because of the very hard work done by the Home Secretary, we will be able to bar more criminals from coming to Britain, and we will have longer re-entry bans. We are solving problems that the European Court of Justice has put in our way. As for prisoners, the prisoner transfer agreement that we negotiated will mean that we can get foreign prisoners out of our prisons and into their jails. Outside the EU, that would be far more difficult—perhaps impossible—to achieve.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I think that I am the only Member who was elected to the European Parliament in 1979, at the same time as the father of the Mayor of London—who, I must say, talked a lot more sense than his son. We were then on opposite sides. I was against membership of the EU, while the Mayor's father was in favour of it. However, I changed my mind. After two years in the European Parliament, I saw the benefits of working with people from other nations. *[Interruption.]* Cynics! We talked about acid rain, and about restructuring and its social effects on people who worked in the older industries. I gained enormously from working with people of other nationalities, and I hope that the Prime Minister will emphasise, again and again, the importance of internationalism.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady for her honesty in saying that she had changed her mind when she was sitting with Stanley Johnson: two blonde bombshells, if you like, in the same European Parliament. I remember campaigning with Stanley Johnson, and if the good people of Newton Abbot had decided to vote the right way in, I think, 2005—or perhaps it was 2010—he would be sitting here, and we would have been able to hear from him as well as from the Mayor of London.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): With respect, why does the Prime Minister “bang on” so much about east European migration? After all, the Poles have a wonderful record in this country of coming here, not for benefits but to work hard and integrate. Is it not much more worrying that millions are pouring into Europe from north Africa and the middle east? Has the Prime Minister any idea of the proportion of those people who will exercise their right to come here once they have their German passports? If we remain in the EU, the channel will be about as useful in stopping them as a trifling Macedonian stream.

The Prime Minister: I promise to “bang on” for the next four months, but I hope to “bang on” considerably less about this subject after that.

My hon. Friend has made an important point. Obviously we have the advantage of being outside Schengen, so foreign nationals coming to other European countries do not have automatic access to the UK. We can stop them coming in, as indeed we can stop European citizens who we think may be a risk to our country. The factual answer to my hon. Friend's question, however, is that, after 10 years, only about 2.2% of the refugees and others who have arrived in Germany have German citizenship, so the evidence to date is that there is not a huge risk of very early grants of citizenship to these people. Nevertheless, I agree that we need to act, and if we are involved, we are more likely to act to try and stem the flow of migrants in the first place. What is

happening now in the NATO-led operation between Greece and Italy is happening partly because of a UK intervention in this debate, taken with the French, the Germans and the Italians. When we are around that table, we can get things done.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister agree that the claim that staying in the European Union would make an attack on our shores more likely is deeply irresponsible and factually wrong?

The Prime Minister: I am struggling to find the right page in my notes, on which there is a quotation. Ah, here we are.

I think that this is important, because we should be clear about the advantages and the disadvantages of the organisation. I have become convinced of this: when we are fighting terrorism and crime, we rely on the police, the security and intelligence services and the “Five Eyes” partnership, and I have seen at first hand that our partnership with America is incredibly powerful when it comes to keeping us safe, but I have also seen in recent years just how much this European co-operation matters. I am thinking of, for instance, the Schengen Information System and the European Criminal Records Information System, and the passage of information between our organisations. Hugh Orde, former president of the Association of Chief Police Officers, was very clear yesterday. He said that staying in Europe and co-operating with our European allies is essential to keeping British people safe:

“The European arrest warrant lets us deport terrorist suspects back to their country of origin, Europol helps our police co-operate with their European counterparts, and EU data-sharing measures allow our security services to access information on threats from anywhere in Europe within minutes.”

That is a very powerful statement from someone who clearly knows what they are talking about.

Of course, outside the EU we could try to negotiate bilateral agreements either with every country or with every system and every organisation, but I do think people will ask: “Why give up a system that is working to keep us safe when it could take so long to try and replicate it?” And then, even when we have replicated it, as Norway has tried to do with Europol, Europol is very clear: the Norwegians do not get the access or the personnel or the extra safety we get by being a full member.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Two hundred thousand of our UK firms trade with the EU and it accounts for just under half our total trade. Given that the EU is the only big world trading bloc in which we have a say in setting the rules, would it not be absurd to give away that say? Would it not betray those 200,000 firms and lead to fewer jobs, less growth and damage to our economy?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. While it would be good if the World Trade Organisation was signing more multilateral trade deals, there has not been a successful round for 22 years. So if we are interested in driving free trade and market access in the world today, we need to be part of a bloc that can sign good and effective deals. We have seen that with Korea and with Singapore, and we now need to see it with all the other countries that the EU is doing these

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deals with. As I have said, of course outside the EU we can sign deals, but the information I have from country after country is “Yes, we’d do a deal but only after we’ve fixed our deal with the EU,” and that is likely to be a bigger deal and a better deal. So I think the argument on this trade deal issue very much goes one way.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Britain has an enormous trade deficit with the rest of the EU, amounting to over £60 billion a year, equivalent to over 1 million jobs exported from Britain to the continent, half of them to Germany. Is it not obvious that the EU needs us much more than we need it and the last thing the EU is going to do is start a trade war with Britain?

The Prime Minister: The problem with the hon. Gentleman’s statistics is this: obviously, 50% of our trade is with the EU, but if we take the EU as a whole only about 7% of its trade is with us. So were we to leave the EU and then contemplate the negotiation that would follow, clearly we would not be in the stronger position. I think that is important. The second point I would make—I made this point earlier—is that, yes, we have a trade deficit in goods, but we have a massive trade surplus in services and it is in the single market in services where the prospects for progress are greatest today. So there would be a danger if we were to leave that maybe we would get that deal on goods relatively quickly because of our deficit, but if they held up the deal on services where would all our service companies be? Where would those jobs be? What would we say to those companies about how long it could take to get a deal to safeguard the incomes and prospects of families across our country?

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on spending 40 hours—apparently four clean shirts and a packet of Haribo—in implementing the Labour party manifesto in his conversations in Brussels? Does this not actually show the problem: that for so much labour he has achieved so little, and that the EU is a failing organisation—a failed common fisheries policy, a failed common agricultural policy, a single market that shackles us with regulation that makes us fundamentally uncompetitive, an immigration system that is betraying people who get to Europe, not to mention the eurozone which, thank heavens, we are not a member of? In this failed organisation, the Prime Minister has said in his statement that we are to make a final decision. It is the one sentence of his statement that I fundamentally agree with: a final decision to be made in June as to whether we stay with a failed body or whether we leave and make our own path. Is the Government’s policy basically,

“And always keep a-hold of Nurse

For fear of finding something worse.”?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, my hon. Friend and I have a profound disagreement about this issue. I very much respect his views because he has held them in good faith for many years, and I have held my view that we need reform, but reform within the EU, for many years. I am sure that we can respect each other in the months of debate ahead.

I do want to take issue a little with my hon. Friend on manifesto delivery. I will not run through the whole thing, but we said that we would legislate for a referendum—we’ve delivered it. We said that we will protect our economy from further integration of the eurozone—that is covered in the settlement. We said that we want powers to flow away from Brussels—that is covered in the settlement. We want national Parliaments to be able to work together to block unwanted European legislation—covered in the settlement. We want an end to our commitment to ever closer union—covered in the settlement. We will ensure that defence policy and national security remain firmly under British national control—covered in the new settlement. We will insist that EU migrants who want to claim tax credits must live here and contribute to our country for four years—covered in the settlement. It is there time and again.

We all stood under this manifesto, and I am proud of it and of the team who put it together and are implementing it. While I say, “Yes, let’s have this vigorous argument”, let us not pretend that we have not delivered the manifesto on which we stood in front of the British people.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): You will be aware, Mr Speaker, that in Slough I am proud to represent an area that has more international headquarters of multinational companies that are investing in Britain than any other place of a similar size. Those companies say to me that they have come here because of the English language, our good transport links, and because we are a gateway to the European market. The bosses of those companies are not saying that very publicly, and during this referendum campaign I invite the Prime Minister to encourage them to talk to those people whose jobs depend on that investment, and to say what would happen if we left Europe, because they tell me that they would leave Britain.

The Prime Minister: I am certainly having that conversation. My message to businesses is: if you have a view, make sure you tell people. Talk to your customers and your suppliers, and above all talk to your employees, your staff and your colleagues, because this issue is so important.

In truth, the business voice, large and small, is very much in favour of Britain staying. Many of them have said quite generous things about this renegotiation because they recognise the dangers, particularly in the area of safeguarding ourselves against discrimination because we are not in the euro. Given that, I hope that business and enterprise will speak clearly in the next four months.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): Much of the protection of the euro-outs in this agreement rests on a safeguard mechanism that is set out in annex 2, but as far as I can tell, that requires nothing more than that a discussion be held about the UK’s concerns at ECOFIN—not even the European Council. That leaves eurozone members free to enforce their will by qualified majority voting. Will the Prime Minister explain what—beyond the discussion, which can be ignored—has been achieved by the safeguard mechanism?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely can answer that, and I think it is an important question. There are two things here. First, a set of principles is set out in section A on economic governance, and they are principles of non-discrimination, no cost, and no disadvantage. Crucially,

paragraph 4—this was of real concern to the Bank of England and I know it will be of concern to my right hon. Friend's Committee—makes it clear that the financial stability of member states whose currency is not the euro is a matter for their own authorities and own budgetary responsibility. Those principles are very important, and what is exciting about this is not only that they have been set out for the first time, and not only has Europe for the first time accepted that there are other currencies inside the European Union, but those changes will be incorporated into the treaties. The mechanism is something over and above a new way of ensuring that issues are raised, should we wish to raise them, at the level of the European Council. We do not have that protection today, but making the principles part of the treaty—already an international legally binding decision—is hugely important. If my right hon. Friend listens to people who speak on behalf of financial services, the Bank of England and others, he will recognise that this is really important progress for Britain.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): There is still plenty that divides the Prime Minister and me politically, but on this and in the national interest I think he is right to be campaigning for Britain to remain in the European Union. Let me read a quote to him:

“leaving would cause at least some business uncertainty, while embroiling the Government for several years in a fiddly process of negotiating new arrangements, so diverting energy from the real problems of this country”.

That was on 7 February. The Mayor of London was right 15 days ago, wasn't he?

The Prime Minister: What I would say to the hon. Gentleman—and to everyone—is that we must examine what the alternatives are, how much uncertainty there will be, and how long these processes will take. Therein lies the importance of this decision for businesses, families and people's prospects up and down our country.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that one of the key benefits of his agreement is to give legal clarity to Britain's special status within the EU? He will be aware of the uncertainties there have been for those advising the Government on the law, which this resolves. Does he also agree that it is wrong to say that this is not legally binding when it is, and that it is irreversible unless we choose otherwise? For those who want to look at the legal niceties, I point to a very long opinion by Professor Sir Alan Dashwood, Queen's Counsel, the leading EU constitutional lawyer in this country, which can be read on the Henderson chambers website.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for what he has said, given that he was a senior Law Officer in the Government. I have also listened very carefully to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who could not have been clearer on this point. I have also read the judgment by Dashwood and seen the Government's own legal advice, all of which says that this is legally binding and irreversible. People who question that should look at the Danish protocol, which has been in existence and worked very well for 23 years.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Prime Minister share my concerns and worries that after 70 years of peace and prosperity any nation begins

to take that for granted, as well as the institutions that created that peace and prosperity? I was born on the August weekend in London at the height of the battle of Britain—[*Interruption.*] Unimaginable. My generation and many people in this country with longer memories know that peace and prosperity are not guaranteed unless we work together across Europe to maintain them day after day, month after month and year after year.

The Prime Minister: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is worth remembering why this came about in the first place, which was the appalling bloodshed on our continent. People of my generation, very much post-war children, should remember that and then look afresh at the institutions of the EU and try to ensure that this organisation works for this century rather than the last one. That is part of what this agreement is about. I absolutely agree, and I remember, for instance, a meeting of the European Council we once had at the Cloth Hall in Ypres: one cannot sit in that building without thinking of the slaughter that European countries have engaged in in the past.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I, too, salute my right hon. Friend for honouring his commitment to the British people to offer them a referendum and for his extraordinary stamina over the last week or so while we have been enjoying the recess, but I am afraid that for me this is not the fundamental reform that we were promised. My right hon. Friend has made much of security in his answers today and in the past few weeks, but does he not agree that the security of Europe is dependent on NATO and not on the EU, that it is NATO that is protecting us from further incursion by President Putin, and that we do NATO no good by suggesting that somehow the EU has some competence in this area?

The Prime Minister: I have huge respect for my hon. Friend, who served brilliantly in the last Government, helping to strengthen our defences. I have to say that perhaps 10 or 15 years ago, I might have said the same—that defence was really about NATO and our partnership with America and not about the EU. However, when we consider defence and security in the round today, and how we fight terrorism, yes, it depends on those other relationships, but it also depends on what we do through the EU. I see that every day through the exchange of information. For example, let us take the agreement we also reached at this Council to ensure a strong NATO mission to try to help the situation between Greece and Turkey. It is a NATO mission, which backs up my hon. Friend's point, but where was some of the conversation about it going on? Where were the Germans, the British and the French sitting together to work out what assets we could supply and how we could get real power into it? It was done around the European Council table. The fact is that we need both. To keep safe in the modern world, to fight terrorism, to fight criminality and to stand up to evil around the world, we must use all the organisations, not just some of them.

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): The Prime Minister has played fast and loose with our cultural, social and economic future in Europe for a series of concessions that seem to do nothing to satisfy his Eurosceptic Front Benchers and Back Benchers. Will he now guarantee that his Government's case for remaining in the EU will stop appeasing them, and instead focus

[Natalie McGarry]

on the many positives of the EU, counteract the leave campaign's narrow, negative focus on immigration, and commit to ensuring that the public have sufficient information to make a positive, informed choice?

The Prime Minister: We will certainly be fighting a very positive campaign. That campaign will involve a series of documents, some of which were mandated by the other place when it amended the referendum Bill, so we need to set out the alternatives to membership, and the rights and obligations here—the things you get out of and the obligations you have in the EU. We will be talking about the economic case. We will address all those issues. I say to those who are interested in some of the cultural or educational arguments that they should come forward, too. We need a strong voice from universities, as they have a lot to say about this issue—they get a lot out of Europe—and cultural organisations should be speaking out, too.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that when this country, in our national interest, makes an international agreement of any kind, it may involve a loss of sovereignty? That may be the case through any trade deal, through trading under World Trade Organisation rules and on the single most important decision this House of Commons could take: whether or not to engage in military action. We are treaty-bound by NATO, under article 5, to go to the defence of a fellow member that is under armed attack—that obliges us. In that sense, we have lost sovereignty because we believe it is in the interests of the country to enter that agreement and that it has made us safer. If the claim of “sovereignty” and its loss were the trump card, would not all those international agreements have to be torn up?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point: if your only determination was never to cede any technical sovereignty, you would never join any of these organisations, you would not do a trade deal and you probably would not be a member of the UN, the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. Therefore, the question really is: what maximises our power, influence and ability to get things done? As the Transport Secretary put it so brilliantly at the Cabinet meeting, “I would love to live in utopia but I expect the EU would probably be there, too.” That is to say, you do not abolish the EU by leaving it; you simply cut yourself off from something and therefore possibly make yourself, in many ways, less powerful, rather than more powerful.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I gently remind the House that people who wish to take part in the exchanges should have been here at the start and remained throughout? People who have gone in and out of the Chamber, and may have come back in again, should not then be standing. That is very much in breach of the traditions of the House, and we need to be clear about that.

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): One of the bogeymen policies for me was closer political union. If this country votes to stay in the EU on 23 June, what guarantees has the Prime Minister got that these things will be put in statute or written into a treaty at that time?

The Prime Minister: First, this is already an agreement and it will shortly be deposited at the UN as an international law decision. Therefore, it will already by then be legally binding and irreversible. Getting out of ever closer union, and indeed redefining closer union, is so important that I think it needs to go in the treaties, and the agreement here is that when the treaties next change, that will be written into those treaties. We have a double lock on this, a vital point.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I suggest that this is tinkering; it is certainly not fundamental change. The red card is not a veto; it will not stop the majority of the EU forcing unwanted taxes and regulations on this country. May I put it to the Prime Minister that he should at least accept the possibility that the red card could be turned against us, in that UK-sponsored initiatives could be blocked by the majority of the EU—initiatives that could be in our best interests, such as access and further enhancement of the single market?

The Prime Minister: I do not overstate the red card. It is a new mechanism, not to delay but to properly block initiatives, that is available to national Parliaments should they want to avail themselves of it. To me, this is about another thing that makes this organisation more democratically accountable to national Parliaments. If my hon. Friend is saying that, on some occasions, that might work against us because other national Parliaments might want to stop something on which we were keen, I have to say that I suppose that that is accountability and democracy. The point is that, because of my decision, this organisation will be more democratic rather than less democratic.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): As the Prime Minister seems to be getting “nul points” from his own side for these European renegotiations, may I commend him for coming round to Chancellor Merkel's view on freedom of movement? On freedom of movement, will he assure the House that there will be absolutely no implications from this deal for the hundreds of thousands of UK citizens living in the EU?

The Prime Minister: Of course if we stay in the European Union, British people will continue to be able to work abroad, live abroad and retire abroad, as they do now. It is not for me to set out what would happen to them in different circumstances. I think the leave campaign will want to try to address that point, but people know with certainty what they will get if the remain side wins.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): In his statement, the Prime Minister observed that leaving the EU might briefly make us feel more sovereign. Does he not accept that for many hon. Members, the issue of parliamentary sovereignty will be the central one of the debate in which we are about to engage—namely, that so long as we are subject to the fiat of the European Commission and the European Court of Justice, we will not be truly sovereign, and that very little changed last weekend in that respect?

The Prime Minister: What changed last weekend in that respect is that because we are getting out of ever closer union, we now know that we cannot be forced into further political union against our will; that is very important. On this issue of sovereignty, let me repeat that,

if we leave the EU, we might feel more sovereign, because we could pass this law or that law, but if we still want to sell into Europe, we have to meet all the rules over which we will have no say. To me, that is a diminution of sovereignty rather than an increase of sovereignty.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On the issue of sovereignty, it has been reported by several news media organisations that the Prime Minister intends to unveil a British sovereignty Bill in the next few days. Will he confirm whether that is the case? If it is, will he tell us what provision he will make in that Bill to recognise that the principle of unlimited sovereignty of Parliament is a distinctively English principle that has no counterpart in Scottish constitutional law?

The Prime Minister: What I have said we should do is to build on what we did in 2011 when we set out that Parliament is sovereign, and just as Parliament can choose to join the EU, it can also choose to leave the EU. That is good for the whole of the United Kingdom. We do have a sovereign Parliament. There are ways that we can add to that, as other countries have done, and I look forward to bringing forward some proposals in the coming days.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On Friday, 2,500 people packed the QEII Centre to see GO launch the national cross-party leave campaign. Among the speakers were two UK Independence party MEPs, a renowned economic commentator, a senior trade unionist, a much respected Labour MP, the co-chairman of Conservatives for Britain, four Conservative MPs, and the leader of Respect. In 2014, Ruth Davidson, our excellent Conservative leader in Scotland, linked arms with George Galloway in the national interest. Does the Prime Minister agree that Ruth Davidson was right and that sometimes we have to work with people we do not like?

The Prime Minister: Everyone will have to make the choice about what platform they appear on and whom they appear with. I think that the disadvantage of appearing on any platform with either Nigel Farage or George Galloway arises when considering who their friends are, whom they support and the overseas politicians whom they seem to support. Everyone will have to think carefully about whom they want to appear with.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): There has been a lot of talk, quite rightly, about the City of London and big multinational companies working here and investing in this country, but the beating heart of our economy is the small and medium-sized enterprise sector. Some 39% of SMEs in this country export to EU countries, so does the Prime Minister agree that it would be madness to slam the door in their face?

The Prime Minister: I think the overwhelming majority of SMEs that export support the case that I am making. Many companies that are not exporters are involved in the supply chain with companies that do export. That is a point that many business service organisations, banks, accountants and lawyers are very well placed to make.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I, too, thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and all right hon. and hon. Members who voted to have a referendum on EU membership. Will the Prime Minister say whether the agreement that he has reached alters the Lisbon treaty?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, it does. When we change these treaties, this will be, as it were, one of the founding documents of the EU, so the international law agreement, and then in time the treaty changes, will sit alongside other treaties that have been produced in the past. Like my hon. Friend, I regret that so many treaties were made with so little democratic accountability, and I think we are putting that right in two ways: first, with things such as getting out of ever closer union—a distant dream for many of us who used to argue for that but never got it—and secondly, through the democratic accountability of holding a referendum.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The Prime Minister has stated explicitly that people who vote to leave the European Union do not love their country. I represent many veterans of the armed services whose patriotism cannot be questioned. Will the Prime Minister apologise to those people?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely did not say that. What I said was that I loved my country, and I think that our country—an amazing country—will be greater and more powerful if we remain in organisations through which we can project our power and influence, and do great things in the world. I do not question the patriotism of anyone in our country—we are all going to have to make a choice—but I believe that Britain's greatness is not simply the parliamentary democracy that we enjoy and the rights that we have in this country. We are an outward-looking country, and I am proud of the fact that we help, whether with Syrian refugees, chasing down pirates off the Somali coast, or trying to stabilise countries from which many problems come. We can do that, yes, because we are strong; yes, because we have great defence; but also because we are members of NATO, we have a permanent seat at the UN, and we are part of the EU. I think it is technical jargon to call it a force multiplier, but that is what it is, and we should be proud of the role we play in the world.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): My right hon. Friend always made it clear that if these negotiations did not succeed he would have no hesitation in recommending that we leave the European Union. Will he place in the Library the papers that cover the contingency plans that would have been used in that eventuality, and will he confirm that in that circumstance he would have had to make the very leap in the dark that he is now vilifying?

The Prime Minister: I have great respect for my hon. Friend, as he has held his views for many years, and believes that Britain would be better off outside the EU. I hope that he respects my views. I have always believed that if we can get reform we are better off in the EU, and that is what I said.

As for the documentation, we will publish something about the alternatives to demonstrate what we believe they are and to demonstrate that we are thinking about what would need to happen if that eventuality came about. As for what we achieved, I am happy to write to my hon. Friend with a list of the things that we said in our manifesto and that we achieved in the renegotiation. I quite accept that colleagues are going to say, "I am going to take a different path from you. I am going to make my own decision." What I do not accept, however, is that somehow we have not delivered the overwhelming majority of what we promised to the British people at the election.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister tell the House whether he thinks rural communities in Britain would be better or worse off in the EU?

The Prime Minister: I represent a rural community—400 square miles of beautiful west Oxfordshire. There will be a range of views in my constituency, but I know when I talk to many of those who are responsible for producing food and for looking after our local environment that they see strong advantages from remaining in the European Union.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that negotiating a special status deal, which he has done, is a demonstration of sovereignty at its best, because he is promoting this country's interests in a rigorous way, ensuring that we are stronger, safer and more economically prosperous, and that that manifests itself in many aspects of the deal and in the way that we will behave as a nation state within the European Union in the future?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for what my hon. Friend says. I think it demonstrates that although that organisation is imperfect and sometimes can be inflexible, it did show flexibility. One country came along with a manifesto pledge to renegotiate its position and a set of changes that it wanted to achieve, and by and large we have achieved them. That is a sign that the organisation can be flexible, which is incredibly important. If we had not been able to achieve any of this, I would have had deep questions about whether we could stay in such an organisation, but it has demonstrated flexibility and that is all to the good.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): As many Members know, I am fiercely proud of Northern Ireland and its place in the world as a global trader, and I know we benefit a great deal from the EU. Will the Prime Minister make clear the benefits to us on our borders and for our farmers, our fishermen and all the people who rely on international trade?

The Prime Minister: I look forward to coming to Northern Ireland to make exactly those points. When we look at the special status that Northern Ireland has been given in terms of vital grants, the important co-operation as part of the common travel area with the Republic, and the way we have already reformed the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, it is clear that there is more to be done, but money goes into Northern Ireland through those programmes. I am happy to talk about all those things in the Province.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): The Prime Minister referred to resolving the issue for a generation. Will a treaty change to incorporate our changes and perhaps to allow greater integration of the eurozone require a further referendum in the UK?

The Prime Minister: That is a very good question. It would depend on what was in that treaty. If the eurozone members were to bring forward treaty changes to change the nature of the eurozone, but without in any way affecting competencies here in Britain, I suspect we would be able to get our changes on ever closer union and on the governance surrounding the eurozone into

that treaty. Whether or not such a treaty change requires a referendum simply depends on whether it passes competencies from Britain to Brussels. If the answer is yes, we have to have a referendum; if the answer is no, we do not.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): In his statement the Prime Minister said, "Responsibility for supervising the financial stability of the UK will always remain in the hands of the Bank of England", but we already share that responsibility with the European Banking Authority and we are already signed up to the single rulebook of that authority. How is the Prime Minister's statement compatible with the view of Mr Andrea Enria, the head of the European Banking Authority, who says that that institution must be the dominant player in setting rules, particularly if Britain wishes to keep the pound and stay within a single European financial regulation?

The Prime Minister: The answer to that question required something like 35 hours of negotiation because it is so important. Let me try to précis it. Of course there are the banking union arrangements, and the eurozone countries need to have their banks properly scrutinised and regulated at a European level. We have our own currency and our own banking supervision arrangements. In trying to supervise a complex, large economy such as Britain, which has one of the largest financial centres anywhere in the world, not just banks but other financial institutions such as central counterparties are systemically important. That is so important because ultimately we need to make sure that whatever the eurozone does, we are protected by the Bank of England playing the role and being able to intervene to resolve and to supervise those systemically important institutions. That is what paragraph 4 is about.

Although that sounds very technical, at its heart is actually something fantastically important: if Britain—fifth largest economy in the world, important financial centre—cannot have fair rules in an organisation where the euro is obviously a very large currency, there really would be a case for saying, "Hold on a second. This is a single currency-only organisation. We'd better leave." So it was absolutely crucial to get it settled—technical but, in the end, fundamentally important—whether we can get fair treatment inside this organisation, and the answer is yes we can.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): This great exercise in democracy is not about what we say in this House, but about what our constituents decide, and my constituents, like many others, will be interested in the things that affect them: the economic protection and the jobs that the new reformed EU and the single trade zone can bring. They do not want the euro, they do not want the Euro superstate and they do not want something for nothing in welfare. Will the Prime Minister confirm for my constituents and for constituents across the country that that is what he has negotiated and that that is why it would be wrong to take a leap in the dark?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to make that point. I do not know whether I will make it to Wimbledon, but I hope to make it to many parts of our country over the next four months to make exactly that point. We have not solved all of Britain's problems with Europe—we

have not solved all of Europe's problems—but we have fundamentally addressed four major problems: too much of a single currency club, too much regulation, too much of a political union and not enough national determination over free-movement abuse and welfare. Those four things go to the heart of the problems we have had with this organisation.

Mr Speaker: As the Prime Minister knows very well, it is always worth while going to Wimbledon.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the Prime Minister welcome the support he has received today, surprisingly, from the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, who has joined his campaign and who supports it, or will he encourage the people of Northern Ireland to stay in tune with his Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who has indicated very strongly, in tune with them, that they should leave? If he is not going to support his Secretary of State, will he, then, follow the Deputy First Minister's advice that she should resign? Will he now support his Secretary of State?

The Prime Minister: The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland does an excellent job. She is exercising her ability to reach a personal decision and to campaign for Britain to leave the EU, and it is absolutely right she is able to do that. The key thing is that everyone in Northern Ireland should make up their own mind based on the evidence, and I look forward to coming to try to help persuade them to remain in a reformed EU.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Does the Prime Minister accept that the thousands of my constituents, the hundreds of thousands of constituents in London and the millions of constituents across the UK who work in financial services will be glad that he, at least, values their jobs, even if the Leader of the Opposition appears to dismiss them? Will he also recognise that the economic governance package is an important win for a strategic British interest and, therefore, that the pragmatic and businesslike thing is not to walk away from a market we are in, but to stay in it, improve it and make it work better?

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree with that. We should recognise that there are something like a million jobs in finance in Glasgow and Edinburgh—I think there are almost a million jobs in Manchester and Birmingham. The key point here is this: because we are in the single market, we have the right to passport—that is, to have a bank or a financial services company here in Britain that can trade throughout the EU. Leave the single market, and you lose that right. What would then have to happen is that companies based in the UK would have to move at least some of their jobs to another European country—that is why HSBC said the other day they would lose 1,000 jobs. So real jobs, real people's salaries and real prosperity are under threat. We really need to explain this. It is complicated, but there is no doubt in my mind: leaving the single market for financial services would mean fewer jobs in Britain.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It was interesting to hear the Prime Minister use the word "divorce" in connection with some of the less than helpful comments from the Mayor of London. I think we are all now fully aware that hell hath no fury like a Bullingdon boy

scorned. I will be voting to stay in the European Union, and I will help the Prime Minister to convince others. However, if he has had such a good deal, why is he struggling to convince so many in his own party?

The Prime Minister: Some people have very long-standing views about wanting to leave the EU. The point I was making about starting divorce proceedings on the basis of renewing the wedding vows is that that is what some people seem to be suggesting, not just the Mayor of London but others—that somehow starting the process of leaving will mean being offered a better deal to stay. I think that is just not the case. We could think about it like this: divorcing not just one person but 27 potentially unhappy partners. While I yield to no one in my belief that I can bring people back, I have seen multiple weddings take place but I have never seen multiple divorce negotiations resulting in a multiple wedding—that would be something!

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): May I join other Members in congratulating the Prime Minister and the Minister for Europe on their sterling work in Brussels last week? I agree that this reform produces a fundamental change in British-EU relations, at least in my living memory. Speaking as someone who started out on my career in 2008, at the beginning of the great recession, the possibility of entering into new turmoil within the economy fills an awful lot of young people with dread. That is why I will be joining the Prime Minister on the in campaign. Does he agree that it is absolutely vital for Britain's economic security that we remain inside the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I very much hope that young people will have a very strong voice in this campaign, because, as my hon. Friend says, we have been through difficult economic times, and at a time of uncertainty, why add extra risk?

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Prime Minister agree with me and with London's Mayor, who said two weeks ago that

"it is in Britain's geo-strategic interests to be pretty intimately engaged in the doings of a continent that has a grim 20th-century history, and whose agonies have caused millions of Britons to lose their lives",

and that the best way of staying "pretty intimately engaged" is to remain a member of the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I do agree with that. As I have said, if we leave the EU, it does not cease to exist, but it would continue to have an impact on our lives and on our world, so the best thing to do is to try to alter it from within.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will try to accommodate remaining colleagues, but short questions are now required. We are having pithy answers but we need short questions.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): As someone who has an open mind and can see competing arguments on both sides, may I ask that we ensure that the information used in the campaign is factually correct? A few weeks ago, a letter criticising the Prime Minister appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*, apparently signed by a local Conservative activist from

[*Rehman Chishti*]

my constituency, linking the association to the letter, yet no one had ever heard of that person. May I ask that information put forward by both sides is fair, accurate and factually correct so that the British public can decide on the basis of fair evidence?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are producing a series of documents and we must make sure that the information is accurate.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Prime Minister reiterate what is surely at the heart of this matter—that if the UK left the EU, we would almost certainly end up having to continue to implement the vast majority of EU rules and regulations if we wanted to access, on the same sort of terms, the single market, and the only difference would be that we would no longer get a say in those terms?

The Prime Minister: I think that is right. I have had a lot of conversations with the Norwegian Prime Minister about this. Of course, you do not have to opt for the Norwegian option, but if you do, you implement the directives but have no say over how they are put in place.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): For the first time in my lifetime, people in Worcester will be able to have a genuine say on this issue. I thank the Prime Minister for that fact, and also for the huge effort that he has put into negotiating Britain's corner in Europe. In the 2010 election manifesto on which he was made Prime Minister and I came to this House, we said that we would bring in a UK sovereignty Bill to assert the sovereignty of our country and make sure that this Parliament took final decisions. Does he agree that sovereignty can be asserted by this House and is not just something for us to argue over?

The Prime Minister: We introduced a sovereignty clause in the referendum provisions of the European Union Act 2011, and I am looking at enhancing that and adding it to the proposals that will come forward.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Given that so many of my constituents work in the City of London, I welcome what the Prime Minister has said about making sure that we have a strong global financial centre that enjoys all the benefits of access to the largest single market. Given that, may I offer the Prime Minister a once-in-a-Parliament opportunity to campaign in my constituency on this issue? Given that there are those in Frankfurt and Dublin who would love to get their hands on Britain's financial services, and that the Mayor of London has given up his day job to think about his next job, may I also ask the Prime Minister to send a very clear message to my constituents and all Londoners that London is stronger in Europe?

The Prime Minister: I would be delighted to come to the hon. Gentleman's constituency and to case the joint for the future. He is right. It is interesting that Chris Cummings, the chief executive of TheCityUK, has said:

“The City is Europe's financial centre and the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) is of strategic importance to the financial and related professional services industry. Business opinion

both within and beyond our industry is that continuing membership is important to Britain's competitiveness”.

Business organisations covering finance, insurance, manufacturing and engineering are all making their views clear, and I think we should listen to them.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware that since 2010 unemployment has fallen by 50% in my constituency, that investment in the black country has gone up and that the west midlands economy is growing. Does he agree that full access to the single market, which focuses on jobs and growth, is critical for the security and jobs of people in my constituency and across the west midlands?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have seen an industrial renaissance in the west midlands, with more people in work and with growth, particularly in the automotive sector. Such sectors are a part of complex supply chains right across Europe and it would be a huge dislocation if we were to leave.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Access to labour and the protection of workers' rights and of human rights are just some of the benefits of our membership of the EU; they are beneficial for our workers, businesses and citizens. It must perturb the Prime Minister, therefore, that his Justice Secretary, Work and Pensions Secretary and Minister for Employment are poster boys and girls for the out campaign. How will he ensure that those positive reasons for remaining are at the forefront of this campaign?

The Prime Minister: We are dealing with an issue that has caused divisions and differences within parties right across this House. Twenty-three of the people who sit around the Cabinet table are very much convinced that we should be better off in the EU, and six take a different view. I do not think we should be concerned about that. This is a referendum—it is the people's choice, not the politicians' choice.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that now is the time for *realpolitik*? We are no longer an imperial power able to demand what we want and get it. We live in a fragile and increasingly volatile world in all senses of those terms. Does not our membership of the EU, together with our seat on the Security Council of the United Nations, our membership of NATO and our position at the head of the Commonwealth, provide an ideal platform for us to promote Britain both here and abroad? That is why we should stay in.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Membership of those organisations helps us not only to get things done for our people and our country, but to make progress on the issues we care about around the world.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Prime Minister deserves credit for the deal he has got; I will be able to campaign for it with confidence. He is right to say that the three different leave campaigns are unable to say what leave would really look like, but given that he will have to do the negotiations in the event of an out vote, it is also incumbent on him to tell us what leave would

look like. When he sets out the alternatives, will he explain specifically what leave, as well as stay, would look like?

The Prime Minister: We will, as a Government, set out what we believe the alternatives are. There is the Swiss model, which took nine years to negotiate, and we have discussed the Norwegian model today. The World Trade Organisation option means that we could face tariffs every time we try to sell a car into the EU. The Canada free trade deal has not yet been agreed, but it does not cover all services so we could be seriously disadvantaged. We need to go into detail on each of those and put accurate information in place so that people can see what is on offer.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that critical to the success of his campaign will be his ability to convince people that, by giving up some sovereignty in Britain, we have gained sovereignty and authority in Europe?

The Prime Minister: Clearly, that is going to be the challenge of the coming months. As I have said, I have no selfish interest in this; I will just tell it as I see it. As I have learned over six years of being Prime Minister, this organisation is imperfect and can sometimes be frustrating, but we are better off in it. I profoundly believe that and I will take that message around the country.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): People in Scotland are entitled to hear the clear and positive case for remaining in the EU, and to make their decisions on the basis of hearing all the arguments in full. The Prime Minister spoke today about the importance of taking account of the express will of the people. Will he undertake to take full account of the express view of the Scottish people and ensure that if we vote to remain, we are not removed from the EU against our will?

The Prime Minister: I very much look forward to taking this message to Scotland and campaigning in Scotland. I enjoyed doing that during the independence referendum, and I look forward to making the argument again that we are better off together. It is a one United Kingdom decision.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): The out voices have been dominant for a long time. If my right hon. Friend had come back as emperor of Europe, they would have complained that it was an idea from Rome. The biggest questions that I have been asked by my constituents are: what are the positives, and what should we be voting on? I urge my right hon. Friend to speak in this campaign about the positives to the economy, to security and to the military, and to make the point that nothing can be more sovereign than 46 million people having their say.

The Prime Minister: Absolutely right. We should talk not only about the conceptual benefits of free trade and open markets, but about the simple and practical benefits. We are free to travel, work, live and retire anywhere in Europe. Because of open skies, the price of going on holiday and taking a flight anywhere in Europe has come down by something like 40%. When you travel, you will hopefully soon be able to access your digital content on

your iPad, so that you can watch whatever you are watching wherever you are in Europe. *[Interruption.]* I think I have been doing this for too long, but you get the point.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Many of my constituents are somewhat nonplussed about the EU question, but they are hugely concerned about the future of the UK steel industry. Does the Prime Minister believe that the UK steel industry will have a brighter future if we remain in Europe or if we leave?

The Prime Minister: That is a very important point. There are huge challenges not just in our steel industry but right across Europe, and that is increasingly being talked about around the European Council table. However difficult it is—and it is difficult—I think we have a better chance of dealing with Chinese overcapacity, dumping and all the rest of it if we work as the biggest market in the world of 500 million people. Of course, we can get some things done as the fifth largest economy talking to China, but as part of 500 million, I think we can get more action.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): The number of unemployed claimants in my constituency has fallen by 80% since 2010. Does the Prime Minister agree that to leave the EU now, at a time of economic global uncertainty, would risk a reversal of the progress that has been made?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted with the unemployment performance in my hon. Friend's constituency. There is a simple point here: we live in uncertain times. We have made good progress on the economy. We should try to take the risks away from that economic performance, and clearly changing our status in such a radical way would be a risk.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): We have been enriched by freedom of movement, we have been made safer by co-operation and we remain relevant in global terms because of our seat in the European Union. All of that and more is, unfortunately, now at risk. With that in mind, will the Prime Minister put some punch into a positive fight to remain in Europe? Would it not be ironic if this Conservative Prime Minister left it to the Scottish National party to save Britain from itself?

The Prime Minister: I hope I have demonstrated today that there is plenty of punch in this campaign, and it will be positive, too. I make no apology for saying that in making a positive campaign about jobs, about business and about competitiveness, we should also examine the alternatives. There is absolutely nothing wrong with doing that.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): As a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, I have seen NATO operations around the world, including Operation Ocean Shield against Somali pirates. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is the 28 member nations of NATO—including non-EU countries such as Norway, Turkey, Iceland, the United States and Canada—that are delivering our international security, not an EU army?

The Prime Minister: We do not want an EU army, and the document clearly says that our national security is a reserved matter for nation states. It puts that beyond doubt. When you look in detail at what, for instance, both NATO and the EU are doing off the coast of Somalia, or at what is happening in the Mediterranean with NATO in the east and the EU in the south, you see that we need to be in both organisations. You do not just talk about one organisation while you are in that organisation; you address NATO questions when you are sitting around the table with other EU leaders.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The UK's membership of the EU has been a force for good for trade, jobs, investment and international co-operation. As the Prime Minister has recognised, the EU is a fundamental part of the architecture that has promoted prosperity and kept the peace in Europe after the ravages of two world wars. Does he agree that those who are campaigning so aggressively to reject his renegotiations and cut Britain loose in the modern world are on the wrong side not only of the big arguments but of history?

The Prime Minister: How best to engage in Europe has always been a challenge for our country. There is a strong case for saying that when we have tried to cut ourselves off, it has ended in disaster and the need to re-engage. We should always work to get our engagement right, which is what this deal is all about.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): There is nobody in this House more Eurosceptic than myself, but I am standing at the side of the Prime Minister on this one, because the Prime Minister has always stood by me and my people in Morecambe. In my constituency, we have the port of Heysham, through which 10% of our GDP passes, most of it from Northern Ireland. We also have two EDF nuclear power stations, which are sponsored by the French Government. I do not want jobs to be lost in my constituency, especially as its unemployment rate is the lowest it has been for generations. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree with me on that synopsis?

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree that this is about jobs and about livelihoods. My hon. Friend stands up very well for his constituents. I remember visiting not that long ago, when we looked at the Heysham link road. I even hammered a rivet into one vital bridge; I just hope it survives.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): The Prime Minister indicated in the House on 3 February and today that a series of documents would be published in relation to the reform proposals. On 3 February, he referred to the impact of an exit on the free movement of people within Ireland—in particular, the removal of that free movement. Will he confirm when those documents will be made available to enable us, as people who want to remain in the EU, to have a full, robust and earnest discussion?

The Prime Minister: I do not have the dates for the hon. Lady of when those documents will be published, but I will try to make sure that when we look at alternatives and consequences, we address the question

of the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland, and the issue of movement of people that could be triggered by that.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): One word that seemed to crop up around the reporting of the summit was “contagion”, as though other states following the Prime Minister's lead would be a bad thing. Does the Prime Minister agree that contagion could be a good thing and that we should encourage it? The one-size-fits-all Europe of the 1970s and 1980s is a thing of the past, and the recognition of more than one currency is a good example of that. We have taken a lead that has set reform in train.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. Europe will never work if we try to make everyone be one-size-fits-all. If a country such as Britain raises concerns, it is right that they are addressed, and I am glad that they have been.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Approximately 30,000 of the UK citizens living in the European Union whom my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) referred to—interestingly, we call them expats rather than economic migrants—claim benefits in the European Union countries in which they live. How will the package that the Prime Minister has negotiated affect them?

The Prime Minister: What we have negotiated is a welfare mechanism that the European Commission has said applies to Britain now, so we are able to pull this emergency brake and restrict benefits for seven years. It is for other countries to determine whether they qualify and whether they are able to do that, but I am in no doubt that it applies right away in the UK, which is what I was determined to secure.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware that we have trading partners and military allies outside the EU. Has he had any representations from those allies and trading partners about whether they see us as being better in the EU or outside?

The Prime Minister: I would say that in all the conversations I have had with our partners, our neighbours and countries around the world that look to us as friends, I have been quite surprised by just how unanimous and how passionate they have been. I would totally disabuse people of the idea that, for instance, there is any sense that some of the countries of the Commonwealth might want Britain to step back from Europe and form some sort of new relationship with them. The Prime Ministers of New Zealand, Canada and Australia, and the President of America, could not be clearer in thinking that Britain should stay in a reformed European Union, and in that way make sure that Europe is looking out to them and signing trade deals with them, which is exactly what we should do.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): While the referendum campaign is in progress in the United Kingdom, Europe will continue to host and witness the worst humanitarian crisis we have seen in the past 70 years. Last summer, shameful attempts were made in the media and elsewhere to link that crisis to our membership of the European Union. Will the Prime Minister give us an assurance that whatever happens in the Mediterranean over the

next three months, the United Kingdom's response will be based solely on humanitarian necessity and will not be influenced by how it might impact on the referendum campaign?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we will do what is right. In the context of our membership, it is important to address the issue of migration. I would make a number of points. First, we are obviously outside Schengen and will remain outside Schengen, so people coming to the EU do not have an automatic right to come to Britain. Secondly, I would make the point that we are doing a very responsible thing in taking refugees directly from the region. Thirdly, we are working with our European partners to secure the external border. At the end of the day, whether we are in the EU or out of the EU, we are affected by this problem in Europe, so we should be working with our partners to make sure that they can better control, and in some cases stop, the flow of people to Europe.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Some argue that we will be able to forge better deals across the world by leaving the European Union, but in the three years that I have been a trade envoy I have not yet met a single representative of any of the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations that believes our trade and investment prospects would be better if we left the EU. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that the referendum is not about whether we should do business with Europe or with the rest of the world, but about the fact that we should and must do business with both, as we are, and that those with whom we most want a free trade agreement will always prioritise the EU?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend puts it in absolutely the right way. It is not an either/or. We are expanding our trade in south-east Asia—we have doubled our trade with China since I became Prime Minister—but I am struck, as he is, by the fact that countries are not saying, “Get out of the EU and sign a trade deal with us”. They are saying, “Stick in the EU and make sure it signs a trade deal, because it will be bigger and it will be better.”

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The Prime Minister articulates the case in the national interest well. However, I have heard unconfirmed rumours that he has been exploiting the situation among Conservative Members for his own self-interest by opening a private book on his successor. Will the Prime Minister confirm that? Will he give us an inkling of where the money is flowing, and will he guarantee to extend the syndicate to the rest of us?

The Prime Minister: My father, whom I miss every day, was an inveterate gambler. I remember nothing so much as sitting with him on a Saturday and watching him bet on race after race. While I enjoyed all that, I have tried to stick away from it myself, so I am not running a book. All I know is that I will do the right thing for this country, and the right thing for this country is to remain in a reformed EU.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Moody's has today warned that it could cut Britain's credit rating in the event of Brexit. It justifies that thus:

“Unless the UK managed to negotiate a new trade arrangement with the EU that preserves at least some of the trade benefits of

EU membership, the UK's exports would suffer. It would likely lead to a prolonged period of uncertainty, which would negatively affect investment.”

Is that project fear or a warning from the real world?

The Prime Minister: There are important economic consequences that we need to lay out so that people can see the potential downsides of what I think is a leap in the dark. We have set out a lot this afternoon about how long it would take to put trade deals in place and about how damaging that could be. It would be irresponsible not to be put in front of the British people the consequences of the outcomes.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): There is one deal the Prime Minister has always had control over, which is the disbursement of common agricultural policy payments to farmers. Will he pledge to pass on the €187 million convergence uplift that the EU has provided to the UK? It is actually based on the payments that Scottish farmers receive, which are the lowest in Europe. That would make it much easier to campaign in Scotland with farmers.

The Prime Minister: I will look carefully at what the hon. Gentleman says. My memory of the CAP deal—the finance deal and its consequences—is that we actually gave the devolved Administrations a huge amount of leeway to determine the right way to spend their money. I think farmers actually benefit from the way in which this is done, but I will look carefully at the point he makes.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May I thank the Prime Minister for all his work on behalf of our country over the past weeks, months and, indeed, years?

Exports to China from Germany, France and the UK have all shown significant increases. Does that not show that the opportunities for trade outside the EU are not, as some would have it, constrained by membership of the EU?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. You do not expand your trade with China by doing less trade with the EU. We want to do both.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Last year, every colleague on the Government side of the House stood successfully under the leadership of my right hon. Friend and under the one nation Conservative team banner. Does the Prime Minister agree that whatever the views of Conservative Members—I am fully supportive of him—and whatever the outcome of the European Union referendum, we must unify once again as a party to ensure that whoever leads our party into the 2020 election does not accidentally allow Jeremy Corbyn and his Labour colleagues into government?

The Prime Minister: I agree. This is always going to be a difficult process. In the Labour party, as well as in the Conservative party, there are people on both sides of the debate. However, this is such a big question—one that will ultimately be answered by the people, rather than by politicians—that we should all be big enough to have an honest and open, but polite disagreement, and then come back together again afterwards.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): May I take the Prime Minister back to another election commitment? In 2014, he and I, along with thousands of Conservative activists, campaigned on a promise, which was emblazoned across our leaflets, to restore control of our borders. The Prime Minister followed that up in the same year, saying that

“I will go to Brussels, I will not take no for an answer and when it comes to free movement: I will get what Britain needs.”

What changed last week?

The Prime Minister: What changed last week is that we are reforming free movement to make sure that we can keep out fraudsters, criminals and those peddling sham marriages, and to make sure that we can apply British rules to foreign nationals coming in as European citizens, just as we do to our own citizens. There are a whole set of changes. To be fair to the Home Secretary, she negotiated incredibly hard, knowing that this was the one moment in which we had the ability to make these changes—reversing European Court of Justice judgments—and to reform free movement, and that is exactly what we have done.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I first thank my right hon. Friend for the referendum? He and I fundamentally disagree, as he knows. My concern is about immigration, which he said he would contain. We have net migration to this country of about 240,000 every year at the moment. In three years—I repeat, every three years—that is between 700,000 or 750,000, which is the size of the city of Leeds. Surely that is unsustainable. What he has negotiated will not prevent that from happening.

The Prime Minister: Where I agree with my hon. Friend is that we have got to do more to control immigration. Net migration to the UK is now made up roughly half and half of those from outside the EU—there is still more we need to do to shut down the bogus colleges and to make sure that people are not coming in unfairly—and those from within the EU, where one of the most important things we can do is to withdraw the artificial draw of additional welfare payments. The fact that people can get £10,000 in the first year they come to this country is surely an important determining factor. I am convinced that, with the correct measures, we can get immigration down while remaining a member of the European Union.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): During the general election, it was reported that the Prime Minister had expressed some concern about the BBC’s coverage of the election and its impartiality. What assurances can he give me, so that I can relay them to my constituents, that the BBC will not abuse its position again?

The Prime Minister: Politicians complaining about the BBC is a pretty common activity. I remember the former First Minister of Scotland getting quite heated about this issue. Every media organisation is under an obligation—sorry, let me restate that, because it is certainly not true of the newspapers. Every regulated television business is under a duty of impartiality, and I am sure the BBC will carry that out.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Prime Minister, other colleagues and, indeed, all 103 Back Benchers who have taken part in this important exchange.

Points of Order

6.9 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have made the office of the Minister for Community and Social Care aware of my intention to make this point of order, as well as your good office. Last week, after much delay, the long-awaited report by the Mental Health Taskforce, which was commissioned by NHS England, was published. On the same day, the Government made a series of apparent announcements to the media in response to the report—a courtesy that is yet to be afforded to this House.

This is a vital moment for mental health in England, so it is highly regrettable that the report was published during a recess, preventing Members from all parts of the House from scrutinising its findings and questioning the Government’s response to it. Will you advise me, Mr Speaker, of whether you have received any indication from Ministers that they intend to make a statement on the Mental Health Taskforce report and allow Members the opportunity to question the Government on the announcements they have made?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order and for her courtesy in giving me notice of it. The short answer to the last part of her point of order is no. I have received no indication that a Minister intends to make a statement on the matter. What I would say provisionally, having learned of this matter only a small number of moments ago, is that significant announcements of changes of policy should be made first to the House. That means, save in cases of emergency, that they should be made to the House while it is sitting. Of course, right hon. and hon. Members and others can and do access reports whether or not the House is sitting and may pursue their contents in debate and in questions. I will cause further inquiries to be made on the content and timing of this particular announcement.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) may inadvertently have misled the House when referring to parliamentary sovereignty and its effect across the United Kingdom. Specifically, I seek your guidance on how we can put it on the record that parliamentary sovereignty, according to Diceyan jurisprudence, applies equally in Scotland and England, notwithstanding the 1953 MacCormick case, which was *obiter dicta* of course?

Mr Speaker: I say two things to the hon. Gentleman. First, I say very gently—I am trying to be kind to him because he is a new Member, albeit an extremely distinguished fellow—that if he wants to raise points of order and argue the toss about the proprieties of parliamentary procedure, perhaps he might learn that he should refer to the Leader of the Opposition as the Leader of the Opposition, not call him by name. People have to be careful that they are on sound ground if they start playing the procedural card.

Secondly, I say very kindly to the hon. Gentleman, whose intellect and eloquence are evident to all, not least to the hon. Gentleman himself, that this does not seem to be a point of order. It is an argument, albeit a cerebral and doubtless high-minded argument, between opposing lawyers. We will leave it there for now.

Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill

Second Reading

6.13 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill gives effect to key elements of the fresh start agreement of 2015 and the Stormont House agreement of 2014. It is an important stage in the implementation of those agreements, which, taken together, have the potential to help us to secure a more peaceful, stable and prosperous future for Northern Ireland.

Before turning to the detail of the clauses, I will remind the House of the background to their contents. As the House will recall, following just over 10 weeks of intensive talks, the Government, the Northern Ireland Executive parties and the Irish Government reached the Stormont House agreement on 23 December 2014. It addressed many of the most significant challenges facing Northern Ireland. Some of those challenges, such as the long-standing disagreements over flags, parading and the past, were deeply damaging to political relationships within the devolved Executive and were fuelling community divisions. Others, particularly the state of the Executive's finances and disagreements over welfare reform, were jeopardising the effectiveness and sustainability of devolution itself.

The Stormont House agreement included proposals to give the Executive a workable and sustainable budget; to set a path towards resolving contentious issues around flags, symbols and parading; to establish new bodies to help to tackle the legacy of Northern Ireland's past; and to deliver reforms at Stormont to make devolution work better. All of that was underpinned by a financial package that gave the Executive about £2 billion of extra spending power.

The Stormont House agreement was and remains a good deal for Northern Ireland. However, by last summer, it was clear that implementation had stalled. That was largely due to disagreements in the Executive over the budget and finances, at the heart of which was the decision by the nationalist parties to withdraw their support for the welfare reform package agreed at Stormont Castle the preceding December. As the stand-off continued, it had the knock-on effect of preventing decisions on other elements of the agreement from being taken. Sadly, the sense of crisis was intensified by two brutal murders in Belfast, one in May and one in August, which once again raised the spectre of the malign influence of continued paramilitary activity on the streets of Northern Ireland.

As we entered last autumn, the political situation looked increasingly perilous. We faced the prospect that resignations might trigger early Assembly elections. That could easily have led to the collapse of the devolved institutions and a return to direct rule from Westminster. That would have been a major setback after all that has been achieved under successive Governments during the past 20 years. It was an outcome that the Government acted strenuously and decisively to avoid.

First, in a speech in Cambridge on 5 September, I made it clear that we could not let the financial impasse continue indefinitely and that if there was no resolution to the dispute, we would be left with no option but to legislate in Westminster for welfare reform.

Secondly, following discussions with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, it was decided that the time was right to convene a second round of cross-party talks, which began at Stormont House on 8 September. Once again, the talks included the five largest parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Government on matters for which they are responsible, in accordance with the long-established three-stranded approach to Northern Ireland affairs. The objectives we set ourselves were twofold: to secure the full implementation of the Stormont House agreement and to deal with the impact of continued paramilitary activity.

The talks once again lasted for 10 weeks and concluded on 17 November with a document entitled "A Fresh Start: The Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan", which was agreed between the UK Government, the Irish Government and the two parties representing a majority of Unionists and nationalists in the Executive. In the Government's view, that agreement goes a long way towards satisfying the objectives that the participants in the talks set themselves. It gives the Executive a stable and sustainable budget that includes welfare reform; it unblocks progress on other crucial elements of the Stormont House agreement, including institutional reform; and it strongly reaffirms support for the rule of law and places fresh obligations on Northern Ireland's political representatives to work together with determination to rid society of paramilitary activity and groups. This agreement, like the previous one, was underpinned by a financial package from the UK Government, this time worth up to £500 million.

I can inform the House that progress on the implementation of the fresh start agreement has been good. On 18 November, the day after it was reached, the Assembly passed a legislative consent motion for Westminster to go ahead with welfare legislation. The subsequent Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Act 2015 was given Royal Assent on 25 November and the related order was passed in early December. The Government are working closely with the Executive on the extensive secondary legislation that is required to deliver the new welfare system in Northern Ireland. We hope to be in a position to begin bringing that forward shortly, with a view to completing its passage through both Houses as soon as we can.

On 21 December, the UK and Irish Governments, along with the Northern Ireland Executive, established a Joint Agency Task Force to reinforce efforts to tackle cross-jurisdictional organised crime. The Executive have established the three-person panel envisaged by the agreement to make recommendations for a broad-ranging strategy to disband paramilitary groups. The appointments process for the new flags commission is under way. A Bill to reduce the number of Government Departments from 12 to nine has completed its consideration in the Assembly. A further Bill to reduce the number of Members of the Legislative Assembly per constituency from six to five is set for its final stage of consideration in the Assembly tomorrow.

The Bill before the House today represents further significant progress, dealing with elements of the fresh start agreement that require UK Government legislation. Clauses 1 to 5 make provision to put into effect a treaty, to be agreed between the UK and Irish Governments, that will establish the independent reporting commission. The Bill sets out the commission's primary objective to promote progress towards ending paramilitary activity

[Mrs Theresa Villiers]

connected with Northern Ireland. It will report on progress towards that objective and on the implementation of relevant measures by the UK Government, the Irish Government and the Executive that were agreed in the fresh start agreement. The Bill makes provision for key aspects of the new commission's work, including the duties to which it will be subject and the legal privileges to be conferred on it as an international body. These are intended to ensure that the commission is able to engage with a range of sources of information in performing its important functions, but will avoid doing anything that might put life, safety or national security at risk. I appreciate that hon. Members will wish to see the text of the treaty. It has not been possible to provide that today, because it has not yet been agreed between the UK and Irish Governments, but we will of course place a copy in the Library of the House in due course as soon as we can.

Clause 6 and schedule 1 will extend the time available for the allocation of ministerial positions in the Executive from seven to 14 days after the Assembly meets following an election. The purpose of the change, as set out in the Stormont House agreement, is to allow parties more time to agree a programme for government on a cross-party basis prior to the allocation of ministerial positions. It is hoped that this will encourage a more bipartisan approach to the programme for government.

Clause 7 will amend the pledge of office for Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive, reflecting strong commitments set out in the fresh start agreement to give unequivocal support for the rule of law and to work collectively to achieve a society free of paramilitarism once and for all. Clause 8 will introduce a similar undertaking by all Members of the Assembly.

Clause 9 will implement the commitments in the fresh start agreement for the UK Government to legislate, with Assembly consent, to increase fiscal transparency in Executive budgets, thus helping the Executive to deliver an affordable and sustainable budget.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): If I may take the Secretary of State back to clause 8, I am very pleased about the introduction of a new pledge for all MLAs. They will not be able to participate in any proceedings, or do anything within the Assembly, unless and until they have taken the new pledge. When they have taken the new pledge, however, what sanctions will there be if they fail to honour it, and who will decide?

Mrs Villiers: Naturally enough, any sanctions relating to the actions of MLAs are matters for the Assembly, rather than for the Chamber and the legislation proposed here today. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention.

Clause 9 provides that the Northern Ireland Finance Minister will have a duty to specify—

Lady Hermon: I am terribly sorry to intervene on the Secretary of State again, but if I may say so that was a rather flippant response and not at all characteristic—she is always so well briefed. Clause 8 actually states:

“Standing orders shall provide for the procedure for giving the undertaking.”

It does not say in clause 8 that Standing Orders will be passed in the Assembly on sanctions for MLAs who do not honour the new pledge, so it must be in this proposed legislation.

Mrs Villiers: I am very sorry. I did not mean for my answer to sound flippant or not serious. It remains the case that the Bill does not provide for sanctions and neither does the fresh start agreement. In terms of internal matters of discipline within the Assembly, that really is a matter for the Assembly itself to determine. What I can provide further clarification on is that an individual who refuses to give the undertaking will not be able to participate in Assembly proceedings, or receive any of the privileges of office or salary.

Clause 9 provides that the Northern Ireland Finance Minister will have a duty to specify to the Assembly the amount of Government funding available, as notified by the Secretary of State. The Minister will have to show, when delivering a draft budget, that the amount of Government funding required by that draft budget does not exceed the amount specified as being available.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Before the Secretary of State moves on to that more detailed point, does she agree that the provisions outlined in the Bill should be extended here? Members who do not take their oath in this place receive privileges and benefits, and are not excluded. Maybe we should learn something from the situation in Northern Ireland and apply it to this place.

Mrs Villiers: I am very much aware of the concerns the hon. Gentleman and his party have on such matters. Issues relating to privileges and expenses are House business, and he and his colleagues are welcome to raise them at any time for the House to consider. In due course, we will look at Short money too.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Just to take a step back in relation to the cross-border task force, I understand a meeting was held in December 2015 to establish it. Can the Secretary of State clarify today how often the task force will meet or is it scheduled to meet?

Mrs Villiers: I think we need to distinguish between the ministerial meeting, which was a one-off, and the agency task force, which will meet regularly. I do not know that it has scheduled a timetable of meetings as yet, but I am sure that once it does I will be able to supply the hon. Gentleman with details. One would expect it to meet regularly to conduct its important work. The membership has been formulated, so it is already cracking on with its work.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that cross-border co-operation on a whole range of issues, not least organised crime, is made much easier by the fact that the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK are members of the European Union?

Mrs Villiers: I was wondering when that subject would come up. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that there are a whole range of reasons why the relationship between the UK and Ireland has improved massively in recent years.

I have outlined the main features of this short, but important, piece of proposed legislation on Northern Ireland.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): There is one area that is not in the Bill. Will the Secretary of State inform the House when the legacy Bill will come forward? Many people throughout Northern Ireland are grieving deeply and want to know when the proposals will come forward.

Mrs Villiers: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue, which I was about to come on to. Sadly, I am not able to give her a date for the presentation of that proposed legislation, but, as I will go into, I am determined to work as hard as I possibly can to build the consensus necessary to enable us to introduce it. I agree with her: it is very important that we press ahead.

I must put on record my gratitude for the co-operation of Her Majesty's Opposition in agreeing to a somewhat faster than usual passage of the Bill through the House. This should enable measures relating to the pledge of office, the undertaking and the extension of the time available for ministerial appointments to be in place in time for the new Assembly when it meets in May. It will enable the new independent reporting commission to be established as soon as possible.

I am very conscious, returning to the point made by the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), that some important elements of the Stormont House agreement are not, sadly, in the Bill we are discussing today.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Given that the welfare reform legislation was microwaved through here and that this Bill will be fast-tracked, can the Secretary of State give an undertaking that the legacy Bill will not be fast-tracked and that her commitment to building consensus will extend to proper consideration for victims and the wider public interest, and not just be something cobbled up between parties?

Mrs Villiers: I need to reflect on that, but I definitely agree with the hon. Gentleman that the legacy Bill will be in a very different category from the other two pieces of legislation—the Bill today and the welfare legislation. In those circumstances, we should do everything possible to make sure that it has an ordinary timetable. If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will not give an absolute undertaking on that for today's purposes, but if we get to the stage of being able to present that Bill to Parliament, it is highly likely that we will want to proceed with it on the basis of an ordinary timetable rather than an expedited one, given the sensitivity of the issues.

As I set out in my speech in Belfast on 11 February, the Government are and remain committed to establishing these legacy bodies. We have a manifesto commitment to do so. We will continue our efforts to build the consensus needed to allow us to present legislation to this House. We have made more progress than any of our predecessors in getting close to achieving an agreed way forward on the past. We are now closer than ever, I think, to resolving the main outstanding problems standing in the way of getting these new bodies set up and operating.

I shall continue to engage with the political parties in Northern Ireland, with victims and survivors and with those who represent them, and I am particularly grateful

for the input and work of the Commission for Victims and Survivors in trying to facilitate this process and for working hard to try, with me, to build consensus for the new bodies.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree that one element of the legacy issue that is paramount in the minds of many survivors of the troubles is that under no account and under no circumstances must Northern Ireland be seen to go forward on the basis of treating the perpetrators of violence in the same way as those who were innocent victims of that very violence?

Mrs Villiers: I entirely agree. We on the Government side would never accept a rewriting of history. I think we should always recall the dedication of, and sacrifices made by, both the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the armed services in Northern Ireland. We should salute that sacrifice, and I am absolutely convinced that in the vast majority of cases, the members of the security forces performed their duties with the utmost integrity and professionalism.

I want to pay tribute, too, to the dignity and determination with which victims and survivors approach the legacy matters under discussion. I have been deeply moved on many occasions when I have met victims and survivors to hear of their experiences and their tragedies. I have welcomed the chance to meet many of them over my years as Secretary of State. They have different and divergent views on a number of issues, but almost all are agreed that the current mechanisms for tackling legacy cases are not working as they should.

The legacy bodies proposed in the Stormont House agreement will not be perfect and, sadly, even when they are set up, they will not provide every answer to every question. Sadly, no set of solutions that we could devise here or in Stormont could ever achieve that, but I believe that those bodies would deliver significantly better outcomes for victims and survivors than the status quo. For that reason, we will continue to pursue them with diligence and dedication.

As a result of the Stormont House and fresh start agreements, I think politics in Northern Ireland is probably more stable now than it has been over the past three years. Economically, although there was undoubtedly some heart-breaking news from Bombardier last week, it is still the case that 46,000 more people are in work compared with 2010 and the unemployment register is down by more than 40% since its peak in 2013. The fresh start agreement also takes us closer to the point where we can complete the transfer of corporation tax powers to the Executive—a move that I believe can have a transformative effect on the economy there.

As we go forward there will continue to be difficulties and challenges. I need hardly remind the House that despite some success in suppressing their activities, the threat from dissident republicans is severe and the need for vigilance is constant. We are also, of course, approaching some very sensitive centenaries—commemorations that can have very different meanings for different parts of the community. Northern Ireland has, I think, entered 2016 more positively than for some time. For our part, the Government remain determined to deliver our manifesto commitment to help build a brighter, more secure future for Northern Ireland. The Bill is intended to help that process, and I commend it to the House.

6.35 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to the debate, and I hope she stays in.

The Bill delivers some of the key aspects of the 17 November 2015 fresh start agreement and the 2014 Stormont House agreement. These agreements ended a financial and political impasse in Northern Ireland that threatened the survival of the devolved institutions and exposed us to the very real possibility of a return to direct rule, which would of course have been disastrous. The Bill is therefore very welcome.

As we address the substance of the Bill, it is crucial for us to stress the importance of economic development. As the Secretary of State acknowledged, the job losses announced at Bombardier last week were a terrible blow to advanced manufacturing in Northern Ireland and a personal tragedy for those who will lose their jobs and for their families. They will now, of course, have to seek employment elsewhere. Jobs in Northern Ireland, as across the UK, are crucial as the strength of the economy and opportunity help to deliver continued progress for everyone.

Of course Bombardier operates in an incredibly competitive global market and demand in that world market has not been as strong as we would have liked. However, the Government have a responsibility, so what are they doing to support those who remain at Bombardier? What are they doing to help ensure that those workers find a route back to employment as swiftly as possible? When the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), winds up the debate, will he say what support has been offered to the workforce and to the Northern Ireland Executive? What discussions will he and the Secretary of State have with the rest of the Government to encourage more direct foreign investment into Northern Ireland?

As we begin to discuss this Bill, let us remind ourselves that the previous 12 months have not been the easiest in Northern Ireland. The murders of Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan in the summer and the budgetary stalemate around the issue of welfare led to a political crisis that required all the skill and commitment of those involved to get an agreement to break the stalemate and allow progress to be made. I have said before and I want to put it on record again that all of those involved—the Secretary of State, all the parties in Northern Ireland, many of whom are represented here, and the Irish Government—deserve huge credit for achieving the fresh start agreement. Without that agreement, there was the real risk of the collapse of devolution or indeed the return to direct rule, either of which would have been unthinkable.

I know there was huge disappointment, as well, that no agreement could be reached on how to deal with the past. I and many others have raised this issue here over the last few weeks and months. As I said, however, I know that huge progress was made and I am glad that the Secretary of State has reiterated that now is not the time to give up, but to build on the progress that has been made while recognising the challenges and difficulties that remain.

The publication of the draft treaty on the Independent Commission on Information Retrieval was, I think, welcome—to show not only the direction of travel, but how much progress was made in the talks. Victims must

be at the heart of any future agreement, as of any agreement—that is clear to us all. The recent allegations with respect to various atrocities of the past demonstrate more than ever the need for a process to be agreed. Victims must not feel that they are locked out of any progress, which is why I urge the Secretary of State to be as transparent as possible, even where difficulty remains, and to continue to seek agreement.

Agreement has not been reached on how to deal with the past so it could not be included in the Bill, but I say to the Secretary of State that we need to take an urgent look at the resources available to the Police Service of Northern Ireland and indeed the Coroners Service for Northern Ireland to support investigations and to speed up the inquests that they continue to be required to do. More and more delay for victims is unacceptable.

Conor McGinn: Does my hon. Friend agree—as I do—with the First Minister of Northern Ireland, who has said that we need to get real when it comes to the funding of investigations of legacy cases? The PSNI operates within stringent budget constraints. It has to prioritise front-line policing, but it is being asked to do more and more. While the current impasse exists, should it not receive funds from this place rather than having to use some of its own resources to deal with the legacy of the past?

Vernon Coaker: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, and with the First Minister and others in Northern Ireland who have pointed out that, although agreement has not been reached on how to deal with the legacy issues, the PSNI, the Coroners Service for Northern Ireland and others are still required to deal with the consequences of those issues. Given that the Secretary of State has put aside money pending any agreement, surely it would be acceptable to give at least some of it to those bodies in order to reflect the continuing work that they must do in trying to investigate and resolve some of the difficulties. I think that the First Minister has made a perfectly reasonable request, and, although I know that the Secretary of State will not be able to respond to it now, I hope that she and the Minister—and, indeed, the Government as a whole—will consider it.

Mrs Villiers: May I intervene briefly to offer some assistance? The fresh start agreement makes it clear that the £150 million package to support the legacy work is linked to the establishment of the new bodies. However, we are listening carefully to representations, particularly those relating to inquests. If a credible reform package for inquests is put together, we will of course take very seriously any request for funds to support it.

Vernon Coaker: That is a helpful response. I think that everyone in the House—and, indeed, in Northern Ireland—will have heard what the Secretary of State has said, which implies that she is open to making money available both to the PSNI and to the Coroners Service. I think that that is what victims would expect. They know that it is difficult to reach an agreement on how to deal with the past—and, although the institutions, or the proposed institutions, are there, agreement has not been reached—but, at the same time, work has to be done. Given that the money is there, we would support the Secretary of State if she—or, for instance, the Treasury—estimated at any point that at least some of

the money could be released to enable that work to be done as soon as possible, because I think that people in Northern Ireland would expect it to be done as soon as possible. The First Minister would have been pleased to hear what the Secretary of State has said.

The House has been in the habit of dealing with Northern Ireland legislation in one day, but we believe that that should happen only when the need is truly urgent. We supported an emergency procedure with respect to welfare reform, and I promised the Secretary of State when I resumed my current role that we would maintain a bipartisan approach based on the principle of consent. I hope that our actions have demonstrated that commitment, but I want to make it clear that in this instance we have agreed to an expedited procedure rather than an emergency process. This procedure allows us more time to consider the Bill, while still making it possible for us to secure Royal Assent before the approaching Northern Ireland elections. I assume that any necessary legislative consent motion will be forthcoming in order to ensure that measures relating to the pledge of office, the MLA undertaking, and extension of the time available for ministerial appointments are in place in time for the Assembly's return. I am told that the Northern Ireland parties themselves are keen for that to happen.

The hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) made a fair and reasonable point about discussion of the legacy issues in due course. I think that anyone in Northern Ireland would expect discussion of those significant and important issues to take place by means of due process in the House, and not to be speeded up.

Lady Hermon: Will Her Majesty's Opposition be tabling amendments to clause 8 to make it absolutely clear that a sanction will be applied to MLAs who make the pledge and take their seats, but then do not abide by the pledge that they have made? There is a code of ministerial responsibility for members of the Executive, and there are sanctions, but there are no sanctions in the Bill, and that is an obvious omission.

Vernon Coaker: I will say something about pledges later in my speech, but, whether we table amendments or not, I think that the hon. Lady is right to ask for clarification. I shall be quoting one of the pledges which contains a qualification, and I shall be asking what that means. Even if we accept that this is Stormont business, I think it is right for such questions to be asked in the House of Commons.

The Bill will establish an independent reporting commission to monitor progress towards ending paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland. That is a key aspect of it. Paramilitary activity is totally unacceptable and has no place in Northern Ireland, but we shall have to consider in Committee what progress has already been made, and why this initiative will work when others have not. How will progress be judged, and what will happen if it stalls?

The issue of disclosure will also have to be explored in Committee. It is bound to arise, because the Bill requires the Secretary of State to provide guidance on how national security and individuals are to be protected. We shall need an explanation in order to ensure that the problems that prevented an agreement on how to deal with the past do not happen again and prevent the Commission from working effectively—or, indeed, from working at all.

The Bill modifies the pledge of office to be taken by Northern Ireland Ministers, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). The revised pledge will include fresh obligations to work together on a shared objective of ridding society of all forms of paramilitary groups and activity, and the Bill introduces a parallel undertaking for Members of the Assembly, who must commit themselves to demonstrating a peaceful pursuit of change and progress. That is to be welcomed. However, the revised pledge includes seven newly agreed commitments, one of which is

“to accept no authority direction, or control on my political activities other than my democratic mandate alongside my own personal and party judgement”.

I think that, in Committee, Members may want to hear a full explanation of the qualification in that pledge.

The Bill extends the period allowed for the appointment of Northern Ireland Ministers, once the Assembly is elected, from seven to 14 days, which we hope will allow more time for a programme of government to be agreed. It also provides for the promotion of fiscal transparency and support for the Executive's delivery of a stable and sustainable budget. It must be made clear what block grant the UK Government will provide, and how spending above that will be funded. I look forward to some interesting discussion of that in Committee.

Ian Paisley: Given the principle that the hon. Gentleman has accepted this evening, does he also accept the principle that if Members of the House of Commons do not take the oath, all the privileges that they gain here should be removed from them?

Vernon Coaker: As the Secretary of State has said, that is House business, but we expect all Members of this House to commit themselves to the pursuit of democracy and the making of decisions by democratic means.

Ian Paisley: If the hon. Gentleman accepts that principle, will he—through the usual channels, and with the support of the Opposition and the Government—table a motion in order to resolve, finally, the anomaly that allows Irish Republican Sinn Féin Members to benefit from privileges in the House without taking the oath?

Vernon Coaker: As I have said, that is House business and I therefore cannot commit myself, but the hon. Gentleman has heard what I have said. We expect all Members of this House to commit themselves to democracy and the democratic process, and I think that that is what all of us have done.

I was talking about the budget, the promotion of fiscal transparency, and support for the Executive's delivery of a stable and sustainable budget. This is another area that will need to be examined in Committee.

Northern Ireland is not out of conflict; it is coming out of conflict. Huge progress has been made, but challenges remain. The cloud of paramilitary activity still hangs over too many communities and impacts on too many people. This activity, whether republican or loyalist, never had a place in society, and it certainly has no place now.

The major elements of this Bill represent another step towards the principle that must be at the heart of any democracy: that the rule of law is paramount in every community—law enforced by the police and subject to an

[Vernon Coaker]

independent judiciary. The success of this Bill, the new pledges and the independent commission will be judged on how far they bring that goal about.

6.50 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I just want to make a fairly brief intervention in this debate. Before I do so, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wonder whether you will allow me a few seconds to refer and pay tribute to my constituency assistant who died very suddenly a few days ago. His name was Mark Calway, and he worked for me for 14 years and took a particular interest in matters Northern Ireland—and indeed in matters the Republic of Ireland—helping me quite a bit with my work on the Select Committee and as co-chairman of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. His death is a stunning shock, and my heart goes out to his parents, Brian and Maureen. I do hope it is in order for me to pay the greatest tribute to him possible today. All hon. Members know how much we depend on our staff, and when they are personal friends as well, such a loss, at the age of 49, is terrible. Thank you very much indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker.

May I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for the work she has done in getting us to this point? I know—or I think I know—how difficult things were back in September when it looked as though the institutions in Northern Ireland might collapse. I know how much work she put in—or I am guessing I know that. Her dedication was total. She was absolutely determined that the institutions would not collapse and that we would in fact find some degree of agreement and a solution that would enable us to move forward. The fact that we are here today demonstrates that she was successful in that, so I really do want to pay tribute to her—and her team—for the very hard work and extraordinarily long hours put into this.

Before I was Select Committee Chairman, I served as shadow Minister for about five years. During some of that time we dealt with an awful lot of legislation—statutory instruments—in Committee upstairs, taking major decisions on behalf of the Province and the people in Northern Ireland. On many of those occasions, at the beginning of my speeches I said how wrong and inappropriate it was to govern the Province in that way, yet we really did face the prospect of going back to the previous situation, and that worried and frightened me. It came about as a result of a couple of tragic murders in Northern Ireland and the linkage between them and people in the Assembly who were allegedly sympathetic to that kind of activity. I am very pleased that this Bill makes it clear that there is no place, either in this place or the Assembly in Northern Ireland, for people who hold those beliefs.

Many years ago we heard the famous and chilling statement that some people would proceed with the Armalite in one hand and the ballot box in the other. Those days are long gone, and anybody who tries to practise that or carry out politics in that way should be in prison, deprived of their liberty. There is no place in the Northern Ireland Assembly for that kind of people. We would not want to work on Committees in this House or anywhere else with people who by day are in the debating Chamber and at night are on the streets causing trouble and wreaking havoc. We would not

accept it in this place, and it should not be accepted in Northern Ireland, so I am very pleased that the Bill paves the way for removing that kind of behaviour.

Ian Paisley: I appreciate the point the hon. Gentleman is making. Sometimes we do have to stop and pinch ourselves and recognise how far Northern Ireland has come in recent years. The point he is making about Northern Ireland politicians taking decisions about the needs of the people of Northern Ireland is emphasised today, as there have been something like 26 amendments on the Floor of the Northern Ireland Parliament today, being voted and consulted on and considered by Northern Ireland's elected representatives. That shows that instead of decisions being taken in Committee Rooms here, they are being taken in Northern Ireland by the elected representatives on the Floor of the Assembly, and they are very prosperous and good decisions.

Mr Robertson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point, which emphasises far more strongly than I was able to the importance of the Assembly's functioning. When we sat in Committee taking big decisions, the great problem was that by the nature of the arithmetic of this House, there were very few people on the Committee from Northern Ireland. The decisions were taken by people like me and many others from English constituencies, with very few representatives from Northern Ireland, so the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to make that point.

The most urgent priority was dealing with the paramilitary aspect, but there were other issues, which are dealt with in the Bill. One was the agreeing of the budgets. I have mentioned before what happens when there is power-sharing rather than the straight democratic system that we have in this House. We all know why we have that power-sharing, and it has brought people together, but there may be times when there has to be compromise in the way the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive do business. There may be times when politicians in the Assembly and the Executive take their stances, make their points and make their objections, but at the end of the day there has to be agreement; if not, and if there is an overuse of the petitions of concern—I accept that both sides have used them to excess—it is not going to be very helpful. If we cannot get agreement on important issues such as the budget, we face the rather dark prospect of the institutions collapsing, as we almost saw, and power being brought back to this House. That is not something I want to see.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The hon. Gentleman refers to issues on which consensus and agreement were reached. Does he agree that the issue of corporation tax was one on which consensus was reached eventually, and that people were and are looking forward to the prospect of possibly tens of thousands of jobs being created in Northern Ireland? How does he feel about the fact that the delay in reaching that consensus was principally down to Northern Ireland's and the UK's membership of the EU? It seemed to delay it for many years.

Mr Robertson: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point and I would make two points in response. When the Select Committee looked at the issue—it was the first issue we looked at under my chairmanship back in 2010—it was not unanimous in its support for

devolving responsibilities for corporation tax, but all the parties in general were in favour of it. Corporation tax was one of the few issues that every party in Northern Ireland agreed with the policy on, which was a real positive.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, I am afraid. We could have done something about it then. The corporation tax rate for Northern Ireland could have been changed in 2010, or long before that, had it not been for our membership of the EU. I am not sure how far Mr Deputy Speaker will allow me to pursue that argument, but even if we wanted to reduce VAT on tourism in Northern Ireland, it would not be legal under EU rules. There are a number of ways of looking at membership of the EU. We spent two and a half hours on it earlier, and I do not suppose we will be allowed to spend too much longer on it now, but the point the hon. Gentleman makes is absolutely right.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I just reassure the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson): there is always Thursday for it?

Mr Robertson: Indeed there is, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I was saying that I accept that petitions of concern have been used to excess by both sides and had not been very helpful in coming to agreements on important issues. This is not contained in the legislation, but I know that the fresh start agreement did address that point and did request in a very strong way, as it were, that that facility should not be abused for the reasons we have given.

I do not wish to detain the House any longer, but this small but important Bill moves us in the right direction. I compliment and congratulate the Secretary of State on introducing it and—as I said earlier—on the enormous amount of hard work she has put in.

7 pm

Deirdre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I shall be brief to allow time for other Members to make substantive contributions to the debate, and to spare Members from having to listen to my voice for too much longer.

There were, and are, people who would rather see this whole process fail than succeed. They have their reasons, and there is some form of logic that underpins that position. It is, however, the right of a people to govern themselves, to take decisions close to home, and to protect their peace. In Northern Ireland, that peace was fashioned relatively recently and at great expense, and it is harried by a continual undercurrent from disaffected minorities. Political leaders on all sides of the debate in Northern Ireland are thirled to a peaceful and democratic political debate, but they have a legacy to address that may cause them some long and uncomfortable times in the years ahead. They must, however, find a way to put the history of their communities in context when looking to the future of those communities. The scars of yesterday cannot be allowed to become open wounds again, and it seems that that is the hardest task they face, no matter what happens in this place.

The land has paid a heavy price of being what it is and where it is, and communities that belong to the land have paid a heavy price for ideology and intransigence over the years. This Chamber has seen many debates,

questions and angry exchanges, which at times seemed to pay little or no attention to the lives that were being affected, and often lost.

The Bill is a step forward, providing that it is accepted by Stormont. There is no magic wand to wave, but a collective movement will allow politicians at Stormont more freedom to plot the direction of travel. It is they who must address the legacy issues, and they must do so in Belfast, rather than London. Stormont should decide on the domestic frameworks to serve the people. They will operate under some severe financial restrictions, but they will at least have control over some of the levers of taxation that they will need, in particular—others have already noted this—the devolution of corporation tax. The devolved Administration should be able to decide tax rates and incentives for companies as well as individuals, and I see no reason why the other devolved Administrations around these islands should not have the same power.

Gaps have opened between the points of the Stormont House agreement, the fresh start agreement, and the Bill, but I welcome the forward momentum that the Bill helps to keep going. I congratulate the Whitehall team that has brought it this far—I assume that these were not the easiest days. Credit should also go to those in this Chamber who have played a positive and forward-looking role in this process: the Secretary of State, the shadow Secretary of State, and those Members who represent constituencies in Northern Ireland.

While I acknowledge the efforts of Ministers and civil servants on this side of the Irish sea, we should also acknowledge those of their counterparts in Belfast and Dublin. The efforts of successive Irish Governments throughout the peace process, and the development of devolution, have been vital in helping deliver the possibility of a peaceful and prosperous future, and it is particularly apt to note that in this year of remembrance for the Irish nation.

The people of Northern Ireland suffered the effects of the troubles, and they continue to suffer them now in the form of higher unemployment and a legacy of arrested community development—I associate myself very much with comments made by the shadow Secretary of State about economic development. Nothing will change that overnight, but we are at least now looking in the right direction, and the SNP supports the Bill.

7.3 pm

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I welcome the debate on this Bill, and the DUP supports the Bill as well as the proposal to fast-track it. I commend the Secretary of State for her speech to the House, which was the latest in a number of wise statements that she has made on Northern Ireland and wider issues in recent days. I commend her for all those statements.

As a general rule, we are keen to see the fullest possible parliamentary scrutiny of legislation that affects Northern Ireland, and in the past a great deal of such legislation has been passed on an emergency basis. Although often that was unavoidable and understandable, we all accept—not least for the reasons outlined by the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson)—that that was not the best way to operate. Often, such emergency legislation was the result of some breakdown or failure of the political process in Northern Ireland, and I am glad that the Bill does not fall into that category.

[Mr Nigel Dodds]

This Bill has been drafted as a result of political agreement, and not political disagreement or crisis. It is based on a political agreement from last November, and it has involved considerable consultation and work in the Northern Ireland Assembly and in the Northern Ireland Executive. The Bill is only part of the implementation process of the Stormont agreement. A long list of issues were agreed, and they are all being progressed and implemented either in the Assembly, through this House, or directly administratively by the Executive and other agencies, as set out by the Secretary of State. I welcome that progress. The Executive in Northern Ireland has already agreed that a legislative consent motion should be put before the Assembly for clauses that deal with devolved matters, and I understand that that motion will come before the Assembly in mid-March.

I am confident that despite the need to fast-track the Bill, we will have the opportunity for adequate consideration. It is important that a number of measures introduced by the Bill are in place so that when Assembly elections are held and the results come in, everything is in place for the new Assembly and Executive to operate under the new legislation, without any hiccup, delay, or question mark about that. In particular, it is essential that the House deals with the agreement of a programme for government, extending the period to appoint Ministers, new paragraphs for the pledge of office, and an undertaking for Members of the Legislative Assembly, before the Assembly is dissolved at the end of March.

Lady Hermon: In the light of the recent controversy surrounding the scrutiny of MLAs' expenses, and—unfortunately—the damage that that does to public confidence in the operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Bill would be an appropriate vehicle with which to introduce in Northern Ireland an institution comparable to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, so as to rebuild public confidence in the expenses vetting procedure in Northern Ireland?

Mr Dodds: IPSA is a whole other area of debate, and I am sure it will evoke much argument and discussion in this House. The DUP suggested the introduction of an IPSA-style regime some time ago, but we could not get agreement on that. The First Minister of Northern Ireland made a speech on Friday night, outlining again the importance of transparency and of that matter being dealt with and taken forward in precisely that way. Whether the Bill is the right vehicle for that remains to be seen, because it would require agreement and consultation within Northern Ireland. That could—and indeed should—happen, and I encourage parties to do that. It is important to maintain confidence in the integrity of the Assembly. We in this House know what it is to have gone through that kind of controversy, and we want to ensure that things are progressed properly, openly, and with the utmost transparency.

However, when IPSA reported on expenses in Northern Ireland, it found a pretty satisfactory situation overall—it is not as if the entire situation was unsatisfactory. We must ensure that there is confidence, and I and the DUP support whatever steps are needed to introduce an open and transparent system in which such matters are not decided or administered by Members; I hope others will agree.

The Bill, as the Secretary of State has said, seeks to implement aspects of the fresh start agreement, which represents a new beginning for politics in Northern Ireland. I totally agree with what she said about the situation in Northern Ireland. It is more positive now. There is a more positive view of the Assembly and politics, because people have seen that agreement can be made. It was difficult, but things can get done when there is agreement and we can move forward. We must continue to build on that.

It was not, of course, possible to resolve every issue, especially in relation to the past. We have discussed that and will discuss it in much greater detail. Of course, it is not in the Bill—we should be discussing what is in the Bill—but I want to state again that, as far as our party is concerned, we are quite happy for the details of how far we got on all that to be published so that the victims, their families and all the people affected can see openly how much work is being done, how much progress has been made, where the gaps are and what needs to be done to bring the process to a conclusion.

The two issues that threatened imminent destruction of devolution at that time—paramilitary violence and welfare reform—have been addressed, agreed on and dealt with and are subject to provisions in the Bill. The resolution of the welfare reform issue was extremely important; the importance of resolving it cannot be underestimated. It was the single most important issue, from a financial perspective, to be resolved to allow the Assembly to function. I deeply regret that even after the fresh start agreement there were still Members of this House and of the Assembly who opposed the implementation of the agreement. They did not seem to recognise that without a budget that measures up and is sustainable, one cannot continue with devolution.

I am glad that there are politicians in Northern Ireland who are prepared to face up to reality, grapple with difficult problems and sit down to reach sensible outcomes through dialogue and agreement. I am pleased that this House was able to take forward the welfare reforms and the Northern Ireland Assembly was able to agree that the mitigations and some of the enhancements to the welfare system will be allowed to proceed as well. Of course, that is very important. We on these Benches would not have designed this welfare system for Northern Ireland, but it recognises the constraints and parameters within which we must operate financially while going a fair distance to meet some of the problems and issues raised by our constituents.

I am pleased that all the major targets under the fresh start agreement and the implementation plan are being met and that deadlines are being kept. Unlike with the Stormont House agreement of 2014, I believe that there is every reason to expect that every aspect will be implemented in full. On the welfare reform agreement, it is important to note that Eileen Evason's group made recommendations that came in under budget and will be implemented by the Assembly and the Executive. That allows more money to be spent in other areas by the Executive, who have now passed a budget for next year ahead of time which has been dealt with by the Assembly as it should have been.

On the issue of paramilitary violence, the panel on paramilitary disbandment has been set up and has begun its work. The trilateral meeting to tackle paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime met before Christmas.

The Executive are seized of the importance of making progress on this issue, because, at the end of the day, as we made very clear when the crisis blew up, we are not prepared to sweep these matters under the carpet. They must be faced up to by everyone who wants to see Northern Ireland move forward. There must be not only a commitment in words to democracy and the rule of law but an implementation of that in practice. That is why we on these Benches, and back in the Assembly, as elected representatives of the people, will not allow these matters simply to be ignored or to be used as a political football for a temporary political point-scoring exercise before being forgotten about. We are serious about these issues and we want them to be addressed, and to be addressed properly.

I am also glad that the Executive has agreed the reduction in the corporation tax rate to commence from April 2018. The reduction to 12.5% is an extremely important addition to the range of attractions that Invest Northern Ireland will be able to go out and promote across the world to possible investors and those who are interested in coming to Northern Ireland. I welcome that and express our gratitude to the Government for their support on this matter. Many parties and people who will no doubt claim credit now gave up on corporation tax. Our party never gave up on it. Some people said that the possibility was over and done with and would never happen—that is the reality—but we did not give up.

I pay tribute to the former First Minister of Northern Ireland, Peter Robinson, who made corporation tax a very important issue. He recognised the value of having the measure in place. Indeed, I pay tribute to him for the work he did, along with the Secretary of State and other parties, to make this fresh start agreement happen. His commitment to ensuring stability in devolution cannot be underestimated. He deserves an enormous amount of credit for the agreement. The corporation tax provision, in particular, was something that he felt very strongly about and that our party has always believed in. I am glad that it is now proceeding. When the First Minister goes to New York and Washington and to the west coast in March, along with the Deputy First Minister and others, the strength of her argument about coming to invest in Northern Ireland will have been greatly increased as a result of this agreement. This tax reduction is another reason why there should be investment in Northern Ireland.

The legislation to reduce the number of MLAs and reorganise and reduce the number of Government Departments is also nearing completion. As we heard, tomorrow there will be further debate on that. The Assembly has passed a resolution to allow an official opposition to be created and that work has been taken forward by the Assembly authorities. Nominations have been sought from the parties and applications sought from the public for the flags commission, and we expect that to be established by the end of March. There has also been progress made on the fiscal council and the compact civic advisory panel.

All in all, progress on the fresh start agreement has been very positive and has heralded a better atmosphere at Stormont, where things are getting done. The Bill is a further positive step in implementing what has been agreed. If I might say so in passing, it is an interesting commentary on the media that when there is a hold-up

in the Assembly, a massive issue of confrontation on political issues, a stand-off or when things are not getting done, there is a mass of attention and commentary. We do not hear the same reporting or the same level of discussion in the media, on the radio and on television when things are getting done, day by day and week by week. Legislation has been passed and progress is being made, but it is as if nothing is happening at all. There is hardly any reporting at all—I do not hear about any of it. It is interesting how sometimes good news, positive developments and progress are massively under-reported in Northern Ireland, whereas anything negative or bad is given massive prominence.

As other Members have said, it is worth putting on record the distance that Northern Ireland has come and the progress that has been made. For all the backward steps and ups and downs, we have made enormous progress. The political institutions that came back after the St Andrews agreement have provided a much more stable environment and I believe that that needs to be celebrated.

Ian Paisley: The story that will appear in tomorrow's newspaper—we might as well settle up for them—will be a photograph of the number of Members in the Chamber now compared with a photograph of the number of Members in the Chamber three hours ago, when the Prime Minister was speaking. It is such a crass story, but they run it week in, week out, telling people to look at the lack of interest in this place when Northern Ireland is being discussed compared with when a European issue or a financial issue is being discussed. We might as well ask the press to go ahead and publish that anyway.

Mr Dodds: On such issues, I always think that quality, not quantity, is what matters. I apply that to all Members present in the House; every Member who is here for this debate is of the highest quality. I welcome those who are here, particularly Members from constituencies outside Northern Ireland, including those who have served on the Select Committee and taken an interest in Northern Ireland matters. Their support and interest in Northern Ireland is greatly welcomed, and we value it very much indeed. I have already commented on some issues about press and media reporting, and my hon. Friend will understand if I do not take that too much further now.

We could go into detail on the independent reporting commission and other matters, but this is a Second Reading debate and so is about the generality of the Bill. We will have more opportunities to discuss it, and I welcome the fact that the Committee stage will be taken on the Floor of the House. I welcome the good co-operation that there has been between the Government, Opposition Front Benchers and the Northern Ireland parties on how this Bill should proceed. It has been an excellent example of how parliamentary scrutiny should happen. As I say, we understand why this Bill needs to be fast-tracked. It is not being done out of any sense of crisis; it is being done out of a sense of wanting to make sure that progress continues to be made and that the provisions are in place before the Assembly elections. We wish the Bill well, and we thank those who have been responsible for the agreement on introducing it and those who have worked so hard to bring this Second Reading debate to fruition.

7.21 pm

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I want to speak briefly about a number of faults or flaws in the Bill, which we certainly hope to address during its next stage.

Tackling paramilitary activity is paramount, and paramilitary activity continues to blight our society in Northern Ireland, not least in and around my constituency, where Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan were both ruthlessly gunned down in the past 12 months. Such events may not, thankfully, be as common as they once were, but they still happen on our streets. Those two murders are stark reminders of the paramilitary activity that persists nearly two decades after the Good Friday agreement was signed.

Throughout the talks that led to the Bill, we were clear that a whole-community approach is imperative if we are to root out paramilitary activity once and for all. Parties cannot and must not be seen to indulge in any class of paramilitary activity, in any circumstances, at any time. That should not be limited to certain groups or individuals, or to activity in certain constituencies; there should be no exclusions or opt-outs. It requires unequivocal and universal condemnation, and a united front, from all democratic parties and from all in civic society. Any vestige of paramilitary behaviour or structures is an affront to democracy, not just in Northern Ireland but anywhere else where it might exist, and should not be accepted. Furthermore, such vestiges continue to blight, obstruct and undermine every opportunity for economic recovery, which is desperately needed in Northern Ireland in the light of some of the news of the past couple of weeks.

The pledge proposed in the Bill, to be undertaken by Ministers and Members of the Legislative Assembly, is a step in the right direction, but the content of the pledge requires further scrutiny, particularly on the transition away from paramilitary activity. We in the Social Democratic and Labour party realise that ridding our society of paramilitary activity will by no means be an overnight process, but support in the transition has been allowed to become, or be seen as, a degree of tolerance of some element of paramilitary activity. That cannot be allowed any further.

The big absence in the Bill is, of course, any reference to the legacies of the past and, particularly, to issues pertaining to legacy. We have made our views clear: victims, survivors and their needs must be paramount, and vague claims about national security cannot and must not be used to prevent disclosure and block every effort to uncover truth and to establish accountability and transparency. There is no degree of honesty or integrity in that.

Northern Ireland society cannot, as some would have it, just move on and forget about the past, abandoning the hurt and the needs of victims and survivors. The wounds of the past must be healed, and the victims and survivors across our society have waited far too long. For many of them, this Bill—or another, if there is one coming, which we would like to see sooner rather than later—is the last real chance for any sort of meaningful truth or genuine justice. It is perfectly understandable that many of those people feel enormously let down by the shortfalls of not only this Bill but previous Bills. Dealing with the past and its legacy has been far too much of a piecemeal exercise. We will work to amend

the Bill at the next stage, and we will work on any other Bill that may emerge. We will seek amendments on the needs of victims and survivors, and on the needs of communities that have been blighted and tortured by paramilitary activity.

We would also welcome some reference in the Bill to other issues that have been left out. We would like it to make much greater progress on dealing with flags and parading. Those things lead to disturbance and need to be addressed, as does dealing with the past and its legacy.

The Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State referred to the economy. During the Stormont House talks we discussed prosperity and the need for an overall comprehensive economic recovery strategy, or a prosperity strategy, but somehow that has been forgotten about. Corporation tax has been mentioned. The SDLP was talking about that 20 years ago and has fully supported this approach at all times in between, but corporation tax will not do everything—it is not a magic bullet, dare I say? There is a desperate need for third-level education, training, apprenticeships and skills development, to go along with propping up and developing a newer and better economy. I say to the Secretary of State that I would have been keen to have some reference in the Bill to the economy and creating a prosperity process. I know that there are issues she wishes to deal with urgently, but we need to address a dire economic situation, and attention has been drawn to that by the Bombardier situation.

Mrs Villiers: I want to provide reassurance that, like the Northern Ireland Executive, the UK Government are absolutely committed to enhancing and increasing prosperity in Northern Ireland. Our main vehicle for the work we do together is the economic pact, so the fact that the issue was not expressly referred to in the fresh start agreement does not mean the two Administrations are not working closely to bring that about.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Secretary of State for that, and I am reassured, but I look forward to further stages of the Bill and the opportunity to flesh it out, amend it and make additions, where appropriate, to ensure that it is as comprehensive as possible and does all that we would expect it to do.

7.28 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): May I start by not only giving our sympathy to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for losing his assistant, but sending our huge thanks to him and the many others who have helped us in Northern Ireland, be it through the British-Irish Parliamentary Association, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee or in other ways? A mass of people are always trying to help us get somewhere.

I welcome the Bill, although I still have doubts about various parts of it. We felt when we saw it that it was a bit of a sticking plaster, rather than a chance to have a rebirth of Stormont. I welcome the many changes that are being made, but we wait to see whether they really get there. Today, I wish to touch on a few changes that we want to see to the Bill and on some of our concerns.

When the independent reporting commission is appointed, we would like to see more people involved than just the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

Too much of what happens in Northern Ireland tends to be done by the two main parties in the Executive. We must find a different way. We could go through the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission. Whatever way we choose, we should move away from just involving the two main parties.

I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State will put the guidance in place. It is certainly necessary to have somebody outside of ourselves to help move us along, although I realise that such a task is a poisoned chalice at times and may well require the wisdom of Solomon. None the less, we do need guidance. I know that it falls on our shoulders most of the time, but, as I have long been saying, we should not leave it all to the devolved Assembly. We must have Westminster working with Stormont. We should all pull together and work together instead of things being left to Stormont when everything gets stuck.

I am really happy to see in the Bill the change from seven to 14 days to try to get a programme for government in place. We must remember that it was my hon. Friend the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) who put that idea forward when he was leader of our party. He wanted a longer period of time to be available to get Ministers chosen, but in line with an overall programme for government, which I hope will be achieved within 14 days. If there is any doubt in that regard, will the Secretary of State look at how we can get something in place to ensure that it happens? We want not Ministers working in silos but a joint programme for government well into the future.

I very much welcome everything in the Bill to do with trying to remove paramilitaries from Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist party was very much behind raising that matter to the top of the agenda during the talks. I would like the Secretary of State and the Minister to make it clear exactly what is meant by “paramilitary”. As we take the Bill forward, I am sure that that is where we will find many of our difficulties. There are many grey areas that need to be clarified. For example, will someone who knocks on doors asking for funding to help pay for the bonfires be called a paramilitary? Will someone who raises the Union flag be deemed a paramilitary? Over many years, the Union flag, which should be the flag of all of us and not offensive to anyone, has been turned by some members of the community into a sectarian flag, which it should not be. Will someone who puts up that flag be treated as a paramilitary? We need clarity, and we need to talk our way through this. One story from my patch is that members of the Boys Brigade were going to take their standards into the local church. They were prevented from taking in the Union flag by one party, which said that such action was sectarian. We need to stop that happening.

There are other matters that need clarifying. When I started off in the council, I was lucky to go to France with a group that would have been known as one of the bonfire groups from Antrim. In those days, it cost us £120,000 to clear up after the bonfires. We had 11 different community groups—others would have given them stronger titles than that—that did not talk to each other. Going away together allowed us to get everyone to work together to find ways forward and find the commonalities that existed. In time, we reduced the number of bonfires and improved most of them—not all. The next time we had

the bonfires, it cost only £40,000 to clear up. We must be absolutely clear—will such groups be deemed paramilitaries? If Members of the Legislative Assembly and others talk to such groups, will they be seen to be dealing with paramilitaries when they take the oath? We need clarity on the whole issue.

As the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) said, we need an organisation with teeth to allow us to ensure that MLAs, Ministers and others are abiding by their oaths. It is essential that we find a way of enforcing that in the future, but we must all do it together. I agree with what has been said about IPSA. We have discussed whether we should try to get IPSA into the Bill, because it is essential that we get something that works much better in Northern Ireland. Most people in Northern Ireland do not think that expenses are under control. They do not think that anyone accepts any responsibility when they have done something wrong. There is such a whiff of corruption, or of things not being right, that we must have an organisation with some sort of teeth, and IPSA seems to carry out such duties extremely well, so let us try to bring it in.

It is great to hear that there are moves for an Opposition in Northern Ireland, but we need to put one or two things into the Bill to allow us to improve how that operates—whether it is on the finance or how Committees are manned—so that we really have a proper Opposition. We must be careful about how we deal with that, but we need to work together.

I long to see things happening when it comes to legacy. I know that we all had differences, and the issues need to be dealt with quickly, but not so fast that we do not all get the chance to talk and have our say. It is vital that Northern Ireland finds a way forward that moves us away from all the legacy issues, so that we can begin to thrive and build our future together.

We have had much mention of corporation tax, but it is not the silver bullet. We must do a whole mass of other things together. As a party, we wanted the devolution of corporation tax years ago, but there were differences between the parties on how it would work, which really slowed things up. Let us get everything in place—better infrastructure, air passenger duty and rates changes—and let us work on all those issues together. I see the Bill as a start to the improvements in Northern Ireland.

7.36 pm

Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I pay tribute to the Secretary of State and the Minister for all the work that they and their teams have done to bring forward this Bill. Having been involved in much of the negotiations in the past, I can say in all honesty—we should always give credit when it is due—that the Secretary of State has gone way up in my estimation for the clear stance that she has taken on issues both in the public domain and privately around the negotiating table. She has done so with great clarity and that is something to be welcomed from a Secretary of State. She has also been ably supported by the Minister.

I pay tribute to Mark Calway, who worked for my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson). I had the pleasure of meeting him on several occasions as he took an interest in Northern Ireland. I know that my hon. Friend and his team will feel his loss very deeply, and we extend our sympathy to him and to Mark's family.

[Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson]

Tackling paramilitarism is an important element of this agreement, and it is long overdue. As a party, we have pressed time and again for the paramilitaries to leave the stage. At times I have heard their spokespersons in the media talk about their big contribution to the peace process, but they have delivered little by way of the necessary steps. For far too long, they have been begrudging about the action that the paramilitary organisations need to take. They have continued to straddle the fence between democracy and the rule of law on the one side, and continued involvement in criminality and at times, sadly, in murder on the other.

One reason for the political crisis in Northern Ireland last year was precisely to do with this continued involvement by members of paramilitary organisations in criminal activity and in carrying out murders. As the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) reminded us, those murders took place in his constituency. We need to be absolutely clear that there is no room for ambiguity, for grey areas or for straddling the fence between the rule of the law and involvement in criminality and paramilitarism. The people of Northern Ireland deserve better, which is why it is vital that we continue to pursue this agenda, and the Stormont agreement marks a significant step in taking it forward.

Lady Hermon: The right hon. Gentleman condemns paramilitarism, whatever shape or form it takes—loyalist paramilitaries as well as republican paramilitaries. In that connection, will he put on record his thanks, and the thanks of many people, to the Police Service of Northern Ireland for completing yet another search for the remains of Lisa Dorrian, who disappeared 11 years ago, and was murdered by those with loyalist paramilitary connections? Her family have never had her returned for a Christian burial, and tragically her mother died broken-hearted earlier this year. I would be grateful if the right hon. Gentleman condemned equally loyalist and republican paramilitaries.

Mr Donaldson: The hon. Lady speaks of the individual, personal and family suffering of the victims of paramilitary violence. Let me make it clear that when, as a party, we refer to paramilitarism we mean paramilitarism across the political divide. I had the pleasure of taking the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State to Lisburn to visit a community project in my constituency. We have worked hard with people who were previously involved in paramilitary activity to enable them to complete the transition to what is now purely community development work, and those communities have been transformed as a result. For example, the Old Warren in Lisburn in my constituency has been transformed as a result of the transition of people previously involved in loyalist paramilitarism to purely community development. I commend the Resurgam Trust in Lisburn and its leadership for what they have done to transform that community by enabling those people to make that transition. I assure the hon. Lady that that is precisely the kind of effort that needs to take place in Northern Ireland.

It was one of the tragedies of conflict, and our troubles in Northern Ireland, that families not only suffered the loss of a loved one but were not able to mourn properly, because their loved one's remains had not been returned

to them. The family of Lisa Dorrian are a case in point, and we hope and pray that one day they will at least have the dignity of being able to bury the remains of their loved one. I appeal to those who know where Lisa Dorrian's remains are to give that information to the police. I appeal to them on the grounds of basic Christian principles: even those involved in such wrongdoing should see that it is the right thing for a family to be able to have some degree of closure and have their loved one's remains returned to them.

The Bill makes provision for the establishment of the independent reporting commission, which we welcome. The commission will report annually on progress on ending continued paramilitary activity, and we hope that it will shine a spotlight on republican and loyalist paramilitary groups that continue to engage in criminal acts and acts of violence. That will apply in Northern Ireland, but one of the important provisions in the Bill is that it will also apply in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. In recent times, we have seen the effects of paramilitary gangster-type activity in Dublin, which is unacceptable, and we must all co-operate to ensure that such activity is brought to an end. I hope that the good people of the Republic of Ireland, who go to the polls shortly, will think long and hard about who they elect to their national Parliament and where they stand on questions such as the special criminal court and the need to bring to an end paramilitarism, gangsterism and criminality, wherever they develop and emerge.

We welcome changes to the pledge of office for Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive and, crucially, a new undertaking to be given by all Members elected to the Assembly after May that will commit them to non-violence and to supporting the rule of law. No such undertaking has been required in the past, even though an undertaking is required of councillors in local government. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is absolutely right: we need to be sure that it is not just a question of a paper exercise but that sanctions are in place so that if Members breach that undertaking they can be held to account. I assure her that we will examine the Standing Orders of the Northern Ireland Assembly to see whether such a sanction exists. If it does not, we are prepared to introduce and support an amendment to the Bill to ensure that provision is made for such a sanction.

The hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) and others have made reference to things that are not in the Bill, and it is a matter of regret that we cannot yet legislate for the provisions of the Stormont House agreement dealing with legacy matters. The Democratic Unionist party supports full implementation of the Stormont House agreement. We are doing nothing that holds back implementation of the agreement. We are all aware that implementation has not taken place because of a stand-off or impasse on the question of national security. Here I differ from the hon. Gentleman. He talked about victims, but I am interested not just in the victims of the past but in ensuring that we do not have more victims in future. When we take action that compromises the security of our people and brings into the public domain the manner in which the security forces operate to counter terrorism we put people at risk in Northern Ireland. We put lives at risk, and we create the potential for future victims in Northern Ireland, because sadly not everyone has signed up to the peace

process. Not all paramilitary organisations are on ceasefire. People out there today are targeting others—in my own constituency, in the past couple of weeks there have been two instances of prison officers having to leave their home because of threats from dissident republican organisations.

Knowledge and intelligence have, thankfully, prevented attacks from going ahead, which tells us that our security services continue to operate to prevent loss of life and prevent further victims from being created. I would say to the hon. Member for Belfast South and the Social Democratic and Labour party that, yes, we want the maximum disclosure that is available, but we also need to ensure that the security of the people we represent is protected. Yes, we want processes to be in place for innocent victims of terrorism to enable them to have access to information and justice and a degree of closure. At the same time, we must not compromise the ability of the security forces to protect the community in Northern Ireland and prevent further victims from being created in future.

On the national security issue, no democratic party should give cover to Sinn Féin on this issue, because we know that what their game is. It is about rewriting the history of the troubles. The reality is that 90% of all the killings that occurred in the troubles were carried out by paramilitary organisations. However, if we look at the media coverage, read the newspapers and look at the amount of money spent on investigations and inquests, proportionately far more of that resource goes on the 10% of deaths attributed to the state. Many of those deaths were the result of the security forces killing people who were engaged in acts of terrorism, but far more emphasis is put on those deaths than on the 90% of innocent victims murdered by paramilitary organisations.

Mr Gregory Campbell: I agree with my right hon. Friend on the 90% versus the 10%, but it now appears that in some instances where the Provisional IRA carried out atrocities there is an attempt by Sinn Féin to blame those in the security forces, the police and the Army. The abysmal audacity of some people knows no bounds, beyond even what my right hon. Friend described.

Mr Donaldson: My hon. Friend is right. We constantly hear the Sinn Féin mantra that it is not just a case of 90% versus 10% of killings, but that the state was somehow responsible for directing many of the paramilitary-related deaths. No one with any rational thought in their head will fall for that nonsense from the republican movement.

There is now an investigation resourced from outside Northern Ireland into the actions of the agent known as Stakeknife, Freddie Scappaticci from west Belfast, in which the emphasis is on the killings that he allegedly may have been involved in, but the question for me is who was directing Freddie Scappaticci? Who was giving the orders to Freddie Scappaticci to carry out the internal investigations of alleged republican informers? It was the IRA army council, some of whom, as we know, are now senior political figures in Northern Ireland—the very same people who point the finger at the Secretary of State and at the Government. However, as I said recently in a radio interview, far more fingers are pointing back in their direction when it comes to those issues.

Ian Paisley: The audacity of Sinn Féin and the IRA in this matter needs to be highlighted. It affects not only Northern Ireland cases—we have the case of Loughgall—but cases involving murders on the mainland, such as the Birmingham case. Now there is an attempt to blame the security services in England for the Birmingham bombing. It is atrocious. We have to nail this one, and nail it true.

Mr Donaldson: My hon. Friend is right. We apply the same standard to republican-related murders and loyalist-related murders. The idea that the Ulster Volunteer Force, for example, would be exonerated from the Loughinisland killings in the constituency of the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) because of allegations of collusion is just as perverse and absurd as the idea that the IRA would be exonerated from the massacres and murders that it committed in the past. The same applies on both sides.

In conclusion, we want to see progress in dealing with the legacy issues. We want to see the historical investigations unit established, with full police powers to investigate the unsolved murders. I talk to the innocent victims, and as they look on at what is happening, they feel that they are not being given a fair crack of the whip, an opportunity. We must move matters on. In the interim—I raised this before with the Secretary of State—the First Minister, Arlene Foster, has supported the call for the resources already set aside for historical investigations to be allocated to the legacy investigation unit of the PSNI so that that money does not come out of front-line policing in Northern Ireland.

The PSNI needs to continue to deal with current crime and with the current terrorist threat, so we do not want to see the police budget depleted by the continued drawing down of resource for the investigation of legacy cases. Those need to be investigated, absolutely, but we hope the Secretary of State will listen to what the Chief Constable and the First Minister have said and allow some of that resource to be freed up and transferred to the PSNI to enable it to do more to help the innocent victims of terrorism.

7.54 pm

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Like others, I welcome progress on the Bill. There are two aspects on which the Ulster Unionist party has been to the fore. The first is the continuing terrorist activity in Northern Ireland and beyond. The second, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan), is the need for more time after elections to allow negotiations on a programme for government. We hope that those two weeks will be beneficial for Northern Ireland in the next term of the Assembly and in future. I look on those as positive aspects. The extension of the time for negotiations was proposed by us as far back as 2011.

I am almost tempted to go into some topics that are not in the Bill, but perhaps what is in the Bill is enough for us to discuss. The legacy issues will need to be dealt with and there must be equality and fairness in any inquiry or investigation. That is not apparent now. For example, I understand that the PSNI legacy unit has almost 20 officers involved in the Bloody Sunday inquiries. That is fine. The problem is that there is not one PSNI officer currently working on the Enniskillen investigation, for example, so there is a huge imbalance.

[Tom Elliott]

On the commission to look into terrorist or paramilitary activities, we must consider recent history, even since the Belfast and St Andrews agreements were signed. The UDA, the UVF and loyalist paramilitary and terrorist organisations have been mentioned. They have been responsible for some brutal murders. We have just heard the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) mention Lisa Dorrian. It is a terrible affliction that her family suffers daily. I cannot imagine what it is like.

On the opposite side also, the republican movement, particularly the IRA, has been responsible for some brutal murders. Let us not forget that, as has been mentioned, the IRA and Sinn Féin are inextricably linked and they sit at the heart of Government. Think of some of the murders that have taken place—Robert McCartney, Denis Donaldson, Paul Quinn and more recently Kevin McGuigan. What strikes me about all those is not just the brutality, but the clinical way in which those murders were carried out. Such planned executions could be carried out only by an organisation with the ability of the IRA.

Let us not forget that the Chief Constable said that the IRA and the army council still exist. We need to deal with that and with the question of whether they are inextricably linked with Sinn Féin. That is a major question that will hang over the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland people for years to come. That is why there is major concern in Northern Ireland that someone who may still be a member of the IRA army council will have the privilege of appointing representatives to the commission.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is outlining the case that Sinn Féin and the IRA are one and the same. Does he agree that in all probability in the two weeks after the Assembly election that will remain the case when decisions have to be made about whether to be in the Executive or out of it?

Tom Elliott: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman. That has been the case for some time now, and it will remain the case, irrespective of what the commission comes up with. There will remain a huge question mark over some people's right to remain senior members of the Executive.

The second aspect of the Bill is the pledge of office for Ministers and the undertaking for MLAs. That is welcome, but I have major concerns about its effectiveness. The hon. Member for North Down indicated that she is concerned about how sanctions—if there are any—will be applied, and I agree with her. Whether we can do anything about that may be an issue for the Committee stage, and I do not know whether the Secretary of State will come back with any suggestions on that. However, I am not so sure whether a pledge of ministerial office or an undertaking as an Assembly Member will make much difference to people who bombed and murdered in the past. If people could do that in the past, these things are not going to make a huge difference.

The third aspect of the legislation is the commitment and the statements in the budget. There was a major logjam in the Executive for months over the financial provisions and the budget issues, and that is why it is welcome that we are trying to progress the matter.

Many Departments suffered greatly because of that blockage: health waiting lists rocketed; road and other infrastructure maintenance and development almost came to a standstill; and care for the elderly and vulnerable was greatly diminished, which everyone feels very sorry about, particularly if they are a carer and did not have help and support because of a political logjam.

Again, I come back to the issue of sanctions. We have heard about the sanctions regarding the pledge of office and the undertakings. What will be the sanction if the budget or financial undertakings are not lived up to? There does not appear to be any sanction mechanism for those who deliberately hold up the process and prevent everyone else from getting the benefit of a financial deal.

I welcome the progress that has been made, but only time will confirm whether the proposals deliver on the issues of terrorism, commitments by elected representatives and commitments on budgetary and financial resolutions.

Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman should be personally congratulated for the legal case he brought, where sanctions were imposed on someone who tweeted evil about him and the gallant organisation he was a member of—the Ulster Defence Regiment. He has demonstrated that, where there is a legal remedy, that is sometimes the best sanction.

Tom Elliott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Obviously, that is still rumbling on, but we got a sanction of some degree. I hope that the Assembly or this House can provide sanctions in this legislation. Like many others, I will await the outcomes and the outworkings of what is proposed here. As hon. Members will appreciate, I have some concerns about the outworkings of some of the proposals, and particularly about the sanctions, but I give the Bill a fair wind at this stage.

8.3 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I am delighted to participate in this Second Reading debate. I offer my condolences to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) following the bereavement of his staff member. I also offer my condolences to my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) following his family's bereavement last night.

In its generality, the Bill deals with trying to eradicate paramilitarism. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell), I want to emphasise not only my party's consistent support for political and economic stability throughout Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland, but, above all, our unequivocal opposition to all forms of paramilitarism, whether it comes from republican or loyalist paramilitaries. Paramilitarism, and what it fed and spawned, created not only instability but fear. It was like a cancer running throughout our society.

There were also other issues. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) referred to the murder of six innocent men in Loughinisland on 18 June 1994. That is a night I will never forget, because two people who were murdered that night were directly related to relatives of mine—one was an uncle and another was a cousin. In that respect, therefore, I know the character of those people, and their only political act on any occasion was to register their vote. Never by word or

deed did they undertake any form of paramilitary activity, but they died at the butt of a gun, and their bodies were strewn over a pub.

I would therefore say to the Secretary of State that her comments on 11 February were in some ways unfair, because at the moment the independent police ombudsman is undertaking, and near the completion of, another inquiry into what happened in Loughinisland on that night and why it happened. Were there elements of collusion between the then RUC and those who perpetrated those awful crimes on that night, robbing the community that I represent and, above all, that I live in of six good people and irrevocably changing our community, not because what happened moved people towards violence in any form, but because it left them in a state of fear, in a community that had never known any form of violence before? I urge the Secretary of State in that respect to be particularly careful, because her words on 11 February could be construed as trying to obfuscate that inquiry by the police ombudsman, which is near completion. That is the second inquiry, because the previous ombudsman's inquiry was inconclusive and, in many ways, could be perceived as being deliberately inconclusive.

Lady Hermon: I am listening carefully to the hon. Lady's comments, and I have huge regard for her. I would just like her to put on record this evening her gratitude to the RUC, which stood between the whole community of Northern Ireland and absolute mayhem through more than 30 years of appalling violence. Three hundred and two RUC officers paid the ultimate price with their lives. I am sure she would like to put on record her gratitude for the sacrifice and courage of the RUC through the awful years of the troubles.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. We were always opposed to the murder of members of the security forces, whether those security forces were the RUC, the UDR or the Army. We saw what that did to those people and to their families. That murder and that paramilitarism against members of the security forces was totally unacceptable; we condemned it at the time, and we will always condemn it—we are very clear about that. Let me move on to other issues.

There is a clear need to ensure that economic stability is embedded in Northern Ireland, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said when he referred to issues to do with corporation tax and the loss of jobs last week at Bombardier in the constituency of the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and other job losses. The most important thing is to ensure that existing economic stability in Northern Ireland is protected. What better way to do that, I say again, than through continued membership of the European Union, because we have a ready export market in the south of Ireland and are also able to trade with the wider Common Market? I ask the Secretary of State to reflect on her position in that respect.

Moving on to elements of the Bill, clause 1(4) deals with the independent reporting commission, to which the First Minister and Deputy First Minister can nominate two persons. I suggest that there would need to be a legislative input for the Justice Department, despite the character of the independent reporting commission. It could be argued that any Northern Ireland nominations should be made by the Executive as a collective body,

or chosen from proposals made by parties. The issues that fall to the independent reporting commission brought the parties together in September last year, because they refer directly to the murders of Gerard Davison in the first week in May last year and of Kevin McGuigan in August. Both people resided in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South.

During the negotiations—I am sure that the Secretary of State and the Minister will recall this—we in the SDLP circulated papers to the three Governments and all parties on a whole-enforcement approach and a whole-community approach on how to address the issues of paramilitarism. Despite fresh start being designed and managed to be a two-party deal, there should have been all-party work on IRC membership. How can the work and the mandate of the IRC, which includes Dublin representatives, be reconciled with Sinn Féin's approach to Tom Murphy from South Armagh? I would like to press the Secretary of State on precisely how much new moneys are to be made available to the National Crime Agency and the PSNI, when those moneys will be released, and how they will be split between the National Crime Agency and the PSNI.

Clause 2(3)(a) deals with national security, which was referred to by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley. Paramilitarism and criminality are therefore to be addressed, but unfortunately the British Government can invoke national security, and that allows for the protection of agents who have information, thereby impeding work on the resolution of many cases.

Clause 6(1) deals with institutional reform. Yes, 14 days before the appointment of Ministers is okay, but fresh start refers to a proposal that parties have to agree to go into the Executive before the programme for government is finally agreed. Have the Government contemplated any amendment to this proposition? The pledge of office for Ministers states that they must

“support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed and...support all efforts to uphold it.”

How can this be reconciled with Sinn Féin's view on the National Crime Agency? The NCA is a vehicle for the rule of law, yet in February 2015 Sinn Féin opposed a motion in the Assembly that proposed support in word and deed, and refused to endorse it at a recent meeting of the Policing Board. How does the new pledge address Sinn Féin's approach to Mr Murphy? The same applies to the pledge of office for Assembly Members.

In the Stormont House talks, and in our submissions to those talks, we have made the point time and again that capricious or divided political messages on paramilitarism exacerbate the challenges facing people trying to move community transitions and graduations away from ingrained paramilitary interests. A genuinely united political stance from all parties in the Assembly is imperative if we are to enable statutory agencies and community groups to challenge ongoing paramilitary activity, which should be condemned outright from whatever quarter it comes. For that reason, the ministerial pledge of office and the undertaking by Assembly Members are welcome, but further clarification is required.

One element of the pledge, in particular, requires further scrutiny: the reference in the pledge of office and the undertaking by MLAs to their duty

“to support those who are determined to make the transition away from paramilitarism”.

[Ms Ritchie]

Will the Secretary of State or the Minister provide some clarification on that? Rooting out paramilitarism is not an overnight process, and scope has to be allowed for transition, but that cannot apply to illegal or untoward activity by paramilitary groups, or manifest itself as respect or tolerance for different classes of paramilitary behaviour. As MPs representing Northern Ireland constituencies, we have seen many examples of paramilitary activity.

As I said in my intervention on the Secretary of State, I regret the fact that there has been no legislative addressing of the legacy issues that need to be dealt with—the victims and the past. I urge that such legislation be introduced and that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle said, it is subjected to detailed scrutiny by this House, because we owe that to all the victims and all those who have suffered so terribly as a result of such heinous violence that was never asked for and never called for.

In the outworkings of all these agreements, we must try to achieve political and economic stability, because that is what we all strive for and all want to see. For the betterment of all our constituents and all the citizens of Northern Ireland, we must ensure that social justice is provided for and that inequalities that have been inherent across the community for some years are totally addressed. We must also ensure that we see the sustaining of existing jobs and the provision of new jobs through the building up of small and medium-sized enterprises, but also jobs through foreign direct investment. I ask the Secretary of State and the Minister to work with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that this comes about.

8.18 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I join my right hon. and hon. Friends and colleagues in acknowledging the presence of the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), who is diligent as the Chair of the Select Committee. He has suffered a close personal loss in the untimely death of Mark Calway and he has the sympathy of all of us. I also acknowledge the message of sympathy from my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), which I will pass on to my sister.

This Bill takes forward aspects of what has been called the fresh start agreement. I said at the time that an undue amount of political Febreze had been attached to that particular agreement, because it was not as widely agreed as the photograph on the front of Library briefing paper for this Bill would suggest. It implies that all the parties were agreed, but we and the Alliance party have made it clear that we see most of the agreement as being between Sinn Féin, the Democratic Unionist party and the British and Irish Governments.

That does not mean that the rest of us did not make significant contributions to the discussions. My hon. Friend is right to point out that, while other parties said a lot in front of the cameras about how the issue of paramilitarism had to be brought to a head, mine was the only party to make substantive contributions, on paper, on how to progress. We suggested a whole enforcement approach, because many parties and people believed that a blind eye was being turned to different levels of

criminal activity and that bye-balls were being given to particular people. There was a feeling that the Governments were happy to allow some crime to continue, essentially on the basis that it related to personal assets. Even if those assets and criminal activities derived from former paramilitary activities and associations, they were somehow deemed not to be political any more.

When we asked the relevant authorities about those assets and activities in the past, we were told that they were being treated as personal and family issues, not as political or organisational matters. Many parties have raised that issue and it has been discussed in previous debates in this House, including by some hon. Members sitting behind me. It relates to fuel laundering, various aspects of smuggling and, indeed, environmental crime, which involves significant quantities of illegal and hazardous waste. Clearly, there are vestiges of former paramilitary associations and a hangover or nexus of certain paramilitary groups or people who were formerly associated with such groups.

Although we advocated a whole enforcement approach, I acknowledge that both Governments were adamant in the negotiations that no blind eye was being turned and that all the relevant agencies, both individually and collectively, were pursuing everything possible. The Governments accepted, however, that perhaps there needed to be even more visibility and that they needed to be more vocal. That is why the commitments emphasise the role of the cross-border taskforce and similar efforts.

We also advocated a whole community approach, because that is what is needed if the north is going to achieve a wholesome society free of all the abnormalities of paramilitary traces and the other divisions that are a hangover of the past. In fact, our paper said:

“Political parties ought to be showing coherent and consistent shared standards which recognise and repudiate nefarious paramilitary interests and involvements. This should reflect a shared approach which is about rooting out paramilitarism and its trace activities, not just singling out particular groups or given parties.

Parties should unite in adhering to a whole-community approach to achieving a wholesome community free of sectarianism, communal division and vicious vestiges of ongoing paramilitarism. A whole community approach should entail more than challenging paramilitary practices or presences in our own constituency or highlighting them in someone else’s. It should mean that we all see pernicious paramilitary activity in any corner of the north as an affront to the wholesome democratic society we should want as this generation’s legacy to the next.

Deep cleansing the spectrum of residual orbits and habits of paramilitarism should be a key dimension in any programme for cohesion, sharing and integration in a healthily united community.

The converse is also pertinent. We cannot eradicate the recurrence of, or recourse to, paramilitarism in given settings without overcoming divisions, tensions, apprehensions and grievances which paramilitaries convert to their own utility.”

In calling for that whole community approach, we posited the idea of parties making new declarations and suggested something along the lines of the Mitchell principles or the Nolan principles of public life. We wanted every party to make meaningful pledges and to adhere to clear commitments, but, as my hon. Friend has said, the Bill does not provide for that. There is no guarantee that the representatives of all the parties will unite around and adhere to any pledges. Instead, the Bill adds to the pledge of office for Ministers and creates a parallel pledge for Members of the Legislative Assembly.

Whenever there have been controversies regarding whether parties have been consorting or engaging with paramilitaries, the allegation has related not just to MLAs or Ministers, but to councillors. Are councillors not bound by the standards of the pledge in the same way as they are to their commitment to non-violence? We are debating this proposed legislation, so should it not also apply to MPs, or are they free of the standards? They apply to MLAs and to Ministers, but not to others. We need a more articulate approach than the pledges as they appear in the Bill.

The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is right to point out that there is no way of enforcing or arbitrating with regard to any dispute or controversy. That applies not just to the pledge taken by MLAs; it applies very directly to the pledge of office taken by Ministers, because there is no means of arbitrating on alleged breaches of the ministerial code. The Executive have no means of doing that. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister have still not suggested a clear way of investigating and making judgments on alleged breaches of the ministerial code. People can take each other to court alleging breaches of the ministerial code, but the Executive have no sensible, clear or credible mechanism to address the issue, even though that is what is needed.

A similar mechanism is also needed for the Assembly in order to decide whether an issue should go to the Committee on Standards and Privileges or elsewhere. It is not good enough to leave the decision to Standing Orders. The issue should be subject to a higher-order political decision, rather than be decided by the Assembly's Committee on Procedures when it considers Standing Orders. That was the mistake made many years ago in the original Northern Ireland Act 1998. The provisions around the petition of concern in paragraphs 11 to 13 of the Good Friday agreement were very particular about how limited the use of petitions of concern was to be. Petitions of concern were to be used selectively in instances where people alleged that there had been a breach, or that there was an issue of human rights or equality. A mechanism would be set up on the basis of petitions of concern to test that issue, and then things would proceed.

Unfortunately, rather than providing for what was in the Good Friday agreement, the legislation simply stated that Standing Orders would provide for the devices that were mentioned in paragraphs 11 to 13. That was never done right, which is why we have the situation that the hon. Member for Tewkesbury complained about. We have a wide open, drive-by, veto-style petition of concern, which has been used on a tit-for-tat basis and often frivolously.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman has made a strong point about the principles that should be in play in public life. Is there not a certain irony in the fact that his colleagues in the Northern Ireland Assembly have, alongside Sinn Féin, this evening signed a petition of concern to retain and enshrine religious discrimination in the selection of teachers in the Province?

Mark Durkan: My colleagues have signed a petition of concern against a current proposal. [*Interruption.*] It is a matter of trying to protect existing laws and not change them rashly before an election. The DUP has

cited that in relation to other matters. It is about defending the existing equality provisions. What happens with a petition of concern should be what was decided under the Good Friday agreement. Rather than that being the end of the matter, it should be the subject of an investigation by a specially appointed committee to see what issues of rights and equality are involved, to test those issues and to allow the matter to proceed. That is how it should have been, as per the agreement. That has been our consistent position on how petitions of concern should properly be dealt with; they should not be abused as they have been.

I turn to the pledge of office by Ministers and the undertaking by Members of the Assembly. The commitment is confined to Ministers and Members of the Assembly, and does not extend to other party politicians. In addition, the pledge of office requires Ministers "to work collectively with the other members of the Executive Committee to achieve a society free of paramilitarism".

I would hope that the Ministers' commitment would extend much further than simply to working with their ministerial colleagues. Similarly, the commitment of Assembly Members should extend further than just to working with their Assembly colleagues.

There is also the question of what some of the terms mean. The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) was right to point out the final sub-pledge in the pledge of office by Ministers and the undertaking by Assembly Members, which is

"to accept no authority, direction or control on my political activities other than my democratic mandate alongside my own personal and party judgment".

In the same pledge of office, Ministers pledge to be bound by decisions of the Assembly and the Executive Committee. The final sub-pledge appears to contradict that, so there is potential tension there. In addition, if we fill the gap that the hon. Member for North Down mentioned by creating clear standards and sanctions, people will have to accept some trammelling of their political conduct, because they will be listening to others as to what the due standards of behaviour and engagement should be. I think that there is a problem, which the hon. Member for Gedling was right to identify.

I want to take up the point that my hon. Friend the Member for South Down mentioned about the second to last of the sub-pledges, which is

"to support those who are determined to make the transition away from paramilitarism".

That might seem to be fair enough as a general statement of support, but what does it mean in practice? Are there potential tensions between that and other parts of the pledge, such as the commitment

"to challenge paramilitary attempts to control communities" and

"to challenge all paramilitary activity and associated criminality"?

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) earlier questioned whether some of the former paramilitary personalities who have talked a lot about their positive contribution to the peace process have been more laggardly in relation to certain standards and practices, and whether they have turned a blind eye to certain things.

The question therefore arises of whether or not, when we criticise or challenge such people, we will be accused of not supporting those who are determined to

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make the transition away from paramilitarism. Many people use as a justification for their demands for funding for particular schemes—jobs for the boys, set-ups and all the rest of those things—that they are all about weaning people away from paramilitarism. Other people in the community sometimes challenge that by questioning why they were not interviewed for posts that had become available in community organisations or whatever, while other people were interviewed. We need to look at such issues.

We should remember the very glaring example involving my hon. Friend the Member for South Down. When she was a Minister, she decided to cease her Department's funding of the conflict transformation initiative because the Chief Constable and other senior police officers made it very clear that those in the Ulster Defence Association, which was essentially funded and supported by the conflict transformation initiative, were up to their necks in a series of high-profile crimes. The Chief Constable made that clear, and high-profile criminal activity was taking place at the time. My hon. Friend brought that to the Executive, which told her she had to decide because it was a matter for her Department. However, when she made her decision, they changed their ideas. Members of other parties said, "Oh, no. The conflict transformation initiative is supporting people who are trying to make the transition away from paramilitarism," while as far as others were concerned, the money was going to support and indulge people who were up to their necks in crime at that time. Which was it?

There are potential tensions in how any of us might interpret the pledge and the undertaking in clauses 7 and 8. We could take them in very different directions, so work is needed to refine them and define them better. We must also ensure that somebody else can arbitrate, because otherwise there will be a lot of arguments between the parties on such issues. The one thing we do not want is for parties to end up arguing with each other about who opposes aspects of paramilitarism either now or historically. The more united and coherent the parties can be seen to be, the better.

We want to make sure that that applies at all levels to resolve many of the existing issues. If there are controversies about party politicians turning up at particular events or protests that paramilitaries are also attending, we need to be able to deal with such issues. We must ensure that the pledge governs what happens when there are other controversies, such as the naming of the play park that has often been mentioned in this Chamber. It should be clear that we have an absolutely coherent pledge relating to paramilitary practices, either historical or current, and that we all have the same yardstick. That would provide protection for all individual politicians put under pressure at community level to get involved in this, that or the other, or to lend their presence to an event. A proper, articulate and robust pledge could give us a lot in that respect.

There are other issues about the Bill that I want to mention, before I touch on what is not in it. As hon. Members have said, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will appoint members of the independent reporting commission. In the fresh start agreement the reference was to the Executive, but the Bill makes

it clear and explicit that the power lies with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I share the view of other hon. Members that that needs to be the subject of wider consideration and consultation. There are also issues to consider about the Secretary of State's powers in respect of the commission. The fact that the Secretary of State will be in charge of defining and possibly changing many interpretations means that more work and consideration is needed.

I want to make a few points about clause 9, which is about draft budgets. The Government say they have included the clause because they want to ensure greater transparency and sustainability in relation to the budget. I am all for transparency in budgets, as I was when I had the job of the Minister of Finance and Personnel. In various talks, the Social Democratic and Labour party has advocated going much further on budget transparency. As well as designing the whole procedure for a fairly transparent process of draft budgets that are fully considered in the Assembly, open to public consultation and then subject to the revised budget procedure, we have advocated in various talks, going right back to Leeds castle, the idea that after the revised budget is approved by the Assembly, each departmental Minister should, within a number of weeks, make a statement about their own spending plan and be fully answerable to the Assembly on how they will deliver it. We thought that that would add to the transparency, but it was not to the taste of many of the parties that were talking a lot about transparency. I remember Peter Robinson telling me, "We don't want that much transparency—that would be just too much." I think there should be transparency in how the Assembly follows up on budgets.

Under clause 9, a statement will be laid before the Assembly about the amount of UK funding to be allocated. Will the Secretary of State consider accepting an amendment to take that further by saying that the statement should specify exactly how the Northern Ireland Barnett allocation was calculated? That would allow people in the Assembly, and Members here, to see exactly how the spending amount for Northern Ireland had been determined on the basis of spending commitments here and, possibly, on the basis of legislation and legislative requirements that had gone through this place. We would be able to see whether the two correlated.

A key argument that the Scottish National party and my party made in relation to English votes for English laws was that England-only or England and Wales-only legislation that goes through this place will inform the spending plans for England or England and Wales, and will, in turn, be factored into the Barnett formula. Therefore, let us have transparency. The Government tried to tell us that no legislation has those sorts of spending consequences. That is funny, because the same Government usually say, when they reject amendments to Bills, that they are doing so because there would be budgetary consequences. So they will not take amendments to legislation because there would be budgetary consequences, but with English votes for English laws they pretend that legislation does not have budgetary consequences.

The Government might be right, or we might be right. The way to prove who is right and to establish the facts in the future is to take the transparency provision a bit further. It should not be hard to colour in the budget statement a bit more. Rather than being just a

brief outline statement, it should be well coloured in, whether in respect of the draft budget or the subsequent statement that comes with the revised budget. If people want transparency, that would be a good addition to the Bill.

There is a question over whether one intention behind the statement is that it can be used, in effect, as a budget cap. The Government say that it is about transparency and sustainability. However, when the Corporation Tax (Northern Ireland) Bill was debated, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury said that the switch-on power would be activated only when the Treasury was satisfied that there was a balanced and sustainable budget. Some of us asked in the Bill Committee whether the Treasury would use that power to make a judgment on the spending plans of the Executive in relation to other matters, such as student finance, water charges or prescription charges. After all, the Treasury was using the Assembly's failure to pass the welfare reform legislation to make the judgment that there was not a balanced and sustainable budget. The Financial Secretary said, "We will judge a budget on the sum of its parts." He did not rule out the Government using the power to involve themselves in those other matters.

One reason why I welcome the provisions of clause 9 on draft budgets is that they settle a point that arose after the Assembly budget in 2008, when Peter Robinson was the Minister for Finance and Personnel. We tried to amend that budget and the programme for government, and we voted against aspects of it. A few months later, Peter Robinson announced that because the budget had contained indicative figures for 2009 and 2010, draft budgets did not need to be tabled before the Assembly in the subsequent years. The procedures that were laid down in the 1998 Act were clearly predicated on an annual financial exercise, but he said that he had received legal advice that the requirement for that exercise before each financial year had been discharged by covering the figures for all three years in the 2008 budget.

We challenged that at the time and took it to the Speaker of the Assembly. Unfortunately, he did not rule but said it was up to us to make a legal challenge. The flaky advice given by Peter Robinson was followed by that of his successor as Minister of Finance and Personnel, the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds), who said that the draft budget exercise was not needed. Clause 9 is clear that it will be an annual exercise. There is absolutely no ambiguity or doubt in how it is framed: it is an annual exercise. A draft budget has to be tabled and debated fully every year, with an additional statement made ahead of it. We are glad that that is set out in the Bill. It may restore the Assembly's role in transparency, which needs to be amplified. The Assembly should be doing much more scrutiny of budgets and spending; that should not just be left to bodies outside the Assembly.

Members have raised issues not covered in the Bill, and the Secretary of State, in her opening remarks, addressed issues relating to legacy. Like my colleagues, I regret that, rather than our ending up with an all-party agreement, welfare reform was agreed by the three amigos of Sinn Féin, the Tories and the DUP—the austerity alliance. This Bill is now being brought forward, and we await the legacy legislation. It is important that it is not rushed. It is also important that we give some issues full consideration again. I recognise that the Secretary of State thinks the measure of agreement

apparent around the table at Stormont House was the highest degree of agreement there has been. I would make the point, however, that Eames-Bradley offered a much better prospectus for dealing with the past. So did the Haass proposals, although not as good as Eames-Bradley. They were watered down in the Stormont House agreement, and they have been watered down further in a number of respects.

Victims' groups have their own concerns, upsets and apprehensions about some of the issues involved. I ask them, and all parties, to consider all the issues in the round, not least with respect to the potential to deal with what have now been called "thematics". It is hugely important that the historical investigations units is set up to undertake the work formerly done by the Historical Enquiries Team and the work on the past done by the police ombudsman, but we should recognise that the HIU will be confined to looking at killings. We should also recognise that it will work, a bit like the HET, on the basis of reports being provided to the families. Those reports will then be treated as the private property of the families.

Many cases, however, are linked. There are wider patterns, themes and issues at stake, not all of which relate to killings, and many of them need to be scrutinised and given an airing. In many ways, we think that would help to answer some of the questions put by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley. He says that there is an unbalanced approach to the past, and that those who are seeking the truth and want the past to be investigated are concentrating entirely on what the state did and not on what paramilitary actors did. The whole question of thematics and patterns in those investigations could lead to more balance, which is why we in the SDLP in particular put such emphasis on that.

I recall that in the Haass negotiations, Richard Haass himself replied to points that the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley made about a failed market in relation to the past, whereby people with the means and the motives were pursuing the aspects of the past that interested them, while others were being left aside. He argued that thematics was one way of evening the situation up and ensuring that other pictures and other concerns were looked at.

Lady Hermon: Before the hon. Gentleman concludes his remarks—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Despite the noises off, I want to take this opportunity to express on behalf of my colleagues and friends how very sorry we are to hear that he has had a bereavement in his extended family. We would be most grateful if he would offer to his sister our sympathy and support at a time when her partner was tragically killed in a traffic accident last night. We are very sorry indeed that death has visited her door and the hon. Gentleman's door at such an untimely stage of life.

Mark Durkan: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind condolences, which I will certainly pass on. I accept them in the spirit in which she has shared them—not just on her own behalf but on behalf of her colleagues as well. Of course, whenever we experience the shock of death like that, it comes as a throwback. I did not know what had happened when I spotted the tapes across the road and the police action that was going on; it looked like a security operation that would have been familiar to so many of us down the years. In talking to the police

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at the scene, I had memories of other occasions, which brought to mind once again the position that we are all talking about, from our different party stances, when we deal with the concerns of victims and survivors about the past. This is why we need to give the issue full consideration now.

When the legacy legislation comes forward, we must ensure that it is going to be fit for the needs and purposes of victims and survivors. We must listen to them, and think a little more about what they say. I hope that the sort of consensus that the Secretary of State says she wants to build will not be one in which she just tries to square things off between herself and one or two other parties. It must be done much more widely.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) has said, we will bring forward amendments on some of the issues that I have mentioned, in an attempt to proof and improve the Bill. We are obviously not opposed to its passage, because we need the changes that it makes, for instance to the timeline for the appointment of Ministers, and we need to allow a programme for government to be aired and shared before Ministers are appointed. If that is to happen in time for the mandate of the next Assembly, the Bill will have to go through. We are certainly not throwing any spanners in the works in respect of the timing, but we want to try to improve the Bill and make good some of the gaps and wrinkles in it.

Even in respect of the limited things the Bill does, we think more could have been done. Why should the First Minister and Deputy First Minister remain the singular appointments of two parties? Why not revert to the original Good Friday agreement principle of electing the First Minister and Deputy First Minister? Sinn Féin and the DUP no longer have a problem in going through the Lobbies together. They could not do so originally in 2007 when devolution was restored, which is why the whole system of appointing the First and Deputy First Minister had to be changed, but now that they can do that and now that they are happy to be an axis and be in a power pact, there is absolutely no reason why they should not. The First and Deputy First Ministers should be mandated by the Assembly. We have tried to secure such an amendment to other Bills. I do not know whether we will try it with this Bill, because we may concentrate more on the matters that are in it than those that are not.

8.54 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Second Reading debates are often described as timely, well-informed and apposite, and occasionally that is true. Tonight we have heard an excellent Second Reading debate, featuring first-class contributions from all corners of the Chamber.

Let me associate myself, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), with the expressions of sympathy for the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on the death of Mark Calway, whom many of us knew. The hon. Gentleman has sustained that loss with great forbearance and courage, and he has the sympathy of the House, as has the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) for a family bereavement that I hope we can all bear with him, while expressing our sympathy and condolences.

One constant theme ran throughout tonight's debate, and I am delighted to say that, for once on these occasions, it was a theme of optimism. This was a serious and a sober debate, but at every stage there was that chink of light, that chance of hope, that good news, and that commitment to a better, shared future. That is what we heard from Members of every party, and I think it was one of the most important things that we heard.

The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) observed—rather flatteringly, I suppose—that we were represented more in quality than in quantity tonight, but many more people beyond the Chamber are watching us tonight and following our deliberations, and many will be noting, with admiration and gratitude, that we are moving on in Northern Ireland: moving on to a better and a shared future. This may not be the most important piece of legislation that has ever been dealt with on the Floor of the House, but it is an essential, crucial building block in that wall, that architecture, that structure of the peaceful Northern Ireland to which we all aspire. I have been greatly impressed by the quality, and the determination, of the comments that have been made tonight.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock)—above and beyond the call of duty—presented herself on the Front Bench tonight despite suffering from something approaching laryngitis. May I suggest a certain marvellous distillation? It is available both in Ireland and in Scotland—although we tend to spell it correctly in Ireland—and it is available to the hon. Lady on request. Whether she has already been able to avail herself of a small nip I cannot say, but I can say that, as a prophylactic against such throat conditions, it is admirable and well recommended. It is also a very, very powerful curative factor.

The right hon. Member for Belfast North rightly said that this was only part of the implementation of the Stormont House agreement. Throughout his speech and others, we were privileged—we were almost blessed—to hear some extraordinarily incisive interventions from the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), although I have to say that her suggestion that the IPISA empire should be extended to Northern Ireland is a tad controversial. We may need to discuss it at some later stage.

I also want to associate myself, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, with the right hon. Gentleman's comments about Peter Robinson. We do not give people enough credit on the Floor of the House for the work that they do. People often achieve great things and then move off the stage—perhaps to return; who knows?—and sometimes we neglect to thank and give credit to them. Not for the first time, the right hon. Gentleman did absolutely the right thing, and I think that all Members will wish to associate themselves with his comments.

We heard from the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) about how things have moved on from the days of the bonfires, and we heard an extraordinarily sobering—as if sobering were needed—comment from the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson). Sometimes, when we debate Northern Ireland business on the Floor of the House, we forget the full scale and extent of the seriousness of the subject that we are debating. The right hon. Gentleman referred to the deaths—more than 3,600—that occurred during

the troubles, but let it never be forgotten that more people have died by their own hand since the Good Friday agreement than died during the troubles. It is that serious; it is that sobering. The work that we do here today must always be done in the context of the facts, the realities, of the existence—still—of a legacy that is so horrific that it is sometimes almost impossible to absorb its full strength. Those suicide figures, which are very seldom publicised, are utterly bone-chilling. Every time any of us feel that we are somehow flagging in our determination to drive forward the peace process in Northern Ireland, we must never forget that it did not end with the Good Friday agreement and that the problems still exist today.

We heard a wonderful speech, not for the first time, from the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie). Having considered her comments at great length, I have decided that, yes, I agree with her that I think we should certainly stay in the EU for many reasons. She was so right yet again to refer to the troubles and the victims.

It is interesting that we strayed far and wide, and occasionally we pushed the envelope of direct relevance, and certainly when we did move out, particularly in a wide-ranging, horizon-scanning speech by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), we trespassed in some of the byways and burreens of the debate which I had not anticipated we would be discussing. However, in one of the other interventions of the hon. Member for North Down, she referred to clause 8 and particularly the proposed new section 40A on the undertaking by members. I say to the House, and particularly the Secretary of State, that I do not think we have heard the last of this. I appreciate that it is Stormont business, but it is legislation on the Floor of this House today and it will be legislation in Committee stage on the Floor of this House. I suspect that clause 8, and particularly proposed new section 40A (1)(b), will come back to us to be discussed later.

This is one of the very few Northern Ireland debates that has not been blessed by a pithy and apposite contribution from either the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) or the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), and I confess to a feeling of some frustration and sadness, particularly as I enjoyed the company of both hon. Gentlemen in what was a cracking good night in the Elim Pentecostal church hall in Ards the week before last, where I have to say the orange juice flowed like—well, it flowed like orange juice. We had an absolutely brilliant evening, showing that we did not need artificial stimulation and there exists in the heart of Ards a wonderful community which I had not previously been that much aware of. But it was such a pleasure to actually be able to be speaking while both of them sat and had to listen.

This has been an excellent Second Reading debate and we will move into Committee next week. There will be more discussion, but let us not forget what I said right at the beginning: the leitmotif throughout this whole debate—the one consistent golden thread that has run through it—is a golden thread of optimism, and I give credit to every single person who has participated in the debate here tonight and so many of those outside this Chamber who have contributed. I look forward to the full implementation of the fresh start agreement and the Stormont House agreement as another step on the road to that shared peaceful future to which we all aspire.

9.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Ben Wallace): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who in every debate is optimistic and positive, and it is especially welcome that in what is, effectively, another stage of the Stormont House agreement and the fresh start agreement, we find ourselves in this Second Reading with the full support of Her Majesty's Opposition. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and all those on the Opposition Front Bench for their continued support for making sure that we move Northern Ireland onwards to normalisation and ensure any bumps in the road that we have experienced are sorted out to allow the Northern Ireland political settlement to bed in and move forward so that the people there can take hold of the opportunities on offer.

With the leave of the House, I would like to respond to some of the points raised in the debate. I reiterate the importance of this Bill in the implementation of November's fresh start agreement as a whole, as well as of the specific provisions, including those that give effect to the independent reporting commission and increase fiscal transparency in the Executive's budget-setting process.

Paramilitary activity has been a blight on Northern Ireland society and is an issue which the UK Government, the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive will tackle together. The measures in this Bill will create an independent body that will report on the progress made towards ending paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland once and for all.

The draft budget measure achieves what was set out in the fresh start agreement, and it will ensure that the Executive cannot consider spending plans that exceed the block grant allocated from the Treasury.

Let me respond to some points raised by hon. Members. I join others in sending condolences to the family of Mark Calway, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) understands that we are here to support him and the family of Mark Calway in their loss. We are also incredibly grateful for the forensic support—if I can put it that way—that his Committee gives to Northern Ireland politics and Government policy. We know that pragmatic, forensic examination of our policies, and those of other people, will help build that trust in Northern Ireland.

I say to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) that as a former Member of the Scottish Parliament I know the internal workings of devolution, and some measures in the Bill that the SNP supports would not necessarily have been right for it in Scotland. However, I know that the SNP supports such measures for the reasons that the hon. Lady eloquently articulated, which are to try to move Northern Ireland forward and achieve a settlement that will allow people to put the troubles behind them.

I pay tribute to the DUP. The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) articulated his tribute to the former First Minister, without whose actions we would not be discussing this Bill today, or indeed the previous Bill. I am grateful for the support that the DUP has given to the Government throughout this process, to try to resolve some of the issues that led to that impasse last year.

[Mr Ben Wallace]

I am also grateful for the positive attitude and speeches by DUP Members, and the support that they have provided to allow an LCM to be put in place swiftly. Such determination by the Executive and the First Minister to deal with those issues in Stormont means that I am incredibly optimistic about Northern Ireland and how it will progress, and I hope that the bumps that appeared in the road when I was first appointed to this post are put behind us so that we move forward, deal with the paramilitary past, and hopefully stop such things in the future. We must also grasp with both hands the opportunities and economic challenges that are presented.

I hear the issues about legacy raised by the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell), and we all want to solve them. In the past few weeks and months my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, the Minister for the Armed Forces and I met the Lord Chief Justice, and the Minister of Justice, the Deputy First Minister and the First Minister of Northern Ireland. Everyone is united in trying to get to a position where we can deal with the legacy of the past and move forward, and the Treasury has agreed to a package of funding—£150 million—to do that. However, we cannot just impose that £150 million on an unreformed system. We are all trying to work together to produce a long-term solution, not a short-term solution.

The phrase “national security” is often bandied about as if somehow it is being used as an unreasonable block on progress. Throughout the troubles, informers, neighbours, workmates, and ordinary members of the public helped the security forces against people who intimidated their own communities. It was not just informers; it was everybody. It was people who did not agree with violence. They might not have been Unionists; they might have been nationalists. Not only do those people deserve our protection, but we have a duty to protect them. Without their information and helpful tip-offs, without the confidentiality hotline being used, and without people in the heart of those communities saying, “We don’t stand for violence and we want an end to paramilitary bullying”, we would not have reached the end of the troubles. When people bandy around the phrase “national security” as some throwaway line, we should remember that at the heart of this is the need to protect those people and provide the duty of protection that we owe them. Without them, more blood would have been shed on the streets of Northern Ireland, and we should not forget the role that they played.

Mark Durkan: Does the Minister agree that when investigating the past, the police ombudsman has always respected such matters fully? It has never breached or compromised anybody’s interest in that regard, so surely others could be trusted to adhere to the same standard?

Mr Wallace: Everyone is entrusted with the powers that they are granted. National security does not just cover the actions of the PSNI; it covers the actions of the security services and of a range of people involved in trying to ensure that our society is safe and secure. We should remember that national security is not taken lightly. It is open to scrutiny by our Intelligence and Security Committee in this House, by the ombudsman and by the courts. The coroner and the judges often make the final decisions on many of these issues and

they see the full facts, so it is important to remember that national security is about protecting life and people.

The hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) is absolutely right about the financial provisions. To enable a stable and secure budget to go forward, it is incredibly important to allow everyone in the Assembly to have a role in producing a budget and delivering services for better governance and better services for the people in Northern Ireland. The extension from seven to 14 days for the appointment of Ministers is absolutely a good example of making Government work better. We are delighted that as a Government we can ensure that that is put in place.

Let me reply to the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) on the definition of paramilitary and paramilitary activity. In our view, that should be left to the commission to decide. It would be hard in a piece of primary legislation to prescribe—and it is the Government’s view that it is not for us to do so—how the four commissioners and the commission should look at paramilitary activity.

I hear the comments made by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) about paramilitaries leaving the stage. When I hear that comment, I often think I would not like to be in the green room at that time. There is no place for paramilitaries in Northern Ireland, and there never has been. We must make sure that there never is in the future.

I welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s support for the Bill and his observations. Of course, the independent reporting commission will also cover paramilitary activity in the south, in Ireland, and that is incredibly important. I know that the people of Ireland will take note of that. The Garda, who have been incredibly supportive over the years in ensuring that cross-border activity is countered, know that all this will be effective between the north and the south, which is something that we will focus on.

The right hon. Gentleman made a powerful point, and it is important that we should be clear about it. It was INLA, IPLO, the IRA, the UVF, the Red Hand Commando and the UDA that killed innocent people on the streets of Northern Ireland and on the mainland of the United Kingdom. No amount of innuendos, or selective leaks and salacious allegations, can change that fact. It does not wash away their guilt by trying to move it on. The narrative that has been growing is very dangerous for the history of Northern Ireland, because the reality is that it was those groups that chose to go out on nights and kill people. It was those groups that planted the bombs. We will not let the alternative narrative be planted that somehow somebody else caused it and that they were therefore not guilty of what they did. We hear that, loud and clear.

Mark Durkan: On that basis, given that these organisations need to be rightly blamed and indicted for what they did, does the Minister now regret that the British Government for so long maintained the UDA’s status as a legal organisation and consistently refused to proscribe it?

Mr Wallace: If memory serves, the UDA was proscribed in 1992. I was not in this House and I was not privy to the work of Government. In fact, in 1992 I was walking around west Belfast. As for the idea that I can condemn or support the ruling, all I know is that when I was

serving in Northern Ireland, I was grateful that the UDA was proscribed. I was grateful that the UVF was proscribed, and the Red Hand Commando. Any paramilitary organisation should be proscribed. Not only should any organisation that uses fear, terror and bullying be proscribed, but the people who take part should be convicted.

To the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) I say that we in this House should not forget the SDLP's long-standing opposition to paramilitary intimidation. Very often, the SDLP bore the brunt of that intimidation. All the parties in this House have experienced at first hand intimidation by paramilitaries, either within the communities that they represented or in the neighbouring communities that sought to keep them out. I pay tribute to that long-standing commitment to peace and the democratic process. We do not forget that, but I say again that we should not take the issues of national security lightly.

On the legacy issues, as I have said earlier, all of us are trying our best. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regularly has meetings with the victims community to make sure they feel we are doing our best. We are going to get there. We are going to try to resolve this, and that will happen—we hope—as soon as we can all get agreement.

Vernon Coaker: May I just press the Minister once more on this issue? He mentions dealing with the legacy of the past. I asked the Secretary of State, but I want to be clear about this because a number of questions have arisen throughout this interesting and good debate. Will the Minister and the Secretary of State look again at releasing some of the funding that the Treasury and the Government have put aside for dealing with legacy issues to fund the PSNI and the coroner service to deal with some of these issues which were supposed to be dealt with by other institutions? Because of the inability to come to an agreement, the PSNI and the coroner service have been left to deal with them but not been given the resources to tackle them. Will the Minister re-examine that?

Mr Wallace: Absolutely, we will support any measures that deal with the legacy, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said. We cannot just release the money; we need all the actors on the stage to produce the solution. We need the victims, the PSNI, the courts, the Lord Chief Justice and the Executive to support the solution. If we were just to release money but nobody else was supporting the schemes or the coroners' courts changes, for example, we would not necessarily solve the issue. We will look with all seriousness and all support at any proposals to solve the legacy issues.

The good news is that we have the Treasury's agreement for the sum in principle, which is half the battle, as anybody who has ever been in government will know—£150 million is there. That means that the gap between getting the money and delivering it is simply a matter of getting an agreement between all the significant stakeholders in Northern Ireland. We are all determined to do that and it is one of our priorities. We are all trying to get there and we will work with all parties in Northern Ireland to try to do it.

Ms Ritchie: I referred to the split of moneys between the National Crime Agency and the PSNI. Would it be possible for the Minister to follow that up in writing to me?

Mr Wallace: I thank the hon. Lady for reminding me of something: £28 million has been allocated for tackling paramilitary activity. As far as I understand it, how that is divided is an operational decision about who needs it and where it should go. That sum has been allocated, and we think it is a step in the right direction in tackling paramilitary activity. If there is any more to tell her, I will certainly write to her.

In closing, I wish to remind the House that this Bill has the support of the Northern Ireland Executive. It will deliver on the UK Government's commitment to the fresh start agreement and it plays a significant part in our efforts to support a stable and workable devolution settlement in Northern Ireland. I urge the House to support the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

NORTHERN IRELAND (STORMONT AGREEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill:

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings at one day's sitting

2. Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration, any proceedings in legislative grand committee and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at one day's sitting in accordance with the following provisions of this Order.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to Third Reading

3. Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings on Third Reading

4. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

Programming committee

5. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to other proceedings up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

6. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—(*Simon Kirby.*)

Question agreed to.

NORTHERN IRELAND (STORMONT AGREEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN) BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No.52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State; and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Simon Kirby.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

REFERENDUMS

That the draft European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 25 January, be approved.—(*Simon Kirby.*)

Question agreed to.

EDUCATION

Ordered,

That Caroline Nokes be discharged from the Education Committee and William Wragg be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

JOINT COMMITTEE ON STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS

Ordered,

That Tom Blenkinsop be discharged from the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and Vicky Foxcroft be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Emergency Tug Vessels (West Coast of Scotland)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Simon Kirby.)

9.20 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): We have heard much today in the debate on our future in or out of the European Union about the issue of our security. It is right that Parliament takes seriously its security responsibilities. As part of this debate, we need to take seriously our responsibilities for the marine environment.

It is worth recapping why we had emergency towing vessels. They were a response to Lord Donaldson's 1994 report following the Braer oil spill off the coast of Shetland. Following that disaster, 86,000 tonnes of oil were released into the North sea. We got lucky to some extent in that the oil was largely dispersed. In other areas and in other circumstances, such an oil spill could be devastating. The ships were put in place to protect human and marine life following the Braer experience. It was right in 1994, and it remains right today. The desire to provide marine safety cannot come at the expense of a penny-pinching Government walking away from their responsibilities. It is a responsibility of this Government to maintain that protection.

The UK Government kept telling us during the Scottish referendum that we were better together. How can there be any shred of validity in that statement if the Government do not take seriously our marine safety? What price better together then? Our safety cannot be traded away on the desire to save costs in Westminster. If the Government compromise on safety, they compromise their legitimacy to govern.

In 2011, the UK Government announced the removal of the vessels, although there was a subsequent agreement to retain one vessel in Orkney. That vessel is now under threat of being removed next month. Sir Alan Massey, the chief executive officer of the Marine and Coastguard Agency, said in Edinburgh two weeks ago that, following a formal risk assessment, the removal of the ETV for the far north and west was unacceptable. I agree with Sir Alan. It was also unacceptable to remove the Stornoway vessel. If there is a risk in the Northern Isles, there is a risk in the west. Put simply, the Northern Isles vessel is too far away to respond quickly enough to any incidents off the west of Scotland.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. As one of the five Scottish National party Members for the highlands and islands, he will of course be aware that we have repeatedly called on the Government to address the maritime safety deficit caused by the removal of the Stornoway vessel in 2010-11. Does he agree that this cannot be done properly by having a single ETV based in Orkney alone? It is deeply worrying that the only existing ETV in Kirkwall is currently under threat. The position that we find ourselves in—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. The hon. Gentleman's intervention is very long. If Members keep their interventions brief, more Members can come in.

Brendan O'Hara: My last point is that the coast has been left vulnerable. Does my hon. Friend believe that the removal of the ETV at Kirkwall would be utterly unthinkable?

Ian Blackford: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and he is quite correct. We cannot comprehend the possible risk of the loss of the vessel in Kirkwall. It is also true that there is no way in reasonable time that that vessel based in Kirkwall can get to Argyll and Bute or indeed to large parts of my constituency. We have been placed at an unacceptable level of risk. Does the Minister agree with the chief executive of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency that the removal of the Kirkwall-based vessel is unacceptable, and will he give the House an assurance that the Government will find the necessary funds to make sure that that vessel remains in place? That is a simple question, and it requires a simple yes or no answer.

Throughout Europe, the provision of emergency towing vessels is commonplace, for example in France, Germany, Norway and the Netherlands. It is good practice to protect your marine environment and coastal communities—we should do the same. The Netherlands put in place such a capability only in April 2014 to provide protection for shipping, the marine environment and their coastal communities. Many other countries see the sense in that, so why do the UK Government not accept their responsibilities? That is all we are asking.

There has been some chatter that perhaps, just perhaps, the Orkney vessel might be saved. That would be welcome—the threat should never have been there in the first place—but it does not go far enough, as my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) said. We need the reinstatement of the second vessel. I say to the Minister, do the right thing: deliver some good news, and put the two vessels back where they should be, in the Northern and Western Isles. Show us, Minister, that the Government take our safety seriously—do not leave us exposed to the threat of environmental disaster.

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that on safety and on all the issues that you have highlighted, the UK Government need to take into account the fact that in the coming years there will be more than 200 movements of nuclear material from Dounreay, and some of that material will be transported by sea?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) continues, I remind Members that they should speak through the Chair. At the moment, Members are addressing one another directly, and I should be grateful if they addressed their comments through the Chair.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I agree with the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan). I would argue that there is a wider point, because if we had responsibility for our marine environment in Scotland we would make sure that we had ships in place to protect our coastal community. Moreover, the unbelievable threat that we face from

nuclear waste being moved by sea down the west coast of Scotland would certainly not be tolerated by an independent Scottish Government.

Let us think about the risks that we face on the west and north coasts of Scotland: extreme weather, treacherous coastlines and changing tidal patterns throughout the year. In those treacherous waters are general cargo boats and tankers, and there is even the threat of nuclear waste, as has been said. The thought of nuclear waste being transported down the west coast leaves me cold. The possibility of no emergency towing vessels being available horrifies me.

The need for such vessels was demonstrated clearly when two days after the announcement of the withdrawal of the vessels in 2011, the ship-towing vessel based at Stornoway was sent to the aid of a nuclear submarine, HMS Astute, which had run aground off Skye. We do not know whether Astute was carrying nuclear weapons—it is a moot point—but a nuclear sub colliding with the Isle of Skye was quite an incident. Who is to say such an event could not happen again? We need the security of an emergency towing vessel. I might add that the towing vessel would provide some security for us; a useless Trident nuclear submarine presents no security to the people of Scotland.

Where is the Government's responsibility to my constituents—what will happen if there is another Braer, heaven forbid? We have learned that ETVs are not a statutory responsibility of the MCA and are not a budget priority. Even so, the MCA admits there is an increased risk if ETVs are not available. One almost could not make this up: there is acceptance of risk, but here is the rub, those of us in these far-off communities, well, we can take the risk—we are expendable. That is the message from this Government. Why should the Minister care? As a local MP, I care for my communities—I will fight for my communities—and I want the Government to take responsibility. What is the point of the MCA if such provision is not a statutory responsibility? Why will the Minister not make it a statutory responsibility?

Let me deal with the issue of vessels in the constituency of Ross, Skye and Lochaber. This wanton disregard for marine safety takes place at a time when the MCA is considering an application for ship-to-ship oil transfers in the Cromarty Firth. Here again, the Government seem to be coming up short in discharging their responsibilities to consult effectively and take environmental considerations seriously. It is environmental concerns that demonstrate the need for our marine safety to be taken seriously, and our communities need the comfort of knowing that emergency towing vessels are there as part of the Government's responsibility.

The Scottish Government are responsible for marine safety yet, incredible as it sounds, we do not know whether Marine Scotland was consulted as part of the process. The application for the ship-to-ship transfer dated 5 November states that the MCA confirmed that the main consultees would be the local government authority, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage, with the appropriate wildlife non-governmental organisations. There was no mention of Marine Scotland. Why not?

That is why I tabled a question to the Minister dated 9 February, which was answered on 15 February, stating that Marine Scotland was consulted. I have not been

[*Ian Blackford*]

able to clarify whether this was the case or not. Perhaps the Minister can do so this evening. Why was Marine Scotland not listed in the consultation document? Was it consulted? In the interests of transparency, will he publish any related correspondence?

I return to the clear need for ETVs both on the west coast of Scotland and in the north. I mentioned the Donaldson report from 1994. We also had the Belton report in 1995, which stated:

“Once a ship has irreparably broken down and is drifting towards the shore tugs represent the first and only line of defence.”

Well, that is pretty clear. We also need to examine the scale of the risk. The Minister has an issue with costs.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am pleased to see in this Parliament so many attending such a debate. In the previous Parliament, before SNP Members were so numerous, there would be very few Members at a debate such as this.

The UK Government are playing fast and loose because of an event that might happen once in 25 years, once in 50 years or once in 100 years. They have no insurance policy because they are a penny-wise, pound-foolish Government who are playing fast and loose with the Scottish coastline, which my hon. Friend and I represent and care about. If the UK Government respected Scotland and genuinely thought of the UK as a family of nations, they would step up to the mark now, instead of abdicating their responsibilities.

Ian Blackford: I thank my hon. Friend for that fine intervention. I look forward to hearing the Minister answering it, as we have not had an answer yet. Five of us went to see the Minister last November. We have been waiting quite some time for this Government to take their responsibilities seriously.

As I was saying, the Minister has an issue with costs. What the Government should be doing is looking imaginatively at making ETVs multifunctional in conjunction with other Government Departments to spread costs. There are many possibilities—for example, increased lighthouse dues, port dues or MCA inspection fees, as well as deploying the ETVs on other activities. Time does not allow a full exploration of potential revenue streams, but there are many opportunities for growing income.

In a letter to me and colleagues on 17 November last year, the MCA stated that there is no formal vessel traffic management system in the Northern and Western Isles region and that no mandatory reporting requirement exists in these areas. There is a voluntary reporting scheme. I find it remarkable that in this day and age we do not know what ships and what dangerous cargoes are afloat on our waters.

Be that as it may, the voluntary scheme showed that in the Northern Isles, the Pentland firth and the Fair Isle channel there were 81 tankers and 290 general cargo vessels over a 30-day period to 9 November last year. For the Minches and west of Lewis the respective figures were 66 tankers and 202 general cargo vessels. We are not talking about the odd cargo. As my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) said, whether it is a one-in-25-year or a one-in-50-year risk or even a one-in-100-year risk, these are risks that

we cannot afford to take. That raises the issue of a mandatory reporting scheme, because we need to know exactly how many vessels are in our waters. The numbers I have given suggest that my communities need the protection that ETVs offer.

The same letter from 17 November lists the towage provided in the Northern and Western Isles since 2011. It includes, for example, an incident on 19 March 2012, when the MN *Flinterspirit* ran aground off North Uist. There is no ETV in the Western Isles, so the Orkney-based vessel was deployed, and the MN *Flinterspirit* was refloated. A month later, the Orkney ETV went to the aid of a fishing vessel that was on fire 50 miles from Orkney. On 7 April 2014, it went to the aid of MV *Norholm*, which had broken down off Cape Wrath.

More recently, the Orkney ETV went to the scene of the grounding of the MV *Lysblink Seaways* at Kilchoan, in Ardnamurchan. Interestingly, the report I have states that the location was well outside the ETV’s operational area, so there we have it: the MCA itself accepts that the vehicle in Orkney was not ideally situated to give succour to constituents in Ardnamurchan. Let us just dwell on that: the MCA concedes that the distance from Orkney is too great to offer security. If there is one thing that demonstrates the need to maintain one ETV in Orkney serving the Northern Isles and one serving the west coast, that is it. Are we just to sit back and hope for the best, or will the Government meet their responsibilities and provide security for the marine environment and our coastal communities?

Mr MacNeil: My hon. Friend asks a pertinent question. He says we do not know what boats are going up the west coast of Scotland at the moment. Actually, looking at a marine traffic app, we can see that an 11,000-tonne oil and chemical tanker is going up there just now—it is between South Uist and my hon. Friend’s home in Skye. There is no insurance policy for that boat travelling through the Minches, because of the UK Government’s negligence. He makes a salient point when he says that we do not know what is going up the west coast; in fact, we do, but the point is that the UK Government do not, because they are not looking at these apps, and they are not worried, because this is Scotland.

Ian Blackford: It is too far from Westminster. Why should they care? However, my hon. Friend makes an important point. The vessel that ran aground at Ardnamurchan—the *Lysblink Seaways*—was a general cargo vessel. Can we just stop and think for a minute about what would have happened if an oil vessel had run aground at Ardnamurchan? We should just think about the environmental damage that could have happened. We should think about the threat to the tourist industry in Ardnamurchan—this is a fragile economy that depends on tourism. We cannot accept that risk. The Government have to act to protect communities up and down the west and north coast of Scotland.

On 7 May 2015, the MV *Industrial Kennedy* broke down 94 miles north-west of Shetland and was towed to Lerwick. That and the other incidents I mentioned are just some of those in which the Orkney ETV was deployed. From my information, it appears that the ETV was deployed on 13 occasions between November 2011 and November 2015. That is a significant number of incidents. More importantly, however, we should remember that these vessels are required as an insurance policy, as my hon. Friend said.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I am just going to wind up.

Incidentally, the Costa Concordia, which was involved in a grounding with calamitous consequences in Italy, was in Orkney just before it was deployed to Italy—yet another warning of the need for an ETV.

The costs associated with these vessels are insurance against the much more significant costs to society of an environmental disaster from, for example, a significant oil spill resulting from a tanker grounding along our coastline. Providing such vessels is a price we must all pay, and I ask the Minister to respond positively this evening.

9.38 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on securing this important debate and, indeed, on having the foresight to do so on a night when the main business in the Chamber collapsed early, which will allow a few other Members to contribute. I hope other hon. Members will have something to say, because the hon. Gentleman has explained at some length the importance of this issue to our island and coastal communities.

It was not a great surprise when we heard after the autumn statement that the provision of the emergency towing vessel was no longer a priority for the MCA and the Treasury, but it was an exceptionally short-sighted decision. The extent to which the MCA has been culpable in relation to the management of this resource—this is the point I was going to make the hon. Gentleman towards the end of his speech—is demonstrated not just by the fact that we now have only one ETV in Orkney, but by the fact that the MCA has been much more reluctant to task it in recent times. The hon. Gentleman referred to the MV Nordholm, which was a work boat from a fish farming company that was owned and operated by constituents of mine. I have been in contact with them and in correspondence with Sir Alan Massey about the incident. In essence, the boat was left with the lifeboat holding it off the rocks, and it was quite some time before the MCA could be persuaded to task the tug. That is illustrative of its attitude towards emergency towing vessels.

On 10 February, the MCA, to its credit—I use the term in the loosest possible sense—held a stakeholders event in Edinburgh at which it outlined its risk assessment. It was one of the most concerning explanations that I have heard from any Government Department or agency in my 14 and a half years as a Member of Parliament. First, its risk assessment was not done in accordance with the industry standards—that is, it was not done by people independent of the agency or a panel of people but by one person, who is an employee of the MCA. When we heard about the risks that it had assessed, we found that it had drilled down, at some length and in some detail, into the question of collision. In fact, because of the volume of traffic, collision in the Minch, Pentland firth, the Fair Isle channel and elsewhere in the Western Isles or Northern Isles has never really been a problem, so the MCA assessed a risk of something that has never happened in the past while ignoring the actual risks that have been encountered in everyday situations, some of which the hon. Gentleman touched on.

The MCA looked in detail at the traffic in the Minch and Pentland firth, which not exclusively but principally consists of ferry traffic. The ferries are good, modern, well maintained vessels which, by and large, tend not to go to sea when the conditions are particularly difficult or challenging. The MCA did not even look at the tanker traffic going through Yell sound into Sullum Voe in Shetland, so the oil tankers going into Shetland that formed the basis of the need for the ETVs in the first place were not part of its risk assessment. It was a seriously deficient piece of work. For all its apparent deficiencies, it still concluded that removing Herakles, the ETV that is currently stationed there, would leave the north and north-western waters of Scotland exposed to unacceptable levels of risk. The MCA then went on to speak about the availability of alternatives. It was pretty well apparent from the discussion that followed on 10 February that it does not see where these alternatives are going to come from.

All this comes a mere seven weeks before the contract is going to end on 31 March. This is all work that, if the MCA was serious about discharging its responsibilities with regard to maritime safety, should have been done before it was prepared to offer up the removal of the ETV in the comprehensive spending review, but it was not done. Frankly, we are left with a mess. It is not the Minister's fault—the fault clearly lies in Southampton with the MCA—but it is his responsibility. I do not see how it can possibly be fixed between now and 31 March. Apparently we will go back to Edinburgh on 4 March, so we will hear what the MCA has to say at that point. Frankly, however, given the parameters it outlined to us on 10 February, I do not think we will hear anything new.

If nothing else, will the Minister please offer us a little more breathing space so that the work that should have been done thus far can be done? It would be criminally irresponsible for the Government to allow the contract to lapse on 31 March and for there to be no coverage thereafter. Concerns have been raised not just by different industries but by local authorities. If the Minister is prepared to offer us a bit more time, I hope he will agree to meet me, parliamentary colleagues and the local authorities of the Highland region, the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland, which made that direct request of the MCA on 10 February. Perhaps he will tell us whether he is prepared to do that and, even better, to hold that meeting on the isles or in the north of Scotland.

Breathing space would give us the opportunity to look again at how the contract has operated in the past. It is an expensive contract—we know that—but it is worth paying for. Given the volume of work available to tugs with the required bollard pull capacity, there is an opportunity to get a good deal for the Government and the taxpayer. The chair of the tug operators association was present at the session on 10 February, and he openly said that it was possible to secure a price for a contract that could run for five, 10 or even 15 years. That would provide good value for money and give our island and coastal communities the knowledge that we had provision and that we would not just be living from one comprehensive spending review to the next.

The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber reminded us of the genesis of the tug provision, which came about as a result of the 1995 Donaldson report. The Braer ran aground off Quendale in Shetland in 1992, and I was still dealing with the long tail of resulting cases when I

[*Mr Alistair Carmichael*]

was first elected here nine years later in 2001. It is no exaggeration to say that the lives of hundreds, possibly thousands, of people in Shetland were changed forever the night the Braer ran aground. We talk about the impact on the industries and about the economic and environmental impact, and that is absolutely true, but the human impact of such an event is absolutely phenomenal, and I just do not know how we can put a price on that.

I have seen what happens if such things are not taken seriously and are allowed to happen again. That is what happened in Galicia in the north-west corner of Spain. When the Prestige ran aground there, it was the second major oil spill in that area in 10 years. I remember visiting the area as a newly elected MP in 2002 and being absolutely horrified by the post-traumatic effect on communities that had been blighted not just once but twice.

Given the location, geography, history and background of the communities under discussion, they are among the most precious and fragile in our country. That is why, as the hon. Gentleman said, it would be unacceptable to leave them exposed to further risk in the way currently proposed.

9.49 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on securing this debate on the subject of ETVs. Only the Department for Transport could come up with a three-letter acronym for a three-letter word—tug. Let me be clear from the start that I share the hon. Gentleman’s passion for protecting the Scottish coast. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) said that I did not care about Scotland. I assure him that Scotland is every bit as much part of my country as is Yorkshire or any other part. I do care for the environment around Scotland and for the welfare of seamen on that part of our seas.

Mr MacNeil: I am grateful to the Minister for mentioning me and for giving way, as is the convention in the House. Will we see his concern and his fine words manifested not only in the retention of the ETV in the Northern Isles, but in the return of the ETV to Stornoway, in the Hebrides?

Mr Goodwill: Let me develop my argument, and I will return to that point. Scotland is not only a stunning landscape but the home of important industries such as agriculture and fishing, which are economically important to Scotland and the whole United Kingdom. Protecting the environment and safety at sea are our top priorities. The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber mentioned the Cromarty firth oil transfer licence. Marine Scotland was directly consulted on 10 December, and on 8 February, when the consultation ended, it had not responded. When it was asked whether it intended to respond, the answer was no. I hope that that clarifies that point.

Shipping has a good safety record, but we must guard against complacency, because incidents happen. The last major environmental tragedy to befall the Scottish coast was the loss of the oil tanker Braer in the early ’90s. We are very lucky that because of the seascape, much of the oil was dispersed. As a member of the European Parliament Committee on the Environment,

Public Health and Food Safety, I, like the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), visited the Galicia area and saw some of the devastation caused to the beaches, the marine environment and the marine ecosystem by the heavy oil. The oil clogged up the beaches, and it was heartbreaking to see the seabirds that were affected by it.

That was 23 years ago, and it is to the credit of the shipping industry and the skills of its seafarers that we have not had an incident on the same scale since. As we have heard, the late Lord Donaldson of Lymington conducted an extensive review of safety after the Braer incident. His report, “Safer Ships, Cleaner Seas”, was published in May 1994. It is easy to select quotes from Lord Donaldson’s excellent report. He recommended that the Government set up a system to ensure that tugs with adequate salvage capacity were available at key points around the UK’s coast. He also said that salvage was, and should remain, a primarily private sector service. That is, of course, what happens around the UK’s coast, with the exception of Scotland. The shipping industry pays directly for towage where it is required, at no cost to the public. Lord Donaldson was equally clear that the costs of pollution prevention should be met by potential polluters rather than by the Government and the public.

Mr MacNeil: The Minister’s arguments are all well and good if there are tug boats available to do that work, but what if there are no tug boats available? Where coastal communities and our coastline are at risk, a responsible Government would make sure that that capacity was there where the market and the private sector were failing. The market and the private sector are failing in that on the north and west coast of Scotland. My hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) has secured the debate because of that failure and the lack of those boats.

Mr Goodwill: If the hon. Gentleman will relax a little, I will come on to some of those points. He might find that he need not be quite as irate as he is, because I share his concerns.

The world has moved on in the more than 20 years since Lord Donaldson wrote his report, and shipping safety has moved on, too. We have seen the introduction of the new global maritime distress and safety system, electronic charts, bridge watch systems, integrated bridge navigation systems, automatic identification systems, better standards of training for seafarers, improved and more reliable ship propulsion and engine systems, and the international safety management quality code. Those have all added to the tools available to support safer navigation practice.

Ian Blackford: I agree with the Minister’s points about the improvements that have taken place, but they would still not prevent things such as the Lysblink Seaways, which ran aground on Ardnamurchan, or indeed the Costa Concordia. That is the point. Even with the improvements that have been made, there is still a risk to our communities from something like that happening—an unexpected happening, such as an oil tanker running aground. This is about how we provide such protection, even with the improvements that have taken place in the shipping industry.

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman's point is absolutely valid. I am talking about some of the other vessels that we have been able to remove from around the coast because of other factors.

There is improved automatic monitoring of ship movements from the shore, both by Her Majesty's Coastguard and by port authorities. That is why we felt it was right in 2011 to decide to withdraw the Government-funded tugs operating in the Dover strait and in the south-west approaches off Falmouth. The savings were substantial. Withdrawing the ETVs elsewhere in the UK saved the public purse approximately £32.5 million over the last spending review period. The ETV based in Orkney in the Northern Isles is funded until 31 March, at a cost of roughly £2 million to £3 million per year.

The availability of commercial tug and salvage operations in such areas persuaded us that it was no longer appropriate for the UK taxpayer to fund that provision. That decision has been borne out by the fact that commercial tows have provided assistance where that has been necessary. However, we recognised that the picture was different on the Scottish coast, where there is a lack of larger commercial tugs. One Government-funded tug has been retained since then, based at Kirkwall in the Orkneys, and can operate both to the north and to the west.

The positioning of the ETV was carefully considered and was based on the density of shipping across the Northern and Western Isles region, notably of tanker vessels; the availability of shelter during inclement weather; and the ready availability of effective logistics support. On balance, the density of shipping, particularly of tanker vessels, carried the greatest weight and predicated the stationing of the tug in and around the Orkney Islands. That provision costs the taxpayer between £2 million and £3 million annually, as I have mentioned.

Since its retention in 2011, the emergency towing vessel Herakles has been used to offer a tow just four times. The tug has been asked to stand by and ready itself for potential towage on other occasions purely as a precautionary measure. At no time has any ship needing a commercial tow failed to secure one, nor has there been any occurrence of pollution within the marine environment through a lack of a timely and effective towing service. It is therefore right that we consider whether it is appropriate for the UK taxpayer to continue to fund that provision. We have not included the provision in our current spending plans.

Mr MacNeil: In fairness to the Minister he is genuinely allowing us to have an exchange of views. However, I find his argument akin to saying, "My house was built in 1906 and it has not been on fire since, and therefore I do not need fire insurance for my house." The reality is—this is the point made by the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber in this debate—that we should have an insurance policy. The Minister is telling me that, no matter the age of my house, I do not need insurance for my house—or, in this case, coastal insurance. In that, the UK Government have been found short and very wanting.

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman is quite correct to raise the issue of risk. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland talked about the MCA looking at all potential risks. Indeed, the risk assessment by the MCA

looked at all factors, including mechanical failure, collision risk, traffic volumes and the weather, including the very severe weather that can affect that part of the world. The stakeholder meeting on 10 February scrutinised the risk assessment, and all parties agreed with the assessment, including the fact that risk levels increase without ETV provision. The MCA will carry out further refinement of the risk assessment in the light of stakeholder discussions.

Ian Blackford: I am listening very carefully to the hon. Gentleman, who is being very considerate with his time. He is identifying that there is a risk from the removal of the ETV. We already know that a grounding has taken place at Ardnamurchan. We already know that the MCA has referred to the time it took to travel to that vessel. The Orkney vessel cannot provide that degree of protection in a timely manner on the west coast. To give security to our community, we need to retain the insurance cover that many of us have mentioned. We need the vessel in Orkney, but we desperately need the vessel on the west coast. What will the Minister say if we end up with an incident at some point in the future—heaven forbid—if we could have had such an ETV to give us at least a degree of protection. That is the price we are asking the Government to pay tonight.

Mr Goodwill: I have made the point that the one vessel we have is best stationed where it is because of the risk and the type of traffic to which it can respond.

We have not made a final decision on whether this provision should continue. I have asked the MCA to consult all interested parties on two questions. First, what is the shared view on the risk of pollution off the coast of Scotland and how has that changed since 2011?

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Simon Kirby.)

Mr Goodwill: The second question is what alternative arrangements are available to maintain an appropriate towage capability that could reduce the burden on the UK taxpayer.

As we have heard, the MCA held its first consultative meeting in Edinburgh on 10 February. It was attended by the agency's chief executive, Sir Alan Massey, which demonstrates the priority the Government give to this matter. I was delighted to hear that the engagement of stakeholders and interested parties was positive and constructive.

In refining the risk assessment, there are many factors to take into account, including the density of shipping, the variety of cargoes, the size of today's ships, the scenarios in which ships may get into difficulty and, of course, the picture of available tugs and salvage solutions. The MCA's officials have gathered a great deal of additional information to add to their understanding of the current risk. It is clear, however, that the overall risk picture is similar to how it looked in 2011, when the decision was taken to retain one Government-funded tug.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I did not intend to speak in this debate, but I have heard the Government talk about risk on so many occasions

[Roger Mullin]

and it strikes me that they are being very badly briefed, because they do not seem to understand what risk means. At the very simplest, two components are being misunderstood. The first is the probability of an event occurring. To follow what my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) said, even if something might happen only once every 50 years, it could happen next week. It does not mean that we will have to wait 50 years for it to occur.

The second point, on which very little has been said, is that we must take account of the nature of the negative outcome. I would argue, as have many people, that because of the nature of shipping today and the types of cargo that are being moved, such as waste, the catastrophic nature of the negative outcome is greater than it would have been 20 or 30 years—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I know that the hon. Gentleman said that he was not going to make a speech, but if he kept his interventions a bit shorter, we would all be very grateful.

Mr Goodwill: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are acutely aware of the risk and the damage that could be caused to the environment or, indeed, the loss of life that could occur if that risk is not correctly assessed and the response correctly put in place.

The meeting on 10 February started to explore whether there might be alternative ways to provide a tug capability. Another meeting with stakeholders is scheduled for Edinburgh on 9 March. We may find that a longer-term solution rests not on one approach, but on a combination of options. I want to give the MCA time and space to work through all reasonable options with the stakeholders to find a longer-term solution. That considered thought and the development of expert advice simply cannot be achieved before the current funding ends on 31 March.

I can therefore announce to the House that I have instructed the MCA to make immediate arrangements to extend the provision of a Government-funded emergency towing vessel to mirror the current arrangement until 30 September this year. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland for making the case for that in such a positive way. The MCA and my Department will find the money for the additional provision from any underspend across our budgets. This is not additional expenditure.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: The Minister is to be congratulated on this announcement. It is clearly not the end of the story, but it is a significant act of good faith. I thank him for taking this step this evening. Will he take away from the House the message that came from the stakeholder engagement meeting on 10 February, which was that this work has to be done again and it has to be done properly? The standard and content of the risk assessment is not good enough. He has given us time. Will that time be used to do the work properly?

Mr Goodwill: I have already made the point that the level of risk has not changed substantially since previous assessments, but we do need to explore other ways in which that risk could be addressed. The point

was made about the availability of tugs because, sadly, of the demise of the North sea oil industry and other areas where we may be able to come up with something more cost-effective.

Ian Blackford: We welcome the announcement the Government have made this evening. That is the right thing to do. What I would say to the Minister, however, is that we explained what happened in Ardnamurchan. The ETV cannot get from Orkney in a reasonable time. In the light of the decision the Minister has made this evening and of the risk assessment that must take place, will he revisit the need and desire for a second vessel based in Stornoway to cover the west coast, based on a realistic understanding of risk as outlined by me, my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) and others? We cannot accept that our communities should be left at risk. This is a small price to pay. We need that insurance policy. I am grateful that the Orkney vessel is being kept on for the next six months, but please let us make sure we get a solution that protects all our communities. That means the re-establishment of a two-vessel solution for the north and the west of Scotland.

Mr Goodwill: I certainly hear what the hon. Gentleman says. The provision of the ETV and the steaming times to get to certain locations where it may be needed is something we need to address. I urge all those with an interest to seize the opportunity this extra time brings to work with the MCA to implement a longer term strategy to meet this need. I hope right hon. and hon. Members will give their encouragement for that.

As I have said in response to questions from hon. Members, the Government recognise the importance of ensuring shipping activities off the coast of Scotland remain safe.

Mr MacNeil: I am very grateful for the Government U-turn, although it is only for six months. We have concentrated a lot on pollution, but two months ago the cruise ship *Star Pride* ran aground at 6.15 am on 22 December near Isla de Coiba, Panama. In such a situation many lives are in peril. Luckily, the climate was better there. There is increased cruise traffic off the west coast of Scotland. Where are the tug boats or the security to ensure that such a situation would not turn into a human catastrophe? We talk about environmental catastrophes, but we have to be aware of human catastrophes. The Government are making a U-turn, but I hope that they carry on steaming further south and think of the Hebrides and the west coast too.

Mr Goodwill: I have already made it very clear that we have two considerations in terms of the marine environment and pollution, particularly from vessels carrying oil, but there is also the potential loss of life from vessels that cannot receive timely assistance.

I will make a final decision about whether it is right for the UK taxpayer to continue funding the emergency towing vessel provision in the light of the MCA's advice before the end of September. We look forward to colleagues giving evidence and giving their views on that consideration. I will, of course, be consulting Scottish Ministers on those options before a final decision is made. As I have said, I am happy to meet island councils to hear their ideas for the future. Indeed, I look forward to travelling north, if the diary allows and now there will be a bit

more daylight up there, to visit some of the locations
and hear at first hand from people on the ground. 10.8 pm

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 22 February 2016

JUSTICE

Grants of Probate

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): On 18 February, the Government published a consultation paper proposing new fees for applications for grants of probate.

In the spending review the Ministry of Justice was allocated £700 million investment in Her Majesty's Court and Tribunal Service ('HMCTS'). This will transform our courts and tribunals, reducing complexity in language, processes and systems; helping people reach the best resolution for them; minimising the steps that people need to go through to obtain justice; and improving access to justice. We will invest in better facilities and use technology to reduce paperwork, so that we create a courts and tribunals service fit for the modern age.

At the same time, we must reduce the burden on the taxpayer of running our courts and tribunals. In meeting our spending review settlement, all parts of the Ministry of Justice must contribute to the national effort to reduce the deficit and restore the Government's finances to surplus. The courts and tribunals service cost £1.8 billion in 2014/15, but only £700 million was received in income. This leaves a net cost to the taxpayer of around £1.1 billion in one year alone.

Our consultation on probate applications sets out reforms designed to increase income for a more sustainable courts and tribunals service and to introduce a more progressive fees regime. Probate applications are currently charged a fee of £155 if made by a solicitor and £215 if paid by an individual ("personal applications"). These fees apply to estates worth £5,000 or more. We propose raising this threshold from £5,000 to £50,000, lifting 30,000 estates out of the need to pay a probate fee altogether. The proportion of estates paying no fee would rise to 57%.

Above that threshold, we propose that the probate fee increases in line with the value of the estate. Estates worth over £50,000 but below £300,000 would see their fee rise to £300, a modest increase of £85 on the current maximum fee of £215. 84% of estates would pay £300 or nothing and 94% of estates would pay £1000 or less. The maximum fee of £20,000 would only be paid by the very wealthiest estates, worth more than £2 million. The fee would never exceed 1% of the value of the estate and in many cases it would be considerably less.

We also want to see a simpler, more streamlined process for probate applications, moving from a paper-based to an online system. This will make the probate service much easier to navigate so the experience of the bereaved is as simple and hassle-free as possible, reducing worry for executors at what is often a very difficult and distressing time, and enabling most applications to be completed online and, we hope, without expensive professional advice.

These proposals are progressive, with lower value estates lifted out of paying any fee at all and other estates only paying more as the value of the estate

increases. They are also necessary, making a significant contribution to reducing the deficit and enabling investment which will transform the courts and tribunals service.

Court fees are never popular but they are necessary if we are, as a nation, to live within our means. These proposals would raise around an additional £250 million a year, which is a critical contribution to cutting the deficit and reducing the burden on the taxpayer of running the courts tribunals.

Full details of the Government's proposals are set out in the consultation document which has published on the website at: www.gov.uk.

[HCWS541]

HM Courts and Tribunals Service

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): On 19 February the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor wrote to the Chair of the Justice Select Committee to inform him of two issues concerning Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service ('HMCTS'): one relating to Form E1 and the other relating to community penalty breach warrant processing errors.

As a result of further extensive investigations to establish the cause of the Form E error, my officials have alerted me to a further calculator problem in a past version of another form, Form E1.

Form E1 is the form that parties must use to disclose financial information in certain kinds of financial proceedings, including proceedings for financial provision for children that fall outside the statutory maintenance scheme. Form E1 is used in a much smaller number of proceedings than Form E.

This fault meant that the automatic calculator in the form calculated the wrong total for an individual's net assets by failing to deduct certain liabilities.

The investigation found the faulty formula was present in the version of Form E1 that was available on the HMCTS Form Finder website between April 2011 and March 2012.

HMCTS has conducted a search on a set of 459 cases that have a record of a financial application or a reference to Form E1 having been filed during this period. Where Form E1s were found, they were checked to see if they were the HMCTS version containing the calculator error, and if so whether the error was present. Three Form E1s have been identified as containing the calculation error.

While we are confident that the trawl has captured the vast majority of cases that could have been affected by the error, anyone concerned about their case can write to us and their case will be checked. Following the Form E error coming to light, HMCTS established a dedicated email address which people could use if they were concerned about their own case: formE@hmcts.gsi.gov.uk. Those who wish to contact us about Form E1 should use this same email address.

Although the faulty form was used in these cases, it will not necessarily have had any effect on the ultimate outcome. Form E1 is only a part of the material used by the parties and the court and is used at an early stage, so the information is often disputed or superseded by further information introduced during proceedings.

We have instructed HMCTS to write to all parties in the three cases identified. The letter will express our sincere regret, set out what happened and explain that, although Form E1 is just one part of the evidence used in their case, there remains a possibility that the error affected the final outcome.

The letter will set out options available to people involved in these cases. They may wish to do nothing, if, for example, they know that the error was corrected during the proceedings or they do not wish to re-open their cases. If they think they have been affected by this error then they can apply to the court to vary or set aside their order. My officials consulted the president of the Family Division about the court rules and procedures that would apply to such applications or for any other proceedings that might be open to the parties. My officials are also consulting the president on the development of a specific form for such applications. We will provide a link to the new form in our letter to the parties, as well as guidance on how to complete the form.

We have instructed that no court fee will be charged for making this application, and this will also be made clear in the letter from HMCTS.

The current version of Form E1 has the correct calculator functionality and we will also consider the future of Form E1 as part of our broader court reforms.

With regard to community penalty breach warrants, on Tuesday 26 January, I was alerted to an error in the processing of an individual breach warrant by HMCTS.

A community penalty breach warrant is issued when an individual has failed to attend court to answer why they have not complied with the conditions of, for example, a community or suspended sentence. In some circumstances, individuals may be remanded in custody following a breach of their order.

The effect of a breach warrant not being processed properly can be that notification that a warrant has been issued to arrest an individual is either sent late to the arresting authority or not sent at all.

Following this individual case, HMCTS immediately began an urgent investigation into whether this was an isolated incident or more widespread. Initial local checks into all 725 'live' breach warrants in the Greater Manchester area discovered that a further 51 breach warrants had been processed incorrectly. Those errors were due to processes being disappplied or ignored by specific members

of HMCTS staff in the Greater Manchester area. Immediate steps have been taken to ensure that proper procedures are now being followed in Greater Manchester and action has been taken against all members of staff identified as responsible for these errors. All of the 52 warrants have since been processed correctly and have either been actioned or are in the process of being actioned by the enforcing authority.

Given the potentially serious repercussions of breach warrants not being properly processed, HMCTS then instigated detailed and thorough investigations across the whole of England and Wales to see if the problems in Greater Manchester had also occurred elsewhere. A total of 4,054 live warrants (including those in Greater Manchester) have been checked in 200 issuing courts across the country—including every warrant issued over the last month. Those checks have identified a further 69 errors nationally, including 47 in the London region.

Investigations are now examining the reasons for error in all 69 cases outside of Greater Manchester, and are particularly focused on why a disproportionate number appear to have occurred in London.

Early findings have already made clear that the majority of the errors in London were due to a change in process and personnel that had been addressed by the end of January 2016.

Immediate detailed assurance is being carried out of local processes to ensure that all community penalty breach warrants are sent to the appropriate enforcement authority, and an in-depth audit is being carried out in London and Greater Manchester to assure their processes independently. The relevant standard operating procedures are being strengthened as a matter of urgency, and best practice that has been identified through the investigations undertaken will be shared and implemented across the country. Appropriate action will be taken in respect of all staff members who have made errors, consistent with the approach taken in Greater Manchester.

HMCTS will report to me as soon as possible on the reasons for each individual error across the country and will also recommend whether more action should be taken to the steps outlined above in order to eliminate the possibility of further errors occurring in future. These mistakes are deeply regrettably and I sincerely apologise to anyone who may have been affected.

[HCWS540]

Petitions

Monday 22 February 2016

OBSERVATIONS

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Planning and studentification (Chester)

The Humble Petition of residents of the City of Chester,

Declares that Government planning guidance requires amendment to ensure that it includes a statutory strategic studentification policy and to ensure that student accommodation demand is factored into housing assessment made as part of any emerging Strategic Local Plan; further that the Government should make clear all development options and locations concerned with delivery of amenities to meet higher education growth; further that student accommodation has been and continues to be permitted at inappropriate locations to house increasing numbers of students in the City of Chester; further that this adversely affects the working city and residential local community; further that the Local Authority and Inspectorate decisions taken to allow this accommodation undermines commitments made on the Petitioners' behalf in the recently adopted Strategic Local Plan to bring a growing West Cheshire elderly population and required future workforce into the city; further that this undermines the Government's National Planning Policy Framework commitment to protect the character of local areas and to defend people's rights to tranquillity as well as compromising delivery of required affordable and mixed residential accommodation; further that in Chester the loss of potential inner city development sites are having adverse effects; and further that in 2011 the Council voted in favour of consolidating a significant body of student intake into a single area by way of a student village solution but despite this, student accommodation is appearing in many areas in the city, causing unbalanced outcomes.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Government to make provision for legislation to ensure that local authorities sustainably manage the interests of all parties when considering where student accommodation is developed.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.—[Presented by Christian Matheson, *Official Report*, 27 January 2016; Vol. 605, c. 384.]

[P001671]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): This Government have moved away from the centralised, regulatory approach which has dominated planning in recent years and created a system which encourages local authorities and local people to take responsibility for shaping their communities. Decisions on location and type of housing should reflect local priorities expressed through the Local Plan, rather than nationally imposed rules. In this case the relevant Local Plan is Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan adopted January 2015 and the Chester One City Plan 2012-2027.

The National Planning Policy Framework states that local planning authorities should have a clear understanding of housing needs in their area. It encourages local authorities to identify the accommodation needs of different groups within the community and to plan proactively to support them. While this includes recognising the needs of students it is also important that local authorities look to plan for a mix of accommodation which would support the needs of local residents, including older people.

The Government fully support providing dedicated student accommodation. This may provide low-cost housing that takes pressure off the private rented sector, avoids potential problems of student houses in multiple occupation, and increases the overall housing stock available for local people. On 25 March 2015 the Government announced the publication of its updated planning guidance on supporting the provision of dedicated student accommodation. This can be found at:

<http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/blog/guidance/housing-and-economic-development-needs-assessments/methodology-assessing-housing-need>

The Government fully understand that a high concentration of houses in multiple occupation in a single part of a city can change the character of that area and can lead to imbalance in communities. We do not want to see so called 'student ghettos' springing up in our university cities. Along with our students we want to see our university cities and towns thrive and grow. In areas experiencing problems with uncontrolled houses in multiple occupation development, local authorities are able to use their existing direction making powers to restrict the use of properties as houses in multiple occupation.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the UK should show leadership internationally to secure fair and ambitious agreements on tackling climate change and poverty; and further that the petitioners are inspired by their Catholic faith and Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to cut carbon emissions to keep global temperature rise below the dangerous threshold of 1.5°C, and to prevent climate change pushing people deeper into poverty.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Chloe Smith, *Official Report*, 16 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 1651.]

[P001663]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): The Government have demonstrated our international leadership in tackling global climate change in helping to secure the world's first truly global agreement on climate change. The Paris agreement reached at the 21st Conference of Parties (CoP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in December 2015 marks a significant step forward towards reducing, on a global scale, the emissions that cause climate change.

The Paris agreement drives us forward on our path to limiting global temperature rises to well below 2°C and to pursue efforts to limit temperatures to 1.5°C in recognition of (he impact climate change is having on the most vulnerable countries. The agreement also sets a clear long-term goal of net zero emissions by the second half of the century, showing that the world is committed to decarbonisation. Countries will now communicate their commitments to reduce emissions every 5 years and will come back to the table in 2020, after a global stocktake in 2018, to update their plans to cut emissions by 2030 or put forward new ones. For the first time, all countries will be held accountable by an independent review for acting according to their pledges.

As the petitioners note, tackling climate change goes hand in hand with improving prosperity, incomes and livelihoods for the poorest. If we fail to do so the development gains of past decades are likely to be reversed. The UK supported the adoption of the new Global Goals for Sustainable Development in 2015 and pushed for the Paris agreement to support the poorest and most vulnerable countries to curb emissions while developing, and protect themselves from the worst effects of climate change. Over the last five years through the UK's £3.87 billion International Climate Fund (ICF) we have supported millions of the world's poorest to better withstand weather extremes and rising temperatures. At the UN General Assembly in September 2015, the

Prime Minister demonstrated UK leadership internationally by announcing a significant uplift in the UK's climate finance of at least 50% with £5.8 billion being made available over the next five years.

Countries now need to implement this agreement. Domestically, we are considering the implications of Paris for UK policy. Our 2050 target, of an at least 80% reduction in emissions on 1990 levels is already legally binding in the UK. The "at least 80%" target is based on previous advice from the CCC that this would be consistent with the UK's share of global 2°C action. The 1.5 °C ambition further strengthens the goal to keep the global temperature increase to below 2°C and highlights the importance of our domestic target. We remain committed to the Climate Change Act and to meeting our 2050 target. We will set out our proposals in full for how we intend to meet them in our new emissions reduction plan—due to be published towards the end of 2016.

As countries implement their commitments under the Paris agreement we expect to see more countries adopting similar targets to the UK, thereby starting to level the playing field globally and helping to drive down the costs of climate action further. One of the most important tasks for the UK is providing a compelling example to the rest of the world of how to cut carbon while controlling costs.

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 22 February 2016

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia

The following is an extract from the Urgent Question on arms sales to Saudi Arabia on 28 January 2016.

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, and as the Minister accepted, a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented magnitude has unfolded in Yemen. As we learned from the United Nations last August, Yemen in five months is like Syria after five years. It is critical that humanitarian aid gets into the country and that, for those purposes, the Red sea ports are opened up. Will the Minister say when he expects that to happen and what we and others are doing to ensure that it happens?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. and learned Friend makes a powerful point and I acknowledge his expertise and interest in the area. The logistics of getting humanitarian aid across the country are severely limited, because aid has to go through the main port of Aden in the south. It is therefore critical that the port of Hudaydah on the Red sea coast is opened up as soon as possible. That cannot happen first of all because it is in Houthi hands, and secondly because the cranes have been damaged, which is perhaps a smaller issue. It is a priority for the UN envoy, Ismail Ahmed, who will be discussing opening that port as soon as possible to allow aid to get in swiftly to the rest of the country.

[Official Report, 28 January 2016, Vol. 605, c. 430.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) during the Urgent Question on arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

The correct response should have been:

Mr Ellwood: My hon. and learned Friend makes a powerful point and I acknowledge his expertise and interest in the area. The logistics of getting humanitarian

aid across the country are severely limited, because aid has to go through the main port of Aden in the south. It is therefore critical that **capacity issues restricting the use of the port of Hudaydah on the Red sea coast are resolved** as soon as possible. That cannot happen first of all because it is in Houthi hands, and secondly because the cranes have been damaged, which is perhaps a smaller issue. It is priority for the UN envoy, Ismail Ahmed, who will be discussing **improving the operation** of that port as soon as possible to allow aid to get in swiftly to the rest of the country.

HEALTH

GP Access

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Health on Tuesday 9 February 2016.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): The same survey indicates that one in four people are now waiting more than a week to see their GP, and a staggering 1 million people are heading off to A&E because they cannot get an appointment with their GP. It is a total meltdown. What is the Minister doing about it?

Alistair Burt: There are 40 million more appointments available for GPs than in the past. The Government have made a commitment to transform GP access, and £175 million has been invested to test improved and innovative access to GP services. There are 57 schemes involving 2,500 practices, and by March next year more than 18 million patients—a third of the population—will have benefited from improved access and transformed service at local level. That is what we are doing about it.

[Official Report, 9 February 2016, Vol. 605, c. 1422.]

Letter of correction from Alistair Burt:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) during Questions to the Secretary of State for Health.

The correct response should have been:

Alistair Burt: There are 40 million more appointments available for GPs than in the past. The Government have made a commitment to transform GP access, and £175 million has been invested to test improved and innovative access to GP services. There are 57 schemes involving 2,500 practices, and by March **this** year more than 18 million patients—a third of the population—will have benefited from improved access and transformed service at local level. That is what we are doing about it.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 22 February 2016

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