

Thursday
3 March 2016

Volume 606
No. 125



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 3 March 2016

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

Broadband: Urban Areas

1. **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): What recent progress has been made on improving access to broadband in urban areas. [903855]

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): I am very pleased to tell you, Mr Speaker, that the broadband roll-out is going extremely well, particularly in our cities. I am also particularly pleased at the success of our business voucher scheme, under which 50,000 businesses have benefited.

Richard Graham: I make no apology for returning to the thorny issue of the frustrations of e-poverty in the city of Gloucester. In 2013, BT promised to upgrade box No. 90. In 2014, it said it was sorry for the delay, but that it would still happen. In 2015, it changed its mind. In 2016, at a meeting with me earlier this week, it asked, "Could you send us the original emails saying we would ever upgrade this box?" At what stage is a commitment from BT a real commitment that will not result in constituents turning around to me and saying, "You lied"?

Mr Vaizey: I am obviously not BT's spokesman, but I hope BT is listening to what my hon. Friend has to say. He is a fantastic constituency MP. While I am very proud of the success of our roll-out programme, it is incumbent on BT to get its act together in terms of customer service and delivering on its promises.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): When the Minister boasts that we have some of the best broadband in Europe, who is he comparing us with? Is he aware of the House of Lords report showing that, for broadband speed, we are the 19th fastest in the world and the 12th fastest in Europe? Is that not really abysmal, and can we not do better?

Mr Vaizey: I do not think we could do better than we are already, actually. When I compare our broadband, I do so first with similar countries, such as Germany, France, Spain and Italy, all of whom we are beating. I would not look simply at speed. The hon. Gentleman takes a very narrow view, and does not look at prices. We have some of the lowest prices anywhere in the

world. If we look at results—the fact that we lead the world in e-commerce, for example—they show that we are probably the world's most advanced digital nation.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): In urban areas, such as Bath, technology is available to skip the roll-out of superfast broadband and go directly to the installation of ultrafast broadband. Does the Minister agree with the logic of that, which will help to reduce disruption and save money in the long term and give businesses in Bath a huge boost?

Mr Vaizey: It is very important to set realistic targets. That is why we dropped Labour's pathetic 2 megabits policy and went to 24 megabits. Now is the time to start looking at a gigabit Britain. I utterly endorse what my hon. Friend says. Let us not get stuck in the past with Labour; let us go forward to the future.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Is the Minister aware that the very latest European Commission digital economy scorecard, published in just the past few weeks, ranks the UK below not just the Nordic countries, which we would expect, but countries such as Belgium? Despite the well-known antipathy of his Secretary of State to all things European, will the Minister press the European Investment Bank to put more money into extending broadband, particularly in rural constituencies such as mine of East Lothian?

Mr Vaizey: I am surprised—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The question is ongoing. People must not beetle out of the Chamber while their question is ongoing. That is a very established principle. I am sure the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) is interested in views other than his own.

Mr Vaizey: It may be that BT, having heard his question, is already on the phone to my hon. Friend.

I am surprised at the hon. Gentleman's tone of contempt for small countries such as Belgium. I think small countries—small and perfectly formed countries—are often extremely successful. Just the other day, I was talking to an investor about the extraordinary digital businesses that exist in Edinburgh, such as Skyscanner. Those really groundbreaking businesses are developing thanks to our digital policies. I know that he will support what we are doing. I have forgotten his original point, because I was going on so much about what a fantastic, digitally innovative country Scotland is.

Mr Speaker: I hope the Minister is right and that the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) will get that phone call before very long.

Public Service Broadcasting

2. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the economic and cultural benefits to the UK of public service broadcasting. [903856]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): Public service broadcasting is the powerhouse of the UK's world-class television industry.

In 2014, public service broadcasters invested £2.5 billion in original TV content, and accounted for over half of all TV viewing.

Daniel Zeichner: I have had representations from hundreds of constituents in Cambridge who are concerned about the future of the BBC. They are overwhelmingly supportive and positive. We now have the results of the consultation and more than three-fifths of respondents were in favour of continuing with the current funding system. Will the Secretary of State give an assurance that there will be no further top-slicing of the licence fee?

Mr Whittingdale: I hope to be able to update the House on our progress on the renewal of the charter in due course. We are taking all the responses seriously and taking them fully into account. We have already agreed with the BBC that one of the top-slices of the licence fee—the additional amount that is taken for broadband—will come to an end in 2020.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend will have noted the BBC's forthcoming Shakespeare season, which is being held in collaboration with many other bodies, including the Royal Shakespeare Company. It is designed to bring Shakespeare to life for a new generation, using not just TV, but radio and online services. Does he agree that that is exactly the sort of thing the BBC ought to be doing, and something that only the BBC could do?

Mr Whittingdale: I agree with my right hon. Friend very strongly. This year is the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death. It is an enormously important event and the BBC has a crucial role to play. I had the pleasure about 10 days ago of watching the filming of Ben Elton's new comedy, "Upstart Crow", which is based on Shakespeare. As my right hon. Friend says, I suspect that that is the sort of thing that only the BBC would do.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State agree that the proposals of BBC Scotland to strengthen its news output by investing in jobs and production for an entirely editorially independent "Scottish Six" programme, anchored from Scotland, are a development that all of us across the House can welcome as an example of a long-term commitment to public service broadcasting? Will he just promise us that there will be no interference from Downing Street?

Mr Whittingdale: I had a very good meeting with Fiona Hyslop a couple of weeks ago to talk about the way in which the BBC meets the requirement to serve all the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. I obviously welcome any investment at the BBC that will create additional jobs, particularly in Scotland, which I know the hon. Gentleman will value. How the BBC goes about meeting the obligation to serve the nations and regions is a matter for the BBC. Certainly, neither I nor my colleagues in No. 10 would want to instruct it on how to go about it.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Eighty per cent. of the 192,000 responses to the Green Paper consultation say that the BBC serves its audiences well or very well, and the majority believe its content to be both high quality and distinctive from that of other

broadcasters. The Secretary of State purports to be a supporter of the BBC, so why is he using charter renewal to cut back and restrict what the BBC does, rather than help it to compete in the rapidly changing and increasingly global broadcasting environment?

Mr Whittingdale: I was not surprised to find that the responses showed that the vast majority of people value the BBC. As I have said, I value the BBC. The hon. Lady will have to await the publication of the White Paper, but it is not a question of trying to cut back the BBC's output. Nevertheless, there is a case, which is borne out by some of the responses and by other surveys we have conducted, for saying that the BBC needs to be more distinctive. That is something that the director-general himself said when he set out his plans for the charter renewal.

Maria Eagle: The Secretary of State's speech yesterday was rather more about bashing the BBC than anything else. That is what the chair of the BBC Trust said. Bashing the BBC is the one thing the Secretary of State agrees about with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor these days. They all want to use charter renewal to eviscerate the BBC and do its competitors a favour, rather than to deliver what the licence fee-paying public want. They just do not seem to accept that the British people like the BBC and want it to continue what it is doing. When will the Secretary of State accept that charter renewal should be about making the BBC fit for the future, rather than trying to diminish it for the commercial convenience of its competitors?

Mr Whittingdale: The hon. Lady must have looked at a different speech from the one I delivered. It certainly was not about bashing the BBC. Indeed, as soon as I finished making the speech, I had an extremely good meeting with the chairman of the BBC Trust, who did not mention anything about my bashing the BBC and welcomed what I had said.

The charter renewal is precisely about making the BBC fit for the future. I intend to bring forward the publication as soon as is possible, but, as the hon. Lady knows, there are a number of very important contributions, including the 192,000 consultations, that we want to take fully into account.

Satellite Broadband Voucher Scheme: Lancashire

3. **Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the level of uptake of the satellite broadband voucher scheme in Lancashire. [903857]

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): We are making great progress on superfast roll-out. We have reached almost 4 million premises, and it is going extremely well.

Andrew Stephenson: I welcome the Government's commitment to spreading faster broadband to rural areas, but my constituents have found it difficult to find information about the voucher scheme. Will my hon. Friend commit to working with Lancashire County Council and Broadband Delivery UK to ensure that households that could benefit from satellite broadband are made aware of that important scheme?

Mr Vaizey: In my original answer, I was obviously pointing out how well the satellite broadband scheme is going as well. We launched it at the end of December to ensure that people with speeds of less than 2 megabits per second can get the speeds they need. It was a soft launch, but we will make the scheme much more high profile in the next few months. I will happily work with my hon. Friend to make sure that his constituents can benefit from the scheme, although I note that superfast broadband roll-out will be almost 100% both in his constituency and in Lancashire.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): On the subject of uptake, nearby Merseyside authorities are not claiming the millions that BT set aside for non-commercial broadband areas. Will the Minister look into that and put some pressure on the councils?

Mr Vaizey: Yes, I will certainly look into it. It is important that councils lead our scheme, because they know what is happening on the ground. We will work with them so that they can access either funding from central Government or European funding.

Tourism: York

4. **Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to support tourism in York since the recent flooding in that area. [903858]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): York, along with other affected areas, is currently being promoted with a £1 million publicity campaign, which was announced by the Prime Minister on 28 January. It is designed to encourage British families to spend their Easter holidays in the north of England. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State also launched Virgin Trains 30% discount offer on 1 February, as part of his visit to York to promote the city and its wider region as open for business.

Julian Sturdy: I thank the Minister for his detailed response. About 200 businesses in York were flooded after Christmas, and thankfully many are now getting back on their feet. Building on what he said about the recent VisitEngland campaign to encourage families to visit northern tourist destinations such as York, will he consider providing individual grants so that local tourist attractions can market themselves and let everyone know that they are open for business again?

Mr Evennett: I know how assiduous my hon. Friend is in his commitment to the area. I am really pleased that York is open for business following the recent floods and welcoming visitors back. Tourism businesses in flood-affected areas that were directly or indirectly impacted are eligible for the £5 million recovery fund from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and businesses can use those grants to help promote themselves. VisitBritain and VisitEngland are in dialogue with specific flood-affected businesses to spread the message about the areas that are open for business and ready to receive visitors.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is 1,000 years since King Canute's accession to the throne. "Campaign Canute" is trying to raise £2 million so that

Jorvik Viking Centre can reopen before 2017. What additional support can the Minister bring to that major tourist attraction in York?

Mr Evennett: The Government's first priority, of course, has been to deal with the physical impact of the floods themselves in the short term, and we have worked hard to make that happen. We now need to make sure that businesses that were affected attract the bookings that they need over the next few months. I have been to the Jorvik Viking Centre myself in the past and was very impressed with it, and I look forward to going again in the future. VisitEngland and VisitBritain are in discussions with such businesses and are using all their channels to support affected areas.

Nuisance Calls

5. **Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to reduce the number of nuisance calls. [903859]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): The Government are taking a range of measures to tackle nuisance calls, including strengthening the regulators' ability to take enforcement action against organisations that break the law and increasing consumer choice by consulting on making it a requirement for direct marketing callers to display their calling line identification.

Sir Simon Burns: Many of my constituents will be very pleased by that answer, but does the Secretary of State accept that they will hope that the action will be taken quickly? Like me, they are fed up to the back teeth with sleazy calls trying to sell them PPI protection or help with personal injuries that never happened. It is time that something was done to stop those disreputable practices.

Mr Whittingdale: My right hon. Friend and I are constituency neighbours, so I am very much aware of our constituents' concerns about this subject. I am sure that neither he nor I would ever be guilty of making nuisance calls, either in relation to our own elections or, indeed, on behalf of candidates in other elections across the pond. However, action is being taken. The new measures are taking effect and in just the last week, the Information Commissioner's Office announced a record fine of £350,000 against one of the leading firms responsible for nuisance calls.

Mr Speaker: We are all better informed.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Nuisance calls are increasingly annoying to me and many of my constituents—the problem may affect people in Scotland more adversely, with nine out of 10 residents claiming to have had them in any given month—and 30 March will mark the second anniversary of the DCMS report, "Nuisance Calls Action Plan". What plans does the Secretary of State have to publish a revised plan, detailing what success the first plan has had and what future action can be taken to tackle the problem?

Mr Whittingdale: We keep the matter under continual review, but we have taken a number of measures, and we will shortly come forward with the outcome of our consultation on strengthening the requirements for direct marketing callers. I am also in contact with organisations such as Which? that have a good record on the matter. If further measures need to be taken, we will certainly do that.

Superfast Broadband

6. **Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): What progress has been made on the roll-out of superfast broadband. [903860]

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): The roll-out of superfast broadband is going very well and we have reached almost 4 million premises.

Paula Sherriff: Areas in my constituency fall into the so-called “broadband white areas”, where internet access is virtually non-existent. In 2010, the Government committed to providing every home with a basic broadband connection by the end of 2015. Three months on from that date, I have been contacted by many constituents who are still without a decent broadband service to their homes or businesses. Will the Secretary of State look into that and deliver on the commitment that was made five years ago to give every household and business access to broadband, which, in 2016, is surely a necessity, not a luxury?

Mr Vaizey: I am very pleased to tell the hon. Lady that about 96% of premises in her constituency will get superfast broadband, but also, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), the satellite voucher scheme is now available and all the hon. Lady’s constituents who do not have broadband or have broadband under 2 megabits can apply and have satellite installed for free.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Those of my constituents who have missed out on the roll-out of superfast broadband are now pinning their hopes on the universal service obligation, which the Prime Minister announced before Christmas. How far has the Minister got with the consultations that I understand have to be conducted before the USO can be introduced?

Mr Vaizey: I am very pleased to tell my hon. Friend that we are proceeding at pace with our consultation, the results of which we will issue shortly, and we will probably legislate to introduce the universal service obligation in the digital economy Bill. I am delighted that he will get 99% superfast broadband in his constituency anyway.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have several cases of superfast broadband not reaching certain constituents, particularly businessmen. In the light of that, what discussions has the Minister had with broadband companies about improving copper cables, thus enabling them to reach further, and connection boxes so that superfast broadband is available to more people?

Mr Vaizey: We constantly challenge the communication providers to provide new technology and I am pleased that Virgin is extending its roll-out and that BT is introducing G.fast. I am also pleased that superfast broadband will approach around 85% in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency.

Fixed Odds Betting Terminals

7. **Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): What recent representations he has received on fixed odds betting terminals. [903861]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): Details of all the meetings that I and other Ministers have had with interested parties on this matter are available via the Department’s transparency returns. In addition, my officials engage regularly with all interested stakeholders to discuss gambling policy more generally, including the issue of fixed odds betting terminals.

Margaret Greenwood: In 2014-15, people in Wirral lost more than £2 million at fixed odds betting terminals, and more than £290,000 of that was lost in my constituency of Wirral West. Low pay and insecure work is such a feature of our economy that people cannot afford to lose large sums of money. Will the Government realise the seriousness of the risk that FOBTs pose to people on lower incomes and substantially cut the maximum stake?

Mr Whittingdale: I understand the concern about fixed odds betting terminals, and we keep the issue under review. The hon. Lady may be aware that last year we brought in new requirements that improved player protection, in particular by putting a stop to unsupervised play for stakes of over £50. It is already clear that that has had an impact on player behaviour. As far as we can see, the rate of problem gambling remains at under 1% and has not shown any sign of rising as a result of FOBTs.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): As the Secretary of State knows, the inconvenient truth is that problem gambling rates have reduced since the introduction of fixed odds betting terminals. The Campaign for Fairer Gambling claimed that each fixed odds betting terminal makes a profit of £1,000 a week. As a betting shop is open for more than 90 hours a week, that works out at an average profit of around £11 an hour. Does the Secretary of State think that that is an excessive profit rate? If he does, what does he think an acceptable profit rate would be?

Mr Whittingdale: An awful lot of claims and counter-claims are made in this area, and not all of them stand up to close scrutiny. The Government intend to maintain a close watch over the issue, and any further changes that we introduce will be firmly evidence-based.

Online Crime

8. **Simon Danczuk** (Rochdale) (Ind): What discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on ensuring that social media companies comply with police investigations into online crime. [903862]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): I have regular meetings with ministerial colleagues at the Home Office to discuss a range of issues.

Simon Danczuk: Companies such as Facebook often talk about corporate social responsibility, and I can think of nothing more responsible than co-operating with the police about death threats. Greater Manchester police have been waiting weeks for Facebook to help to identify those who made such threats to some Members of this House, not least me. Does the Secretary of State agree that Facebook and other social media need to do more to help the criminal justice system?

Mr Whittingdale: I expect all social media companies to assist the police and uphold the law. Those providing communication services to users in the UK have an obligation to comply with UK warrants that request the content of communications, and with notices requiring the disclosure of data. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should bring that to the attention of Facebook, and indeed to Greater Manchester police, if such co-operation is not forthcoming.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Will the Minister join me in roundly welcoming the consultation that is starting today on taking action against cowardly internet trolls who create fake social media profiles and bully, harass and menace others online, and on taking action to help children affected by online bullying?

Mr Whittingdale: I entirely share my hon. Friend's concern, and it is very distressing when such things happen. I discovered that someone had set up a profile of me without my knowledge a few weeks ago, and I swiftly had it removed. It is clear that we must tighten the law where people are using such profiles to cause distress. In some cases they are breaching the law, so I welcome the new guidelines from the CPS.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Internet companies are required to respond to requests from the police, but there is no timescale for that. It takes more than three weeks on average before Twitter provides data to the UK police for criminal investigations. What will the Minister and the Government do to force internet companies to respond promptly and immediately to our law enforcement agencies that are pursuing criminals?

Mr Whittingdale: As I said to the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk), I expect all social media companies to comply with the law without any unnecessary delay. If there is evidence that they are delaying, I am happy to discuss the matter with my colleagues in the Home Office and to consider what more can be done.

EU Digital Single Market

9. **Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to bring about the completion of the EU digital single market with regard to telecoms, audio visual policy, IT security and data protection. [903863]

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): This Government are a great champion of the digital single market, and I know that

all colleagues will have read the Prime Minister's excellent White Paper. It means, for example, that people will no longer pay roaming charges when travelling across the EU, and once the digital single market is in place, we will see a huge increase in our GDP.

Nic Dakin: According to the No. 10 website, we could create £325 billion of additional growth by fostering a digital single market, and it points to the advantages of that for consumers. Given that, why would anybody campaign to leave the EU rather than energetically work to get the best deal for the UK?

Mr Vaizey: Why indeed would anyone want to leave the EU? We present a united front in this House on the benefits of EU membership.

Mr Speaker: Yes. [Laughter.]

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The Minister will be aware that, at 12.4% of GDP, the UK's internet economy is by far the largest of all the G20; it is double that of the US, more than twice the size of Germany's and about four times the size of France's. Does the Minister agree that getting a good deal on the digital single market is particularly important for the UK, because so many jobs and so much of the economy depend on it?

Mr Vaizey: I agree with my hon. Friend. He points out the share of the internet economy, and it is incumbent on the Opposition to explain why they come to this House all the time to rubbish our digital record and pretend there is no broadband in the UK. How has the digital economy come about if people are not using the brilliant superfast broadband we are delivering?

Tourism: Northamptonshire

10. **Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con):** What recent steps he has taken to support tourism in Northamptonshire. [903864]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): Our five-point plan for tourism makes clear the Government's support for the tourism industry. That includes a commitment to encourage tourists to explore the country beyond London. I am delighted that we have secured the £40 million Discover England fund. That competitive fund will encourage public and private sector partners across the country to come together and improve our English tourism offer.

Tom Pursglove: I thank the Minister for that answer, but what help is being provided to owners of historic homes, such as Rockingham Castle in my constituency, not only to conserve that important historic home and those around the country but to boost local tourism?

Mr Evennett: My hon. Friend is well known as a real champion for his constituency and for Northamptonshire, and I commend him for that. I recognise the importance of privately owned heritage such as Rockingham Castle in supporting tourism. I am pleased to say that historic houses can apply for Heritage Lottery funding of up to £100,000 on projects that are a public benefit. Sites on

Historic England's heritage at risk register can apply for funding from Historic England. *[Interruption.]* It is very important for the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) to know the facts.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, before you reprimand me, may I remind the House that John Clare was a Northamptonshire peasant poet? The John Clare Trust has opened his wonderful cottage to visitors and tourists, and the Minister would be welcome to pay an official visit at any time. Will he also tell the world that the trust supports the Every Child's Right to the Countryside campaign to get kids out into the country and learning?

Mr Evennett: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. I endorse his comments and I look forward to visiting the area.

15. [903871] **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): Northamptonshire and Rugby share a heritage in leather products: in Northamptonshire it is footwear and in Rugby it is balls for the game that bears the town's name. The town saw 50,000 visitors during the Rugby world cup, which established an interest in sport tourism. Does my right hon. Friend agree that now would be a good time to develop a permanent rugby-themed visitor attraction in the town? When we get that attraction, I will invite him to come along and visit.

Mr Evennett: I commend my hon. Friend's hard work in ensuring there were visitors to the birthplace of rugby during the Rugby world cup. I am interested in his proposition. I look forward to seeing what progress can be made and to visiting his area.

Internet Service Providers

11. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve competition among internet service providers. [903865]

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): We have a very competitive internet service provider market in the UK. Ofcom has just published its digital communications review. It promises further changes, which we welcome.

Andrew Rosindell: Will the Minister tell the House what discussions he has had with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills regarding the potential benefits of encouraging alternative investment and competition in the UK's telecommunications infrastructure?

Mr Vaizey: We have announced a joint review with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills of business broadband, and the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills takes a very close interest in that issue. Both Departments are very focused on Ofcom's recommendations. My message to BT is that I hope it will reach agreement with Ofcom in the very near future.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): In areas where there is insufficient competition, tough regulation is required to ensure that existing providers are providing

a fair service. In parts of rural Cheshire, there is no competition and insufficient regulation because Ofcom allows providers to charge a premium to rural customers because they live in rural areas. Where there is insufficient competition, will the Minister speak to Ofcom to provide that tough regulation and a fair deal for rural broadband customers?

Mr Vaizey: Yes. I met the chief executive of Ofcom yesterday, and I told her that we were four square behind the digital communications review, which includes, as I say, tough measures on BT—we want BT to reach agreement on that by the end of the year—and pro-consumer mechanisms such as automatic compensation, which we also strongly support.

Northern Powerhouse: Arts Funding

12. **David Rutley** (Macclesfield) (Con): What plans the Government has to support the northern powerhouse through funding for the arts. [903866]

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): I am pleased to say that there is strong support for the arts within the northern powerhouse project. For example, there is investment in the Factory in Manchester, as well as our backing for the Hull city of culture project and, of course, the Great Exhibition of the north.

David Rutley: I welcome my hon. Friend's statement and his plans for the future. This year sees the return of the Barnaby festival in Macclesfield, with over 100 events, 250 artists and performers—of course, all visitors are welcome. Does he agree that, with £90,000 of Arts Council funding joining the mix of private and public funding, that is a perfect example of how arts funding can help to add fuel to the northern powerhouse?

Mr Vaizey: I agree with that. I understand that the funding has helped, for example, to make the festival director a paid position for the first time. It is a great example of how the Arts Council is working with organisations all over the country, but particularly in the north, to support our world-class arts and heritage.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): As the Minister will know, the Royal Photographic Society's archive was recently threatened with being moved from Bradford's National Media Museum to London. What assessment has he made of the impact of such a move on cultural provision within Bradford, the wider Yorkshire region and, indeed, the northern powerhouse?

Mr Vaizey: I have been closely involved with the Science Museum on the future of the National Media Museum, and I am pleased that it is now being put on a firmer footing. However, I would say to the hon. Lady that there is extensive support for the arts in Bradford, with something like £9 million of Arts Council funding. I point her to the excellent article by the chief executive of the Arts Council about the support it is giving to Bradford.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister shows great artistry in the picture he paints, but we know that the regions were already losing

out on arts funding by a ratio of 14:1 before the Chancellor chose to chop billions from northern local authorities struggling to maintain arts for all. The Sutton report last week said that the arts are becoming less and less accessible. Does the Minister agree that the arts are far too important to our culture and our identity to be left in the hands of a privileged few?

Mr Vaizey: I would certainly agree with the hon. Lady on that. Our forthcoming White Paper will announce new measures to increase access to the arts, but we have already supported, for example, music education hubs, extended the In Harmony scheme and introduced new schemes for the arts in schools, so I take great issue with her implicit criticism that we are not doing anything to increase access to the arts.

Historical Sex Abuse: Broadcasting Sector

13. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If he will make an assessment of whether further steps need to be taken to investigate allegations of historical sex abuse in the public service broadcasting sector. [903868]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): The report published by Dame Janet Smith last week was the result of a comprehensive and wide-ranging review. This is clearly a matter for the BBC, which commissioned the review and is responsible for responding, but I know that the chair and director-general take these issues extremely seriously, and I have already had a discussion with the director-general about them.

Mr Hollobone: This four-year, £6 million inquiry confirmed that Jimmy Savile molested 72 victims, that he raped a youngster as young as eight and that attacks occurred in the corridors and dressing-rooms of every BBC premises over a period of 47 years, yet no senior manager, past or present, has accepted individual responsibility for failing to stop him. Does the Secretary of State believe that this is an adequate response from Britain's leading public service broadcaster?

Mr Whittingdale: I hope that my hon. Friend will read in full the statement by the director-general, which makes it clear that the BBC takes this matter very seriously. It has offered a full apology and fully accepts the recommendations of Dame Janet Smith. The important thing is that measures are put in place to ensure that this kind of thing can never happen again. A lot has been done already by the BBC, but I welcome the fact that the BBC has also accepted the recommendation that a further review be carried out to ensure that everything possible is being done to stop this kind of abuse ever happening again.

Topical Questions

T1. [903875] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): As you will know, Mr Speaker, today is World Book Day.

Since our last question time, my Department has published a summary of the responses to our consultation on the BBC charter review, Sir David Clementi's report

on the governance and regulation of the BBC, and the results of independent research on the BBC's market impact. All those publications will inform our thinking.

The House will be delighted to hear that the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), has had a baby since the House last met. I am sure that Members will join me in congratulating her, and in wishing her and the new arrival well.

I know that the House will also join me in congratulating the British winners of last weekend's Oscars, and in wishing our Davis Cup and track cycling teams well this weekend.

Chris Green: The British horseracing industry has an economic impact of £3.5 billion a year, and the Aintree and Haydock racecourses are very popular with my constituents. Will my right hon. Friend tell us when he plans to require offshore bookmakers to make a financial contribution to racing, as those based in Britain already do?

Mr Whittingdale: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the importance of horseracing to this country. I can tell him that we intend to introduce a new funding arrangement for British racing by April 2017. We will create a level playing field for British-based and offshore gambling operators, and will ensure a fair return for racing from all bookmakers, including those based offshore. The racing industry will be responsible for making decisions on the spending of the new fund. We will make further announcements shortly.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Four out of five tourism companies surveyed by UKinbound believe that staying in the European Union is important to their business. UKinbound's chief executive officer, Deirdre Wells, has said:

"Saying 'yes' to staying in the EU sends a clear message that we are open for business."

Why is the Secretary of State so intent on damaging our tourism industry by campaigning for Britain to leave the European Union, against the policy of his own Government?

Mr Whittingdale: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that, whatever the decision on Britain's future membership of the European Union, this country will remain open to tourists, not just from the European Union but from across the world. We are already enjoying a steady increase in the number of international visitors, and I expect that to continue.

T2. [903876] **Suella Fernandes** (Fareham) (Con): Fort Fareham is on Historic England's heritage at risk register; it is listed as priority A. Built in 1861, it forms part of the region's distinctive naval and coastal history. What support can the Minister give such heritage assets, which are at risk of rapid deterioration, particularly those in private ownership?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): I am well aware of Fort Fareham, which is one of several sites that testify to the important role of Portsmouth in the defence of our nation in the past. The purpose of the at

risk register is to enable Historic England and other partners to target their advice and support at the sites that are in greatest need. I am pleased to say that Historic England is working with its partners in south Hampshire to make the most of the fantastic history of Portsmouth harbour.

T3. [903878] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State was as aggrieved as I was to learn that late last year the Royal Society of Arts ranked South Tyneside as one of the lowest boroughs in the country on its heritage index. He should know as well as I do that South Tyneside has a huge amount of history and culture to offer. Would he consider accepting an invitation to come to the borough, with members of the RSA? He could take part in our summer festival, explore our ancient Roman sites, or perhaps pull a rabbit out of a hat during the upcoming annual magic show at our brilliant arts venue, the Customs House.

Mr Whittingdale: That is an almost irresistible offer, given the attractions of South Tyneside. The magic show sounds highly enticing.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right to stress the importance of heritage to South Tyneside and, indeed, to the whole country. I hope that I shall manage to accept her invitation in due course, but I know that, in the meantime, the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr Evennett), is being assiduous in trying to visit as many tourism and heritage destinations as possible.

T5. [903880] **David Rutley** (Macclesfield) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that all Government Departments get behind the Government's excellent new sports strategy, particularly in relation to outdoor recreation, with its benefits for physical health and for the tourism economy in rural areas in Macclesfield and far beyond?

Mr Evennett: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the value of outdoor recreation and sport. We recognise this and we are committed to working across the Government Departments to ensure that the new Sporting Future strategy promotes opportunities for everyone to get involved in outdoor activities, no matter where they are. Indeed, Sport England already invests millions of pounds in activities as diverse as trail running, canoeing and mountaineering, which provide exciting opportunities. We will continue to work with other Departments to make sure that this happens.

T4. [903879] **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Across the regions of the UK, there are some 4,500 miles of road with no mobile phone signals, according to a recent RAC report. That includes 452 miles in the highlands without 4G, 3G or 2G, which means that no texts or calls can be made there. Will the Minister commit to taking action to plug these specific gaps in mobile coverage?

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): I am pleased to be able to tell the hon. Gentleman that the emergency services network proposals will see 300 new mobile masts built, and our mobile infrastructure programme will see 75 miles covered.

Our changes to the licences of mobile providers will require 90% geographical coverage, which will also result in improvements in mobile coverage.

T6. [903881] **Stephen Phillips** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Sports Minister pro tem will have seen yesterday's suggestion from distinguished luminaries in the medical world—including from places such as the University of the Pacific, wherever that might be—that we ban any form of tackling in rugby in schools. Does he agree that it is time to stop this molycoddling of young people, and, while doing all we can to ensure that sport is safe, to let schools get on with teaching contact sports and the values that they represent?

Mr Evennett: My hon. and learned Friend will be well aware that the Government are committed to ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to get involved in sport from a young age, provided that it is made available within a safe environment. The Department for Education is responsible for sport in schools. Rugby and many other sports always carry an element of risk, and we expect those supervising sport at that level to ensure the safety of all participants. He will be interested to note that as part of our strategy on sport and physical activity, a full review of the duty of care in sport is to be carried out, chaired by Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson.

T7. [903882] **Tristram Hunt** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): Local authority budgets are now under extreme pressure, and the Treasury is urging councils to liquidate all extraneous assets. Will the Secretary of State confirm from the Dispatch Box that that should not include the antiquities, paintings and artefacts in local authority museums and galleries? None of us wants to see a fire sale of our national heritage on the back of this Government's stumbling economic policy.

Mr Vaizey: One treasure that I hope will not be liquidated is the hon. Gentleman. I hope he will not be liquidated by the Momentum campaign in Stoke and that he will be reselected. We are all praying for him on this side of the House. In answer to his question, it is obviously up to individual local authorities, but they must adhere to the code of ethics of the Museums Association. I take a very dim view of local authorities getting rid of their heritage assets, particularly those that have been left to them by prominent members of the community.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): There have been numerous resignations from the board of London 2017. Has the Secretary of State had the chance to discuss the reasons for that with London 2017, and does he have any concerns about its working relationship with UK Athletics?

Mr Whittingdale: This is a matter that we keep under review, but I have not had a chance to discuss it recently. I will certainly look into it further and discuss it with the appropriate authorities.

T8. [903883] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): To prevent our pop charts from being disproportionately dominated by acts from private schools, and to prevent another all-white Brit awards like the

event that was criticised last week, would the Minister consider starting a scheme similar to the much missed music action zones that the Labour Government created to encourage creativity and talent in music in non-classroom contexts?

Mr Whittingdale: This country produces some of the finest music acts in the world. A lot of the ones that I go to see certainly did not go to public school, and I am looking forward to going to see Muse and, I hope, Rainbow in the coming months. Of course, I want to see opportunity for everybody who has talent to succeed.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Victoria Pendleton, the Olympic champion, on riding her first winner over fences at Wincanton yesterday, on Pacha Du Polder, a horse owned by Andy Stewart and trained by Paul Nicholls? Her exploits are a big boost for the racing industry. Will the Secretary of State confirm that when he sets the rate of the new levy, he will be taking into account all the current streams of funding that go into racing from bookmakers, such as picture rights?

Mr Whittingdale: I of course join my hon. Friend in congratulating Victoria Pendleton. I heard her talking about her success this morning, and it shows how somebody can achieve great accomplishment in one sport and then go on to succeed in a second. On the specific point he raises about the extension of the levy to cover offshore, the amount will be determined by an analysis, which we have commissioned, of the funding and costs of racing. That will take account of all sources of revenue, including media rights, as he points out.

T9. [903884] **Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab):** Will the Secretary of State tell the House why his Government have gone from promising victims of press abuse that part 2 of Leveson will happen to saying that it “may” happen? Will he also tell the House how many meetings he and his Cabinet colleagues have had with newspaper proprietors over the past year and whether that was a topic of conversation?

Mr Whittingdale: We have always said that any decisions about whether or not Leveson 2 should take place will be taken once all the criminal proceedings have been completed. We are not at that stage; further criminal proceedings are under way. Once those are completed, we will come back to look at this question. We regularly publish a record of all meetings with newspaper proprietors, with victims of press intrusion and with ministerial colleagues. Of course, I have regular meetings with all of those, and I am looking forward to having a further meeting with Hacked Off to discuss these matters in a few weeks’ time.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

The Leader of the House was asked—

Public Engagement in Parliament

1. **Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to engage and involve more members of the public in the day-to-day business of Parliament.

[903885]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Government are committed to promoting public awareness of Parliament. Much has been achieved in this area in recent years, and this important work must continue. The Government particularly welcome the new e-petitions site, which has increased public engagement with Parliament since it was set up in July. The site collected 7 million signatures in its first six months, and to date 135 petitions have received a Government response and 19 petitions have been debated in Westminster Hall.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Lady for her response. One way in which we can ensure that more people engage in politics is by reaching them at a young age, and I therefore welcome the increase in school visits to this place under your speakership, Mr Speaker. What assessment has the Deputy Leader of the House made of the effectiveness of schools visiting Parliament and of the education centre in getting young people interested and involved in politics? In addition, has she given staff their bonuses for now having to try to explain the Government’s incomprehensible English votes for English laws process?

Dr Coffey: I visited the education centre for the first time earlier this week to speak to children from Sandlings primary school in my constituency. It is a really impressive facility and I am sure that Mr Speaker is rightly proud of it. The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about our effectiveness at getting children from around the United Kingdom to come here, and as a constituency MP I have written to the Administration Committee to ask it to look at the effectiveness of that programme.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Further to the excellent point made by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), will the Deputy Leader of the House join me in welcoming the news that 224 students from seven Pendle primary schools will be visiting Parliament in the next three months? Will she also join me in reminding teachers from across constituencies such as mine, which are more than 200 miles from London, that a travel subsidy is available for school trips to this place?

Dr Coffey: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the fact that he has got so many children engaged in this. Of course, the subsidy regime varies, but this is also about initiatives such as the Speaker’s school council awards. I have written to every school in my constituency encouraging them to enter it, and I think the closing date is in April.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the Government look at the level of school subsidies? I looked at it in relation to people from my school coming down, and found that they are only allowed to claim the subsidy if they are coming to the House of Commons as the main part of their business. If they are going to be doing other things in London, they cannot claim the subsidy. There are too many rules for the scheme to work for people in my constituency.

Dr Coffey: The rules on the school subsidy are not a matter for the Government, but there are members of the Commission in the House. The Administration Committee is probably the best avenue for taking this matter forward.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does the Deputy Leader of the House agree that the use of the internet, particularly developments such as parliamentlive.tv, has the potential to increase hugely the engagement of the public in proceedings of this place?

Dr Coffey: The internet is a marvellous form of communication—whether we are talking about social media or parliamentlive.tv. People can also watch us on the BBC Parliament channel if they so desire, and I am sure my mother is watching right now.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It will be of great concern to everybody in the House that more and more people think that Westminster politics is remote, corrupt, boring—inexplicably—and unclear. A third of eligible voters in Britain chose not to go down the road and cast a ballot in last year's general election. What does the Deputy Leader of the House believe are the main problems with Parliament that put people off, and what are the Government doing about it?

Dr Coffey: Voter engagement in terms of general election turnout collapsed in the 2001 election, after four years of a Blair Government. I am pleased to say that voter turnout has increased. The hon. Lady talks about this institution potentially being corrupt. That is not the case, as we have high levels of integrity, but where MPs have been found to break the law, they have been sent to jail and that is where they belong.

Barnett Consequentials

2. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What parliamentary mechanisms are available to hon. Members to scrutinise Barnett consequentials within the estimates process. [R] [903886]

7. **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What parliamentary mechanisms are available to hon. Members to scrutinise Barnett consequentials within the estimates process. [903892]

8. **Steven Paterson** (Stirling) (SNP): What parliamentary mechanisms are available to hon. Members to scrutinise Barnett consequentials within the estimates process. [903893]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Estimates are formal requests for authorisation of expenditure proposed to the House by the Government. Scrutiny of these, which are effectively departmental budgets, is undertaken in a variety of ways, including debates selected by the Liaison Committee, and it is also open to Select Committees to examine these budgets. The Procedure Committee has recently announced that it will look at the House's procedures for examining estimates and the passing of legislation that authorises this expenditure—the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill, which we dealt with yesterday.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Deputy Leader of the House for her answer. May we have a commitment today that steps will be taken to modify the estimates process so that Members representing Scottish constituencies can properly scrutinise the impact of legislation on Scotland?

Dr Coffey: I think the hon. Lady is on the Procedure Committee. Is that right? [*Interruption.*] I think she is. She will be aware of the inquiry that is happening right now. I believe that the Committee is accepting written submissions till 25 March. I really want to emphasise this point: when I served on a Select Committee, we certainly dedicated time to scrutinising budgets. I encourage all Select Committees to do likewise.

Dr Whitford: Yesterday, this House approved a budget spend of more than £600 billion without any real debate or breakdown of the Barnett consequentials. As fewer than half the Secretaries of State have taken oral questions since the estimates were published, how are Scottish MPs—or indeed any MPs—meant to hold the Government to account?

Dr Coffey: I believe that there are avenues to do that. I welcome this inquiry by the Procedure Committee, especially as it might open up some new ideas, and I hope that all political parties will contribute to it. I really encourage this idea that Select Committees are one avenue. Of course Ministers are always held to account at this Dispatch Box, and by written questions as well.

Steven Paterson: The hon. Lady keeps telling us that the Procedure Committee is reviewing the estimates process. Will she tell us whether, when giving evidence to that Committee, she or the Leader of the House will be supportive of reform of the estimates process?

Dr Coffey: I am not sure whether the Procedure Committee has invited me or my right hon. Friend to give evidence, but I am sure that it will. Our Government have always been in favour of modernisation of the House, and there is no reason why that journey will not continue.

Back-bench Business Debates

3. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If he will make it his policy to protect the time available for Back-Bench business debates on the Floor of the House. [903887]

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling): It is for the Backbench Business Committee to schedule the business for the days allocated to it in each Session, and for the Chair to manage the debates when they take place.

Mr Hollobone: This afternoon or perhaps late this morning there will be a debate on gangs and serious youth violence, which is an extremely important topic. The Leader of the House will know that this debate was scheduled for an earlier day, but because of urgent questions, statements and other business overrunning for legitimate reasons, there was no time left for that important debate to take place. That situation could have been avoided had the Leader of the House allocated that debate protected time. Using that experience, will he look to protect Back-Bench business on future heavy business days?

Chris Grayling: As I have said to the Chair of the Committee in recent weeks, I keep that under careful review. It is certainly the case that the gangs debate

moved to today because of a number of other parliamentary events that took place on the original day. However, the Backbench Business Committee has been able to bring the debate back to the House shortly afterwards, and as there are no urgent questions or statements today, there should be a full day available for today's important debates. I will keep the matter under review, but I will need to be persuaded that things are going badly wrong before we could countenance a change to the way things work at present.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Surely the Leader of the House will agree with me that it is not just Back-Bench business and debates that are affected, but the rights and privileges of Back Benchers. Is he aware that very often the Opposition get squeezed by Front Benchers, with all their privileges, acting as Back Benchers as well, so it is much more competitive for us? Will he also bear in mind the fact that after my point of order to the Speaker, we had better behaviour from the Leader of the House and his Front-Bench colleagues at business questions, but after one week they have reverted to type?

Chris Grayling: Surely the hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that Members on his Front Bench, particularly on this occasion, go on for much too long? That view might not command agreement on the Opposition Benches, but it certainly does on the Government Benches.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend consider the fact that when Back-Bench business debates are scheduled in this House, Members on all sides take the opportunity to come along to participate? We on the Backbench Business Committee try to arrange for 15 speakers, and if the debate gets squeezed and pushed to another day, that is very unacceptable to Back Benchers who have made the time to speak on important subjects?

Chris Grayling: Of course, that is an important point. That is why I say we will keep the matter under review. This is the first occasion that it has happened in recent times. Clearly, if it becomes a regular feature, we may have to think again, but I do not want to manage processes unnecessarily. We need to see whether there is genuinely a longer-term issue.

Short Money

4. **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): When the Government plans to make a decision on future levels of Short money. [903889]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Cabinet Office published a document on 18 February seeking views from members of the parliamentary parties panel, political parties, individuals who were elected to the House of Commons at the last election, and the Clerk of the House, with a deadline of 7 March for written submissions. I understand that there will also be oral discussions. These responses will be considered before any decision is taken. We will then put forward a proposal for Parliament to approve.

Margaret Ferrier: Government consultation is ongoing, but there is clearly a pressing need to know what resources will be available in a few weeks' time. Can the Deputy Leader of the House assure us that no changes to the Short money allocation formula will take effect until the beginning of the 2017-18 financial year at the earliest?

Dr Coffey: The Government have not yet reached any conclusions, but my understanding is that that is part of the ongoing discussion between the parties.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): When making decisions about Short money, will Ministers ensure that appropriate arrangements are put in place for transparency about how those moneys are spent?

Dr Coffey: I welcome that contribution from my hon. Friend. That is indeed part of the proposal in our call for views, and I am sure he can write in to that formally to add weight to that argument.

English Votes for English Laws

5. **Tristram Hunt** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the introduction of procedures on English votes for English laws. [903890]

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling): We have fulfilled our manifesto commitment to introduce English votes for English laws, which I believe will strengthen the Union. We have undertaken two Legislative Grand Committees, and several statutory instruments have been passed without Division. There have been some technical issues, but they relate also to the introduction of electronic counting in this House using iPads, which is routine in the other place now and which the House authorities are working on. Clearly, we would not wish to be left behind by the other House in the technologies that it uses. We will undertake a review of English votes for English laws procedure later this year.

Tristram Hunt: Does the Leader of the House not agree that the current Gilbert and Sullivan system for EVEL is simply unsustainable? It is confusing, haphazard and totally incomprehensible to the public. Will he therefore join my call for a referendum on an English Parliament so that the voice of England has clarity in our representative democracy? After all, we know how much he enjoys a referendum.

Chris Grayling: I am not necessarily certain that that is the Labour party's policy. It is an interesting concept, but the Government were elected on a manifesto to deliver English votes for English laws in this place. It is set out in detail how we will do that, and we have implemented our commitment, as the electorate would have expected.

Mr Speaker: Very briefly, and on this question, I call Ian Lucas.

6. [903891] **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you will be aware that Coleg Cambria in my constituency has students resident in England who are directly affected by issues you have certified under the EVEL procedure as relating only to England. Will the

Leader of the House urgently consider this issue, which is directly affecting the livelihoods of people in my constituency? He is limiting my voice on these matters.

Chris Grayling: I have to admire the hon. Gentleman for his persistence in this matter, but as I have explained to him time and again, he has no say over matters such as health and education in his own constituency. It is not obviously logical that we should make special arrangements for him to have that say across the border in constituencies represented by other Members of this House.

Mr Speaker: Finally, and also briefly, I call Mr Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): There has barely been a more disastrous and divisive innovation than English votes for English laws. It is totally unnecessary, and the Tory majority in England and the UK is crushing any hope of a Tory revival in Scotland with this anti-Scottish tone. Is not EVEL now ripe for abolition, and should it not be confined to the dustbin of history?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman speaks with his customary reserve and understatement. I have to say that I totally disagree with him.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we must move on.

Business of the House

10.37 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

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

MONDAY 7 MARCH—Second Reading of the Policing and Crime Bill.

TUESDAY 8 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Enterprise Bill [*Lords*] (day 1), followed by a debate on International Women's Day, a subject determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 9 MARCH—Conclusion of the remaining stages of the Enterprise Bill [*Lords*] (day 2), followed by, if necessary, consideration of further Lords amendments.

THURSDAY 10 MARCH—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill, followed by a debate on a motion on record copies of Acts. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 11 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 14 March will include:

MONDAY 14 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Energy Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 15 MARCH—Second Reading of the Investigatory Powers Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

WEDNESDAY 16 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his Budget statement.

THURSDAY 17 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

FRIDAY 18 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

Finally, I indicated before Christmas that we would provide regular updates on the situation in Syria. The intention is that there will be a further statement shortly on matters in Syria.

Chris Bryant: There have been two fire alarms in the Palace this week, and on both occasions there was great confusion among Members and members of the public. May I urge the Leader of the House to initiate a review of those arrangements as soon as possible?

Last week I asked whether the Leader of the House plans to delay the Queen's Speech until after the EU Referendum. He refused to answer, which is of course usual, but we all now know that the Government intend to extend this Session beyond 23 June. We know that not because the Leader of the House has told the House, but because Downing Street has told *The Times*. I know that, as a Brexiteer, the Leader of the House is not allowed to see Government papers any more, but one would think that the Government would at least allow him to know when the recess dates will be. So come on, just tell us: will the Queen's Speech be after 23 June, will there be a Whitsun half-term recess, will the House sit during the week of the referendum, and will he give us the dates through to the end of the year? Before he goes all pompous about this—oh no, it is too

late for that—I just say to him that Members from across the House, and, for that matter, the staff who work in this building, all want answers to these questions.

The terrible news about the article in *The Times* is that Downing Street has also said that there is going to be a reshuffle after the referendum and that the Leader of the House tops the list of those who are going to be sacked. I, for one, am beginning to feel very, very sorry for him, so I have been searching the job pages for him. Sadly, the only thing that seemed even vaguely suitable was working as an unpaid voluntary intern for the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett), but unfortunately he says in the job description that he wants somebody who is a "good team player", so that rules out the Leader of the House. All the other jobs say they want someone with a good sense of humour—need I say more? He need not worry though: I am sure the Prime Minister will give him a glowing reference.

The previous Parliament was the zombie Parliament—for months on end the House had no proper business—and now we have the return of the living dead. They walk among us, they look like Ministers, and they are paid like Ministers, but they are doomed. They hate the Prime Minister; they think he is damaging the economy and putting our security at risk. Frankly, the only thing that is keeping them in the Government is the £23,570.89 in extra salary they will get come 23 June.

How do the Government intend to fill the business between now and then? Here are my suggestions. One: I have married a lot of people in my time—to one another, as a vicar, that is—but it has always seemed wrong to me that marriage certificates include the names of the fathers of the bride and groom but not the mothers. Even the Prime Minister says that he wants to change this, but apparently he has written to one of our Members saying there is not enough time. Well, there is clearly now going to be enough time to do it in this Session. My hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) has a handy private Member's Bill to be considered tomorrow: why do not the Government adopt it or help it into Committee so that it can be amended?

Two: I am delighted that the Government are no longer going to water down freedom of information, but should we not extend it to private companies engaged on public sector contracts? How much did the Government's preposterous review cost? The Leader of the House might as well tell us now, because he knows full well that if he does not we are going to put in a freedom of information request and he will have to tell us in the end anyway.

Three: I am glad that Adele did so well at the Brits last week, but tickets to see her live are now selling on the secondary market for up to £24,000. This market pretends to support the arts, but actually it just leeches off them. The Business Department's review of the ticket resale market closed on 20 November. When is it going to be published, and when will the Government legislate to put an end to this pernicious, parasitical secondary market?

The hon. Members for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) and for Salisbury (John Glen) and I have long been calling for a parliamentary inquiry into concussion in sport. This week, more than 70 doctors and health experts have written to the Government calling for a ban on tackling in school rugby games. I do not want youngsters wrapped in cotton wool, but given that it is

[Chris Bryant]

12 years since the West Bromwich Albion footballer Jeff Astle died of chronic traumatic encephalopathy brought on by heading the ball, five years since 14-year-old Ben Robinson died of second impact syndrome, and Will Smith's new film "Concussion" shows how the NFL failed to protect its players and ended up with a legal bill of \$1 billion, is it not time that we set up a proper parliamentary inquiry to make sure that we get all the facts out there?

Next week sees the 100th anniversary of Harold Wilson's birth. He gave women, for the first time, control over their own property and their bodies; he abolished the death penalty; he decriminalised homosexuality; he introduced the first race relations Act; and he won the referendum to stay in Europe. He ended censorship and created the Open University and the Arts Council. For that matter, under him we won the Eurovision song contest—I know the Leader of the House is obsessed with this—three times: three times more than we have ever won it under the Tories. Is it not outrageous that we have a louring statue of Mrs Thatcher, who made my constituents' lives miserable, but just a bust of Harold Wilson, who made this country a civilised society?

Chris Grayling: I very much hope that we will win the Eurovision song contest under the Conservative party next year, with that great band MP4 leading the charge for the nation.

In order to understand what does and does not work with fire drills, it is, of course, necessary to carry them out. Lessons will be learned from the experience earlier this week, but I extend my thanks to all the Officers of the House who were involved in the fire drill. They will now work out how to make sure that our processes are appropriate and suitable for the future.

We will announce the date of the Queen's Speech when we have decided the date of the Queen's Speech. As always, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) makes the mistake of believing that what he reads in the papers is what is actually going to happen. We will take a decision on the Queen's Speech and we will announce it to this House, as usual.

We have to be mindful of the need to ensure the progress of business. The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. It is somewhat ironic that, on the one hand, he asks, "Where are the recess dates?" while on the other he says, "This is a zombie Parliament with no serious business." He is completely wrong. I have just set out plans for the Second Reading of the Policing and Crime Bill next week. That really important measure will restore a sensible balance to many aspects of our policing and justice system. I have also announced the Second Reading of the Investigatory Powers Bill, which will be crucial in enabling us to defend our country. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that that is a feature of a zombie Parliament, then frankly he does not know what the word "zombie" means.

May I echo the hon. Gentleman's comments about the work done collectively by Members across the House, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), on the issue of head injuries? I know how serious an issue it is. The Children's Trust is situated in Tadworth Court, just outside my constituency, and it does a brilliant job in helping children who have

had the most terrible experiences. The issue should be of concern to Members on both sides of the House. I hope very much that the Select Committee will pick up on the work that my hon. Friend and others have done and write a full report. The hon. Gentleman asked for a parliamentary investigation, and the best way to do that is through the Select Committee.

The Welsh affairs debate will take place later today. It was, of course, St David's day this week, and I extend my good wishes to all Welsh Members of Parliament. I am looking forward to 5 May, when the people of Wales will have the chance to get rid of a failing Labour Administration.

It is a bit of a relief to me to see the shadow Leader of the House in better spirits today than he was yesterday. I do not know whether others noticed that he looked utterly miserable during Prime Minister's questions, but I understand why. It was not just because the Leader of the Opposition spent last Saturday, just like old times, at a CND rally, or because he has appointed the former Finance Minister of the Greek Syriza Government as his new economic adviser, although heaven knows how any self-respecting Member on the Labour Front Bench could take that appointment seriously. It was not even because a former shadow Cabinet member said of the Leader of the Opposition's appearance at the parliamentary party meeting on Monday:

"Expectations were rock-bottom—and he fell below them".

The most bizarre claim to come from the Labour leadership this week was when the Leader of the Opposition said that he gets his moral compass from "Eastenders". Surely not even the shadow Leader of the House can think that this is a man fit to be Prime Minister.

I understand that it is hard for someone who has decided, as the shadow Leader of the House has, to become a cheerleader for a team he clearly does not support. I would be happy to grant him a debate on learning from the lessons of history, because he is the man who says he is proud to have stuck a knife in the back of Tony Blair. Only this week, however, he seems to have had second thoughts and has started to show signs of thinking again, because he told a group of students:

"I'm going to talk about Tony Blair, I think we're still allowed to speak about him".

Of course, those were the days when Labour was a serious political party.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Some French Minister has apparently been saying today that if we have the nerve to come out of the EU, all 4,000 people in Calais will be put on rubber boats and come across to Britain, because the French do not want anything to do with them. If I were a Frenchman, I would be hugely embarrassed by my Government. If a country that is two and a half times the size of this country, with roughly the same population, cannot disperse 4,000 people and look after them, it should be ashamed of itself. Could we have a statement next week from the Foreign Secretary on whether it is the Government's position that, if we come out of the EU, we would have more rather than less immigration to this country?

Chris Grayling: I am absolutely certain that the Foreign Secretary will be back before the House shortly, so there will be an opportunity for my hon. Friend to put that

point to him. In the last couple of weeks, I have heard the French Interior Minister reassure us that the French Government would not wish to put at risk the bilateral agreements over border controls between the United Kingdom and France.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I, too, thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week's business. Today is World Book Day, and it is worth noting, especially as I am chair of the all-party writers group, the wonderful wealth of writers that we have in this country and the power of literature to bring joy to people and enhance their lives.

The Leader of the House and I now have a joint experience in fighting referendums. We have both been on the sharp end of various "Project Fears". In the Scottish referendum, I experienced "Project Fear", and he is now experiencing the new "Project Euro-fear" as he leads the campaign to yank the UK out of the EU. The scaremongering from the inside is almost straight out of the useless and dysfunctional Better Together manual, and it is likely to cause as much damage to the in campaign as it caused to the massive lead of the no campaign, which was shredded, in Scotland. As a supporter of our place in the EU, I want that counterproductive scaremongering to stop, although I presume that the Leader of the House is quite happy with it, given that it will probably work in his interest. Can we have a debate about positive campaigning, and can we encourage everybody to ensure that when we debate our place in Europe, we do so as positively as possible?

We need an urgent statement from the Defence Secretary on Trident. Apparently, he is just about to declare that Trident renewal is already under way, before we have had the opportunity to approve that in the House. It is absolutely appalling that the Defence Secretary can simply take the House for granted, and he must come to the House and explain himself. Scotland rejects Trident, and we intend to make it a huge issue in the Scottish elections. We simply refuse to have that weapon of mass destruction dumped on our nation without any approval from the House.

What do we do now, Mr Speaker, about large parts of Scottish funding? On English-only legislation, you are to lay aside minor or consequential issues when certifying legislation as English only, even though they have huge Barnett consequentials to Scotland. The Leader of the House told us that the mysteries of the Barnett consequentials lie in the mystery of the estimates. I tried to debate estimates in the estimates day debate, but I was ruled out of order within two minutes and 46 seconds. Somebody, somewhere, has to tell us how we should get that addressed and when we, as Scottish Members, will get to discuss, debate and vote on the critical issue of the Barnett consequentials.

Finally, the irony of last night's debate on the Lords amendments on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, in which Tory after Tory lambasted all those wicked Lords, was not lost on Scotland. For the Tories, however, the Lords are only to be chastised when they do not do the Tories' business, and to ensure that that happens, the Tories are going to introduce another 40 Tory Lords. Why do the Tories not just back us? Instead of trying to gerrymander that bizarre House, how about working with us and getting rid of the whole shooting match altogether?

Chris Grayling: I agree with the hon. Gentleman on the need for positive campaigning, and I hope that all who are involved in the debate over our membership of the European Union in the coming months will take a positive approach and set out the facts so that the British people can take their decisions. I gently chide him for mentioning "Project Fear" when he talked about positive campaigning, and I remind him of the things that he said about the introduction of English votes for English laws. To listen to what he said, one would have thought that about as much doom and gloom and disaster as possible would fall on us, but it is not entirely clear to me that that has happened. The Union has not fallen apart because of the introduction of English votes for English laws, and the Scottish people I know think that it is entirely fair.

The hon. Gentleman raised Trident. If he is concerned to bring the Defence Secretary to the House to explain himself, there are mechanisms in the House by which the hon. Gentleman can do so. He can either seek your consent, Mr Speaker, or use the other avenues that are available to him, and I am sure that he will choose to do so. He talks about Trident being "dumped on our nation", as he phrases it. I remind him of all the people in Scotland whose livelihoods depend on Trident, and of the people in the north-west of England whose jobs depend on the future replacement of Trident. Is he really saying he wants all those jobs to disappear? Is he really saying he wants the area around Rosyth to end up abandoned and without an economic role for the future? I do not think that is in the interests of those communities. I have to say that it is in the interests of Scotland and the United Kingdom that we retain a nuclear deterrent both for our national security and to ensure there are jobs in the parts of the United Kingdom that need them.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the estimates debates. I simply remind him that he is a member of the Liaison Committee, which chooses the subjects for debate on estimates days. The Committee is perfectly free to hold discussions on any aspects of public spending, and it chose to do so on Foreign and Commonwealth Office matters. It is for the hon. Gentleman, who sits on the Committee, to secure the debates he wants.

The position of the hon. Gentleman's party on the Lords has been well set out. I must say that I think the Lords plays a role in helping to improve the quality of legislation in this place, but I suspect that we are never going to agree on that subject.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): In recent months, five coal-fired power stations have announced that they will close, potentially close or partially close: one of them is Rugeley B. The Government have stated that they intend to phase out coal-fired power generation by 2025, but market conditions mean that the closures may come far sooner. May we have a debate in Government time on energy policy and the role that existing power station infrastructure can play?

Chris Grayling: I understand my hon. Friend's concerns, and I heard her question at Prime Minister's questions yesterday. She is freely able to bring forward that subject in an Adjournment debate or to seek consent for a Back-Bench debate to have it discussed in the House.

[Chris Grayling]

The matter clearly affects the constituencies of a number of hon. Members, and I encourage her to bring that subject forward for discussion.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): If this Session of Parliament runs beyond June, will the Leader of the House consider giving us more days for Back-Bench business and for private Members' Bills? If he gives us more days, will he put the Bill I am promoting with support from colleagues on both sides of the House—for the automatic registration of children for free school meals and the school premium—at the top of the list on one of those days? That is the one move we could make between now and the summer holidays that would have a real effect on poor families.

Chris Grayling: The right hon. Gentleman has a long track record of pursuing social reforms of that kind, and I will certainly look very carefully at what his Bill proposes. Of course, the progress of business in the House very much depends on our success in getting Government business through. We have a substantial programme—it was set out in our manifesto—to bring forward and complete by the end of this Session. I want to make sure that the dates set for both the Queen's Speech and for the end of this Session and the recess are consistent with our need to ensure that our manifesto is implemented.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the impact of c2c timetable changes on the lives of commuters who live in Southend? The company has at long last accepted that there is overcrowding and it has ordered new rolling stock, but it has just announced that it will not be arriving.

Chris Grayling: I commend my hon. Friend for the work he is doing on behalf of his constituents on an issue that, in different ways and on different lines, affects very many of us. The Transport Secretary will be in the Chamber for questions next Thursday, and I encourage my hon. Friend to raise the issue directly with Ministers. He is doing a good job in keeping the company under pressure at a time when there are clearly serious issues about the delivery of the service on that line.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): As Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, I wrote to the Leader of the House to look for assistance in getting protected time for particular debates. The debate on gangs and serious youth violence was bumped, but has now been rescheduled for later today. On Tuesday, which is International Women's Day, we have a particularly time-sensitive debate on International Women's Day. I asked the Leader of the House to give an undertaking that the time for that debate would be protected. I have received a reply, and I am afraid to say that no such undertaking has been given. That is regrettable, because it is possible that there will be urgent questions and statements and that the Enterprise Bill will run, which would curtail the time for the International Women's Day debate. We have already seen evidence that such protected time is required from time to time. Will the Leader of the House please reconsider that matter?

Chris Grayling: As I have said, I have given that matter careful consideration. I have looked at the flow of business on Back-Bench days and will watch carefully next Tuesday. I am sure that you and I, Mr Speaker, will want to ensure that there is proper time for debate on that day. At the same time, I have to be mindful of the working hours of staff and of this House, so I do not want to make significant changes without being confident that there is a real problem that needs to be solved, rather than an occasional problem. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will keep the matter under review, but my hope and intention is that we will have proper time available next week.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): In the light of Switzerland's withdrawal of its application for EU membership after 24 years, may we have a debate next week on why it might possibly have chosen to do that?

Chris Grayling: I think that will simply add grist to the mill of the debate on the European Union referendum. Although I have not scheduled a debate on European Union matters for next week, I am in little doubt that there will be an opportunity shortly for those matters to be raised with Ministers.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Most Members will be surprised that many current and former service personnel never receive a medal acknowledging their service. All those who served accepted the danger and sacrifice associated with their decision, but they will never receive a medal unless they were actively involved in conflict or served for a very lengthy period. May we have a debate in Government time on the introduction of a national defence medal, which would be a tangible recognition of their service?

Chris Grayling: It is open to the hon. Lady to bring forward an Adjournment debate on that subject if she wishes. From my perspective, I do not think that medals should be handed out without consideration of the contribution that has been made and the individual's circumstances. If we start to have medals for all, the value of the medals for particular examples of valour and service in particularly tough circumstances will perhaps be slightly devalued. I praise unreservedly all our armed forces, but the medals system that we have always had in this country is designed for those who go beyond the routine and put themselves in danger in the service of this country.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): When will the House have an opportunity to express its opinion on the new fiscal framework for Scotland? When we have a debate on that issue, will we be able to debate Barnett consequentials? For example, when the United Kingdom Parliament gives more money to Glasgow in city grant, there is a Barnett consequential that means that more money goes to the Scottish Government as a result.

Chris Grayling: The Scotland Bill is making progress through the other House. I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes. The agreement that we have reached will provide for a transitional period to a new world for the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government now have to start using the powers they

have been given and taking some of the decisions that other Governments have to take, which they have so far insulated themselves from.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the last few weeks, there have been many stories in the media about gamblers and addiction. Tony Franklin lost his money, his job and his family, and claims that fixed odds betting terminals were the reason. It is clear that the gambler stands little chance of leaving the roulette table with heavier pockets than when he entered. There is a need to change the legislation on fixed odds betting terminals. Would the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on that matter?

Chris Grayling: Unfortunately, we have just had Culture, Media and Sport questions, when the hon. Gentleman would have had an opportunity to raise that matter with the Ministers concerned. They will, of course, be back before the House in due course. I am aware that this is a matter of concern across the House. It might be possible to take the subject to the Backbench Business Committee if his concerns are shared across the House.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If the Government persist with their intention of delaying the vote on Trident renewal until after the Labour party conference, it will become harder for pro-defence and pro-Trident Labour MPs to vote in favour of renewal. May we please have the date on which the debate and vote will take place, especially if more time will be made available by extending the length of the Session?

Chris Grayling: I know about my right hon. Friend's concerns over the timing of the debate. I will make sure that his views are fed into the discussions about when the debate should happen.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): This week, a Select Committee in the Lords found that, contrary to Government claims, the Trade Union Bill will profoundly affect Labour party funding. Previously, the Leader of the House had a letter from the Minister for Skills, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), seeking to make concessions on the Bill. Will the Leader of House now agree to the concessions and commit to cross-party talks to reach a fair and long-lasting settlement on party funding?

Chris Grayling: Of course, that is a matter of discussion and debate in the Lords, and the Lords Committee has made recommendations. We are trying to provide a sensible balance for the future. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Leader of the House says, "Oh no you're not", but the Conservative party has to seek voluntary contributions from individuals who choose to back it. The Labour party has depended on a system in which people have to go beyond the extra mile to take themselves out of automatic contributions.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): One of the major issues to be debated during the European referendum campaign will be the size of the UK's net contribution. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate so that those of us who are in favour of leaving the EU can outline the infrastructure projects and improvements to public services on which we could spend that money? It

would also provide others with an opportunity to try to defend why money should go to Europe rather than be spent in their constituencies.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes his point in his customarily succinct way. Of course, we have just had an all-day debate on our EU membership, and I am absolutely certain that it will not be the last time these matters are debated in this House between now and June.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate on the dodgy dossier that the Government have produced in advance of the EU referendum? I do not know whether you, Mr Speaker, saw the Minister for the Cabinet Office skewered on the "Daily Politics" by Andrew Neil yesterday when he tried to back up his claim that Norway had to abide by three quarters of the EU's laws. Andrew Neil pointed out that the figure was actually 9%. If the Government are prepared blatantly to lie so badly on that issue, perhaps we need a full debate on the dodgy dossier to see how many other blatant lies they are prepared to resort to.

Chris Grayling: I would simply say that I hope everyone will set out their views and the facts in a completely dispassionate way.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Hannah Morris, the fantastic Camden youth mayor, is stepping down later this year. When I have spoken to young constituents, the point has been made to me over and over that young people feel disfranchised from politics and disengaged from Parliament. That has been exacerbated by the Government's refusal to lower the voting age and their scrapping of policies such as education maintenance allowance. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate in the House on young people's worrying disengagement from this Parliament, the mother of Parliaments?

Chris Grayling: We talked earlier about the importance that the education centre plays in this place and the importance of bringing as many young people as possible to Parliament. All of us individually have a duty on this matter, and I spend quite a lot of time talking to groups of sixth-formers in my constituency. I am sure the hon. Lady does the same. Every one of us has a duty to go out and explain why the decisions that we take in Parliament and the issues that we debate are of material importance to young people, and why they should vote and take an interest.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Can time be found for a debate on the effects of uncontrolled immigration into the UK, which would be one of the impacts of our remaining in the EU? It has a massive impact on people's access to services, healthcare, school places and decent wages, and it is extremely important to my constituents.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He may have seen the serialisation of the new book by Tom Bower over the past few days, which has exposed just how complicit the Labour Government were in opening our borders and allowing uncontrolled immigration to this country. Those who were part of

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that party and that Government should be forever ashamed of the way in which they allowed uncontrolled immigration—not managed immigration or immigration organised in a careful way—as a deliberate policy. They should be ashamed of that.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Has the Leader of the House received a request from any Minister to make a statement explaining why the wheels have come off the Brexit BMW, or perhaps a request from an individual Member who has performed a handbrake turn on EU membership to make a statement explaining their diversion? Such statements would provide the public with critical facts about the weaknesses of the Brexit case and the motivation of some people in supporting it.

Chris Grayling: No, I have not.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Has the Leader of the House seen reports that plans are being drawn up to reclassify e-cigarettes as tobacco products for tax purposes? Vapers and the sector accept that some additional duty should be charged, but the consequence of the proposal is that the price of e-cigarettes to consumers will more than double. Public Health England has deemed e-cigarettes to be 95% safer than tobacco, so may we have a debate to consider taxation of those products to ensure that they remain an effective method of smoking cessation?

Chris Grayling: I know that my hon. Friend raises a matter of concern, which affects a large number of people. I suspect that it is the sort of proposal that causes uncertainty and disquiet about decisions made in Brussels. I very much hope that no decision on the matter will be made without due care and attention, and without due focus on whether e-cigarettes are a good way of enabling people to move away from smoking.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): May we have an urgent debate in Government time on the recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, which showed that 10 of the 12 towns and cities in greatest economic decline are in the north of England? Not a single town in the south is among the worst 24 listed. That causes real concern about the vision of a northern powerhouse. We urgently need a debate, particularly as Steve Rumbelow, the chief executive of my council, Rochdale—which, incidentally, is listed as the town in the greatest economic decline—has accused the foundation of using out-of-date figures, which mask the progress made in northern regions.

Chris Grayling: It never ceases to amaze me that Labour Members do not understand why the northern powerhouse is needed. It is because, when they were in power, the manufacturing sector of this country almost halved. Northern towns declined steadily—Labour policies failed the north of this country unreservedly. That is why we need a northern powerhouse, which helps to contribute to the significant fall in unemployment across the north of England. We inherited high unemployment in those towns and cities, and we are sorting it out.

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments about St David's day, and I look forward to the Welsh affairs debate later.

Cardiff and Wales held the rugby world cup at the turn of the millennium. Since then, we have held the FA cup finals, the Ryder cup, the UEFA super cup and Ashes tests, and played our part in the Olympics. I pay tribute to the Scottish Government for what they did with Glasgow and the Commonwealth games. Is it not time to have a debate about what we can do to chivy and encourage the Welsh Labour Government to put in a bid for the Commonwealth games to come to Cardiff?

Chris Grayling: London did a fantastic job of hosting the Olympics, Glasgow did a fantastic job of hosting the Commonwealth games, and I would love to see the Commonwealth games come to Cardiff. I echo my hon. Friend's view and I hope that the Welsh community will come together and find the right moment to make that bid for the future.

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): Last week, I discreetly visited the besieged district of Sur in Diyarbakir. I witnessed almost incontrovertible evidence of suppression of civil liberties and worrying signs of the potential for more civilian deaths. Given Diyarbakir's proximity to Syria, the fact that Turkey is a NATO ally, and emerging evidence that Turkey is targeting US and UK-backed Kurdish forces fighting against Daesh in Syria, will the Leader of the House commit to a debate in Government time to allow Members to discuss the nature of our relationship with our NATO allies?

Chris Grayling: As I said earlier, I have agreed with my colleagues in Government and made provision for a further statement on the situation in Syria shortly. That will give the hon. Lady an opportunity to raise that very point.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Tomorrow, I will be at New College in Huddersfield with the Anthony Nolan "Register & Be a Lifesaver" programme. May we have a debate on bone marrow donation, blood donation and organ donation to see how we can increase the number of people involved in those programmes and raise awareness?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point and I pay tribute to everyone involved in that important work, particularly in his constituency. He raises an issue that has, over the months, been of concern to Members of all parties. Again, it might be a subject that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee would like to consider as an opportunity for a Thursday.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Next Thursday will be exactly 29 years since the brutal murder of Daniel Morgan of Llanfrechfa, who was investigating police corruption in south London. This week, "Panorama" gave a vivid account of the extraordinary amount of corruption that existed in the Metropolitan police. I am one of the few people in the House to have read, under strict surveillance, the Tiberius report. It is the most deeply shocking document I have read in my life. Will the Government publish it—perhaps next Thursday—so that the whole country can understand the breadth and depth of police corruption in this city?

Chris Grayling: I will ensure that the Home Secretary is aware of the hon. Gentleman's concerns. I am not aware of the detail of the report, but I will make sure that she responds to his request.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Unfortunately, a number of my constituents have recently been the victim of a substandard building firm that, when challenged, liquidates itself only to quickly re-establish itself in a new guise. May we have a debate on such abuse of company law?

Chris Grayling: It is obviously disturbing when one hears of such incidents. The Business Secretary will be here in 10 days' time, and current procedures for director disqualification allow members of the public to lodge direct complaints when such issues arise, so that they can be investigated.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we debate internet awareness? The Prime Minister's explanation of his damascene conversion on Sunday trading between April and June last year is the existence of internet shopping—in other words, between April and June he discovered the internet. Is that not just an empty excuse for a broken promise that will affect workers not just in England and Wales, but also in Scotland and Northern Ireland?

Chris Grayling: Those measures also include provisions to improve workers' rights, and the hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to debate all those matters when the provisions are brought before the House. If he has concerns, he will be able to raise them then, and vote accordingly.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): All Members of the House recognise how sensitive pensions are, and that any changes we make impact on individuals—we have seen that with the raising of the pension age for women. I understand that there may be further general changes to pensions. Will the Leader of the House guarantee that should that happen, we will have sufficient time to debate them in this House, and to consider the impact that they will have on our constituents' quality of life?

Chris Grayling: I know that the Chancellor will want to take great care when bringing forward any proposals to reform the pension system. I do not know what will be in the Budget, but whatever there is, there will be ample time to debate it in this House. Such matters must be handled enormously carefully, and we do not want to make the same disastrous mistakes that Gordon Brown and the Labour party made when they were in government.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): I wish to outline an important case. I am supporting Kath and Tom Leary, who are parents seeking answers following the death of their son, Wayne, who was killed in a hit-and-run accident in 2010. The driver, Colin McDonald, is a criminal with little regard for human life. He was on bail for a serious stabbing, having already been given early release for the manslaughter of Jonathan Tripp. Colin McDonald was sentenced for that stabbing and hit and run, but again he was let out on early release on licence until 2021. Last week he was again sentenced for another manslaughter, of Dominic Doyle. The parents want answers. How can a justice system that is meant to give people confidence do this to people? Will the Leader of the House support me in securing a meaningful debate on the issue?

Chris Grayling: In my time as Justice Secretary I was involved in discussions on a number of such cases, and we introduced measures to tighten the law. We also started a broader review of the laws on motoring, precisely to see whether further steps needed to be taken in tragic cases of this kind. The Lord Chancellor will be here next Tuesday, and from past experience of constituency matters, I encourage the hon. Gentleman to use the Adjournment debate system to bring a Minister to the House, go through the case in detail, and look for changes that can make a difference to families who have been through the most terrible situations.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Local councils must help to maintain trust in politics by openly discussing and transparently agreeing their budget, and by explaining the savings, efficiencies and programmes that they will undertake. Does the Leader of the House agree that councils such as Eastleigh Borough Council must lead the way, because it is struggling to explain openly its future budgets to the public? May we have a debate on open and balanced council budget setting, so that MPs can highlight the importance of vital local decisions and how they must be clearly and roundly understood by residents?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There is a curious irony, given who controls her borough council. The Liberal Democrats argue for openness, but do not necessarily deliver it when in power. I am sure that if the decisions they take are as opaque as she is suggesting, they will not be holding that power for very much longer. It is of course important that local government is transparent, explains the decisions it takes and sets out why, when it has had to take difficult decisions, it has chosen that route rather than any other.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Yesterday in Westminster Hall we had a debate about the chaos on Southeastern trains. The Minister gave us some reassurances that things were improving, but last night I got a phone call from a concerned constituent who was on a train. He was told by the driver that the signallers had mistakenly put the train on the wrong line, so it would not be visiting any of the stations the passengers on the train intended to go to. My constituent said to me, "We are used to the chaos, but this is downright dangerous." May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Transport about safety on our railways and, in particular, Southeastern? This is going too far.

Chris Grayling: Obviously a situation like that is unacceptable. Every service is occasionally subject to human error, but nobody would seek to defend a situation of that kind. The Secretary of State for Transport is here on Thursday and will be able to take questions on the challenges in relation to Southeastern trains. They are, to a significant degree, being generated by the huge investment we are putting into London Bridge. That means some disruption in the meantime, but it will mean a better service for passengers in the future.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): At the most recent Council of Europe meeting we initiated a debate on the media portrayal of the women abused in Cologne and in other places at new year. The media had not reported

[John Howell]

the situation fully or in a timely fashion. May we have a debate on that in this House, because the BBC was one of the media groups identified?

Chris Grayling: It is not acceptable for the media, in particular a free media, not to set out the facts when they arise. I commend my hon. Friend for his work in the Council of Europe. I am sure my right hon. Friend the Culture Secretary has taken note of his comments.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Four weeks ago, in response to my question about the 1955 UK-Malawi tax treaty, the Leader of the House very helpfully replied that he would ask the Foreign Office to give me a detailed response. The quill pens are writing slowly. When can I expect a response?

Chris Grayling: I am sorry about that. I will give the FCO a kick after this session.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): May we have a debate on the midlands engine, the important role manufacturing plays in our regional economy, and how the Government can provide further support to this vital sector?

Chris Grayling: I commend all those in the midlands who are working so hard to revitalise business in that part of the country. The midlands is another area that was badly affected by the collapse in manufacturing in the years of the Tony Blair and Gordon Brown Labour Governments. We are now seeing real investment and real progress, for example in the automotive industry. In the midlands, we are seeing an expansion of capacity, new investment and new jobs created. It is a sign that the midlands, under a Conservative Government, is going from strength to strength.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Earlier this week I took part in a workshop delivered by the Alzheimer's Society. MPs from across the House attended in order to become dementia friends. May we have a debate on what more can be done to support those living with dementia, and their carers and families, and in particular how we can extend the blue badge parking scheme to those facing dementia-related challenges?

Chris Grayling: I commend all those in this House who have trained to become dementia friends. Members of the Cabinet did the same a while back. It is enormously important that we all understand the impact of dementia. I had an elderly relative who suffered from dementia. My understanding of what she went through, having taken the training, is now much greater. I praise all those who deliver it. This is a subject the Backbench Business Committee might like to consider. There is a demand for subjects to debate and the hon. Lady may wish to bring this forward for consideration.

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, there is a shortage of engineers in the UK. May we have a debate on career advice for young people who are approaching school-leaving age? After all, how else are we going to have enough engineers to build the network of hedgehog highways around the country?

Chris Grayling: Well, Mr Speaker, we were all waiting—and we were not disappointed. I gather that my hon. Friend has now got his petition past 20,000 signatures, so we are on the way to debating it in the House, for which I commend him. This nation's hedgehog population has every reason to be grateful to him. On a more serious note, the solution to the problem is very much at the heart of this Government's strategy, with the huge expansion in the number of apprenticeships. In my view, these provide the best way of ensuring that we have the breadth of engineering skills that we need.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): A year ago today, the Tuberous Sclerosis Association started its "fight4treatment" campaign because sufferers of this pernicious disease are currently not able to access everolimus, the life-saving drug that they so desperately need. A year on, may we finally have a statement from a Health Minister about when the sufferers from this ultra-rare condition can finally get access to the treatment that can save their lives?

Chris Grayling: This is of course a matter that would normally go through the procedures of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which decides which drugs it is right for the NHS to offer. I will, however, ask the Department of Health to respond to the hon. Gentleman on the issue he has raised.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): This week we welcomed the new Indian high commissioner to a meeting in the House, and next week there is the celebration across the Indian sub-continent of Maha Shivratri, which commemorates the auspicious occasion of the wedding of Lord Shiva and Parvati. Can we find time—eventually—for a debate on the tremendous links between the UK and India, and the opportunities for business, trade, education and the opening up of services, because it has been a very long time indeed since we have had such a debate in this House?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is a powerful champion for the ties that exist between this country and India. I pay tribute to all members of the Indian diaspora in the UK, who play an important role in our society and our economy. The links of our Indian business community, not just with the sub-continent but with the Asian economy as a whole, are immensely valuable to us. In my view, we should continue to develop the best possible trade links with India for the future.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): May we have a statement on the uses of broadcast footage of the House of Commons? My constituent Charlie Brooker has raised with me—[*Interruption.*] He has, and he was one of my 270-something constituents who contributed to my majority. He has raised with me the problem that he is unable to use such footage in his programme "Screenwipe", yet other not too dissimilar broadcasters are allowed to use it. It depends on whether the programme is satire, light entertainment or factual. Given how vague these boundaries are and the fact that these rules

were dreamt up some 27 years ago, does not the right hon. Gentleman agree that now is a good juncture to revisit this matter and have a statement on it?

Chris Grayling: If it is a matter of concern to the hon. Lady, she should make a submission to the Administration Committee. However, I think it is very important to ensure that the coverage of this House's debates is used in an appropriate way, and I am not in favour of making it available to satire programmes.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): In other referendum news, I know that the Leader of the House will be paying close attention to the outcome of the referendum on the Mayor of Bath and North East Somerset, which is coming up on 10 March. It is opposed by me and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), as well as by pretty much every other local party. Will my right hon. Friend join me in opposing a Mayor for Bath and North East Somerset, and consider having a debate in Government time on its huge cost and its impact on reducing democratic accountability?

Chris Grayling: I am sure that I could not do a better job of influencing the people of Bath and Somerset than my hon. Friend, so I will leave it to him to make that case.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Yesterday at Prime Minister's Questions, the Prime Minister admitted that he is going to go begging to the French President to try to get EDF to commit to Hinkley Point C. Later on in the session, he praised the Royal Mint without saying that it has been mooted for privatisation. Hinkley Point C and HS2 can happen only with Chinese investment. "For sale" signs are on the Green Investment Bank, Network Rail assets, air traffic services and Ordnance Survey, among others. May we have a debate in Government time on why the long-term recovery plan means owning nothing and being for ever in debt to other countries?

Chris Grayling: I always thought it was a good thing to attract international investment, but if it is now Scottish National party policy not to, I am sure investors will be able to come to England, Wales and Northern Ireland and not to Scotland. My own personal view is that we want international investment in Scotland, too.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Nuisance calls are an annoyance to many Members on both sides of the House, but they can cause real distress to the vulnerable and the elderly. The Government have already taken some steps, but may we have a debate about what more can be done to tackle this menace? *[Interruption.]*

Chris Grayling: The shadow Leader of the House is chuntering as usual, but I think that this is rather an important issue. Many elderly people suffer from nuisance calls, and the more that we can do to prevent them, the better. A great deal of work has been done by the Government and the regulatory authorities. However, my hon. Friend should take advantage of the opportunity presented by Business, Innovation and Skills questions on Tuesday week, or, indeed, table a written question

to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, to ensure that we do not ease the pressure on sorting the problem out.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I request the right hon. Gentleman's assistance? The 90-strong all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood has sought a meeting with the public health Minister to discuss the consultation that is currently taking place, but she has refused to meet us. Many of our constituents are rather perplexed: they do not understand why, in the middle of a public consultation, the public health Minister will not meet MPs and listen to what has been said by people who have been affected by the worst treatment disaster in the history of the NHS. Might the Leader of the House be able to intervene and ask the Minister to reconsider her position?

Chris Grayling: I will certainly make inquiries on the hon. Lady's behalf. In the meantime, I hope that the preparations for the year of culture are going well in Hull.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): This morning, in the Vote Office, I picked up a copy of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill, which authorises, for the year ending 31 March 2017, Government spending of £258,322, 682,000. Last night, the Bill received its First, Second and Third Readings in the space of three minutes. When, during those three minutes, did I, as a Scottish MP, have an opportunity to debate and amend Barnett consequentials arising from the Bill?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman clearly did not do enough of a job in persuading his hon. Friends on the Liaison Committee to secure such a debate. That is the route to decisions on what we discuss during debates on estimates. I advise him to talk to his hon. Friends more closely next time.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I was disappointed to learn of the closure of the Fab Lab in Ellesmere Port, which provides advice and opportunities for entrepreneurs to develop their ideas and represents an important part of the future of manufacturing, as well as contributing to the regeneration of the high street. If the Government are really serious about the northern powerhouse, why are they allowing this excellent facility to close? May we please have a debate so that we can ask when Ministers will start putting their words into action?

Chris Grayling: Business Ministers will be here on Tuesday week. I do not know where the funding came from—whether it was national or local—because I do not know enough details of the individual case. However, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that unemployment in the north of this country, and business in the north of this country, are moving in the right direction, not the wrong one.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Services at popular walk-in clinics in Harrow are being put out to tender under the direction of the NHS procurement authority, including services at the Alexandra Avenue

[Mr Gareth Thomas]

clinic, which is used by many of my constituents. May we have a debate in Government time so that we can discuss the role of the procurement authority, and, in particular, explore the question of why local GPs who are currently running walk-in clinics continue to be granted a stake in the long-running provision of such crucial services?

Chris Grayling: Local GPs are able to have a stake in the future of those services. Local GPs are, typically, private organisations providing services for the NHS, and if those services are put out to tender, GPs are perfectly able to demonstrate that they are best placed to do the work.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Despite his funny ways and daft policies, I have become very fond of the Leader of the House over recent months. One of the things that I think he is very good at is arranging regular debates on Syria, so that we do not put the issue on the back burner but, every now and again, have a good debate about it. Most people in this country would expect us to do the same when it comes to the European Union and the referendum. Every week, surely, we should have a major debate on that subject. Could we begin with a debate on the dreadful impact that leaving the EU would have on our universities? For most of us who represent university towns, the universities are our biggest employers and vital to our future, but not one vice-chancellor has come out in favour of Brexit. May we have an early debate, and a regular debate?

Chris Grayling: I am sure that we will have plenty of opportunities to debate European Union matters. We have just had a series of statements and debates on these issues and I am sure that the future of universities and their means of funding, whether direct or indirect via Brussels, will be a regular subject for debate.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): The Guardians of Scotland Trust is a Stirling-based charity which also involves the excellent Stirling Smith art gallery and museum. It is raising money to create a permanent memorial to Sir Andrew de Moray, who alongside William Wallace governed Scotland following the battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297. May we have a debate on recognising excellent fundraising efforts such as this?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is able to use the Back-Bench debate system or the Adjournment debate system to bring forward such a debate. This might also be a subject that he would like his colleagues in the Scottish Parliament to debate.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): The Leonard Cheshire care home in Littleborough provides care for 22 people with long-term disabilities. I visited the home last month and was truly taken aback by the lengths to which the staff will go to help their patients. However, Leonard Cheshire has decided to close the home, which is devastating for the patients, families and nurses. May we have a debate on the priorities of such charities?

Chris Grayling: It is obviously disappointing to hear of a change of that kind, although I do not know enough about the circumstances of that particular decision

or the reasons behind it. I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise his concerns with the charities Minister—the Minister for Civil Society—either in questions or in an Adjournment debate.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): On 17 November, I wrote to the Department of Energy and Climate Change asking for a meeting after DECC officials had met in my constituency to discuss a deplorable situation relating to an open-cast mine that is still not being restored. Despite several follow-up phone calls, I have still not secured a meeting. On 2 November, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs promised me a substantive reply by 20 November on the case of Mr Thornhill that I have been chasing since 2010. I am still waiting for a reply. May I ask the Leader of the House to utilise his foot, which he has also offered to the Scottish National party, to assist my efforts to ensure justice for my constituents?

Chris Grayling: Of course I will chase that up for the hon. Lady.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Yesterday, a train carrying highly radioactive waste travelled through Gilmour Street station in Paisley, causing obvious anger and concern to commuters and residents alike. The Scottish Parliament is against nuclear weapons and new nuclear power, and we do not want those weapons or that waste travelling through our communities. Will the Leader of the House ensure that we get a statement setting out what safety precautions were put in place prior to that nuclear train setting off on its journey?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman might not remember this, but some years ago there was a very visible public demonstration of the safety of such trains to show just how robust the units that carry the radioactive waste are. Nuclear energy remains an important part of the electricity generation for the whole of the United Kingdom, and the waste will need to be moved around, but speaking as a former Minister involved in the whole area of health and safety, I can assure him that the safety standards are of the highest level.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Last Friday, I visited Greenhead College, at which many of my young constituents study. Deep concern was expressed about the delays in the accreditation process for some of the Government's new-style A-levels that are due to start this September. Without that accreditation, planning for the new curriculum cannot take place. This is leaving many teachers in limbo. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on this issue so that colleges and sixth forms can make the necessary plans for their new intake of students?

Chris Grayling: This is an obviously important issue. The Education Secretary will be here on Monday, and I will let her know that this concern has been raised today so that the hon. Lady can raise it again and get a proper response at that sitting.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Leader of the House has yet again failed to announce the recess dates. I can understand the political advantage in failing

to announce Prorogation, but hundreds of staff in this place are struggling to juggle their childcare arrangements and will now be unable to take holidays with their partners as a result of this. When will the Leader of the House stop this unnecessary power trip and show some respect for staff members in this House?

Chris Grayling: As I have set out time and again, the Government's first and foremost task is to ensure the flow of business and to get our business across. We will announce the recess dates as soon as we can, but I am also committed to ensuring that we can deliver our manifesto.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): The Wilton Lane allotments in Guisborough have been used as allotments for more than 100 years, and some families, including the Grouts, have had an allotment there for all that time. Part of that land is in the ownership of the denizens of Guisborough. The Tory chair of Guisborough Town Council wants to sell the land off for development, and went to the extent of asking the clerk of the council to strike a sentence to that effect from the record, so that that information could not be spread around the town. May we have a debate on the powers and responsibilities of town and parish councils across our country?

Chris Grayling: On the matter of town and parish councils, I simply say that it is for the town and parish councillors to decide whether or not to take a step, and of course no individual can take a step without securing a majority vote from their council.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): With the working and child tax credit departments accepting only faxes and letters, and not emails, from constituency MPs' offices, and with the Information Commissioner's Office defining faxes as an unsecure form of communication, may we have a statement from Ministers confirming a full modernisation programme of upgrading communications to the 21st century?

Chris Grayling: Clearly, each Department has to work out the best way of receiving complaints and information about issues from Members' offices. I hear the point the hon. Gentleman makes. The relevant Cabinet Office Minister is here next week for questions and I am sure he will want to make that point to him then.

Point of Order

11.40 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance as to whether I need to ask a Minister to correct the record and, if so, how I go about it. Yesterday, I attended the Committee on the draft Renewables Obligation Closure Etc. (Amendment) Order 2016, with which I am sure you are familiar. I spoke in the Committee, mentioning thousands of job losses in the solar industry. In her response, the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) said that I was making inaccurate comments and that the losses were not as I had described. I wanted to check that, so I have gone back and seen that the Government's own impact assessment says that "between 9,700 and 18,700" jobs will be lost in the solar industry as a result of cuts to feed-in tariffs. The Solar Trade Association said in December that it knows of 1,800 redundancies since the general election and of three companies that have folded. To me, that seems as though I have my facts correct, yet I was rebuked for issuing incorrect information. I wonder how I can go about setting the record straight.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, of which I did not have advance notice. I make no complaint about that, but I am therefore simply issuing a response off the cuff. She complains that she was "rebuked" for her observation, although she is satisfied, from her inquiries, that her observation was correct. I can say, for the completeness of the record, that she was not rebuked by or from the Chair; she was simply rebuked by an opponent in debate. The matter seems to me to be substantially one of debate and argument; she will say she is right and the Minister may well claim likewise.

When the hon. Lady asks me how she should proceed with this matter, my advice would be that she should go to the Table Office to table a question on the matter and see where that gets her with the Minister. Everybody in this place is responsible for the veracity of what is said in the Chamber or in Committees. It is incumbent upon a Member to correct the record if he or she has misled the House, but it is not for me to arbitrate on whether or not that has happened, especially as I was not present at the time. The hon. Lady is notably assiduous, and I feel sure that she will use the device that I have suggested to try to secure satisfaction. If she does not get that, we will no doubt hear from her again.

Backbench Business

Gangs and Serious Youth Violence

11.43 am

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to establish an independent, all-party commission, involving a wide-ranging consultation, to identify the root causes, effect of, and solutions to, serious youth violence, including knife crime, its links to gang culture and the sale of illegal drugs.

At the outset, I wish to say how grateful I am to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate, and I am also grateful to the 19 other Members of the House who supported this application. In particular, I have worked with my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and for Westminster North (Ms Buck), my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), among others, for several years on these issues.

The issues that we are discussing today are difficult. There is no single cause for the violence that we have seen, nor one single solution. What we are seeing on the streets of our country is leading to a senseless loss of lives. That perhaps explains why the digital debate organised on Twitter ahead of this debate by the House of Commons digital team was the House of Commons most successful such debate in terms of the number of Twitter accounts reached—more than 8 million. The hashtag for today's debate is #stopyouthviolence. I recommend that anyone watching this debate uses it.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that our young people are among the very best in the world. Their creativity knows no bounds; their energy is infectious; and they put the great in Great Britain. They give us confidence that our future will be even better than our glorious past.

It is also important to note that the violence that we are talking about is committed by a minority—a significant minority—of young people. We should not draw the conclusion that all of Britain's youth are engaged in serious youth violence. I say that because, too often, the youth of our country are demonised. They are demonised in our national media, and I do not want us to add to that today. It is important in this debate to recognise how wonderful our young people are and to celebrate them. It is because we care so much for them and because we do not want to see their talent and their futures wasted that we are holding this debate today.

In 2007, the violence in different communities—in urban city centres in particular—across our country was put into sharp relief by the shooting, in broad daylight, of a young man, Andre Smartt-Ford, at Streatham ice rink in my constituency. To this day, no one has been charged with Andre's murder, but his mother continues to fight for justice and is now working through the JAGS Foundation to prevent other families from going through the same thing. Tracey Ford has voiced her strong support for this debate today. She is joined by many other parents, such as Richard Taylor, who also lost his young son, Damilola Taylor, to this violence. He set up the Damilola Taylor Trust, which established the Spirit of London Awards to celebrate our young people.

Representatives from SOLA are here today. We pay tribute to all those parents and to those who are working to better the lives of our young people.

What followed from Andre's death in 2007 was a catalogue of tragedy, with 29 teenagers losing their lives in London alone in 2008. The number of fatalities has abated since that time, but, let us face it, the problem has never gone away. Following falls between 2009 and 2012, we have seen the number of serious youth violence offences in London increase by 13.4% and the number of offences the Metropolitan police tags with its gang violence indicator measure increasing by more than 25% since 2012. Much of this goes unreported. Members can go to any A&E in the kind of communities that I am talking about, and they will hear about all sorts of things that are not reported and that do not feature in the figures.

According to Citizens Report, which is a not-for-profit organisation that collects local data on this issue, 17 teenagers lost their lives to this violence last year, which is up from 11 in 2014. Just two weeks ago, I was notified by police of gunshots being fired on a Friday in a location in the north of my constituency. On the Saturday after, there was a multiple stabbing of a young man in the south of my constituency, and then on the Sunday, just outside my constituency, there was a drive-by shooting. On Monday this week at 5.30 in the afternoon, a teenager was stabbed in the north of my borough, in Oval, after a fight at a chicken shop, and so it goes on.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I am so pleased we have been granted three hours to debate a crucial issue not just for young Londoners, but for all communities. Does he agree that there are far too many firearms in circulation in London, and that previously, where a fist or, dare I say it, a knife might have been used, now a very large gun and increasingly sophisticated firearms are being used in these terrible crimes, and that makes the situation even more difficult to manage?

Mr Umunna: I entirely agree. When I was a trustee of a youth charity in Brixton called the 409 Project, I wrote an article in 2007 about the availability of guns and knives, and I did a kind of focus group with some of the young people in our area. What shocked me was the level of detail that some of our young people in Lambeth were able to give me about a gun—they could tell me how many bullets a MAC-10 could spray in a second or in a minute. My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue, and she is right to say that this is not just a London problem. The situation is serious and it is getting worse. It is not confined to London. Last Sunday a teenager was stabbed in Bristol. We hear of this happening all over the UK.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): In my constituency I have recently seen the impact of large-city drug crime moving into the regional towns, and I am very concerned to make sure that Avon and Somerset police devote enough resources away from the big cities such as Bristol to be able to combat that. I do not want see that deteriorate into violent crime which, thankfully, we have not yet seen, but what the hon. Gentleman is saying about the increase in London and Bristol is a worry.

Mr Umunna: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which highlights the suite of issues, including the drug trade, which hang heavy over this debate and will come through as our dialogue progresses.

I want to say something about the title of this debate. I put in for it using the word “gang” deliberately, because we need to talk about the use of this term. We often refer to youth violence and gang or gang-related violence, but it is pertinent for us to question whether we should use the word “gang” at all, in spite of the title of the debate.

Ian Joseph of Middlesex University, who is watching this debate from the Strangers Gallery, has done some very interesting work in this area. He argues that the official definition of a gang distorts the focus of interventions and promotes an understanding of everyday behaviour that does little to permanently avert young people from the real causes of violence. He argues that to be effective, interventions must give greater account to how cultural norms and social processes impact on young people’s friendships and the local neighbourhood-based relationships that they have.

This is backed up by others. The Centre for Criminal Justice Studies has also questioned whether we should be using that term. I wonder whether, by using the term and labelling young people as gang members, we reinforce the notion that they are gangsters. What is a gangster? I wonder how helpful it is for us to use the term. Let us face the fact that using the term enables officialdom to put all these young people in a bracket—“Oh, they’re part of a gang. If they lose their lives, oh well, that doesn’t matter. They’re part of a gang.” I am not sure we should allow this to carry on.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I regret interrupting the fine speech that is being made. Is my hon. Friend familiar with the work of Harriet Sergeant, a rare journalist who has gone to great trouble to engage with members of this underclass? Perhaps “gang” is the wrong word. From reading her books and articles on the matter, one comes away with a profound feeling of regret at the gulf of misunderstanding between official bodies and those who are part of that underclass, and great sympathy for the problems involved and the depth of suffering of those gangs who, in my view and her view, have been badly neglected.

Mr Umunna: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for referring to Harriet Sergeant’s work. Hopefully, those using the hashtag for this debate can post a link on Twitter so that those watching can read more of her work.

Part of the reason why I am not sure how helpful it is to use the word “gang” any more is that things have changed a lot just in the borough I represent in London. Around the time I was first elected, in 2010, we had mass groups of young people who had labels for their groupings. Now the situation is more parochial: things are often confined more to a particular estate, and we have much smaller groups of young people. The situation is also far more fluid.

Whitney Iles, the chief executive officer of Project 507—she, too, is watching the debate in the House—works to prevent young people from engaging in this kind of violence. She put things really well when she told me that we give young people this gang label, but we

never give them a way to get rid of it. So let us consign it to the bin, and let us not refer to it again in the House after this debate, if we can possibly avoid doing so.

The reasons for serious youth violence are not new, and we know what so many of them are. Yes, some violence is carried out by young people from dysfunctional, often chaotic families with a history of, say, domestic violence in the background. However, very often, a lot of young people who get wrapped up in these things come from quite stable families. Sometimes there is an issue because two parents are struggling to make ends meet and holding down two jobs to pay the bills. There is a link there because, as I heard from some young people this morning, someone will often have a desire to help provide for their family—for their mum—and they get wrapped up in these activities as a way of making money to help mum pay the bills.

I really do not care if the usual suspects in the media start saying, “Oh, you’re excusing all this.” We are not providing excuses today, but unless we look at why these things happen, we will not be able to prevent them. I can see the headlines: “MP says children are trying to pay the bills so they go and knife people”. That is not what I am saying; what I am saying is that we must understand the underlying causes if we want to prevent this violence from happening again.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for making a very good speech. Is not fear the real reason why people join these groups? A young person who lives on an estate in an area where these groups operate and who is not a member of any group will be fearful that a group will set upon them and do them great damage. In my limited understanding of this problem, it seems that fear is the spur for young people joining such groups.

Mr Umunna: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important intervention. I agree with him: fear is definitely a major factor, and I will come to it shortly. Trauma also plays a role, and I will come to that too.

There is another common theme, which I have talked about with my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham and my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North. Time and again, at every community meeting on this issue, we hear that there are simply not enough things for our young people to do. I get fed up with hearing that every week and every time we discuss this issue in the House, because nothing ever seems to get done about it. We have to ensure that there are more meaningful things for our young people to do outside school hours, and I am not talking about some windy church hall with a table tennis table. We need decent, proper activities that will expand our young people’s horizons and give them things they will enjoy doing in their local areas. Otherwise, we have the problem of collectives of their peers becoming their surrogate family. That relates to the issue that the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) talked about, but I will come on to that in a moment because I want to go through some of the other factors.

In relation to popular culture, it is too easy to blame rap music or whatever, but it is a society thing. We live in a society that promotes and glamorises violence. It is too easy to say that it is the fault of the creative industries. We increasingly have a society where our

[Mr Umunna]

young people are encouraged to engage in these kinds of violent activities. This is promoted among us and we have to deal with it.

We live in a society that not only promotes violence and too often glamorises it, but promotes an ideal whereby our young people define themselves by reference to what they have as opposed to who they are. There is a consumerism element. Helping one's family to get on is definitely an issue.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend acknowledge that this is not just about young people providing for their family but about their desire to have things, and the role of criminal gangs in offering them a quick buck, so that they are able to earn money to buy things, which because of their low income they are otherwise unable to have?

Mr Umunna: There are so many big elephants in this room of issues, but one is poverty and deprivation. We cannot ignore the part that that plays. My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue. Young people who do not have anything are often robbing from other young people who do not have anything, then there is revenge, and we end up with a cycle of violence. That is definitely part of what we see happening.

Part of the reason that too many of our young people do not have enough money is the unemployment rate among them. Our education system is producing a whole generation who do not always have the skills that our employers need, particularly the technical and vocational skills. Let us face it, this has happened under Governments of all persuasions. I do not see this as a party political issue; I am not interested in scoring any points. We have to deal with the problems in a skills eco-system that is not giving our young people the skills that they need to offer employers to get a job. Let us not forget that hanging over this is the fact that youth unemployment is double the main rate.

The things I have spoken about are fairly obvious—the more talked-about factors—but we need to delve far deeper into the causes than we generally have. The hon. Member for Beckenham referred to the belief of many young people that they are safer in a group than they are on their own. As academics have argued, the perceived need for safety and protection tends to validate behaviour and levels of violence in ways that can obscure the boundary between right and wrong. There is also the issue of being bullied and how that interrelates with carrying or using a weapon. We do not like to talk about that, but we should. There is a semi-formal, often unsupervised daily routine outside school, but sometimes inside school too, that can incubate the production of behaviour and values that lead to a life of this kind of violence, and the expected norms of school and wider mainstream society are juxtaposed to that.

In addition to the fear that the hon. Gentleman talked about, the other big issue is trauma—the sheer trauma that many of our young people experience in their daily lives, which requires much greater consideration than we see reported in our media.

To return to the work of Whitney Iles, this issue needs to be seen as one not just of violence prevention, but of health, particularly mental health. Our young

people are being traumatised by some of their experiences, but they are being given no support to deal with them. Unless we start engaging with them, not only on the obvious level, but at a deeper level, we will not be able to resolve the violence on our streets.

What should be done? First, the Labour Government introduced Every Child Matters, which had a strategic aim to provide wraparound care for young people from long before they went to school to long after they left. That did bring in teenagers, but I think we need to adopt an “every teenager matters” approach, with much more targeted schemes and versions of the previous initiative, in order to address problems experienced by teenagers. It must be said, however, that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham has said, the problems are impacting on younger and younger children, not just teenagers.

Secondly, we have to elevate the standing of youth work in our country. It is about time that we put it on the same pedestal as teaching. Often, youth workers spend as much time as teachers with our young people, but we do not talk about their profession in the same way. We have to do so and put it on a pedestal; we cannot just look at it as an add-on. Too often, youth work is left to people who have other jobs and who may, through their tenants or residents association, be providing youth work on top of their daily job. It needs proper funding so that people can do youth work full time and so that we regard our youth workers in the same way as we regard our teachers.

Thirdly, I really do think that the Government have done some good things, and that is why I want them to reverse their decision to disband the very important ending gang violence and exploitation peer review network, which spreads best practice to local authorities and others. It is due to end in April—next month—but I really hope the Government will reverse that decision, because it is a good network and I have heard very good feedback about it from all over the country, including Lambeth. I want it to continue.

Fourthly, we have to ensure that our young people are properly taught in school about the consequences of what they do, and that they are provided with support to deal with their experiences outside school as well. I want to see more role models who have been members of groups and who have been victims, or even perpetrators, of acts of violence and suffered the consequences. I want more of them to go into schools and tell their story so that future generations do not take the same wrong turn as they did. There is nothing like having somebody who has lived that life telling young people what will happen if they carry on down that avenue. We need to provide much more support to our schools.

This is controversial, but I do not care and am going to say it anyway: a lot of the young people who get wrapped up in all this ultimately have quite commercial and entrepreneurial instincts. Their energy, however, is simply not channelled in the right way and the result is that they turn to criminality and highly illegitimate, terrible ways of doing things. If many of our young people received enterprise teaching in our schools, and if they were provided with inspiration and more access to opportunities to set up their own business, do their own thing and work for themselves in a way that delivers the goods and some money, perhaps we would be able to stop them taking a wrong turn. I can just see

the write-ups saying, “MP says terrible gangsters should start businesses”, but, frankly, I do not care. If they have that kind of instinct, I want to make sure that they do not end up taking a wrong turn and doing illegitimate business, but that they set up a business and become the next Branson. I would like to see many of the kids from the Tulse Hill estate in my constituency going on to be the next Richard Branson.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very important point. Does he agree that the *Evening Standard* should be congratulated on its campaign? He is recommending precisely the sort of work that it has been doing in support of people turning away from gang violence. It is turning young people’s skills and expertise towards business and entrepreneurship, and ensuring that they are able to make something of their lives.

Mr Umunna: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The *Evening Standard* has done excellent work in its “Frontline London” campaign, which it has plastered on the front page frequently. I would like to see other publications and media outlets following its example.

None of us is excusing wrongdoing; none of us is excusing the violence that we see; and none of us would argue that for people who commit such offences, there should not be sanctions. Of course there should be sanctions. I suppose the point that everybody will make today is that if we can prevent people from doing such things in the first place, we will not have to apply those sanctions. Too often, the debate is about clamping down, zero tolerance and banging people up. It is harder to focus on how we prevent them from doing those things in the first place.

That is, ultimately, why I would like the Government to set up an independent cross-party commission on these issues, involving a wide-ranging consultation that, importantly, includes young people. Too often, we talk about young people but they are not at the table when we do so. I would like the commission to identify the root causes and effects of, and the solutions to, youth violence so that we do not see more death on our streets.

To wrap up, I think we should be absolutely honest, up-front and frank about the fact that if we were talking predominantly about middle-class children from comfortable, middle-income families and wealthy neighbourhoods, the issue would be much higher up the national agenda. The murder of young people by other young people who fit that middle-income demographic profile would command many more column inches. It is a disgrace and a damning indictment of our society that, increasingly, it is becoming immune to what is happening on our doorsteps. Our society is ignoring the issue, putting a whole generation of young people into a corner and saying, “That is what happens with those kinds of young people from those kinds of areas.” I want to make it very clear in this debate that the House of Commons recognises that no matter what their background—whether they grow up on an estate or in a comfortable neighbourhood—every single young life matters. We will not stand by while violence and fatalities continue to hit the next generation, because it is our future.

12.12 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) on securing a debate on this most important of issues. He gave a powerful and articulate speech. Last year, 188 people were killed with a knife and 119 sexual assaults took place at the point of a knife. Attempted murder and threats to kill involving a knife totalled over 2,100 incidents. It is no exaggeration to say that thousands of Britons, many of them young, have feared for their lives through stabbing.

When I was elected in May last year, I pledged to my constituents that I would do all I could to tackle to scourge of knife crime. Why? Colchester has seen too many young lives destroyed by crimes involving weapons. Jay Whiston, James Attfield and Nahid Almanea all lost their lives too early, and each case was a personal tragedy. Too many people, particularly our young people, still feel that it is acceptable to carry blades and knives. They wrongly believe that doing so will keep them safe. Let us be clear. Carrying a knife does not keep them safe; it is illegal and puts them and others in grave danger.

Bob Stewart: I believe that some people carry such weapons because they feel that doing so gives them status.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, and he is absolutely right. There are many reasons why young people carry blades. Sometimes it is to do with fear—that relates to his earlier point—and sometimes they are a status symbol. We have to hammer home the message that not only is it illegal to carry a knife, but a person is statistically far more likely to be the victim of a knife crime if they do so. We have to get that message out loud and clear.

I believe that the answer to youth violence is threefold, involving deterrence, education and intervention. In the interests of time, I will focus on the first two. I welcome the steps that the Government have taken, such as minimum custodial sentences for repeat knife possession and the commitment on police budgets. I agree with the hon. Member for Streatham on the need for education, which has a key role to play. We need to do far more to educate our young people about the dangers of carrying knives.

I have campaigned for some time with a local knife crime charity, Only Cowards Carry, which provides weapons awareness lessons in schools. The charity, which is based in north Essex in the Clacton area, was set up in 2012 by Caroline Shearer, whose 17-year-old son, Jay Whiston, was fatally stabbed that year. Since then Caroline, who is an inspirational woman, has campaigned to show the devastating impact of knife crime on young lives and families, and she has provided weapons awareness lessons in schools. Those hard-hitting lessons show young people the dangers of carrying knives and blades. I have been to one and, trust me, they leave an impact. Students who are usually cocky and confident finish the lesson shocked and startled at the brutal impact that knives can have on lives. The images of knife attacks and knife wounds on young people hit home very hard. We need to send out the message that all it takes is one moment of stupidity for lives and reputations to be shattered.

[Will Quince]

We teach our young people about internet safety, road safety and citizenship. There is a strong case for more schools to teach pupils about the danger of carrying knives. As I have found, Ministers regularly throw back the challenge that the demands on the curriculum are great. I accept that point, but, to be clear, I am talking about one 45-minute lesson in year 9 or year 10. That would not be a huge burden on the national curriculum.

Last summer, Caroline Shearer and I presented a petition with 50,000 signatures to Downing Street to call for charities such as Only Cowards Carry to go into schools to give those hard-hitting lessons to our young people. That would be a big step forward in tackling knife crime, not only in Colchester and north Essex, but across the country. The Government should take another hard look at encouraging more schools to introduce weapons education lessons.

According to the crime survey for England and Wales, violent crime is down since 2010, but according to violence against the person statistics recorded by the police, violent crime has increased. The picture is far from clear, and the reasons for spikes and falls in violent crime are not well understood. It is essential that the police, supported by good academic analysis, do the research to enable them to understand what is happening in our towns and cities.

There has been too much speculation about the causes, and we really need to focus on the facts. In Essex, more than half of the notable increase in recorded victim-based crime in the last 12 months—4,463 of 8,165 crimes—was in the “violence without injury” subcategory of violence against the person. That has traditionally covered harassment, shouting and very minor stone throwing, but the Home Office has decided that it should also include online bullying and harassment. That is nonsense, and it will really distort the debate.

I believe that there is a strong argument for a new stand-alone crime type category for recording online crimes. If those crimes continue to be placed in the category of violent crime, it will be difficult to debate violent crime and its specific causes. Of course, online bullying and harassment are extremely serious crimes, which sadly affect young people more than people in any other age groups. However, the steps we need to take to tackle physical violence and gang violence are different from those needed to tackle online abuse and harassment, so it is important to look at recategorisation.

In my constituency, victim-based crime is up by 821 offences on the year. Within that, violence is up by 681 offences. As I have just mentioned, a staggering 93% of those crimes are violence with no injury, and much of the total is made up of online bullying or harassment. That puts the rise in a very different light.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in relation to reported crime, particularly among young people, so much violent crime goes unreported?

Will Quince: The hon. Lady makes a good point. Lots of crimes up and down this country go unrecorded for all sorts of reasons. I very much support police forces, such as Essex police, that are making it easier for people to report crimes, particularly online. We must

make it far easier for people to report crimes and give them the confidence that they will be followed up by the police.

To return to the point I was making—I apologise that it is a little detailed—it is really important to be able to base this debate on accurate statistics. It is almost impossible for us to have such a good, clear debate when the Home Office has provided such broad and unclear definitions of violent crime. Better categorisation is needed, including, as I have said, a separate category for online offences.

Another serious concern is to do with geography and location. In Essex, there is very clear evidence of increased violence related to gangs involved in the supply and distribution of class A and other drugs. The hon. Member for Streatham made the point about the clear link between gang or youth violence and class A drugs. Communities in Essex are consistently evolving, as they always have, with the movement of people from London. The sad reality is that some of the gang problems traditionally associated with areas of London are spreading to many, if not all, towns up and down the country, as my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Marcus Fysh), who is no longer in his place, pointed out.

There have been a number of murders, often involving stabbings, where neither the victims nor those arrested and, in some cases, nor those convicted of the offences live in Essex. The London gangs are, without doubt, extending their county lines into Essex. Violent gang members have been using intimidation and violence, often against vulnerable people, to take over properties in towns such as Southend and Basildon, and even as far north as Colchester, to supply drugs to local dealers. This is not just about drugs, but about serious intimidation and threats against vulnerable people. We know what happens in London, and even outside London there is sometimes extreme sexual violence against women and girls who associate with such gangs.

It is essential that our police forces co-operate really closely on this issue. I am pleased that Essex police already co-operates well with the Metropolitan police, but it is extremely disappointing that, in 2016, most police forces still do not automatically share crime data and that they operate on different crime systems. I commend Essex for leading the way in having the first fully collaborative policing IT system, which will soon be used by nine forces. I am also pleased that the very recent report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary on police effectiveness judged Essex police to be good at dealing with serious crime of this sort. Other forces quite simply must follow their lead in taking a more comprehensive approach and working more closely together.

To conclude, it is refreshing to hear a sense of cross-party consensus in the Chamber—not entirely around possible solutions, but certainly around a willingness to address this most important of issues. I very much support the call made by the hon. Member for Streatham for cross-party working on this issue. A fact-finding exercise to identify the root causes would be a sensible step. As I have mentioned, perhaps a little long-windedly, better categorisation is important so that we can get to the root causes and have a debate based on facts, rather than conjecture. Education, deterrence and intervention are also absolutely key to reducing violent crime and

serious youth violence. For many of our young people, delaying action to address this problem is simply not an option.

12.23 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am very grateful for the opportunity to participate in this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) on holding it. I know that, behind the scenes, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) has been quietly campaigning in the Tea Room for such a debate because of the concerns in her constituency. It is fantastic to be joined by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who has huge experience of these issues and has continually brought them, certainly during my years in Parliament, to the House's attention.

This is where I start: the issue is not new. In a sense, it is very important not to have this debate as though this is a year zero moment. We have had this problem for several years. Problems with young people getting caught up in crime, particularly in urban and deprived areas, are absolutely not new. Those at home over Christmas who landed on the show "Dickensian", an adaptation of many of Dickens's books, and those very familiar with both "Great Expectations" and "Oliver Twist" will know that we had gangs in London. We had groups of young people getting up to criminality in London, and above such gang activity was usually the adult activity running the gangs, so these issues are not new. I was born in the period just after the huge public concern about mods and rockers congregating in different parts—

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Yes.

Mr Lammy: I notice that the Front-Bench Opposition spokesman is absolutely aware of that. She is ever so slightly older than me. At that time, there was real concern about gang activity in seaside areas or in urban areas of the country. The debate in this House about young people and crime and about gang activity is not new, so what is new? I think that the level of violence is new, the age profile is worrying and the geographic spread feels out of control.

On the age profile, the Met police says that its matrix—its central way of recording who is caught up in what it describes as gang activity—had a total of 3,459 individuals at the last time of publication in May 2014. There were 500 individuals under the age of 18: two 13-year-olds, 21 14-year-olds, 71 15-year-olds, 138 16-year-olds and 268 17-year-olds. There were also 356 18-year-olds, while 55% of the total were aged 18 to 22. Something is going on, and it is something we should be very worried about.

Any Members with significant housing estates in their constituency will talk about the arrival in this country of a phenomenon, which we often associate with America, of young people—teenagers—running drug activity on behalf of older individuals.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the serious violence against women and very young girls associated with gang-related activity is not presently recorded appropriately or understood, and that not enough action is being taken on that specific part of this important problem?

Mr Lammy: I am so pleased that my hon. Friend raises that issue, because that is the other factor that is new. I am about to come on to that.

The young age profile has something to do with the fact that enforcement on this national problem is working: the police are locking people up. We are serious about people carrying a knife and, historically, we have been serious about people carrying a gun. The police have locked up some of the older individuals, particularly after the 2011 riots, but all that has done is to drive the crime down to younger individuals.

My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham made a point about the definition of gangs. It is very dangerous to call any congregation of young people a gang. It almost feels as though we call any congregation of young black and brown people a gang. Those of us in the House who have children, particularly children who are getting to their teenage years, know that, to a 12 or 13-year-old, joining a gang is quite attractive. We therefore need to be very careful about the definition of gangs.

Matthew Pennycook: My right hon. Friend rightly raises what happens when the police target older members of criminal gangs—I am talking about criminal gangs, not groups of young people—in operations. It leaves a vacuum that triggers a spike in violence among the younger, lower orders of the gangs, who have been drawn in for the very reasons he cites.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is completely right. What is unfortunately being said about the moral compass of these young people is incredibly worrying. They are impressionable; they are young. For reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham raised, when I say that they are impressionable, I am referring to the fact that we live in a society that has prioritised choice for the individual above everything else. We live in a society where people have the choice of whether to be exposed to quite serious violence on social media, on television and in parts, although not all, of the games industry. It is hard for modern parents, however much money they have, to distinguish between access to those images and that impression.

We therefore have young people stabbing others, almost as if they do not realise the consequences. It is quite, quite bizarre that someone might not realise that puncturing skin and causing blood loss might lead to a loss of life. I have seen images—they are on YouTube, so we can see them—of young people being stabbed continuously and it being almost like a pastime. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford is right that much of this goes completely unreported. It never turns up in our hospitals. It is solved by self-medication. People go to the pharmacy and get their band aid. It is sorted out in the community, so there is an indication that this violence is going down.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) raised something else that is new and worrying and that we would not associate, historically, with mods and rockers or Dickensian times: the phenomenon of women, including young women, being at the centre of the action. Again, as some of the older individuals who run the gangs have been locked up—actually, let us be clear that they can still run a gang from prison—they bring in the younger folk. Why? Young folk are less likely to get a sentence if they

[Mr Lammy]

are caught. They also bring in the women on the estates and prey on the young women. Historically, the Children's Commissioner has done tremendous work to raise issues such as the sexualisation of women and the way in which women become the victims of gang activity. Someone can hide the knife in their girlfriend's bedroom or hide their stash with her. She can walk quietly over to the opposite estate and perhaps not get detected or picked up in quite the same way, so the profile is changing.

Mr Umunna: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way during his powerful speech. The issue is not just girls and women concealing weapons or being used to conceal weapons, but the straightforward exploitation of women in our communities, who are passed from one group of young lads to another. That just does not get talked about nearly enough in my view, as my fellow Lambeth MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), said.

Mr Lammy: Absolutely; there is a deeply disturbing pattern in the sexualisation of these women, and they are victims. That issue has not been picked up, as has been debated in other places.

All of this leads to a disturbing combination of violence, sexual activity, real victims, both young and female, and criminality in our areas. It is not just Members who are saying that. Dean Haydon, head of Scotland Yard's homicide and major crime command, said that the presence of 13 and 14-year-olds on the gangs matrix was concerning and warned of exploitation. It is very worrying that 17 men aged 18 or under were fatally stabbed in London just last year.

The Minister published a strategy in January 2016. I ask her as gently as I can, does this problem merit an eight-page strategy or something more considerable? At the back of the strategy in annex A, there is a list of the constituencies that are described as being "Ending Gang and Youth Violence areas". The first question I have in relation to that is what we mean by "ending". Are we really dedicated to ending this problem?

I have been in the House for 16 years and this story began around about the time that I came here. In 1994 or '95, at about the time that Tony Blair became the leader of the Labour party and John Major was coming to the end of his leadership of the Conservative party, we would not have had a debate about youth violence and gangs. It just was not present in the British lexicon at that point in our history. Towards the end of the '90s, we started to see an upsurge in gun violence and Operation Trident began. I thought this was inappropriate, but it was termed black-on-black violence. That morphed into the strategies that we saw, particularly under Charles Clarke's leadership as Home Secretary, under the Tony Blair Government. After the riots under the coalition Government, there was also an upsurge.

Why am I talking about annex A? We have to decide whether we want to end this problem. I am afraid that it is going in the wrong direction. I have talked about the young people. I have talked about the women. I have talked about the violence. Other hon. Members have mentioned trauma. Let us look at the geography. In April 2012, the areas that were identified were places

like Hackney, Haringey, Islington, Lewisham, Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham and Sandwell. Hon. Members will not be surprised that those were the areas we wanted to deal with. By December 2012, it had moved on to include Hammersmith and Fulham, Merton and Leeds. When it got to Barnet, Bromley, Havering and Thanet, it started to get quite worrying. Last year, it included Basildon, Grimsby, Harrow, High Wycombe, Southampton and Swindon.

What is going on here? Something that was urban and inner-city has become incredibly suburban. Murders that were traditionally black have become white. It is reflecting on all our young people and they are being caught up in this violence. The picture is not unique to particular communities, but is spreading. There is a geographic spread.

I therefore come back to whether this problem is worth just an eight-page strategy of very anodyne statements:

"We will continue to prioritise the reduction of gang related violence including tackling knife crime."

How? By when? Local areas are encouraged to continue to follow the approach of

"bringing key partners together and developing an effective local response to gang violence."

How? Who is going to do that? How do we know what is best practice? We have evidence that some of the gangs straddle different local authorities. There is real spread. Gangs in London—adults, actually—are running young people into the suburbs to sell drugs. How does the strategy in Lewisham or Haringey relate to the strategy in Kent? What is the pattern? That is not mentioned.

Apparently, the Ministry of Justice has brought together analysts

"to examine the evidence base"

and

"ensure responses will be more coherent",

but how is that analysis being shared? Where do I get hold of it? How are we coming together to deal with it? It does not feel that there is enough of a grip on a spreading epidemic that is taking the lives of young people and inflicting real pain and hardship on differing communities. I believe that is why my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham secured today's debate.

What is required? We need much better understanding of best practice, and we have to get into the issue of violence in society. Any social worker or youth offending team worker will tell us that domestic violence is often going on in the homes of the people involved. We have the troubled families initiative, but what impact is it having on the problem that we are discussing, given that it seems to be getting worse? The statistics are worrying. The figures up to January 2016 show that there has been an 18% increase in assault with injury and a 22% increase in violence against the person in London. Data from the London ambulance service—we know that there are profound problems with its data, so they are not necessarily the best—show a 9% increase in assaults involving knives. Knife crime is up by 14% in London as a whole over the past 12 months. The situation is urgent, yet it is not figuring in our national conversation and responses in the way that it ought to.

After the 2011 riots, there was huge fanfare, because the Mayor of London, now the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)—he is obviously very good at fanfare—brought in Bill Bratton, the commissioner from New York. Hon. Members will remember that he had all the strategies and plans, but what happened to them? There has been some discussion of the model used in Glasgow, where there was a significant problem. What bearing does what Glasgow has done with its violence reduction unit have on the Government's plans? We have also heard about what has gone on in Chicago and in Boston. The ideas to end the problem are out there, and there are solutions, but where is the coherent strategy to deal with it?

I am sorry to challenge the strategy document, but to people living in or representing one of the areas affected it feels like a civil service exercise, not the deliberate action that we will require. We particularly need not enforcement but diversion activities, especially for our very young souls.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the next speaker, may I say that we want to start the wind-ups at about half-past 1? We have three more Back-Bench speakers to go, so if they can keep to 10 or 15 minutes, everybody will get in.

12.43 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) on introducing this important debate and on his powerful speech, which set out the challenges that we face. We have heard some extremely strong speeches, in which Members have made the point that this is not year zero. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) said, there is a long tradition of violent groups in this country, going back centuries in different manifestations. However, the nature of the problem is changing. It is growing younger and more female, and it is spreading to other areas. Yet it remains true that the crisis largely, but not exclusively, affects black and minority ethnic populations and is one of deprivation.

It is a great shame that we do not have more Members of Parliament in the Chamber to discuss this subject, and I fear that my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham is right that if the problem were not overlaid with that of deprivation, we would have more. It is critical that we exercise our duty as Members of Parliament to all our constituents, and that we echo the cries of pain that we hear in our communities by addressing the problem.

Because this is not year zero, we know that after a sharp increase in deaths from serious youth violence in London in 2007 and 2008, action was taken and the situation improved in the years to 2011 or 2012. The last debate that I secured on gangs and serious youth violence was in 2011, and after that time—I am not saying that the two facts were connected—there was genuine progress. Steps were taken, and there was a welcome reduction in the number of deaths in London. As my right hon. and hon. Friends have set out, that success is now being reversed, which is extremely worrying. As others have said, by no means all incidents are reported to the police.

Westminster North is not Lambeth, Haringey or one of the other areas usually associated with such pressures. It is certainly not south central Los Angeles. However, I will tell the House about some of the incidents that have happened there over the past couple of months. In January, just after the unfortunate removal of security cameras in Church Street in my constituency, a young man was stabbed in the street in front of witnesses. A constituent emailed me to say:

“This brutal and bloody event was shocking to witness and occurred immediately outside two shops that belong to”

the local trading association.

“I understand...that the victim is in surgery, and was lucky that a deep stab wound just missed his heart.”

Two days before Christmas, a young man I know well who did work experience in my office was surrounded by a group of 20 local young people and stabbed in the chest. The knife entered the fatty tissue of his heart, and he was extremely lucky to survive.

A few weeks earlier, a constituent who lives in my road emailed me to say:

“I was awoken by noises in the street outside and some desperate shouting. I got up and looked out of the window and saw a young lad on the phone, he was saying to someone on the other end; ‘I’ve been stabbed’.

I called 999—it took a long time for me to persuade them it was a real, serious incident. I understand that the boy had 4 stab wounds.”

That boy was 16 years old. In October, constituents reported violent clashes in St Mary's Paddington Green and in Paddington recreation ground, tweeting at me:

“We desperately need police on patrol. The situation is out of control.”

They said that violence was rampant, with drugs and gangs, and tweeted:

“Huge gang fight behind Little Venice Sports Centre”.

That is a few weeks in Westminster North, which indicates how real the problem is.

It is true that, as my right hon. and hon. Friends have said, people can live in the communities affected and be completely oblivious to the situation. As a middle-aged woman, I can walk the same streets and live in a different world from the one in which our young people live in our cities, but increasingly also in some of our towns. Their experience of it is different, and the adult community needs to wake up to the challenges.

It is important to note that although most adults might be oblivious to every single one of those incidents, they have ripples, which spread out. The 20 young people who stabbed the young man who had done work experience in my office know what happened. Their families and relatives know the risks and dangers, and so do the family of that young man himself.

One of the most distressing things that I encounter is when I go into schools in my constituency and talk to eight or nine-year-old children and ask them how they feel about their community. One point they raise is gang violence. They ask whether it can be stopped, because they fear for their relatives.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. In my constituency, the youngest gang member is eight years old and the oldest is 61.

[Dawn Butler]

That shows the breadth of the problem in communities such as Brent Central. As she says, many people are oblivious to what happens on the streets.

Ms Buck: My hon. Friend is right. We know the parents of those children who are injured or tragically murdered. They are in the community, in their churches and neighbourhoods, and their agony echoes throughout the community.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. My constituency is in mourning this week because, on Monday, a young, 11-year-old lad was the victim of a hit and run by young people in a vehicle. He was killed outside the mosque in front of his father, and the whole community is in mourning. As I have said before, often our young people do not understand the consequences of using weapons, and they feel that it is just part of being in a gang, or part of youth culture. That has serious consequences for the rest of their lives and for the whole community.

Ms Buck: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I do not want to go into the causes because they have been well set out and time is pressing, but she is right about the lack of understanding of the consequences of violent behaviour. A community group in my constituency ran a campaign called “fear and fashion”, which encapsulates the story perfectly. People are frightened, and “fashion” refers to people knowing that these things are going on in the community and considering them to be normal.

Every single incident, even non-fatal ones, is a tragedy that has ramifications and an impact on communities.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know, as a former member of the Home Affairs Committee, that the Committee conducted an inquiry into this—I think she was a member at the time. Given the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna), is it not important to revisit some of the conclusions because some of the knowledge is already there and just needs to be revisited and acted on?

Ms Buck: My right hon. Friend is right. As we have heard, there are changes in the way in which gang and serious youth violence is working itself out, but constants remain, and we need to learn from that experience.

Some positive things are going on in the work that community organisations do. I do not often praise Westminster council, but I do when it deserves it, and it has a gangs unit that includes excellent staff, who work intensively with young people. Redthread community organisation works out of four accident and emergency units and tries to catch young people at what it describes as a “teachable moment”, when injury has been inflicted and young people can learn from it.

There is therefore much that is good, but I am going to break a little with consensus by saying how much we are in danger of losing at the very point when we need to gain. I am deeply worried about the crisis in our youth offending institutes, which are ridden with extreme gang violence. The more the cost pressures bite in the youth justice sector, and the more the overcrowding in our prisons and youth offending institutes, the more

dangerous the situation becomes. That is at a time when we are spending £138,000 a year in Medway to keep a young person in one of those units. In Feltham, we are spending £69,000 a year. That is kind of money we spend to lock up a young person—obviously not only for gang and serious youth violence—yet we are doing something dreadful: we are removing the investment that is necessary to prevent that behaviour.

I am horrified by my local council, which is not alone, because it is withdrawing all funding from its youth service. If we are talking about intervention and catching young people at a teachable moment, the youth service is critical. My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham made a point about youth workers and the continuity and expertise that they provide in the community. They are critical and we are losing them.

Mr Umunna: My hon. Friend is making a very important point. So many activities that are provided for young people are not statutory. A lot of youth provision is not statutory, so it is often first in line for cuts. I am desperately trying not to be party political, but the 56% cut in the local government grant from central Government to our local authorities will inevitably have an impact on the support that local authorities can give to third sector organisations working on this matter.

Ms Buck: My hon. Friend is right. We are in a dangerous situation as the pressure on youth services bites, because early intervention is so important. We often think of early intervention as being for the under-fives, but it is as important in the teenage and adolescent years as it is for under-fives.

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. When I was the Minister for young citizens and youth engagement, it was our hope that such provision would be made statutory and that youth services would be ring-fenced in each council. It is disappointing that the Government have scrapped that and that we do not invest in all the youth services that have done an excellent job in communities for many years.

Ms Buck: I agree. However, it is not just youth services; there is also pressure on child and adolescent mental health services. For all the talk about giving mental health services parity, there has been an unprecedented squeeze in modern times on mental health services, particularly on CAMHS. My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham made a point about mental health and I want to spend a minute or two on that. Westminster council—again, I praise it when it does good things—commissioned a report on gangs and mental ill health, a vastly unexplored subject that is important in understanding serious youth violence.

The report said:

“Street gangs and associated serious violence have been a growing concern in the UK over the past decade and a specific concern in Westminster. They are concentrated in poor urban areas with high crime and multiple social problems. The mental health needs of young people in gangs have, until recently, been overlooked.”

The report demonstrated extremely high mental health need among those involved in gangs. Compared with non-violent men, gang members had increased rates of antisocial personality disorder—57 times higher than the average. Suicide attempts are 13 times higher, psychosis

is four times higher, and anxiety disorder rates are twice the average. Gang members are significantly more likely than non-violent men to have used mental health services, with gang members eight times more likely to have consulted a psychiatrist, eight times more likely to have been admitted as a mental health in-patient and five times more likely to have used psychotropic medication.

We have a mental health crisis that affects the very people that we need to deal with, yet, at the same time, CAMHS are being reduced, and particularly some of the school-based services that can provide early referral. I am especially worried that the mental health intervention in my local authority is half what it was two years ago, and is funded only until next year. Of course, the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime—MOPAC—anti-gangs initiative is funded only until next year. There is therefore uncertainty about intervention.

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. There have been 35 gang-flagged incidents in Greenwich and Woolwich in the few months since I was elected last May, including far too many tragic deaths in the Woolwich area. Given that, and the epidemic that hon. Members have described, does she agree that it makes no sense for the Government to pull front-line capacity, peer reviewers and national co-ordinators out of the ending gang and youth violence programme?

Ms Buck: I totally agree. We understand a great deal about what is going on, even with a changing dynamic, yet we are in danger of doing all the wrong things. We are scrapping youth intervention in some places; we are closing down the youth service in some places; we are cutting CAMHS and so many other areas of early intervention; and we are—fatally in my view—ensuring that services that work for children and young people who are at risk of gang involvement are short term and end quickly.

I believe two things. First, it takes a village to raise a child. Those of us who live in the city, which is diverse, mobile and disconnected, know that we have to build and rebuild that village every single day. Voluntary endeavour alone cannot do it: our village must include neighbourhood police and the youth service, the national health service, CAMHS and schools, as well as churches, mosques, voluntary groups and individual families. Secondly, we should treat gangs and serious youth violence as a public health emergency as much as a criminal justice matter. Mental health services are on the frontline of that battle.

12.58 pm

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) for securing this important debate and for his excellent speech, which outlined the complexities and difficulties of the subject. It is a privilege to follow the powerful contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck).

I want to focus on the phenomenon of “county lines”, whereby urban, criminal gangs groom and coerce children and young people into selling class A drugs, particularly heroin and crack cocaine. Young people travel many miles from their home, often to quiet market and seaside towns where they are set up to deal drugs, sometimes from the home of a vulnerable person.

Last July, I attended the launch of the first major report on county lines, entitled “Running the risks: the links between gang involvement and young people going missing”, which was published jointly by Catch22 and Missing People. A month later, the National Crime Agency produced an intelligence assessment that said that county lines affect “most forces”, and almost always involve the exploitation of vulnerable people. It said that children are used

“as they are inexpensive, easily controlled and less likely to be detected by police”.

In January, the Home Office published a report entitled “Ending gang violence and exploitation”, which highlighted the fact that gangs have wised up to police tactics and are operating more covertly, making it harder for the police to disrupt activity and safeguard vulnerable people. The reports also state that young girls are groomed for involvement in criminal behaviour and harmful sexual behaviour as part of the gang culture. Indeed, the recent Rotherham trial showed the connection between organised crime and drugs, and child sexual exploitation.

We do not yet know the scale of the county lines problem, and where it is discovered, agencies are not clear how to deal with it. I have been told about children from Greater Manchester who have been found selling drugs in flats in seaside and other provincial towns, including some as far away as Devon. Children are used to reduce the risk to older gang members, and they may go unnoticed by local police, particularly if they have no record of offending. The gang leaders are rather like modern-day Fagins or Bill Sikes—hard men who groom youngsters and then use them to do their dirty work. There is serious under-recognition of the county lines phenomenon, which I believe is the next big grooming scandal.

Just as with children groomed for child sexual exploitation, we must recognise that young people drawn into criminality and drug dealing have, in the first instance, been groomed and manipulated. Those young people end up being charged with criminal offences, which gives them the same relationship with the law as the adults who groomed them. That leaves them vulnerable to further exploitation, and they continue to be victims at the same time as offending. That must be seen in the context of organised crime and the systematic grooming of young people. Often, those at the centre are long-term hardened criminals.

The Catch22 report stressed the link between gang involvement and young people going missing, and said that too often the young people are criminalised rather than safeguarded. It said that, although missing incidents for children and young people are generally under-reported, that is particularly acute for those involved in gangs. It presented evidence of gang-involved children and young people being placed into care miles away from their home town, with little care planning or support, leaving them vulnerable to getting drawn back into gangs. An additional issue with county lines is that the young people involved may often be aged between 16 and 18. According to the Children's Society, there is evidence of massive under-reporting of young people who go missing in that age group.

Understanding of county lines is developing at a national level, and the use of young vulnerable people to traffic drugs across county lines is flagged up as a major issue by practitioners. Organisations that work to

[Ann Coffey]

turn young people away from gang crime—most notably the St Giles Trust, a charity in London that works with young people to break the cycle of offending—have been dealing with the issue for some time and have harrowing stories to share. I was told by the St Giles Trust that young people are using the plastic container from Kinder Egg toys to transport drugs inside their own bodies—a serious risk to their health. It is hard to imagine a more graphic metaphor for the perversion of childhood. The trust also told me about young girls dressed in school uniform who are being used to mule drugs because they are unlikely to be stopped and searched. The age at which young people get involved with gangs is concerning. There have been reports of cases in London involving children as young as nine, and the trust gave at least one example of a child aged 12 being involved in county lines.

Increasingly, there are stories about gangs setting up their own young members to be robbed en route. They are then told that they must work off the debt by trafficking and selling drugs for free, or by engaging in sex. That is nothing less than slavery. The threat of child sexual exploitation for girls involved in gangs is known, but the added factor of being trafficked to remote locations compounds their vulnerability. Those young people are at risk of physical violence, sexual exploitation, and emotional and physical abuse. That model of grooming arguably involves both trafficking and modern slavery.

These children are seen as “bad kids” who have chosen a criminal lifestyle. For example, a national newspaper recently reported a court case involving a 13-year-old Manchester boy who was sent to Barrow in Cumbria by a criminal gang and set up as a heroin and crack cocaine dealer. There was a quote saying that police said the boy “revelled” in his role as a “little gangster”. He was a child.

The recent Home Office report indicates that we still have some way to go in tackling county lines. Action is needed at national level to set out clearly where responsibility lies within law enforcement for detecting and disrupting county lines, and how information should be shared with local authorities and safeguarding boards so that when young people are found they are supported in an appropriate manner.

We need to know the scale of involvement of vulnerable young people in county lines. I asked a number of parliamentary questions to try to establish numbers. The Home Office Minister responded that, because the National Crime Agency does not conduct county lines operations, it does not hold that information. We also need to know how much use is being made of anti-trafficking legislation and modern slavery laws to charge older gang members with grooming younger members. Finally, we need to know how best to support those young people once they have been found.

The police should be using data on missing episodes, and cross-referencing that with information about possible gang involvement, not only to understand trends, but to take an early intervention approach, and to try to disrupt involvement early after missing incidents. I offer the Minister a practical suggestion that would help to disrupt the grooming of children and young people to sell drugs at that early stage. Currently, numerous civil orders are available to the police to combat grooming

for child sexual exploitation, including sexual risk orders, sexual harm prevention orders, and child abduction warning notices. I would like similar orders to be created, to be used where children are being groomed by organised criminals and gangs to act as drug runners. Perhaps they could be called “Fagin orders”.

Many children who are initially groomed into criminal activity are often then groomed for sexual exploitation; alternatively, they are initially groomed for child sexual exploitation, and then for criminal purposes. The two forms of exploitation are often inextricably linked, and young people are reluctant and frightened to disclose either. Return interviews with children who have gone missing are an important source of establishing the risk to the young person, and of gathering information about their associates and intelligence about county lines. It is important that that information is used for safeguarding by police and children’s services.

When young people are found and arrested after involvement in county lines, the approach from agencies should be holistic. The St Giles Trust has suggested a pilot in which their caseworkers—who are ex-offenders—accompany police on targeted raids and immediately offer support to the young people, who are more likely to listen to those who have been in the same situation.

To conclude I will return to the point I made at the beginning of my remarks: we must learn from the child sexual exploitation scandals that have ruined so many lives, and we cannot afford to make the same mistakes again, blaming young people, saying that they have made their own bed, failing to ask the right questions, and failing to respond even when we know what is going on. Missing People has been working with a mother whose son started going missing aged 12 and was being groomed by a gang to sell drugs away from home in a county lines operation. The mother was desperate not to lose her son to that, and always reported it every time he went missing. It took her six months to receive any support from services. How can that be right? The boy repeatedly went missing for periods ranging from overnight to up to three months. He ended up being taken into care and had numerous distance placements.

We need a response to county lines that ensures that children are found, safeguarded and supported out of gangs, and that the adults who groom and manipulate them are punished to the full extent of the law. Until then, it will continue to be the young victims who are blamed and punished, as their abusers and puppet masters continue with a trade that nets them thousands of pounds a day.

1.9 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): As a new MP, nothing can prepare you for receiving the call from the police telling you that a teenager has been murdered in your constituency. Once was hard enough, but within weeks of each other, it happened twice on exactly the same estate. In fact, since becoming an MP last year, four young people from my constituency have lost their lives due to the needless violence on our streets: Shaquan, Naseem, Kabba and Jamar. I have sat down with many of the family and friends left behind. Many of them are here today. Losing loved ones is hard enough. For them to have been murdered, and to not be able to understand what has happened, is even harder.

I have been calling for a debate on this subject since October last year. I am therefore grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) for securing the debate, and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting it time.

There is so much we could talk about; there is so much that needs to be said—but we also need to listen. We can all stand here and give passionate speeches about gangs and youth violence, but the truth is that nothing will change. There is no speech that any one of us could give today that will stop our young people killing each other. That is the harsh reality, so what do we do? Do we accept that it happens and simply move on? No. Each one of us has an obligation to find solutions. I believe that they will come from building a stronger, more resilient community base for our country—one where we look out for each other.

Do we write another report, pull some words together and call it a policy? No. The Government need to realise that writing down 2,500 words, giving it the grand title of “Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation” and then calling it a policy simply will not work. There can be no more top-down solutions. Things have changed and we must listen and respond. There are some huge Departments looking at this: the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime in London. None of them can possibly understand the issues being faced by young people on a daily basis. They all engage with young people, but they do so in a tokenistic way. They do so to tick the box that says, “Must engage with young people.” They do not engage in a youth-led way; no, they do so in a “led youth” way. This whole approach needs to change.

Young people and our communities have the solutions, because they are the ones facing the problems. We need a far-reaching, youth-led consultation to really get to grips with the core issues that underpin the reasons for and the impact of the violence that is present in young people’s lives. This is not just about gangs. If we ask 10 people what a gang is, we will get 10 different answers. It is not just about youth violence, either. We need to drop the negative language. Young people are fed up with constantly being portrayed negatively by politicians and the media.

Mr Lammy: On the point about what is a gang, is my hon. Friend surprised that in the Government’s document they have not even sought to define what they interpret to be a gang? Does she not think that that would help the conversation?

Vicky Foxcroft: I agree with everything my right hon. Friend says. As he said in his speech, the document is so brief that it barely defines anything or suggests what any of the solutions should be. We need to transform the debate fundamentally.

Bob Stewart: Further to the point made my friend, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), as I understand it these groups often call themselves gangs. That is part of the problem. It is therefore quite difficult to define.

Vicky Foxcroft: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, but we tag people in certain ways too. We define groups of people as gangs, when they could just be groups of young people hanging about together. That is why we need to transform how we talk about the subject.

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I belonged to a gang when I was younger. We had a uniform and a code—it was called the Girls’ Brigade. We have to be very clear when we are defining gangs. It is also our responsibility as MPs to work with everyone. I met my borough commander this week, and I do so every month so that we are all working together and, as my hon. Friend says, we are listening to young people to ensure that they are not criminalised or labelled from a very young age.

Vicky Foxcroft: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good and strong point. We need to talk about violence in our society. We need to forget age for a second. When someone—anyone—gets so angry they end up killing someone, we have failed as a society. We have failed the victim, failed the victim’s friends and failed the victim’s family. We have also failed the killer. What a life they must have led up to that moment when they pull out a knife and stick it into another human being.

What is our answer? What do we do to them? Police, court, prison—we lock them up for a minimum sentence of 25 years and then they are released. Then what? What kind of life have we provided for that person? We can picture the scene: dad out of work, mum an alcoholic; missed by social services, due to cuts; missed by youth workers, because they no longer exist; missed by the local police, because of cutbacks. We are creating a perfect storm. Youth work, cut; police, cut; social services, cut. What hope do we have while this Government are in power?

Shrinking the state—is that really the answer? Of course not. It is the very fabric of society that needs to be fixed in order to stop these events. I do not hold the Minister solely responsible. There is little that she can do on her own that would fix things. The problem is bigger than that. What do the Government do? They spend close to £1 billion on a citizenship scheme. They give it some clever branding and congratulate themselves on building a social movement. But what then? Once young people have completed the scheme, they are still in the same situation as before. The scheme is £1 billion of window dressing; £1 billion to change nothing. We do not need window dressing. We need to change fundamentally the way we approach society. We need to change the narrative. We need to talk about peace. We need to talk about community. We need to promote positive images of our young people. We need to give them a voice.

Running programmes for teenagers—well, that is nice, but it is not going to change much, not fundamentally. We need to start much younger. It is only when we change the lives of the youngest in society that we will see real change take place. Any psychologist or educationalist will say that. The younger we start to effect change, the sooner we can start to make change. So let us change things. Let us change the record, change the narrative, change the future.

This debate calls for a wide-ranging consultation focusing on serious youth violence. I am sure we can all get behind this. Let us do this together, because it is by working together that we will prevent young people from disappearing from our streets.

1.18 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) for securing a debate on such an important subject, one that is rarely debated in this House.

The reality is that this problem is not specifically about gangs or young people. It is about violence and how we deal with that violence. Violence has a devastating impact on families, communities and young people. It does not affect young people exclusively, but it is their futures and their lives that hang in the balance and change absolutely while we debate this subject.

Despite the difficulty that comes with legislating to tackle the problem, it is through legislating and a variety of other measures that we can deal with this issue. Scotland recognised the need to tackle this issue and to take serious measures, in particular in areas of Glasgow where there were incidents of violence that were recurring, serious and in many cases severe.

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): The east end of Glasgow was once almost a byword for gang violence. Significant work, education and a cohesive approach has reduced violent crime, gang membership and weapons possession. I am sure my hon. Friend will join me in congratulating the Scottish Government and the Violence Reduction Unit, who have done sterling work to reduce gang violence in Glasgow. Does she agree that Members across the House could learn some valuable lessons from the work that has been done in Glasgow over the past decade?

Angela Crawley: I thank my hon. Friend for her point. I was intending to come on to Glasgow East later, but the project that took place there in 2008 was a response to the worst instance of gang violence that had ever occurred, which made Scotland, and particularly Glasgow, one of the worst places in western Europe for violence. The more than 600 gang members involved were presented with a choice—to use their experience to educate and train others, or face a zero-tolerance approach and possibly a prison sentence. Through this work and the ongoing commitment and support they received, remarkable results were witnessed. Violence was halved; weapon possession was down by 85%; and this group went on to establish a charity to create employment for other young people. So there are examples of where positive work can be done to reframe and re-approach the problem not just through legislation, but by working with young people to provide the support they require.

Bob Stewart: What was actually done to reduce the violence there? What happened on the streets to reduce it?

Angela Crawley: There are a number of projects, but this particular one focused on bringing the young people in, engaging them and providing them with opportunities to go on to further education or training. They continued to be supported throughout that process so that they could reach sustainable employment and other routes outwith the confines of the environment in which they had grown up and themselves experienced violence or been party to it.

This Government must recognise that where legislation is proving ineffective, they must consider changing course. Lessons must be learned from where we have

been successful. I share the sentiments of the hon. Member for Streatham that young people have been given a bad name in this discussion and that more often than not we tarnish them with this reputation that makes them the perpetrators, without seeking to address the root causes of the problem, which many Members of all parties have addressed in their speeches.

I have listened to Members who have spoken of their constituents' experience of violence and its impact on their lives, and of heart-breaking accounts from loved ones of lost years and lost lives. The hon. Member for Streatham spoke about the level of violence in London, but as has been repeated in the debate, the problem is not unique to one particular area or one particular city, so we must do more to address the problem as a matter of policy. Factors such as poverty, violence and drugs, and the rising incidence of violence against women in ghettos must be looked at in a far more holistic way to address some of those root problems.

Let me acknowledge that it was only 10 years ago, as I mentioned earlier, that Glasgow was named the murder capital of western Europe—something that the then Scottish Executive could not ignore. Despite the number of convictions, there remained a need to tackle the root of these serious problems. Scotland has been successful in reducing the number of incidents. The campaign “No Knives Better Lives” raises awareness and seeks to educate young people about the consequences of knife crime. This is one example of a measure that has contributed to success in reducing violence.

In my constituency in south Lanarkshire, a local community group established a drama workshop known as “The Street”, which has a real-life setting. It is produced by young people, many of whom have been involved in violence themselves, and it tackles issues of violence, knife crime and drug and alcohol abuse, as well as sexual violence. This message can be delivered by young people to young people in a hard-hitting way with a powerful impact, addressing the serious ramifications and consequences of actions occurring on a daily basis on the streets.

Under the stewardship of the former Scottish Justice Secretary, Kenny MacAskill, we focused on early intervention, improving life chances and the integration of the police within the community, working with young people. This resulted in a significant reduction of crime and violence. Let me declare that the incidence of violence continues on a daily basis, but we must continue to tackle these issues, which I hope the Government will take into consideration.

1.24 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Let me make it clear that I was not around for the mods and rockers, but heard about them from my mum and dad!

A couple of years ago, I was driving home when, around the corner from my home, I saw to my horror the body of a young man curled up on the pavement. Several police officers were with him, and I could hear the sirens of ambulances on their way. That young man was the victim of a stabbing and was clutching a stomach wound that thankfully proved not to be fatal. That incident shook me to the very core; it was so close to my house and it was not even late on a Friday night.

Some in my community live every day with the pain and worry that results from knife crime and gang violence. They worry about their children's safety and they have been robbed of a basic sense of security. They want—they need—weapons off our streets and they want their children to be safe.

I am therefore disturbed by the recent rise in recorded knife crime—up 9% in England and Wales last year after a long downwards trend. If we look at the numbers in more detail, we find that rapes involving a knife are up by 26%; threats to kill by 20%; and attempted murder by 24%. Gun crime is up by 4%. Those numbers are absolutely chilling.

I know that we need to treat recorded crime numbers with caution. The police should not be discouraged from improving the reporting or the recording of crime, which can explain such fluctuations, but sadly there is evidence that the increase in recorded knife crime simply reflects an increase in criminal activity using knives. For example, data from the London Ambulance Service shows a 9% rise in incidents resulting from assaults involving a knife.

There is some evidence to show that the rise in knife crime is related to an increase in the number of gangs. Recent Home Office research suggests a sharp rise in the number of gangs in the capital, and the number of offences that the Metropolitan police associates with gang activity has increased by 25% in the last three years. There are 225 recognised gangs in London, with around 3,600 gang members. In a large city, that is a relatively small number of people, but they still account for 17% of serious violence in the capital.

Given those numbers, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) is quite right to draw this issue to our attention and to call for a debate this afternoon. There have been some stonkingly good speeches, and I want to pay tribute to all colleagues who have contributed to such a good debate.

I am aware that a number of police services have chosen to focus significant resources and activity on dealing with the scourge of knife crime. Last week, I visited Bedfordshire police to discover how they had managed to cut knife crime by 21%. Officers from Bedfordshire's Operation Boson told me that they had adopted best practice from across the country, and tried to attack knife crime relentlessly from every angle. They believe that they have reduced the number of knives on their streets through "secret shopper" inspections and by carefully deployed "surrender bins", unannounced "knife arches" and the judicious use of stop and search powers. They have also supported diversion schemes in partnership with the likes of Luton Town football club, which are aimed at offering alternative ways in which young people can deploy their abundance of skills and energy.

Bedfordshire's magnificent performance has been done on a shoestring. The excellent police and crime commissioner Olly Martins told me that balancing all the demands of the service with ever-decreasing funding and resources was like trying to balance spinning plates, always worried that something would come unstuck. It is clearly a testament to his skill and determination and to the commitment and professionalism of serving police officers in Bedfordshire, particularly those in Operation Boson, that Bedfordshire police have been so successful in their assault on knife crime.

However, in the case of much crime, prevention is always better than cure, and I know that some first-class work is already being done throughout the country to try to prevent crimes of this nature from happening. If the House will forgive me, I shall give a parochial plug to the "Carry A Basketball Not A Blade" initiative, which is run by Newham All Star Sports Academy. That charity was started in tragic circumstances by Anthony Okerefor after two of his friends were lost through knife crime. Anthony helps young people by harnessing the power of sport to provide a counter-narrative to the poisonous idea that gang life is in some way glamorous. It is the sort of "peer-to-peer prevention service" that I think works incredibly well, and the Home Affairs Committee thinks that it should be "expanded" and "commissioned more consistently" across the country.

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. In the context of prevention, may I thank the Reverend Rose Hudson-Wilkin, who is in the Chamber today, for all the work she has done in Hackney, where she has comforted so many families who have experienced violent crime?

Lyn Brown: Absolutely. People of that kind, with commitment of that kind and programmes of that kind, require our support. They require staff who have expertise and the trust of their communities, but they are also seriously in need of investment. Last month, however, we discovered that the Home Office was pulling the plug on funding for the ending gang and youth violence peer review network, a practical programme that brings together academics, local government officials and the police to develop and share knowledge and best practice with the aim of reducing gang violence. The Government's last annual report on the network described it as "successful" and

"low cost and high impact",

so why is its funding being cut?

Two weeks after news of the cut was leaked to *The Guardian*, we were told by the Minister that the network would be replaced by a new "forum". The network had the resources that were necessary to establish and share best practice; will the new "forum" be equally well resourced, or will its funding be reduced?

I should be very grateful if the Minister answered some of those questions. I can tell her that Deborah and George Kinsella, the parents of the murdered teenager Ben Kinsella, said:

"We are extremely disappointed to hear that the government is making further cuts to funding to tackle serious youth violence when there are so many of us trying to make things better for others after losing our own children."

June Addai, the grandmother of 17-year-old Marcel, who was murdered by a gang on a Hoxton housing estate, said:

"The government seem to be cutting everything. Children have nowhere to go, they need clubs to go to rather than hanging out on the streets where they can get into trouble. They get left behind."

Knife crime is beginning to creep up, and it is an undeniable truth that that is happening after five years of deep cuts in spending on youth clubs and crime prevention. There will be naysayers who will claim that the increase in knife crime has nothing to do with the

[Lyn Brown]

cuts, and that is why I fully support my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham's call for an all-party commission. We need to get to the bottom of why youth violence is on the increase, so that we can begin to turn the tide. I ask the Minister, who is not a bad woman, "Can we have an all-party commission—please?"

1.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): Goodness me! I do not think that the shadow Minister has ever been quite so nice to me across the Dispatch Box, although I am sure that that will not be repeated. I am speechless, but the hon. Lady will be glad to know that I will not be speechless for long.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) on securing this important debate. It could not take place on a previous occasion owing to time restrictions—a number of urgent questions were granted, which ate into the time—and the fact that the hon. Gentleman has initiated it again today demonstrates his perseverance and his determination to draw attention to this issue. His long-standing interest in tackling gangs and youth violence is well known, and I congratulate him.

I also congratulate the other Members who took part in the debate: we have heard some powerful contributions, which featured the in-depth local knowledge that is key to tackling the issue.

Let me begin by assuring the House that tackling gangs and serious youth violence is a priority for the Government. I have met and spent time with victims of such violence, and I am aware of the devastating impact that it can have on families, communities, and young people whose lives were ahead of them, but may not be so any longer. We must all remember that that is the case.

We have heard many references to the Government's approach. If the House will allow me, I shall spend a few minutes talking about what we have done, and what the future holds.

The Government published their refreshed approach to tackling gangs in a paper—it was only a paper; I shall return to that point shortly—entitled "Ending gang violence and exploitation". It explains that the Government's approach is focused on both reducing violence, including knife crime, and preventing the exploitation of vulnerable individuals by gangs. It builds on the ending gang and youth violence programme that we established in 2012, at a time when many people were only just starting to understand the problems caused by gangs in their areas. The EGYV programme dealt with the need to understand those problems, and to build local resilience. It was due to end in March last year, but because we were beginning to see gangs operating in new ways, and, in particular, the exploitation of vulnerable young people, we extended it for a further 12 months so that we could identify where gangs were operating, and could help local areas to build that resilience.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I am not sure whether this tallies with what the Minister has just said, but the Government announced in January that they

would extend the programme to nine new areas, including Great Grimsby. That came as a surprise to me, because I had not known that our area contained gangs of the nature that has been described by my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna). A subsequent conversation with my local police and crime commissioner indicated that the programme might be along the lines of what the hon. Member for Yeovil (Marcus Fysh) mentioned earlier, and might be more concerned with serious organised crime. What criteria were used to decide on the towns that were included in the programme?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady makes some important points. The original programme's work, which included the peer review network, is now complete. Local resilience has been built, and local areas have had that peer review. We have now passed the stage of understanding, and need to proceed to delivery, which is the reason for the new programme. The new areas are areas where, as part of the peer review, we identified possible problems. We spoke to local authorities and local police chiefs to find out whether they wanted to be part of the new programme, which is intended to help local areas to understand the problems and the way in which best practice might work, and to give them the support that they need.

Several hon. Members rose—

Karen Bradley: I will give way first to the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who is my Member of Parliament in London.

Ms Buck: I am happy to oblige with any casework.

The Minister mentions the partnerships that are being built. Does she think that the local authorities that have withdrawn all the resources for the youth service will be able to enter into such partnerships?

Karen Bradley: It is for local areas to determine what works best for them, but the Home Office can help them with resources and best practice from the centre.

Mr Umunna: It is good to see the Minister responding on behalf of the Government. May I make two points?

I do not accept that the work of the peer review network is done, because the nature of what is going on is changing. The programme started in 2012, since when the extent to which social media are used by, for example, the groups of young people who are perpetrating these acts has become much greater, and, as I said in my speech, the nature of the groups has changed. My second point is that the peer review network appears to have been replaced by two civil servants manning a mailbox. I really hope that that is not the case, but that is what I have been told by insiders. This is why I am so concerned about its being disbanded.

Karen Bradley: I want to assure the hon. Gentleman that that is not the case. I spoke at an event earlier this week to try to get more involvement in the forum that we are establishing, and I will say more about that in a moment. I would like to extend an invitation to him to meet me, because there are many things that we need to discuss and we simply do not have time to do that today.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): On the important point about liaison with local police forces and local authorities, may I thank the Minister for the work that she and her officials have done in relation to the horrific knife crimes in Chelmsford over the past 18 months, and for the way in which her Department, led by her, has been willing to liaise with Essex police to see what more can be done to overcome this problem in our community?

Karen Bradley: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I know that he wanted to take part in this debate, but he has been involved in an important Bill Committee. I thank him for being here now and for the work that he does in Chelmsford. He is right to suggest that the work of Essex police, supported by the Home Office, has played an important part in tackling the issue of “county lines”, which my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) also raised. *[Interruption.]* I see the shadow Minister bobbing.

Lyn Brown: Seeing as I have been so nice to the Minister today, I would be very grateful if she would extend that courtesy and invite me to the meetings that she is going to have on these issues.

Karen Bradley: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady and—I am probably going to regret this; my officials will certainly regret it—I extend that offer to any Member who wants to come and talk about what is happening in their local area. I am more than happy to spend time with Members to help them build local resilience. As the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) said, this is about local solutions. This is not top-down; it is not about the Government imposing anything.

Vicky Foxcroft: I thank the Minister for agreeing with me, but part of the problem is about having the funding to enable us to deliver those local solutions.

Karen Bradley: I will come on to funding shortly. I am trying to be non-party political, but I might have to make some comments shortly if I am not allowed to continue in that vein. However, I am trying to be non-partisan and I want to work with hon. Members from across the House. I know that they are facing this problem in their communities and I want to ensure that the Home Office extends whatever support we can in order to get a local solution that is right for their area. That will not be a top-down solution, however, and it will not be one size fits all.

Mr Lammy: If we have had the peer review stage and we know what works, will the Minister tell us more about what works and where that information is published? Why does she think that the figures are getting worse across the country?

Karen Bradley: I will address that point briefly, but I must make some progress because I am conscious that this debate is to be followed by an extremely important debate on Welsh affairs in which many Members want to take part. On the figures, on which the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) commented, we want to see these crimes recorded. We want the police to know about them and we want to understand what is happening.

I recently visited the A&E department at King’s College hospital in the constituency of the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). It is absolutely tragic that the first opportunity we get to have a teachable moment with these young people is when they turn up at A&E. They are turning up not in an ambulance—the gangs do not phone an ambulance or any other blue light service—but in private cars and being dumped at A&E, and that is the first opportunity that any agency has to make contact with them.

I want to pay tribute to Redthread, which provides young people’s advocates at A&E departments across London. Those advocates are important in making contact not only with the young person who has been the victim of an attack but with their family when they come to visit. They play an important part in keeping that young person in hospital and getting them to speak to someone they trust. That might be the first opportunity we have to speak to them, and we need to find a way of making that happen sooner. This is about education, about working with schools and about working in vulnerable locations. When I talk about the revised programme, I will mention some of the approaches that we are using in that regard. I want all those hidden crimes that are not being recorded at the moment to be reported and recorded so that we can understand what the problem is. *[Interruption.]* I sense that the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) might want to intervene on me, but this must be the final intervention as I need to make some progress.

Dawn Butler: I am not sure that I entirely understand the Minister’s response, because there are plenty of opportunities to intervene on these young people. Lots of people and organisations in Brent and elsewhere are intervening at an early stage. Poverty is key, but education and early years provision are also key in providing opportunities to intervene. Perhaps she will get to that point later in her speech.

Karen Bradley: I agree that there are many opportunities for intervention. My frustration is that those opportunities are not taken until the young person is found in A&E. I hope the hon. Lady shares that frustration. I pay tribute to her council in Brent. I met her council leader recently and learned about the partnership working that the council is doing to understand the problem. It was a peer review that assisted in understanding the problem, but now this is about local delivery.

The hon. Lady is right to say that this is about poverty. People in Brent talked to me about the housing estates and the work that they are doing in South Kilburn, which neighbours the Paddington recreation ground, with whose football pitches I have to say I am familiar. They are doing incredibly important work on the South Kilburn estate to transform it into a place to live where gangs will not be allowed to flourish. I pay tribute to Brent and to the many other local authorities around the country that are working hard in this regard. I hope that many others will be able to take advantage of this programme through the support that the Home Office provides.

I want to make some progress now, so that we can get on to the important Welsh affairs debate. First, however, I will just mention that although I understand that the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) is

[Karen Bradley]

concerned about an eight-page Government document, this might be the first time that anyone has ever told me that a Government document is too short. We are usually accused of producing too much with too little substance underneath it. The “Ending gang violence and exploitation” document has been widely welcomed. We worked with many organisations and stakeholders to develop this approach. The paper sets out the high-level approach, but incredible amounts of work have gone on underneath that. It has been welcomed by many organisations including Safer London, the Met police and the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) asked why certain areas were involved in the programme. The answer is that those areas have said that they want to be part of it. They want to know what learning is available and to understand the partnership working. For example, they want to learn about working and sharing information with A&E departments. It is vital that we get that information as quickly as possible and share it with different agencies. I also take the point about the definition of a gang. The definition for gang injunction purposes is set out in the Serious Crime Act 2015. That is why there is no separate definition; it is a known definition that has already been set out in legislation.

So, what does our new programme involve? There are six priorities, based on the fact that gangs are operating in different, more covert ways. That is why our first priority is “county lines”, which was mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Yeovil (Marcus Fysh) and for Colchester. The hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey)—I think I shall refer to her as my hon. Friend, if she does not mind—also referred to that in her speech. It is important that we help the most vulnerable people in our society who are being exploited by urban street gangs to run drugs and to do many other things, and I am enormously supportive of the missing persons charities and of her work on the all-party parliamentary group on runaway and missing children and adults. That work is vital in helping to find those young people and getting information about what happens to them when they go missing and who is influencing them. She was right to talk about trafficking and modern slavery; this is very much modern slavery and these are trafficking offences. I hope the prosecution services and others will use those modern slavery offences, where appropriate, to get convictions, because I want us to get convictions and stop this happening. If the best and most likely way to get the conviction is by using modern slavery offences, I am all for that and it is what we should do.

The second priority in the programme is protecting vulnerable locations, which again links to the point about missing people and “county lines”. We need to get to the places where vulnerable young people are being targeted—pupil referral units and residential children’s care homes. These are places where young people who are very vulnerable to exploitation find themselves. On the point about young offenders institutes, these are vulnerable locations and, as hon. Members will know, the Ministry of Justice has asked Charlie Taylor to lead a review of this matter. I want to see the results of that review. I also want to make sure that we understand and that those young offenders institutions understand that those vulnerable young people are being exploited, and that they take action to stop that happening.

The third priority is reducing violence, including knife crime. I have listened to many of the contributions about knife crime and I agree that we do not want to see knives on our streets. There are many offences and measures that police, trading standards and local authorities can use, but we are looking carefully at what else we can do to make sure the authorities have all the weapons they need to take knives off our streets. I was at a conference last week hosted by the Metropolitan police at New Scotland Yard with retailers, making sure that they understand their role in a responsible society in ensuring that knives do not hit our streets.

The fourth priority is safeguarding gang-associated women and girls, which has been mentioned by many Members, including the hon. Members for Dulwich and West Norwood and for Streatham, and the right hon. Member for Tottenham. The very idea that girls think that it is acceptable to be exploited in a line-up by various gang members and that this is something they should do is absolutely wrong. I am pleased that the Government—I hope that hon. Members noticed this announcement earlier this week—have committed £400,000 to young people’s advocates to work with all young people, but specifically targeting girls and young women, to try to get that teachable moment. The aim is to get to the young women, educate them and give them the experience and knowledge they need to say no.

Our fifth priority is to promote early intervention, a point raised by many Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester talked about how we have to get in early and educate young people. Finally, our sixth priority is providing meaningful alternatives, and the hon. Member for Streatham made the point on that clearly. We need to show young people alternatives, and he rightly says that that does not just mean a windy church hall. These have to be meaningful alternatives to gangs, so that young people do not feel that gangs are the only place they can go.

I want to touch on some of the specific points that were raised. I am looking forward to discussing the independent commission with the hon. Gentleman. I am not convinced at this stage that a national independent all-party commission is the best way to approach this. We need to get into delivery and make sure that the programme is allowed to deliver. I know that local commissions are being set up. I met the West Midlands police and crime commissioner yesterday, and he is setting up his own local commission. I encourage hon. Members to do that work locally. I hesitate to establish a national commission because, as we have all said, there are different considerations to take into account and different things are going on. The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford made the point that local young people and local communities need to be part of this. I would encourage local work and local commissions, where appropriate, but I am not convinced that this is the right time for a national commission. I am, however, looking forward to meeting the hon. Gentleman. May I also ask to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport to discuss her interesting suggestion about Fagin orders? Civil orders have been successful. They are used when we do not have enough evidence for a criminal procedure, and I would be very interested in talking to her about that.

There are many more things I could say and many more points I could make, but I am conscious of the time so I will conclude by repeating my thanks and

congratulations to the hon. Member for Streatham on securing the debate. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to it. I wish to finish by assuring everyone that the Government and I regard this issue as incredibly important. It is a continuing priority, and we will continue to work with national and local partners to address these issues.

1.55 pm

Mr Umunna: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall speak for a couple of minutes to reflect on the debate. First, I wish to thank all hon. Members who have participated in a fantastic debate, which has done great credit to our House. It sends a message to those watching that the House of Commons takes this matter seriously. Secondly, what has been so interesting in the debate is that a lot of the points made have been ones that have not been made before. For example, I am thinking of the point made by the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) about data collection. I could also mention the good points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), and my hon. Friends the Members for Westminster North (Ms Buck), for Stockport (Ann Coffey), for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), among others.

I heard the Minister say that she was not convinced at the moment of the need for a national commission, but I am pleased that she has not ruled it out. I agree with her that it would be useful if localities set up their own commissions, and we have already done that in Lambeth. I think it would be useful to have a national commission, because we could share best practice and see what is happening as the situation changes on the ground. That was one thing we tried to do through the London gangs forum, when it was operating—as I said, however, we should not use the term “gang” any more. Not only does having a national commission say that we take this seriously, just as we have commissions in respect of other issues, but it would be very useful in sharing best practice from around the country.

As I said, this has been a wonderful debate and I think that we will all want to reassure those watching that this is not the end of the matter. It is very much the start of this campaign by this Parliament, and we will not rest until we see an end to the violence on our streets, and the opportunities and horizons widened for our young people, who are, as I said, our future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to establish an independent, all-party commission, involving a wide-ranging consultation, to identify the root causes, effect of, and solutions to, serious youth violence, including knife crime, its links to gang culture and the sale of illegal drugs.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am amazed to see that the Secretary of State for Wales is not in his place to respond to our next debate today, despite the fact that he made an extremely important announcement about fundamental changes to the draft Wales Bill on Monday, to journalists and not to this House, with the Wales Office tweeting at the time that hon. Members could wait until today to debate these changes. Have you been

made aware that the Secretary of State plans to attend today's debate to answer the important questions that Members have for him?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): As the hon. Lady knows well, Mr Speaker, or the occupant of the Chair, has no authority to require Ministers to be here for a debate such as this. Mr Speaker has said on many occasions, and I agree with him, that it is very important that this House of Commons is the body that holds Ministers to account and that speeches and announcements ought to be made here. I am not aware of what the Secretary of State said on Monday or of what he is doing today, but I am aware that a very capable Minister is here at the Dispatch Box. On behalf of the House, I trust that he will answer the questions that the hon. Lady and other colleagues will undoubtedly put to him and will draw to the attention of the Secretary of State anything that ought to be drawn to his attention, which will indeed be the whole debate. Mr Speaker has made it very clear, and I reiterate this, that Ministers making announcements should make them in this House and not anywhere else.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am concerned about not only the Secretary of State's absence from this important debate, but the fact that he was absent at a St David's day reception hosted in Lancaster House earlier today. Perhaps he has died or perhaps he has resigned and not told the House. Perhaps you could shed some light on this.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Chair definitely has no responsibility whatsoever for receptions held outside this House.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I can advise the House that the Secretary of State has parliamentary business elsewhere and I understand that he has spoken to the promoter of the debate to explain that that is the case. I should also say that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State hosted a very successful St David's day reception on St David's day at No. 10 earlier this week.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We will have no further discussion of this matter, as it is not my responsibility to explain where the Secretary of State is. The Minister has given an explanation and that is the end to the matter.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Is it a different point of order?

Ian C. Lucas: It specifically concerns a communication from the Wales Office. On Monday, when the Secretary of State made a closed announcement to journalists, I tweeted that I was surprised that the matter was not being made in a statement to the House of Commons. In response to that tweet, I received from the Wales

[*Ian C. Lucas*]

Office a communication saying that I would be able to raise such matters with the Secretary of State in this debate today. It seems that it is entirely inappropriate for the Wales Office to communicate in that way—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That is the same point of order. If the Secretary of State decides that the Minister should answer these questions today and respond to the points, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman will in due course make, then that is up to the Secretary of State and the Minister. Now we will continue with the debate.

Welsh Affairs

[*Relevant document: First Report from the Welsh Affairs Committee, on Pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Wales Bill, HC 449.*]

2.1 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Welsh affairs.

I can confirm that, this morning, I enjoyed a meeting with the Secretary of State, at which we discussed the crisis in the Welsh steel industry, so he was certainly available for discussions then.

It is a great honour to open this debate today, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing a St David's day debate. The debate offers us the opportunity to speak about the challenges and opportunities affecting Wales. I am sure that Members will wish to touch on a wide range of different matters. I want to open today's debate by concentrating on what I believe are some of the most salient, political, cultural and economic matters facing our country and our people today.

This will be a momentous year for Wales. First, we are on course for a championship-deciding clash with England in the Six Nations. I remind the House that it is traditional for Wales to win the Six Nations after a World cup. Perhaps the most momentous sporting occasion will be when the rugby team's round-ball counterparts make their debut in the European championships in France this summer. It has been 58 years since we have been at an international finals. That is far too long for a country that has produced footballing greats—such as Allchurch, Rush, Hughes and Giggs—to be absent from major footballing tournaments. “Together Stronger” was the mantra of the team and the supporters through qualification, and it is a philosophy that can be applied across many of the issues that I wish to speak about today.

When Bale, Ashley Williams and Ramsey are flying the flag for Wales in that contest, campaigners from this House and across Wales will be making the case for Wales and the whole of the UK to remain in the European Union. We will do it with special zeal. Wales is a net beneficiary of EU funding. Our membership of the European Union is vital to our economy, security and our place in the world. A Brexit would be a massive gamble for Wales, putting jobs, investment, trade and therefore the safety of our communities at risk. The very last thing that we need now is the instability that the possibility of secession from the EU inflicts on a country that already endures economic fragility and social disadvantage.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way on that point. Does he accept the Library figure that the UK makes a net payment of around £8 billion to £8.5 billion each year to the European Union, and that if that money were taken and Barnettised and 5% of it were handed over to Wales, Wales would become a net beneficiary from exiting the European Union?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I am afraid that he is confusing the budget of the European Union with the British economy.

The British economy benefits to the tune of £227 billion a year in the exports that it makes to the European Union, thanks to its membership of the single market. If we are looking for value for money, £9 billion to £227 billion looks like a pretty good deal to me.

More immediately, many share my concerns about the months between now and 23 June and ask whether it is realistic to expect rational decisions to be made around a Cabinet table that is beset by mutual loathing.

Hundreds of thousands of Welsh jobs are linked to EU membership, and that membership is our largest source of investment, bringing growth, quality employment and higher wages. Much of our global investment from outside the EU is made possible by the fact that, inside the EU, we provide a gateway to the single market. That is a major reason for international firms such as Tata Steel in my constituency to locate in Wales.

As Members will be aware, the Welsh steel industry finds itself in a precarious position and nowhere in Wales is that felt more acutely than in my constituency. The works in Port Talbot are the productive core of our local economy and community, so the announcement at the start of the year of 750 job losses was a bitter blow, which will be compounded when the impact starts to be felt through the supply chain and the wider local economy.

Although the steel crisis may be partly the result of global trends and events, what cannot be ignored is that the Government have been asleep at the wheel for the past five years. Far more could and should have been done to give the British steel industry a fighting chance. From the blatantly unfair and distortive dumping of Chinese steel to the incompetent and complacent management of public procurement, this Government have failed to give justified support or stimulus to steel.

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. May I draw his mind back to the evidence that we took from management and the unions about those terrible job losses? Both said that the European Union had delayed bringing in tariffs on Chinese rebar and had taken a very long time to agree the compensation package—for which the Government had to ask permission from the EU—in order to give back to companies such as Tata some of the money that had already been taken as a result of energy taxes.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Membership of the European Union is defined by how a country engages and how it works with partners in Brussels—both with the European Commission and the other member states. What we have is a Government who, in 2011, recognised that there should be an energy-intensive industries compensation package, but then failed to knock on the door in Brussels and make it happen. How can it be that it took five years to deliver that deal?

When it comes to the dumping of steel, the British Government are the ringleader of a set of member states that do not want to reform the anti-dumping rules—so we still have the lesser duty rule—and are cheerleaders for China, lobbying for it to have market economy status. I am afraid that we need to draw a line under this constant scapegoating of Brussels. The blame

should be laid squarely at the doors of Nos. 10 and 11 Downing Street and the rest of the Cabinet. Unlike other member states, they have failed to engage in Brussels in a way that wins for British business.

The Government operate in a fog of laissez-faire ideology. They pray to the gods of the free market, and then they hope for the best. In reality, the market economy can function effectively only if it is regulated. Just as football requires the off-side rule to ensure fair competition, so our steel industry requires the right regulatory framework, so that it can trade in equitable conditions—on a level playing field. Instead, the Government's blithe faith in the free market is driving them to lobby for China to be given market economy status, and to refuse to support the scrapping of the lesser duty rule.

I wish to state now, with utmost gravity, that if speedy action is not taken to prevent the dumping of Chinese steel, we will witness the beginning of the end of UK steel making. The Government know full well that this foundation industry is hanging by a thread. Neither free market dogma nor cosying up to Beijing should be allowed to impede their patriotic duty to emulate other EU countries and stand up for the men and women who are the backbone of the British economy.

The Minister for Enterprise and the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills recently visited my constituency, and I hope they will return so that they can go to the homes of some of my constituents who have lost their jobs. I hope they will look those men, women and families in the eye and explain themselves—explain how they can claim publicly that they are supporting the steel industry, while fighting tooth and nail behind closed doors against the lifting of the lesser duty rule and for market economy status for China.

I hope those Ministers will explain how they can claim publicly that they are changing public procurement to maximise the use of British steel, while allowing the Ministry of Defence to build the latest flotilla of Royal Navy frigates with Swedish steel. I hope they will come to Aberavon and explain the breath-taking contrast between their words and their deeds, for the people of my constituency deserve an explanation.

I am certain that the British steel industry has a promising future if it is given the right support by Government. The men and women at the Port Talbot works make the finest steel that money can buy and they are breaking all production and efficiency records, but the industry requires a long-term industrial strategy based on a sustained, comprehensive approach to skills, investment, regulation, energy and industrial relations. That is why I am proud to co-chair a working group of the all-party parliamentary group on steel, which will produce a report, "Steel 2020", on formulating a long-term industrial strategy for British and Welsh steel.

Our strategy for the future of the Welsh economy must not be limited to steel. We need a new industrial revolution grounded in the new economy of renewables and connected technology, a fourth industrial revolution such as the one that was spoken of at the recent meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos. I see Wales at the forefront of that revolution. The Swansea Bay tidal lagoon could transform the energy industry, but frustratingly, its future is under threat owing to the Government's perpetual flip-flopping. A positive decision

[Stephen Kinnock]

on the lagoon would not only put a much needed tick in the Government's ever-diminishing green credentials, but deliver a massive boost to the local economy. By committing to sourcing as much steel as possible from the UK, it would significantly help the UK steel industry. That project needs and deserves rapid advance. The Government need to get off the fence, and fast.

The Government's short-sightedness is undermining other forms of renewable energy, such as wind and solar. These are burgeoning industries in my constituency, with hundreds of jobs at stake, but they are under threat because of the Government's moves to cut price stabilisation mechanisms, such as the feed-in tariffs. The Government have been on a policy descent from "Hug a huskie" to, in the words of the Prime Minister, "Let's cut the green crap".

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): May I point out the hypocrisy in what the hon. Gentleman is saying? There is a contradiction between supporting steel—Celsa Steel, for example—which uses so much electricity, and putting a price on that electricity for renewables?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As we have discussed, it is clear that energy-intensive industries require support from Government. That was recognised by the Chancellor in 2011. The support that has come, finally, is welcome. The big question for me is how it could possibly have taken five years to make that happen—to get the state aid clearance that was required from the European Union. Fundamentally, the strategy for energy must be about spreading the burden of the cost more effectively so that our energy-intensive industries are not being hung out to dry by an energy policy that does not make sense. It is also about making a firm commitment so that those investing have a sense of the stability and sustainability of the market in future. We currently do not have any of those things in place, which is why we are in such a mess.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an important point about stability. Does he agree that the real problem in industries such as solar and anaerobic digestion—on which a reception was held in the House earlier this week—is the instability of the legislative and regulatory framework, which is a deterrent to long-term investment and is costing a large number of jobs in communities right across Wales?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree absolutely. The Energy and Climate Change Committee has just produced a compelling report that clearly demonstrates that we are losing investment and jobs precisely because of the mixed messages and signals that this Government send to investors. Business abhors a vacuum. Business needs stability. It needs to know whether there will be a return on its investments, and at present it sees no evidence whatever of that in the United Kingdom.

Wales, and south-west Wales in particular, can also be at the forefront of an internet revolution. Swansea Bay city region has based its city deal proposal on the concept of an "internet coast" to drive the digital future of energy, health and economic acceleration. All eyes

are on the Chancellor. If he really wants a "march of the makers", he must give his full backing to that exciting vision. The Swansea University bay campus, which, I emphasise, is based in my Aberavon constituency, has a huge role to play in the development of the internet coast. I look at my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for verification of that.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab) *indicated assent.*

Stephen Kinnock: This outstanding project, made possible by EU and European Investment Bank funding, is one of the largest and most important knowledge economy projects in Europe, producing cutting-edge research focusing on science and innovation.

The "internet coast" is a plan for the future. It is a pity the same cannot be said of the Government's draft Wales Bill, which does not provide anything like the lasting settlement that it was intended to create. Instead, it has thrown up more uncertainties around the legislative process, and succeeds only in generating reams of constitutional red tape. Just this week the Welsh Affairs Committee, under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies), called on the Government to pause the proposed timetable for the Bill so that there is opportunity to reflect fully. That is the least that is needed. My specific concern is about ministerial consent and the risk that the process is seen as tantamount to an English veto, but my more general concern is that the Bill has been drafted in a bubble, isolated from the broader debate about the constitutional reform that our country so desperately needs.

The UK is more centralised than any other leading industrialised economy, and the Scottish referendum demonstrated that the constitutional foundations of the UK are cracking beneath our feet. The British people need and deserve better. The piecemeal, make-do and muddle-through approach that is epitomised by this Wales Bill is simply not going to get the job done. We must, therefore, have a full constitutional convention that would formulate a bold, radical, rational, root-and-branch reform of our constitution. The convention would develop a written constitution that is anchored in a confederal UK, an elected senate, a more proportional electoral system, and properly defined devolution of powers to the nations and regions of the United Kingdom.

We have also seen the results of government by muddle in Wales with the Trade Union Bill. Having taken a sledgehammer to crack a nut, the Government have found that the nut is not entirely theirs to crack in the first place. I am delighted that my Labour colleagues have stood eyeball to eyeball with the Government, and it was the Government who blinked first. The Trade Union Bill, coupled with the changes in voter registration and the alterations in constituency boundaries, are blatant and disgraceful attempts to turn the UK into a one-party state, the thinly veiled agenda being to eradicate parliamentary opposition altogether. Vladimir Putin would be proud of such fixing. Wales is disproportionately hit by the boundary changes, losing around a quarter of our MPs, reducing Wales's voice in the House and marginalising the Welsh people.

There is great potential in Wales, but we will realise that potential only with bold leadership. There is vision and willingness in Cardiff Bay, but we find those qualities abysmally lacking on the Government Benches. As we go into elections in May, we should remember all that

we have to be proud of in Wales: a Labour Government delivering for working people, creating 50,000 apprenticeships and getting 15,000 young people back to work with Jobs Growth Wales; ground-breaking legislation on violence against women; a Labour Government who have improved the cancer survival rate faster than anywhere in the UK, and who are training more nurses than ever before; a Labour Government who stood up to Westminster to protect farm workers' wages; a Labour Government who stood by Remploy, while the Tories were shutting it down across the rest of the UK.

Let us remember that it is the work of the Welsh Labour Government under the leadership of First Minister Carwyn Jones that has enabled the creation of 750 jobs at Aston Martin in St Athan. Under Carwyn, Labour will make use of the Welsh Government's new powers by cutting business rates for small businesses and supporting entrepreneurship, growth and jobs. That is the kind of leadership we need in Wales.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his wonderful speech and for his important leadership in the whole steel debate—he has been critical in moving it forward. Will he talk a little about the importance of clarifying what will happen with rail franchising in Wales? Will he talk about whether it is true, as suggested by the Department for Transport, that no trains that start or end in England will be franchised in Wales? We have to know what is happening. Is it not important that we take that issue forward?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree entirely. That comes back to an issue I was talking about earlier: the need for a long-term industrial strategy that connects supply with demand and that gives our steel producers some certainty so that they know what infrastructure projects are coming down the track. They can then configure their production processes to ensure that they make the right kind of steel at the right time. That is about a partnership between Government and business; without such a partnership, industries such as the steel industry will continue to struggle. I hope that we will hear a little more today about the Government's commitment to such a partnership.

That is the kind of leadership we need in Wales: the kind that creates jobs, opportunity, industry and enterprise and that stands up for all in our nation—the kind we can be proud of. That is why it is vital that we see a Labour victory in Wales on 5 May.

Wales has the talent and creativity to emulate our Celtic cousins Scotland and Ireland in gaining strong recognition in the world. Our people achieve far beyond the nation's size in rugby, football, athletics and so on. With effort and fair chances, we can do the same politically, technologically, environmentally, culturally and economically. I am proud to be Welsh, to be British and to be European. I am certain that we can make those advances because, in all dimensions, together we are stronger.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hope we can manage this debate without a formal time limit on speeches. If everyone who has indicated that

they wish to speak takes under 10 minutes—that means around nine minutes—everyone will have an equal chance to put their points.

2.22 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): May I take this opportunity to wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, a belated happy St David's day? May I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important debate? Traditionally, it has always been held close to St David's day. It reminds the entire House that, even in an age of devolution, many of the most important decisions that affect Wales are still taken in these Houses of Parliament.

There have been busy times recently for the Wales Office. We recently had a very full debate on the draft Wales Bill, so I do not propose to rehearse the remarks I made then, save to tell the Minister how pleased I am that he and his colleagues have taken the opportunity to have a pause in the process of developing what will be extremely important legislation. It was generally agreed by hon. Members, and indeed by commentators outside this House, that the draft Bill was really not ready and not fit for purpose.

I am glad that the Minister and his colleagues are giving further consideration to the matter. They are looking at the issue of the list of reservations, but my concern was not so much with the reservations, as he knows, as with the necessity test, which was rather sketchy and ill-defined. I hope he will be able to come back to the House with something that is more fit for purpose.

I wish to speak—briefly, Madam Deputy Speaker—about north Wales, because that is the part of Wales I come from and in which I have lived all my life. Welsh Members frequently think that north Wales is something of an afterthought in Westminster and in Cardiff Bay. In the case of the Welsh Assembly Government, I think few of its members come from north Wales and understand the peculiar circumstances that prevail there. For example, I do not think it is fully understood by members of the Welsh Government that most of north Wales is, in reality, closely tied to north-west England; in fact, it is fair to say that it is very much part of the north-western economic region. That lack of understanding has resulted in certain problems for north Wales, and I am glad to say that north Wales Members of Parliament are beginning to address that through the formation, under the excellent chairmanship of the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), of the new all-party group for the Mersey-Dee north Wales region.

North Wales needs to maintain its close links to north-west England. Traditionally, it has always looked, culturally and economically, to the great cities of north-west England—specifically Manchester and Liverpool. However, devolution carries with it the danger that those historical and traditional links will be loosened. It is important, now that Government policy is firmly focused on developing the northern powerhouse agenda, that north Wales is not overlooked in that process.

One aspect of the northern powerhouse that north Wales needs to link into is the rail network. I was glad when, a few months ago, the Chancellor announced that he was making funds available to upgrade the Halton curve, which many Members on both sides of

[Mr David Jones]

the border—not least my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans)—had been pressing for for some time. However, there is much more that needs to be done.

North Wales MPs hear constantly of the wonderful electrification upgrades in south Wales. Before long, the Great Western line will be upgraded to electrified status all the way through to Swansea.

Mrs Moon: Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern that it appears from announcements by the Department for Transport that the north Wales line to Manchester will be held by an English franchise and that there will be no opportunity for a Welsh franchisee to hold it, because it will not be possible for any franchise that starts or ends in England to be held in Wales?

Mr Jones: I do have concerns about the franchise, but now that the hon. Lady has raised the subject, I am bound to say that the citizens of north Wales would not express much satisfaction with the franchise that has been put in place by the Welsh Assembly Government. Arriva Trains provide a very poor service. It is actually much quicker for me, as a north Wales MP, to travel to London by Virgin Trains than to Cardiff by Arriva. Certainly, issues of topography are partly responsible for that, but they do not explain the appallingly low standards of comfort that one experiences on Arriva. I would certainly hope, therefore, that all aspects of the franchise will be looked at, not least the adequacy of the service that is provided at the moment.

The north Wales coastal line needs to be upgraded. We must not miss out on the opportunity to tap into the new service that will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new hub will be provided at Crewe, and it is essential for the travelling public of north Wales that proper, electrified services connect the whole north Wales coast, from Holyhead, all the way to Crewe.

In that connection, valuable work is being done by the North Wales Economic Ambition Board, and the new all-party group can play a role in that. It is hoped that there will shortly be a meeting that will be attended by the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (James Wharton), who is the northern powerhouse Minister. I was very pleased to see the Minister at a meeting organised by the board in Llandudno a few months ago. It is essential that the Government do not take their eye off the ball, because electrification of the north Wales line is fundamentally important to the economy of north Wales and to its connectivity with the northern powerhouse.

Similarly, consideration should be given to the Borderlands railway line that runs between Wrexham and Bidston, connecting the two enterprise zones at Wirral Waters and Deeside. Electrification of that stretch of line, particularly between Bidston and Shotton, would provide a relatively inexpensive, but highly desirable, piece of infrastructure. It would put Deeside industrial estate within commuting distance of the centre of Liverpool, again improving connectivity.

Ian C. Lucas: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words earlier. He knows that I strongly share the agenda he is outlining. The Welsh Government have invested £43 million in dualling the Wrexham-Chester line, which is hugely important, and we need to do more. Will he join me in pressing the Welsh Government and the UK Government to put their money where their mouth is? The Welsh Government, to be fair, believe in cross-border transport so much that they have dualled the line in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) rather than in Wrexham, and we want it to run right through to Wrexham.

Mr Jones: Yes, that is the burden of my speech. As the north-eastern part of Wales is so dynamic and so important to the economy of north Wales, as well as that of the country of a whole, and because it straddles a border—a line on the map that was not there in reality until fairly recently—we need to ensure that differing policies on either side of the border do not have any unforeseen effects. Yes, of course it is essential that both the Westminster Government and the Welsh Government should be working extremely closely together in this regard.

Before I sit down, Madam Deputy Speaker—I am very much alert to your strictures on time—I will mention the A55 coast road, or expressway, which is the most important route in the whole of north Wales, linking the areas around the border to Holyhead. The road is now quite old and in desperate need of upgrading. A few years ago, arrangements were made whereby borrowing powers were given to the Welsh Government—in fact, they were given the right to access the old borrowing powers of the Welsh Development Agency—in order to upgrade road infrastructure. That was stated to be specifically for the M4 and the A55. The Welsh Government are taking steps to upgrade the M4 around the Newport area, and that is all well and good, but looking at this from a north Wales point of view, it is rather galling that they do not appear to be accessing these borrowing powers to upgrade the A55. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to give his colleagues in the Welsh Assembly Government the message that they should realise that the A55 is just as important to the people of north Wales as the M4 is to the people of south Wales.

There is a strong perception among us north Walesians that we always get the short straw. I very much hope that the Welsh Government are listening to the contributions made to this debate and will understand that there is life north of Merthyr Tydfil and that the people of north Wales need their own specific economic interests to be reflected—and that means more connectivity and more integration with the great north-west economy.

2.33 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I would like briefly to refer to three issues: first, what has happened to the draft Wales Bill; secondly, the importance of the European Union to Wales; and, thirdly, the need for the third runway at Heathrow airport from a Welsh perspective.

I have to ask where the Secretary of State for Wales is this afternoon. Surely this is an important debate and his place really ought to have been in this Chamber listening to what Members have to say and responding to their remarks. It is not asking too much that he show

some courteousness and political common sense by coming here. I very much hope that he will learn the lesson from his embarrassment this afternoon. The Under-Secretary will clearly take that message back to him.

Quite a significant decision has been taken by the Secretary of State over the past week—to withdraw the draft Wales Bill—but I am concerned that there has been no oral statement or even a written statement. There has been no communication with the House of Commons. We learned about the decision from the press. That is a gross discourtesy and an undermining of the parliamentary system that we are all committed to.

That brings me to my main issue. I ask the House this question: what do the following individuals and organisations have in common? They are the Wales Governance Centre, the leaders of three political parties in Wales, the Learned Society of Wales, Sir Paul Silk, Sir Emyr Jones Parry, the head of the Wales office of the Law Society, and the professor of governance and constitution at University College, London—and the list could go on. The answer is that they all said that the draft Wales Bill was not fit for purpose. There was relative unanimity on that among those in Wales who follow these issues closely—the objective experts and academics, and the people who are at the sharp end of implementing legislation. I am sure the Under-Secretary will say, “Well, yes, that is why we withdrew the Bill—we listened”, but would it not have been better if he had listened at the start?

Concern was expressed about the draft Bill right from the very beginning, when it was first published. I have a copy here, and quite a heavy tome it is. The Secretary of State said in the foreword:

“This draft Bill sets out in detail how the Government plans to deliver the St David’s Day commitments to create a stronger, clearer and fairer devolution settlement for Wales that will stand the test of time.”

It stood the test of time for four months, and then he recognised what everybody else was saying—that it was not fit for purpose and he should go back to the drawing board and start all over again.

Mr David Jones: I have listened to the hon. Gentleman’s criticisms, but does he not agree that it is far better to get the legislation right than to bring through hasty legislation that does not stand the test of time? In that regard, did he read the recent report by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee that bemoaned the fact that the Blair Government of 1997 hastened through legislation that has now resulted in the West Lothian question not being addressed?

Wayne David: I agree up to a point. Pre-legislative scrutiny is good—it makes for better legislation—but it would have been far better if the Wales Office had recognised that meaningful constitutional change can be achieved only on the basis of a high degree of political consensus. It cannot be achieved by a Government—any Government—trying to push through legislation that does not command broad support and is seen by some people as partisan and not properly thought through. That was one of the fundamental problems with the draft Bill. Many people thought it was purely impractical and would therefore lead to bad governance. That lesson ought to be learned.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): That part of the splendid report referred to by the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) is a fine example of inventing precedent to suit a case. In fact, the words inserted into the report were disputed, because they are a great example of the argument made at the beginning of a splendid book about those times called “Dragons Led by Poodles”, which asserted that only the future is certain, but the past is always changing. That is what the Committee tried to do.

Wayne David: My hon. Friend is too modest to say this, but it is worth pointing out that he was the author of that book. I disagreed with some things in it, but it did have many words of wisdom.

My central point is that those of us who believe in devolution need to recognise that there needs to be a high degree of consensus, dialogue and debate among all politicians involved in the process, both here and in Cardiff Bay. I really hope that when the Government start from scratch, they will have learned the cardinal lesson that they have to consult—genuinely and openly, and on a cross-party basis—opinion here in Westminster. I think that all our colleagues are prepared to contribute.

It is also important that the Government work with the Welsh Assembly. It is very important that we have that dialogue with Cardiff Bay, because, to be frank, it is unthinkable that a Westminster Government could decide a devolution package that is not acceptable to the body to which power is being devolved. If they had proceeded with the draft Bill, we might have been in that situation, ridiculous though it seems. I ask the Government for dialogue not only here, but with our colleagues and friends back in the Welsh Assembly.

My second point is about the European Union. In my view, there is an overwhelmingly strong case for the United Kingdom to remain a full member of the European Union, but that case is particularly strong for us in Wales. There can be no doubt whatsoever that the European Union is vital for jobs, exports and, therefore, prosperity in Wales.

Last week the Prime Minister visited the General Electric aircraft engine maintenance plant in Nantgarw, just outside my constituency. He made his case for why Britain should remain in the EU and why it benefits south Wales and General Electric. Objectively, he had a strong case to make, because General Electric is one of my constituency’s most important employers; many of the workers travel down Nantgarw hill to work there. It recognises how important it is to have a good relationship with the EU and to be an integral part of the single European market. I have no ideological axe to grind; empirically, we recognise that it is good for our economy to be firmly linked to our partners in the rest of Europe. It is as simple and straightforward as that. It is a bread and butter issue.

On Monday night, I met representatives from DS Smith Recycling Ltd, which is a British company with a strong European presence. It is expanding its operations in an innovative way throughout the European Union, and it is a major and important employer in my constituency of Caerphilly. The company is not committed to the left or to the right; it simply wants to expand its work and be a good employer. It recognises that it would be absolute lunacy for itself and the people it employs if we extricated ourselves from the European Union.

[Wayne David]

The message that went out on Monday evening was, “In the interests of the company, jobs and prosperity, please make sure that the strong case is put for Britain to remain in the European Union.”

The two companies I have mentioned have innovative and well-structured training programmes, which the EU’s structural funds contribute to in large part. Wales has been allocated £2.4 billion from the EU structural funds for the 2014 to 2020 period. Indeed, Wales is a net beneficiary—more money comes in than goes out—to the tune of £838 million a year. There are strong practical reasons for making the case over the next few weeks that Britain and Wales should remain an integral part of the European Union. It makes sense for ordinary people and for the country’s prosperity, to which we are all committed.

My final point is also linked to the prosperity of Wales, namely the question of whether Heathrow should be expanded and have a third runway. As a Welsh MP, I believe that the strongest single argument in favour of the third runway at Heathrow is the positive impact it would have on the Welsh economy. That is not just my view. The First Minister of Wales, Carwyn Jones, was clear the other day that the Welsh Government support the expansion of Heathrow because it would provide the best possible support for investment, tourism and jobs in Wales. His comments are informed by hard facts and clear analysis. It has been estimated that 85% of the new manufacturing jobs that an expanded Heathrow would generate would be created outside London and the south-east. Up to 6,000 of those manufacturing jobs would be in Wales, constituting a significant part of the 8,400 Welsh jobs accompanying a total of £6.2 billion of economic benefit.

Those facts speak for themselves. It is essential that the Government stop shilly-shallying and give the go-ahead for the expansion of Heathrow. It makes sense for the country as a whole and for Wales in particular.

Whether or not Heathrow will bring the best possible benefits to Wales depends on access. That is why it is essential that Heathrow’s expansion is accompanied by the electrification of the Paddington to south Wales railway line and the construction of a rail spur directly to Heathrow. I am aware that a consultation began this week.

Craig Williams: On the subject of Governments dilly-dallying, if we are going to have a third runway at Heathrow—which I support wholeheartedly—would it not make sense for the Welsh Labour Government to get on with the M4 relief road and improve the tunnels and the capacity of the M4 so that we can get to the airport?

Wayne David: I am in favour of that, but the decision is not up to the Government in Cardiff alone. A lot depends on what the Government in London do and on whether financial facilities are made available to the Welsh Government. That is important.

It is vital that a message goes out from the consultation that Network Rail is commencing that the Governments in Cardiff and in London are in favour of the spur to Heathrow. When the Minister replies, I would like him to say that strong representations will be made to Network

Rail to make sure that we get the spur. We hope that that will be part of a longer-term project for the expansion of Heathrow airport.

I have spoken about three important issues. We want a coherent draft Wales Bill to be presented, and I hope that it will be formulated on the basis of consensus. I hope that in the next few months many Members in this Chamber will decide to pull together and argue the case for Britain’s continued membership of the European Union, highlighting its importance for Wales. I also hope that we will be able to unite in support of an expanded Heathrow airport. That, again, would be of tremendous benefit to the Welsh economy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. My experiment of having a voluntary time limit has not worked. We will therefore have a formal time limit of nine minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

2.49 pm

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): You just got the nine minute bar in before I rose to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker, which is probably a good thing. This debate is close to my heart. I have always thought we should have a debate in the Chamber as near as possible to 1 March. I always think of it as a St David’s day debate, and that tends to lead me to take a non-adversarial approach.

I opened the debate last year, as the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) did this year. In preparation, I remember looking back through *Hansard* to see who had spoken in similar debates. I was rather hoping that my favourite British politician of all time, David Lloyd George—his statue rightly stands outside the door to the Chamber—had opened a similar debate, but he had not. He was a remarkable politician. A left-wing, radical Welsh speaker from Criccieth in north Wales whom nobody had ever heard of until he came here, he effectively led the Conservative party for six years in this place. Only a Welshman could pull off a trick like that, and he did. It was his daughter, Megan Lloyd George, who opened the first St David’s day debate in 1944; this debate does not have a long history. In her speech she focused mainly on two issues: the dire situation of the farming industry, particularly the dairy industry, and the way in which mid-Wales is ignored. Over the last 70 years, not an awful lot has changed. Welsh dairy farming is in seriously dire straits, and mid-Wales continues to be ignored.

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): Is it not the case that for a short period of time, mid-Wales was given some support by the Development Board for Rural Wales, which did a fantastic job for the locality?

Glyn Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for offering me the opportunity for some degree of self-congratulation, but I had probably better not take it.

I particularly enjoyed one comment from Megan Lloyd George’s speech, which you may enjoy as well, Madam Deputy Speaker:

“No Englishman”—

I think she meant English women as well, but in those days women were not included as they are today—

“can understand the Welsh. However much he may try, and however sympathetic he may feel, he cannot get inside the skin and bones of a Welshman unless he be born again.”—[*Official Report*, 17 October 1944; Vol. 403, c. 2237.]

That explains quite a lot.

I am supportive of making St David's day a national holiday, and I support the efforts of the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams), who is sponsoring a private Member's Bill under which that decision would be devolved to the National Assembly for Wales. When I was a National Assembly Member, I declared 1 March to be a bank holiday in my office, and the staff were always told that they need not come in to work. If we are not able to agree a bank holiday, I could certainly do the same again.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for supporting that idea. Would he support Plaid Cymru Members if we tabled an amendment to the Wales Bill to remove public holidays from the list of matters reserved to Westminster?

Glyn Davies: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman would expect me to go further than to say that that may well be an idea that could be supported and looked at.

St David was a great Welshman, pure in thought and pure in deed—a condition to which every good Welshman aspires. He performed awe-inspiring miracles. People usually refer to the most famous one, which was to raise the ground on which he was standing in order to be seen. The First Minister of Wales gave that very example in London today in a speech that I heard. What I find most interesting about it is the reflection made by the late Professor John Davies, another great Welshman, who said that he could not

“conceive of a miracle more superfluous than the creation of a new hill at Llanddewi Brefi.”

That is true, but it was still a very good trick to pull off.

I want to comment on three areas. They are points that I feel I ought to make in this place as often as I can. The first is on culture. I will then make some comments on sport. I also want to comment on the transfer of power, which will take place under the Wales Bill and to some extent under the constituency boundaries review, from this place to the National Assembly for Wales.

Wales is a great nation of culture—it is part of the Welsh DNA—but the one thing that is particularly special is the Welsh language. It makes Wales different. Not everybody can speak it, but it does make Wales very different from any other part of Britain. We can go to certain places and hear the indigenous language of Welsh being spoken on the street. I think that is very special.

A key part of supporting the Welsh language is Sianel Pedwar Cymru—S4C—the Welsh television channel. Every couple of years, we seem to have to fight very hard to maintain the public support that is needed for such a channel to continue. I hope that Members from all parties in this place will acknowledge its importance in ensuring that the Welsh language thrives and keeps Wales the special place that we all aspire to its being.

I want to talk briefly about sport, but perhaps not to say the obvious things. We know about the Welsh rugby team, and we wish them well. We have a magnificent captain in Sam Warburton. I say that not just for the quality of his play, but for the type of man he is. When I look back on everything I have seen in sport, I will never forget how, when he was so unjustly sent off in the semi-final of the world cup, he looked at the referee, nodded his head and walked off. He showed no disagreement with the referee, but accepted a really unfair decision—the referee's judgment—and went off. That requires a level of self-control that I find absolutely amazing. To my mind, that makes him a magnificent man. I must of course also make reference to the Welsh football team, who are going to France for the European championship. We wish them well.

I want to mention two other sportsmen. One of them is an international figure, John Charles. I am of a certain age—a lot of Members in the Chamber are young—and in my view he was the best footballer that Britain has ever produced. He is never thought of as such and does not come to people's minds, but he was an absolutely amazing man. He could leap, above everybody, like a salmon. Actually, he was a little bit like St David in that he could rise himself up, but he did not need a hill. He was appreciated across the world. Again, amazingly, he had the same Warburton-like concept of fairness. He was never sent off or cautioned in the whole of his career. How someone could play at his standard—one of the best players in the world—and never be cautioned, or never have an argument with anyone, is amazing.

The other person I want to mention is a local man from Welshpool, Barry Williams. I played rugby in the midlands and the north of England, and I eventually came back to Welshpool, where we had one team. Sometimes, we were lucky even to get out one full team. In terms of the first team, Welshpool is not much different now, but has up to 10 teams of youngsters—under-eights, under-10s, under-12s and under-14s—playing every week. Barry Williams organises all that. To my mind, he is the sort of individual who makes a massive contribution to Welsh sport and, indeed, to the spirit of encouraging young people to be part of society. I think that Welshpool rugby club—it is not the greatest rugby club in the world, although I thought it was when I played there—has the sort of man we need as an example to everyone right across Wales.

Finally, I want to say one or two things about the Wales Bill, which we have not yet seen. I am one of the few people to be disappointed by the pause. In the end, I acknowledge that there has to be a pause because of the delays in getting to where we are, but I would very much have liked it to be a subject for debate during the National Assembly election. It would have been a real issue of contention. Elections very often finish up as a debate about all sorts of things that are very much unrelated to what they should be about. If it had been an issue in the Welsh Assembly election, we could have focused on the future of Wales and how Wales is governed, which would have been very appropriate.

What I have seen of the Bill so far has pleased me. Clearly, the draft Bill did not receive a level of support that would have enabled it to go forward. We still have the reserved powers model, but it seems that the powers that are reserved will be greatly reduced—something we should all welcome. Other parts of the Bill are important.

[Glyn Davies]

The inclusion of income tax responsibilities for the Welsh Government is crucial. It will give them a financial responsibility, rather than just a spending responsibility. That will enable the Welsh Government to grow up. There are a whole lot of other issues on which there is general agreement across all parties. Hopefully, in the end there will be a Bill that Members from all parties can support and that delivers the stable, long-term devolution settlement that all of us in this place would very much like to see.

3.1 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this debate. It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies).

Well done to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for securing this important time in the Chamber to talk about all things Welsh. He rightly talked about the crisis that the steel industry faces. The issues that he raised in respect of Aberavon also have a huge impact on Llanwern steelworks in my constituency, so I wholeheartedly support the points that he made. This morning, he, I and other Labour Members who are in the Chamber lobbied the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise on those very points, and we will keep saying those things. I support my hon. Friend's call for more help to protect our industry for the sake of constituents who work in Aberavon and, crucially, in Llanwern. We must never forget the Llanwern workers, given the announcements on job losses. We are feeling the effects of the job losses, too.

We went into this matter in some depth in the debate on steel on Monday. I know that the Secretary of State and the Minister are extremely mindful of these issues, but on behalf of the steelworkers I represent, I ask the Wales Office Ministers to keep speaking up in Government on behalf of the steel industry. I shall not repeat the five asks because we went through them in depth on Monday, but I ask the Minister to please be mindful of them.

I realise that there is a mixed picture in my constituency in respect of steel, because there is positive news at the Orb steelworks, which is also owned by Tata. It produces some of the best-quality transformer steel in the world and delivered a profit in quarter three last year. Liberty steel, which my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) mentioned in the debate on Monday, has restarted production at the old Alphasteel works and hopes to increase production in the months and years to come. We must acknowledge that news, too.

I know that many hon. Members want to get in, so I want to use this opportunity primarily to bang on about the Severn bridge tolls. I make no apology for doing so again. It is by no means a new issue for the House, but after many years of debate, questions and meetings, it is coming to a head. The bridges will soon come back into public ownership, so we are in the crucial period when discussions are taking place about the level of tolling. We must not miss the opportunity to get the tolls reduced.

As local issues go, the tolls are one of the most frequently raised with me, alongside the overcrowding on the commuter services to Bristol and beyond. Some 12,500 people travel from Newport and Monmouthshire

into England every day. There is a transport trap for people in south-east Wales: they can either take the expensive overcrowded train, if they can get on it, or pay the eye-watering tolls on the bridge every day.

If the Minister wants to grant my St David's day debate wish and, I suspect, the wish of many of my constituents who are commuters or who run local businesses, he will commit to lobby the Department for Transport to slash the tolls to a near-maintenance level when the bridges become publicly owned. The tolls have a huge impact on commuters, and also on access to jobs for many of my constituents, because when people factor in having to pay the tolls, they cannot afford to take many of the jobs that are on offer in Bristol and the surrounding area. There is a huge impact on local businesses—not just hauliers, about whom I will continue to talk in debates on the subject, but other businesses across south Wales that absorb the cost in their bottom line or that in some cases have to relocate to England.

My neighbour the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) recently discovered in his role as Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee that the debts on the bridges were due to be paid back earlier than expected—as early as autumn 2017—because of tax changes and increased traffic volume. In an answer to a recent written question, I was told that the concession is due to end in 2018. It is therefore really important that we know the answers to the following questions. Will the debts be cleared by 2017, and is it the Minister's understanding that the concessionaire has had increased revenue? If so, why will the concession end in 2018, not 2017, and what will the concessionaire recoup in the meantime? What discussions are going on, and between whom, about the date on which the concession will end and the future level of the toll? Will Ministers please heed the calls for the tolls to be slashed?

We know that VAT will have to be taken off the tolls when the bridges revert to public ownership—thanks to kindly EU rules, I might add. What would happen to the Severn bridge tolls if we voted to come out of the EU? That is a new angle. It is important that the Government recognise that the change would have happened anyway, so it is not a great gift. We need some clarity about the money that the concessionaire is recouping from the bridges, the current debt and the money that the Government are getting in from the VAT and other taxes.

My plea today is that the Government involve hon. Members with constituency interests in the bridges in their discussions. I appreciate that the Minister will not have all the answers today, but will he at least commit to getting Transport Ministers to write to me with answers to those questions? Would he be able to broker a meeting between me and other hon. Members and the Department for Transport, so that we can find out what is happening?

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon talked about bold leadership in the Welsh Government, and their partnerships and achievements were one of the themes of his speech. In Newport, there is real optimism about the newly opened Friars Walk development.

Paul Flynn: Hear, hear.

Jessica Morden: I thank my hon. Friend. All credit is due to Bob Bright and Newport City Council for their brave political leadership in driving the project through

at a time when hardly anywhere else in the country was building such projects. It is not a silver bullet and will not answer all of Newport's problems, but 120,000 more people came to our city centre in November. Along with Coleg Gwent's hope to relocate to the city centre with the University of South Wales, and other developments and partnerships involving businesses and the Welsh Government, it is bringing real optimism to our city. We need the UK Government to play their part, too, to save, protect and build our manufacturing industries. They have a role to play in allowing our city to thrive and grow, and protecting our steel industry is one way to do it.

3.8 pm

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): In the spirit of St David's day, may I first give huge congratulations to the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important debate? More importantly, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) for introducing a bit of consensus just before my speech, which I will build on. In that spirit, I add my name to the lobby of the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) on the Severn bridge tolls, which are an important cross-party issue on which we all campaign strongly. I would certainly like to come to the meeting with the Department for Transport if Ministers can arrange that.

I want to touch on several points. I am mindful of the time limit, but as the Member for Cardiff North it would be remiss of me not to start with the Cardiff city deal. I know that my colleagues would be sad if I did not bang on about it for at least half my speech.

It is an important time for Cardiff, and an exciting time to be involved with what I see as the engine room of the Welsh economy—Cardiff and the city region. If the city deal is successful, it could bring a lot of scope, investment and vision together. The next couple of weeks will be incredibly important for our capital city. I want to make a couple of pleas from the Chamber about private sector involvement. I know that the Minister is a champion for us, and I implore him to do anything he can in the spirit of consensus and the framework of the city deal.

The Aston Martin announcement was so welcome and brilliant, and the Minister was integral to that. It resulted from championing by the UK and the Welsh Governments. If we take that partnership approach on many more issues, we could secure much more investment. We are all tempted, so close to an election, to take all the credit for anything positive in Wales, but there are many more companies floating around south Wales—and I hope north Wales, but I am unabashedly the champion of Cardiff—and working together can help secure investment.

Electrification is a key issue. When that happens in Cardiff and then in Swansea, there will be an opportunity to tie into the south Wales metro. I want to work with the Welsh Government and Network Rail to get work in the south Wales valleys into the right control period. I want to be involved in the conversations, for example, about whether the line is heavy or light. I want to do what I can, and I want the spirit of consensus to get into the city deal. I hope that the metro will be at the core of that. I realise that the next couple of months will be

difficult and that we might not quite agree on everything in the run-up to the Assembly election. However, in the spirit of consensus. I very much look forward to working with Councillor Jayne Cowan in Cardiff North, who, with 16 years of experience on the council, could help deliver the metro.

I also want briefly to mention IQE in the context of the city deal. It is a great Cardiff and Welsh company that produces the compound semiconductors that we find in most electronic devices. Its relationship with Cardiff University, and the new catapult that the Chancellor of Exchequer launched in Cardiff, are bringing high-end, brilliant manufacturing to Wales—exactly the sort of industry that we need to attract together. By “together”, again I mean the UK and the Welsh Governments.

Without venturing too far into the European debate, I have to say that Cardiff University punches far above its weight. That ties into Horizon 2020 funding and the critical mass we get in the single market for research and development, which I support wholeheartedly. The metro, electrification, IQE and working with the private and third sectors will deliver a Cardiff city deal to rejuvenate south Wales. The valleys are important in the Cardiff city deal, which might start with Cardiff but is incredibly important to that critical work population of about 1.5 million people. Although Cardiff is the engine room of the Welsh economy, we need transformation for south Wales.

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Gentleman alluded to the importance of the European Union for Cardiff University and research funding. He knows, of course, that the leader of the Conservative party in the Assembly has said that he will vote for Brexit. What impact does the hon. Gentleman think that that will have on higher education policy in the Conservative manifesto for the Assembly elections?

Craig Williams: The hon. Gentleman is trying to ruin the consensus within my party as well as the debate. I will try my best to skirt around that issue. Although I disagree with Andrew R. T. Davies, a good friend and colleague, we will work those things out when he is First Minister. I therefore would not worry about that.

Let me move on quickly to the redevelopment and challenges that I envisage for the south Wales and Cardiff economy. The hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) is not in his place, but I am sure that he will read *Hansard* later. The barefaced cheek of saying that we are waiting for some sort of financial package from the UK Government for the M4 relief road is unbelievable. That borrowing power—the old Welsh Development Agency powers—has been available to the Welsh Government for a considerable time and they have not done much to progress that.

Mr David Jones: Does my hon. Friend accept that although the Welsh Government may not have done much in south Wales, they have done nothing at all in north Wales?

Craig Williams: I wholeheartedly accept that, and I feel for the A55 as much as I do for the M4. However, the M4 relief road is key for our links to Heathrow, as is the spur for Network Rail. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) referred

[Craig Williams]

to Andrew R. T. Davies—the next First Minister—and he has committed to having, within 12 months, a spade-ready M4 relief road. I massively welcome that and look forward to its coming to fruition.

I am conscious of the time, but I want to touch on the redevelopment of the M4 and the Eastern Bay link road. It is a shame and a travesty that Wales's capital city does not have a circular road around it, and any visitor to the National Assembly for Wales who comes out of the Butetown tunnels then sees the national disgrace of a road that ends—it is a road to nowhere and it needs finishing. I know that phase 1 is now on the cards, but it is ridiculous to do one phase of a circular road, but to leave out a small section up to what would be an excellent gateway to the new M4 relief road. I have also touched on the metro and the tolls, on which there is cross-party consensus.

Let me briefly mention the Commonwealth games, and a bid that we must champion as a nation. Cardiff is at the core of that, but the games have the opportunity to be a real Welsh national Commonwealth games. When we consider what happened in Glasgow and Scotland, and at the Olympics in London, the kind of economic redevelopment and opportunities that a Commonwealth games presents for Wales cannot be missed. I hope that all parties in the upcoming Assembly election will have in their manifestos a clear commitment to the Commonwealth games. Sports, businesses and Welsh civic society are behind that bid, and we need political vision and leadership from Cardiff Bay. I hope that that will be the only bid within the United Kingdom, and that we can have full support from the UK Government.

I will now touch on sporting success. I asked permission from my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire to mention one hero, but I will actually mention three. He mentioned Barry Williams. I spent many a Saturday morning more than two decades ago selling match programmes with him, and he is a true champion. We finally have something in common again, because he is up for election in the Peter's Pie competition for a Welsh rugby hero. Outside of Cardiff North, Welshpool rugby club is the finest rugby club in Wales, and I support his bid wholeheartedly. He is a true champion of Welsh rugby and a great friend.

Lewis Wilkins is a young scientist from my constituency, and he is coming to the House of Commons on Monday as part of the SET for BRITAIN initiative to encourage, support and promote Britain's early-stage and early-career research scientists. It is a great scheme to get young people into science and research and development so early on. He will be in Portcullis House—I will not give the time and date, but if anyone wants to join me in going to see Lewis Wilkins, they will meet a true champion of science and a true advocate for Cardiff and Cardiff University.

Finally, I want to mention Mrs Beth Baldwin, whose son tragically died of undetected type-1 diabetes. This week she presented a petition to the Assembly on raising awareness of diabetes and on having a simple prick test—perhaps as part of schools' injection processes—to discover whether children are diabetic. She received the Pride of Britain award, and she is an incredibly brave woman from an incredibly supportive and great Cardiff

family that have turned a tragedy into a great campaign. She is a true Welsh hero. I am delighted that she will be coming to No. 10 later this month to present another petition about having a gold standard or minimum for GPs and other health care professionals to routinely test for diabetes.

I hope that I have captured the economic development, excitement and potential of Cardiff and Wales. We should not talk it down too much. We have great opportunities, but a Commonwealth games bid could draw much of that redevelopment together, and I very much want that to happen.

3.19 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): It is a tad ungracious to complain about the absence of the Secretary of State for Wales without having sympathy for the dreadful week he has had. On Monday, it was the humiliation of having to withdraw his signature Bill. Things then got worse. Humiliation was heaped on humiliation on Tuesday when he lost a competition in which last year he won first prize. This year, he came in an extremely lowly position. This extremely prestigious competition is run by the Beard Liberation Front. Happily, there was one Welsh parliamentarian, with a beard of a different hue, who managed a creditable position. It is quite right that the Secretary of State wants to hide the pathetic starter beard that disfigures his features and not to be seen in public today. We do understand.

The main point I would like to make, after expressing sympathy with the Secretary of State, is one of optimism for the Welsh nation. I recall in 1957 the publication of a book called "Wythnos yng Nghymru Fydd", a story about the future in which somebody is transported to 2033. It was a dreadful Wales that he saw. It was a Wales that had changed its name to West England. The language was dead and the Welsh personality had gone. There was another depressing moment in 1962, when the genius Saunders Lewis made his speech "Tynged yr Iaith". He foresaw a Wales where the language would die and not live beyond the 20th century. When we look at the Wales of today, however, there are huge reasons for satisfaction and optimism.

We had a lovely service this week, with Welsh spoken at its beautiful best by the young children, representing the future, from the Welsh school. The fact is that we have succeeded in the dream. In the 19th century, politicians came here in their droves as Welsh patriots and soon became seduced by this place. Wales was let down, generation after generation. Now, however, we can rejoice. We have our own Parliament on the soil of our country, where we speak both the beautiful languages of Wales. I had the pleasure this week of talking to a delegation from the Icelandic Parliament. While we call ourselves the mother of Parliaments, they call themselves the grandmother of Parliaments. They are in Cardiff today. I am sure they will be equally impressed by the young grandchild of Parliaments, a Parliament that started brilliantly and has achieved much in spite of criticism from outside. I think we can all take pride in the Welsh nation.

In this atmosphere of consensus, one person to whom we should pay great tribute is the man who ensured that Welsh is heard on the lips of all our children in Wales, wherever they live. That was a very courageous decision.

That was the work of Wyn Roberts, who was called the bardic steamroller. He was a member of the Gorsedd bards and his subtlety was regarded as akin to a steamroller. I think that was a little unjust, but we should remember the vital role of steamrollers in the area of construction. He constructed politics. I watched with great admiration the way he took the policy on Welsh language education through a hostile party of his own. We need to acknowledge that great debt.

The issue I would like to raise is one that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). It is the sole point I want to make and it relates to the future of energy in Wales. If we look at our map and our potential, our North sea oil, which is Scotland's great treasure, is the tide and hydroelectric power. We have allowed this immense source of energy to run to waste untapped. There is an extraordinary devotion to Hinkley Point, which I find inexplicable. It is based entirely on a stubborn view that will not accept the truth and the scientific reality. It will not accept that Hinkley Point is the final manifestation of a technological blind alley. It is an EPR reactor. The one in Finland is now seven years late and €6.7 billion over budget. It will probably never work. The one at Flammanville has had a terrible technological problem in the roof of the reactor's vessel, and it will probably never finish.

As for finances, if we look on the other side at tidal power and at the source of the energy, we find that it is free, British and of immense power, whereas the source of energy for Hinkley Point is an imported form of fuel that will leave a legacy for all time. The source of the power on the tide is entirely predictable—unlike most other forms of renewable energy such as solar. We can predict precisely how the tide is going to come in and make the energy entirely demand responsive by linking whatever it is—lagoons, barrages or whatever—to electric storage schemes that allow us to pump water up to the heads of the valleys when electricity is required and save the energy when it is not. That is how the Dinorwig power station has provided a vital element in our electricity supply for many years.

Now that it seems we have had yet another year's delay at Hinkley Point, the Government must come to their senses. They have done an atrocious deal with the French to guarantee them a price of electricity that is twice the present going rate and is guaranteed—and index-linked—for 35 years, yet we cannot guarantee what the price of electricity will be for 35 weeks. This is an extraordinary deal. All the sensible money has retreated from Hinkley Point. Centrica invested £200 million, but it has gone—abandoned the project. All the money left is Chinese, and China is anxious to invest in what it sees as a Hinkley sprat in order to get the mackerel of all the future engineering at Bradwell and everywhere else, in perpetuity. China is stealing our jobs and our skills through that deal. EDF is virtually bankrupt. It has a debt of €37 billion, and its board has now cancelled the project—a further cancellation—for another year.

If we look at the evidence at other EPRs, we see that they are going nowhere, so we should recognise that this investment, taken together, is one of the worst investment decisions since the building of the pyramids—when objects were bought at great cost but had no practical value. It is now becoming clear that the established scientific community, which has been locked in this stubborn view that we had to have Hinkley, is realising

that we have an enormous financial disaster on our hands—and that at some time it will be necessary to pull out.

What could be better than investing the money in tidal power? Ignored for so long, this great moving cliff of water that comes up and down the Severn—the second highest tide in the world—could provide energy that is green, non-carbon, predictable and eternal in its duration. We have seen examples where it has worked magnificently. Fifty years ago, a barrage was built in La Rance in Brittany, and it still has turbines in pristine condition producing energy that is the cheapest in the world. That, I believe, is the way forward for Wales.

3.28 pm

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), and it was quite a surprise to hear such a consensual speech from him, which leaves me in the position of carrying on in the tradition of this debate and not being too aggressive in the way I behave.

I also thank the hon. Member for Newport West for his comments about my predecessor, Lord Wyn Roberts of Conwy, which I think were appreciated by all Members and I know will be appreciated by my constituents and Lord Roberts's family. His contribution was indeed significant. My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) mentioned the A55, and we should not forget that in addition to the work that Wyn Roberts did for the Welsh language, he was the prime mover for the development of the A55 from Chester all the way to Holyhead. It is remarkable that in his maiden speech of 1970, he stated that his ambition as an MP was to ensure that a general hospital was built in Bangor and a dual carriageway was built from Chester to Holyhead. It is quite an achievement for any Member of Parliament to deliver both the promises that he made in his maiden speech, but Wyn delivered so much more.

Sometimes, in a debate such as this, a Member can feel that, occasionally, he or she can make a difference through membership of a Select Committee. We have heard about investment in the Halton curve railway line to provide better connectivity between north Wales and Liverpool, and I agree that that investment is essential to the economy of north Wales. I remember sitting in the Welsh Affairs Committee back in 2011 when we called for that investment. It is good to know that the work that we do in Select Committees occasionally results in changes.

I can paint an upbeat picture of the current economic situation in Wales. The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock)—whom I congratulate on securing the debate—spoke of some of the concerns of his constituents, and I am sure that all Members sympathise with them, because what is happening to the steel industry is indeed a matter of grave concern. However, the Government should be proud of the fact that, since 2010—under the coalition and, subsequently, under a majority Conservative Government—we have seen a significant improvement in employment in Wales, and a significant decrease in unemployment. I think that we should be genuinely pleased about the strides that we are making.

I also think that, in the context of a St David's day debate, it is crucial to emphasise that when the Governments in Westminster and Cardiff work together, we see better

[Guto Bebb]

results. That co-operation, that willingness to work together, often results in a better performance on the part of the Welsh economy. I am in a staggering position, in that I have only received really bad news, from an economic perspective, on two occasions since my election. One example was the recent tragic fire at Llandudno Junction, which caused 50 people to lose their positions at Express Linen Services. I find it remarkable that, although I have been a Member of Parliament for nearly six years, that is one of the few examples of job losses that I can remember. The story in Aberconwy is of a halving of unemployment since 2010. More and more people are in employment, and when I talk to businessmen, they are very positive about the future. I think we should acknowledge the successes that have been achieved as a result of co-operation, with successive Secretaries of State trying their best to work with the Welsh Government.

I think that the present Secretary of State has made the right decision in “pausing” the new Wales Bill, because it is unlikely that there will be any willingness to agree on a way forward between now and the Welsh Assembly elections. That was a mature thing to do. The hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who is no longer in the Chamber, should reflect on the fact that it is a brave politician who is willing to pause, and to say that he will look at the evidence and come back with something better. What we want for Wales is a settlement for the long term. Let us be honest: we are building on a devolution settlement that was not about Wales, but all about the Labour party. We are slowly trying to make the settlement more effective and constructive, and I believe that taking time to secure a proper deal is necessary and correct.

The second big issue facing Wales this year is the European referendum on 23 June. I have a long track record as a Eurosceptic. I certainly experienced some difficulties in a former life as a result of my membership of Business for Sterling, a campaign which launched a great political effort to ensure that we did not join the single currency—and no one in the House today would say that we should have joined it. That campaign was correct; we made the right call. Our slogan was simple: “Europe yes, euro no”. Europe is not perfect, but I think that it gives us more than we have to give it, and that we benefit from our membership.

When we are talking about the north Wales economy, it is sobering to reflect that, just last week, the largest company in north Wales, Airbus, stated clearly that it considered membership of the European Union to be important. Moreover, the largest potential investor in north Wales, Horizon Nuclear Power in Anglesey—which is developing what may be the first new-generation nuclear power station, if the hon. Member for Newport West is correct—has also expressed the clear view that it is important for us to remain in the EU.

We should also reflect on the small businesses that benefit from our membership of the European Union. I would like to highlight an example in my constituency. A company called Zip World, run by Sean Taylor, did not exist in 2011. I remember Sean coming to see me and telling me that he was going to set up some zip wires. As someone who is scared of heights, I was not particularly interested, but I can tell the House that that

company now employs 240 people from my constituency and those of the hon. Members for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). Sean has created 240 jobs from scratch in rural Snowdonia, and that is a huge contribution to our economic wellbeing. Even more importantly—my constituency predecessor, Wyn Roberts, would be proud of this fact—70% of those workers are local Welsh speakers. That company makes a huge contribution to keeping those people in their communities, and it was seed-funded by European money.

I am not going to be quite as reasonable as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) on the issue of European grant funding. Wales is a net beneficiary, and it is clear that my constituency of Aberconwy, which is in west Wales and the valleys, is a significant net beneficiary. The figures that I have recently obtained from the local authority, Conwy County Borough Council, show that well over 900 jobs have been created in 240 new ventures as a direct result of the European grant funding of small businesses over the past five years.

Is the European grant spent well in Wales? I do not think so. We could do much better. In a speech at the National Eisteddfod in Denbighshire in 2013, I highlighted the failures of the way in which we spent that European money in Wales, but I started my speech by saying that those failures were a “made in Wales” problem, not a European problem. The problem is the way in which we have used the money in Wales. When we claim that there is waste in the European funding that is allocated on a regional basis, it is important that we highlight where the problem lies. I would argue that the Welsh Government’s lack of willingness to embrace the private sector is more of an issue in regard to the use of European funding than any decision taken in Brussels.

Also on the subject of European grant funding, there has been a fantastic achievement by the Wales Office and the Secretary of State for Wales in at long last establishing the funding floor. We have been asking for that for a very long time. However, I would ask our leader in the Assembly to consider carefully whether he genuinely believes that, with the Barnett floor in place, there would be additional money to make up for the current shortfall if we lost European funding to areas such as mine. I very much question that.

Looking at the European issue from a local perspective, and taking into account agriculture, regional development funding and, more importantly, the trade deals that allow companies such as Airbus and Horizon to invest in north Wales, I believe that despite all the European Union’s flaws, Wales will be stronger in the EU.

3.37 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): St David’s day, 1 March, is a national day of celebration in Wales. It is a day on which to celebrate Wales and being Welsh. We are a proud nation of culture, literature, song, art and sport. I congratulate the Wales women’s rugby team on recently beating Scotland and France at the Knoll ground in my constituency and on qualifying for the world cup. That is a great achievement. It would be remiss of me not to mention squash—the game, not the drink—because in a former life I was the national coach for Squash Wales. As a small nation, we have always punched above our

weight and medalled on many occasions, including the European Championships, in many countries. That leads me to what I want to talk about today, which is the importance of staying in Europe.

In my constituency of Neath and across Wales, we enjoy great opportunities and great benefits as a result of EU membership. I pay tribute to Derek Vaughan, our Member of the European Parliament for Wales, who is vice-chair of the budgetary control committee in the European Parliament. He has fought for the benefits that Wales receives. He is a former leader of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, and he has used his great experience and knowledge as a former leader of the Welsh Local Government Association to fight for Wales in Europe.

Wales is a net benefactor from the EU to the tune of £838 million a year. Moreover, the lower prices, higher job numbers and increased trade and investment that come from our membership of the EU are worth more than £3,000 a year to the average Welsh household. That is 10 times more than the £274 that each household pays in.

The EU is without doubt the biggest, richest market in the world, upon which, according to the Centre for Economics and Business Research, 191,332 jobs in Wales depend. The economic benefits are clear: for the 2014 to 2020 period, Wales will receive £4.9 billion from the common agricultural policy and structural funds. It is estimated that, over time, the UK could lose as much as 6.1% to 9.5% of our GDP following an exit from the EU. In my constituency, the EU has created 1,120 jobs, helped 6,680 people into work, granted access to further education for 3,490 people and helped 13,630 to gain qualifications. The help in my local authority area—that of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council—that the EU has provided to enterprises has meant that 670 have been assisted and 420 have been created.

One of the best examples of EU funding benefiting my constituency is the newly relaunched Workways Plus scheme, which is led by the local council and has received £7.5 million in EU funding. It offers training and paid work experience opportunities to 4,000 long-term unemployed people to help get them back into work. The support targets disadvantaged people, helping them to take their first steps to re-engage with or enter the labour market; the scheme offers one-to-one mentoring, and support with job-seeking and interview skills. The programme targets individuals affected by work-limiting health conditions and disabilities, as well as those with care responsibilities and low or no skills. It is the perfect scheme to get people back into work, and it continues a similar EU-funded scheme that ran across south-west Wales between 2009 and 2014, which was an enormous success and showed the true benefits that EU funding can bring to our communities.

Not only are there jobs that have benefited from EU funding, but the effects of our membership have benefited the infrastructure in Neath. EU regeneration funds have been used expertly by Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council to regenerate many town centres across the constituency, and this, in turn, has revived the use of these town centres and has helped the local economy get back to strength after tough economic times. Crucially, EU investment and involvement would also help aid the UK steel industry, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) said. The UK Government

should follow the example of the Welsh Government, who have taken full advantage of our membership of the EU to help fund many of their projects and schemes, such as Jobs Growth Wales, which have helped get the Welsh economy, and the jobs and skills market, back on track.

Business leaders have already warned that leaving the EU would amount to a step into an “Abyss of uncertainty and risk.”

The path for a potential exit is unclear; it has been likened to getting off a bus and into a car, which sounds a dangerous prospect to me. My constituents cannot afford this uncertainty as the negotiations conclude and then a potential exit is negotiated. The economic reality for Wales and for my constituents in Neath is such that Brexit would be disastrous for our jobs and prosperity, not to mention for the benefits we all enjoy, such as workers’ rights, environmental protections, consumer safeguards and free movement.

The Conservative party has treated the issue of our membership of the EU as a political football for many, many years, and the Prime Minister has put so many jobs, businesses and projects in my constituency on the line just to appease his own Back Benchers. Rather than address the necessary reforms of the EU in a constructive manner from inside, we face the prospect of an exit, which will be a disaster for Neath and for Wales as a whole.

I cannot speak about matters important to Wales without mentioning another critical issue—the ongoing farce that is the Wales Bill, which, as originally drafted, met with criticism from all sides, including the Welsh Affairs Committee of this House. To make matters worse, we learn, not in this House but from the media, that the Bill is now on pause, pending a major overhaul. As the First Minister said, we are back to where we started. How can the Conservative party justify putting Wales’s economic development and prosperity at risk with its mishandling of this Bill and of our relationship with the EU?

3.45 pm

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak today. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this debate. I am very conscious of what he said about different Members having different matters to raise, as I have several areas of concern that I would like to discuss. I thought I would do that by taking Members on a very quick geographical tour of the south Wales coastline.

I will start at Cardiff Bay, the seat of the National Assembly for Wales. During my time as an Assembly Member, I fell upon what must be one of the most scandalous episodes in Welsh devolution. One of the main jobs of any Government is to ensure that the public receives value for money, but I am afraid that, in this tale, the public received absolutely no value from the Welsh Government in the Regeneration and Investment Fund for Wales. It is crucial that Governments attach the highest importance to public assets, but, on this occasion, the Welsh Government not only sold land for an incredible amount under its true value, but seemed completely complacent during the process of the sale.

[Byron Davies]

There was huge weakness in the oversight of this project. It is incomprehensible that the “jewel in the crown” site at Lisvane in Cardiff was sold to a preferred purchaser for £1.8 million, when its potential open market value for housing was at least £39 million.

Craig Williams: The Welsh Government sold the land in Lisvane in Cardiff North, the most valuable land in Wales with the richest agricultural output, for £15,000 an acre, when it is worth £1.2 million an acre. It is a national scandal. If it had happened in this House, does my hon. Friend think that people would have been held to account and that there would have been resignations?

Byron Davies: I am absolutely sure that my hon. Friend is right. I am amazed that the First Minister did not hold anyone to account and sack them. That perhaps speaks volumes.

Indeed, Guernsey-based South Wales Land Developments, the preferred purchaser, which bought 15 sites for £21 million, has made £19 million by selling just a few of them. That casts a very dark shadow over what the Welsh Government were doing during the process. The cavalier approach to the disposal of public assets is quite disturbing. Furthermore, questions must be asked about the valuers, Lambert Smith Hampton, and the fund managers, Amber Infrastructure, which gave the Welsh Government extremely poor advice.

There have been two recent reports on the Regeneration Investment Fund for Wales by the Wales Audit Office and the Welsh Assembly Public Accounts Committee, both of which are damning in respect of all parties involved in the deal. The Wales Audit Office made it clear that effective oversight of the project was difficult because of the governance weaknesses in establishing the RIFW. I know that the Serious Fraud Office has taken a look at the matter, but how deep did it go? I would like it to reassess any new evidence. Anything the Wales Office can do to get to the bottom of the issue would be very welcome.

Moving on further down the coastline, we come to the steelworks at Port Talbot, which plays a huge part in the landscape of south Wales. It is a crucial part not just of the economic fabric of the country, but of the social fabric, and nowhere is that truer than in my constituency of Gower. For decades, the works has provided for people across south Wales. They either work directly at the plant or in the supply chain. Indeed, the community surrounding the steelworks has survived, and indeed thrived, because of the plant. It is a crucial part of the community, and it is vital that we work together to ensure that the industry has a successful and prosperous future.

I have met Ministers and discussed their efforts to help the steel industry win procurement contracts. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will help where he can to stimulate the demand for steel, which will have a positive knock-on effect on opening up opportunities in the supply chain in Wales. I recently visited Rosyth in Scotland to see the new aircraft carriers and was delighted to learn that 94% of the steel used in their construction was British steel.

Continuing our journey around the south Wales coastline, we come to Swansea Bay and the Swansea tidal lagoon. Much political point-scoring has been attempted on

this, particularly in the local press, which is rather a shame. We are all at one—we all want to see the scheme developed. It will be a pilot scheme and we should realise that it will cost an awful lot of money to develop. There will be a great deal of public money involved, but it is the first of what could be several schemes. The Government are right to sit down and look at the whole thing in the round. I hope we will see it developed one day, and I know that other politicians in the area share that hope.

I was delighted with the recent announcement from Sir Terry Matthews about the Swansea Bay region. That scheme needs to be pushed along, perhaps through an elected mayor system. I am keen for that debate to be opened in Swansea. We need more infrastructure in Swansea, such as a parkway railway station. At present there is Swansea railway station at one end of the town and the bus station at the other end. For a successful bay region, we should consider that.

I shall move quickly round to the Burry inlet and talk about my constituency and the north end of Gower, the first area of outstanding natural beauty in the UK. I want to speak about the loss of the cockle industry and the loss to the economy of about £23 million over 10 years. That was once an extremely successful industry in Gower that supported the community and was the livelihood of many people. Now there is a 95% mortality of the cockles when they get to one year old. They should live to four or five years old. They are usually harvested when they are 18 months to two years old, but can be harvested up to about five years.

The problem has existed for about 10 years. The cockle beds have never recovered since 2005 when the mortality started. In 2000, this area had the best cockles in Europe and exported to France and Spain, bringing tens of millions of pounds into the region. The cockles are no longer suitable for the high-end market and there is a limit to how many small cockles can be sold. The nucleus of the cockle industry is Penclawdd and there are questions about its viability now that the main processor has been taken over by a Dutch company.

Local cocklers are unable to guarantee a regular supply of cockles to the processors. The season starts in May but is finished by July, whereas it used to be a year-round business. The cocklers believe that the cockles are being killed by discharges of sewage from waste treatment plants on the south Carmarthenshire side and from sewage works at Gowerton. Samples have been taken of dead and rotting cockles and of some live ones and these have been analysed, but we have never seen the results. The cocklers are calling for further scientific research, including a parasitology investigation, which has never been carried out before and requires funding from the Welsh Government. Research has discovered that each cockle in these waters carries up to 29 different types of parasite, many times more than is found in cockle stocks elsewhere in the UK and along the Atlantic seaboard from north Africa up to Scandinavia.

There are 35 licences still in existence in the Burry inlet and 25 of them are still being used. People are paying for licences but cannot make a living. In the 1960s and 1970s, up to 100 people were working there, gathering cockles 52 weeks a year. The licences cost £700 a year but they can no longer be transferred to sons or relatives, who have to go on a waiting list to be given a licence. There are still 120 people on the waiting

list in Gower. There is much hope in the community that the industry will recover, and here in this House we must do all we can to support the efforts to help the industry.

When I was an Assembly Member I raised the matter many times in the Chamber. Since I have been a Member of this House I have written to the Welsh Government to try to get them to fund an inquiry into why the cockles are dying. To date I have had no success. We need to find the cause of this problem and ensure that the cocklers whose livelihood has been greatly affected are treated with the respect and dignity that they deserve to get this great product and industry thriving again. Anything that the Wales Office can do to encourage the Welsh Government into action would be very welcome.

3.55 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important debate on Welsh affairs, which marks St David's day.

I would like to focus on three issues, albeit briefly. First, there is no doubt that Wales has been hit hard by the UK Tory Government's austerity measures. In my constituency advice surgeries, the most common theme is the hardship people face due to the welfare reform agenda being pursued by the Tory Government. I think there are Tory Members who do not understand the situation people find themselves in.

Specifically, the spare room subsidy, or bedroom tax, is harming people in my constituency and across Wales. A report by the Welsh Affairs Committee in 2013 showed that Wales was disproportionately affected compared with the rest of Britain, and that remains the case. This tax is, quite frankly, the most unfair and pernicious since Margaret Thatcher's poll tax.

I have spoken with staff at my local citizens advice bureau in Merthyr Tydfil, who have told me about the many cases they regularly see coming through their doors—people who have nowhere else to turn. Those clients already have a number of other significant issues in their lives, and the bedroom tax only adds to them. Some of those people are now in rent arrears because of it, and some could lose their homes. That could have massive consequences, and for those who are physically or mentally disabled, it could result in even more severe issues, such as homelessness, suicidal thoughts, substance misuse or further debt—a downward spiral.

Unfortunately, in many communities in my constituency, there is not a huge number of smaller properties. Therefore, people affected by the bedroom tax decide either to stay in their property, thus incurring a financial penalty and placing great strain on their ability to manage, or to move to a smaller property, which can often be in a village some miles away. I have spoken with constituents who are in debt for the first time because of having to pay the bedroom tax. Food bank usage has increased massively, which is totally unacceptable in 21st-century Britain.

The second issue I want to focus on is the forthcoming EU referendum. As other Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Aberavon and for Neath (Christina Rees), have outlined, Wales has benefited considerably from EU investment. Projects right across

Wales have been delivered using EU funding, which is vital in helping to create a skilled and inclusive labour market and in driving economic prosperity.

Byron Davies: When we had the first round of funding, the then First Minister, Rhodri Morgan, said it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but here we are now with a third round of funding. Would the hon. Gentleman like to comment on that?

Gerald Jones: EU funding is important, and it has benefited Wales considerably—the evidence is there in terms of jobs and the businesses that have been supported—but there is still work to do. *[Interruption.]* If I may, I will carry on.

A key example of the projects I mentioned is the Welsh Labour Government's Jobs Growth Wales fund, which has supported more than 15,000 young people across Wales since 2012, when it was created in response to the Tories' scrapping of the future jobs fund. Using £25 million of European funding, the programme has supported countless young people. There are many more examples of how the EU has benefited Wales, which is why it is so important for Wales that the UK remains a strong part of the EU.

I turn now to the Wales Bill. As the party that established the Welsh Assembly, the Labour party supports the additional powers for Wales proposed in the draft Bill, but we had significant concerns about how the Assembly's powers were rolled back in other parts of the Bill. It is fair to say that the draft Bill was not met with universal support. In fact, despite the Welsh Affairs Committee having witnesses from various aspects of Welsh life, it was a struggle to find anyone who had anything positive to say about it. I am pleased that the Secretary of State has finally listened to the overwhelming body of evidence from experts, lawyers and politicians from all parties, and to the Committee's recent report. The Bill is deeply flawed and I welcome the fact that he is now not pushing ahead with it in its current form. Labour Members have been raising concerns about the Bill since its publication last October. If those concerns had been listened to then, perhaps we would not be in this situation now. Only last month, in the Welsh Grand Committee, many of the same concerns were again raised with the Secretary of State, who at that point, just a few short weeks ago, was defending many of the provisions he now seems to have binned.

It is only fair, right and proper that Members of this House, and indeed members of the Welsh Affairs Committee, have clarity about the detail of what the Secretary of State announced on Monday. Specifically, we need to know if anything is going to replace the necessity test, what system will be used for Minister of the Crown consents, and how different the list of reservations will be. It is imperative that the Secretary of State gets the Bill right this time and sticks to a timetable. Any delay means a consequent delay in the powers being transferred to the Welsh Assembly. It is also important that the Secretary of State and the Government fully consult the Welsh Government to iron out the practicalities.

The fact that the Secretary of State has presented a radically different Bill from the one that the Select Committee scrutinised may be problematic. The Committee's report states:

“Whilst this pre-legislative process has flushed out views, it has also made it apparent that the final Bill will be significantly

[Gerald Jones]

different to that which we have been scrutinising. That is wrong. Whilst changes and improvements are what this process seeks to provide, the weight of the evidence we received has meant we have had to focus on fundamental principles of the draft Bill rather than the specifics of the text. The Government should have focused its effort on resolving these matters of principle, before proceeding with a draft Bill.”

The Secretary of State said that he wanted a lasting devolution settlement that would resolve the constitutional situation for a generation, and I am sure that is what we all want. The best way to get it is to consult and negotiate with all stakeholders, such as the Welsh Government, the Welsh public sector, and other key interested parties to get broad agreement on the direction of travel and iron out the practical difficulties and issues. Ideally that should have been done before the Bill was put to this House, but it should be done now. The Bill is deeply flawed as it stands, and progress is needed. I urge the Secretary of State—who is now, thankfully, in his place—to get things back on track.

4.2 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I am sure that Welsh Members who see me, as an English Member, rise to address this debate will be a little curious as to my intentions. Let me reassure them, and the House, that I am not here to assert my historical right to use my crossbow with extreme prejudice on any of their fellow countrymen I might find within the walls of my beloved city after the hours of darkness. It is a historical right but I certainly do not intend to assert it.

In fact, I hope to give something of a mirror image of the speech by the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) about the importance of cross-border working between north Wales and my area of west Cheshire and Merseyside. He talked about a border that does not exist. That border might have prevented me from taking part in this debate, but, as he said, it is a border in name only. Indeed, Colin Brew, chief executive of West Cheshire and North Wales chamber of commerce—a cross-border body—tells me that business, in particular, does not recognise the border. When the Minister was at a North Wales CBI dinner just before Christmas at which I was also present, he felt very confident and positive about these matters, and he is well aware of the importance of this strategic area.

Let me give some examples. Of the 5,000 skilled manufacturing workers at Airbus in Broughton—which is, in essence, in Chester but across the border in north Wales—at least 600 live in my constituency. The situation is similar for other major manufacturing employers, such as Toyota and Tata Steel on the Deeside industrial park, which my good friend and parliamentary next-door neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), visited last week because so many of his constituents work there.

It works both ways. For example, Bank of America MBNA is one of Chester’s most prestigious employers and is based on Chester business park. It employs about 3,500 people, a third of whom live in north Wales. The cross-border region has a population of about 1 million,

81% of whom work in the region, but whether they live in north Wales and work in England, or the other way around, is scarcely relevant for them.

I was pleased to join noble Lords, right hon. and hon. Members of all parties and local government representatives from the Mersey Dee Alliance at a meeting—this was mentioned by the right hon. Gentleman—of the all-party group for the Mersey-Dee north Wales region, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) and has been formed to drive forward in Parliament and Government the concept of the Mersey Dee Alliance. The group and the alliance will work together to prevent needless duplication; propel economic growth; provide flexibility for greater cross-border co-operation within the parameters of existing local government frameworks; and, above all, overcome administrative differences created by the national boundary running through a successful and functioning economic region.

I reject the Government’s notion of a northern powerhouse. I believe it is nothing more than a slogan from a Government who are very adept at using slogans to hoodwink and mollify those of us outside London and the south-east of England while our imbalanced economy continues to grow at an imbalanced rate in an imbalanced direction.

Given that economic growth in north-west England is focused on the big cities, there remains a danger that Cheshire and north Wales will be squeezed out. The MDA initiative will give us strength to stand our ground, stand up to that squeeze and punch at our true weight. Discussions are currently taking place about local government reorganisation in England. Anything that would force Cheshire West and Chester to look the wrong way, as opposed to across the border, would be very unhelpful to north Wales, as well as to Chester. I ask the Minister to bear that in mind in his discussions with the Treasury and the Department for Communities and Local Government.

If we are to maximise the natural economic link between north Wales and Chester, we must optimise our infrastructure, which is important to north Wales and west Cheshire. As the West Cheshire and North Wales chamber of commerce has said, this is all about connectivity. I want to give the Minister a couple of examples of how it might be improved.

For starters, the M56 motorway in Cheshire must be upgraded. Although it is in England, it is the main link road to north Wales—people also use it to get to Holyhead and Ireland—and it provides the principal access to industrial zones in Deeside and to industrial parks in Wrexham via the A483. Serious accidents and major delays are a weekly occurrence, but Department for Transport Ministers have declined to include the upgrade of the M56 to a smart motorway in any programmes before 2020. Will Wales Office Ministers have words with their Department for Transport colleagues and impress on them the importance of that link road to north Wales, including its role as a driver of the north Wales economy?

We also hope to get a new bridge over the Dee near Broughton, which would link the A55 and A494, thereby improving access to the industrial zones I have mentioned, particularly near the Airbus site, and increasing capacity and resilience in the network. I have written to the

National Infrastructure Commission in support of that major project and I ask Ministers to seriously consider supporting the proposal.

There is also a strong case for the electrification of the north Wales coast line, from Crewe to Chester and on to Holyhead. The Minister and the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), who has responsibility for rail, attended a meeting in Llandudno last year. She expressed the view that electrification was not the magic bullet that many of us believe it to be. It is the view of Mersey Dee Alliance members, however, that electrification of the line is necessary for performance, capacity and reliability, and to run larger electric trains from Holyhead to London. The right hon. Member for Clwyd West mentioned the importance of linking it to HS2 in Crewe. I do not want the benefits of HS2 to terminate at Crewe; I want them to extend to Chester and north Wales.

It is important for the future prospects of Cheshire and north Wales that the UK votes to remain in the European Union, as other hon. Members have said. So many of our major employers in the Mersey Dee Alliance area are dependent on our relationship with Europe. Airbus is the obvious example. To Members who claim that a so-called membership fee of £55 million a day is the cost of EU membership, I say that every time the Beluga flies out of the Airbus plant into the north Wales skies with products that are the result of skilled manufacturing, the fee, bogus as it is, is paid off.

Bank of America, Tata Steel and Bristol-Myers Squibb all have a presence in the area that is central to their European operations. That is not to mention the countless smaller businesses that trade with Europe but would not have the time or energy to worry about negotiating through trade barriers with each EU country, should we leave. Those businesses simply could not afford to wait for the chimera of a promised free trade deal, which is supposedly the answer to every argument that proponents of our leaving the EU cannot face up to.

I finish by echoing the sentiments expressed by the right hon. Member for Clwyd West and continuing the consensual note that he brought to the debate by daring to suggest that many residents of north Wales feel a stronger affinity with Chester and west Cheshire than they do with Cardiff. We in the region are doing something about that; we are working together to drive forward common economic growth across that border. I hope and believe that hon. Members will be hearing a lot more about the Mersey Dee Alliance and our successes in the years to come.

4.11 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for spearheading our attempts to secure this debate. It has given hon. Members from across the country a welcome opportunity to debate a rich variety of issues.

I commend the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies), who is no longer in his place, for his glowing tribute to David Lloyd George and Lady Megan Lloyd George. Lady Megan Lloyd George strayed a little in later life and became the Labour MP for Carmarthen. The hon. Gentleman failed to mention the word “Liberal”, but for 54 years, David Lloyd George was a Liberal in this House, as was Megan Lloyd

George for 22 years. Perhaps none of us aspires to 54 years in the House, but Lloyd George managed it. He is a great hero of mine as well as of the hon. Gentleman’s.

I want to raise a range of issues. I do not have the geographical organisation of the hon. Member for Gower (Byron Davies), who gave us a tour de force around Wales. I will pick randomly on issues that affect my constituency, but which I believe are pertinent to other constituencies across the country.

I believe that the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) will relate to one issue that cropped up earlier today, because he has done a great deal of work on the mis-selling of interest rate swap products and led our campaign on the matter. I have done a little work on that as well, and I have tried to represent the interests of my farming community. I am concerned about a letter that I saw this morning from a bank to one of my constituents. I had no hesitation in referring my constituent—a farmer, who has worked hard and continues to do so, and who wants to develop his business—to the Financial Ombudsman Service to attempt to get some redress and independent adjudication. The bank wrote:

“If the FOS agrees with us, they will not have our permission”—
so says the bank—

“to consider your complaint and so will only be able to do so in very limited circumstances. If you do not refer your complaint to the FOS within six months, the FOS will not have our permission”.

That is the bank talking, not the independent adjudicator, the ombudsman. I will not go into the specifics of the case, but it is a concerning state of affairs when the banks regard the ombudsman in such a way, and when my constituent is treated with such contempt.

Transport has been a big theme of the debate. I want to raise the issue of physical connectivity. If the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) has been, to use her words, “banging on” about the Severn bridge tolls for a long time, I have been talking about the Aberystwyth to Shrewsbury railway for a long time. There have been great advances, and I pay tribute to the Assembly Government for instigating an hourly service and investing in a new signalling system. I very much welcome the fact that Welsh Ministers are likely to be the franchising authority for Wales and the borders by 2017. Negotiations are taking place between the Government in Wales and the Department for Transport. Concerns have, however, been expressed about the remapping of services in the franchise. The Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth Rail Passenger Association is very concerned about consideration being given to splitting the current Cambrian coast and Aberystwyth to Birmingham service, meaning that all trains will terminate in Shrewsbury, rather than going all the way through to the west midlands. I understand the logic of a neat franchise boundary, but that will have an impact on constituents.

We have spent a long time promoting the tourism sector in west Wales and building links between Aberystwyth and west Wales and Birmingham International airport. During the previous Parliament, the Welsh Affairs Committee looked at the direct route through to the airport. It is now a great success, with 50% more trains through to Aberystwyth and a 40% increase in the number of passengers using the service. I hope that the Wales Office will, if it has not already done so, become engaged in those discussions, and at the very

[Mr Mark Williams]

least voice the concerns that some of us have about the need for direct services from the midlands to west Wales.

Guto Bebb: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Williams: I will give way briefly, because I am conscious of the time.

Guto Bebb: Aberystwyth University is important to the economy of mid-Wales. Such connectivity is important to the university in attracting students from Wales and from outside Wales.

Mr Williams: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. I know he has a potential interest in Aberystwyth University, and I commend it unreservedly to the Bebb family. Whether they come by road or on the train, the issue is important in developing the university.

I commend to the House early-day motion 1073 on the proposed closure and franchising of Crown post offices. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales will be interested in the one in his constituency of Vale of Glamorgan. Both Governments rightly talk about the vibrancy of the high street, and few of us would doubt the economic benefits that Post Office Ltd brings to our communities, so there is an inconsistency in franchising post offices, such as mine in Aberystwyth, out of the high street and into some backwater or into the back corner of a retailer.

There is also the effect on staff. The hard-working staff in Aberystwyth Crown post office were given the choice of redundancy, redeployment to the nearest Crown post office—in our case, that is the one in Port Talbot—or possibly transferring to employment by the retailer concerned, with wages and work conditions that were far from conducive to such a move. I urge Ministers in the Wales Office to look at those issues and to intervene with Ministers from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to encourage them to protect such valued businesses on the high street in our communities.

Not only post offices but banks have been leaving the high street. There have been bank closures in rural areas. In my constituency, banks in Aberaeron, Llandysul, New Quay and Tregaron have left the community. One reason why banks leave is that, as they say, so much bank business is now undertaken via internet banking.

I make no apology for talking again about broadband provision and mobile coverage in my constituency. The Under-Secretary of State was very kind to me, or I think he was, when he told me during last week's Welsh questions that I was persistent. I am persistent, but I am increasingly frustrated, as are many of my constituents. We still have significant problems in rural parts of Wales; this applies not only in rural parts, but I am standing up for a rural area. We fall into the bottom 10% of seats represented in the House for average download speeds and superfast availability. Since Christmas, my constituency office has already had 100 concerned constituents from different parts of Ceredigion coming to us. We sit 639th out of 650 constituencies across the UK for broadband provision, which is bad. There has been some progress and there have been some advances, but, quite frankly, not enough for areas such as ours.

If broadband provision is bad, I must say that the Government's mobile infrastructure project is far worse. Arqiva, their agents, has identified 24 sites across the Ceredigion constituency for new masts to alleviate the problem of "not spots" and lack of mobile reception. It spoke to landowners, the county council and community councils. It all sounded so impressive at the start:

"A publicly funded project to provide mobile phone coverage by all four Mobile Network Operators in areas that have none at present."

The scheme ends at the end of this month. We were promised 24 masts; three masts will be achieved, one of which was already there. That mast was built by the excellent Ger-y-Gors community project, under the leadership of Duncan Taylor of Pontrhydfendigaid. One of them was a £60,000 makeover of a mast and just one other mast was built. Nationwide across the United Kingdom, 600 masts were identified, but by the end of March only about 50 will have been built.

This issue is not just about domestic households. We have talked a lot about building our economy and the advances that have been made. Surely the most basic infrastructure in areas such as mine is broadband and basic mobile coverage. My constituency is as vibrant, innovative, creative and entrepreneurial as anywhere else, but it is being denied the most basic infrastructure. That must be addressed by both the UK and the Welsh Governments. If funds have been available to the Assembly Government, they need to publicise them more and make them more available, and there need to be additional resources for rural areas such as mine.

Finally—I will not go beyond the 46 seconds I have left—it came as no great surprise to me that Ceredigion was listed in *The Sunday Times* as the most pro-European Union constituency in Britain, according to YouGov. That has a huge amount to do with our excellent universities and the collaborative work they are doing with those on the continent. It has a huge amount to do with the fact that we have qualified for and used money from convergence funding over the last few years. That is for good reason, because there are significant pockets of deprivation in the constituency. It also has a lot to do with farmers, who are concerned about the blank sheet of paper being offered to them by the out campaigns and UKIP. I look forward to a massive yes vote in Ceredigion on 23 June, even if I still have some concerns about the date.

4.21 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): We have become very accustomed to waiting for things in Wales. We waited a very long time for rail electrification, we waited patiently to get the Welsh national football team into the Euros, and we waited a very long time for a Welsh premier league football club, but now Swansea City is there. Today, we waited a very long time for the Secretary of State to make an appearance in this very important debate. Either our performances are not up to scratch or he has had a better offer, because he has chosen to leave the Chamber.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I am happy to announce to the hon. Lady that the Secretary of State has an important telephone conversation with the Minister for Economy, Science and Transport in the Welsh Government.

Carolyn Harris: It was nice to see him for a short period of time.

We are now waiting for a review of the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. We waited a full year for the negotiations between the developer and the Government, and now we are being asked to wait while the Government establish an independent review of tidal lagoons nationwide. My first reaction to that news was to ask the very same questions that many of my constituents threw at me. Why are the goalposts being moved again? After so much talking, what is there left to learn? Is it a sign that the Government are serious about the project, or is it an airports-style way of kicking it into touch without losing votes in an election year in Wales?

Having discussed the review with the developer, I am encouraged because although it thinks the wait is frustrating, it is optimistic that the scene is being set for success. It has to be hoped that the launch of an independent review of tidal lagoons represents a new level of commitment from the Government. I hope that if the Government are investing time and money in reviewing the concept, they too can see the potential of this exciting new industry. If the review is genuinely meant to be the vehicle through which this technology can at last be realised, it will be to the good, but if this stalling is just to kick the scheme into the long grass, it will be a travesty.

Wales and my constituency of Swansea East will be the big winners from the launch of a UK tidal lagoon, but the whole country will share the success of this globally ground-breaking innovation. I look forward eagerly to the quick formation of a committee and a chair—a committee that, one naturally assumes, will have Welsh representation among its members. I look forward to seeing the details of how the review will operate, who will be involved and when it will report. I will follow those developments closely, as I know many people here and in the other place will. We also eagerly await updates from the Department of Energy and Climate Change regarding the progression of negotiations on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon.

The UK needs to seize this opportunity. We have to be seen as the leader, not a follower, in tidal power. We have the potential to have the first tidal lagoon in the world to secure planning permission. The project can be delivered, and it could match costs with other energy projects that are springing up around the country. Swansea East is ready to host this new global industry, and Swansea is ready to be that leader.

What may be lost on many Members is the effect that the lagoon has already had in transforming my community. People have bought into the vision in a way that has not been seen before, and as that vision has become ever more real it has brought with it a new high morale and a new can-do attitude. It has given rise to many plans, from small businesses in and around Swansea bay to the industrial facilities that are ready to win contracts for the Swansea bay city region and the Sir Terry Matthews strategy for a city deal. As plans for further tidal lagoons around the Welsh coastline start to take shape, the sense of optimism will spread.

There is growing international interest in the plans, which are putting Swansea and Wales on the map. I conclude my speech in this St David's day debate with a message for all colleagues in the House: here is an issue on which we can and should all agree. Here is an

opportunity that the whole of Wales and the UK can benefit from. Let us work together and ensure that tidal power brings world acclaim to Swansea, Wales and Great Britain, and that we have the first tidal lagoon in the world. On the morning when a tidal lagoon opens for the first time, the words “good morning” need to be spoken as “bore da”, not “bonjour”.

4.27 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I will start by talking about the European Union, as many Members have during the debate. I will vote yes for a number of reasons. In a previous life I was an international historian in the international politics department at Aberystwyth, a world-renowned department in our country. It was set up in the aftermath of the first world war, following a generous donation of £20,000 by the great industrialist David Davies Llandinam to honour the dead and maimed students of the university. Davies was motivated—I will quote the university's website, because I could not put it better myself—

“by a global vision, forged in the fires of war, aimed at repairing the shattered family of nations and, more ambitiously, to redeem the claims of men and women in a great global commonwealth”.

My academic speciality was both world wars and the cold war. No one should ever question the vital role played by greater economic co-operation on the continent, and by the European Union, in forging lasting security, prosperity and peace.

I will vote to remain also because Wales is a net beneficiary of EU support, to the tune of £4 billion by 2020 if match funding is added. To its credit, the EU has redistributive mechanisms whereby resources and investment are aimed at the poorest geographical areas—mechanisms sadly lacking in the UK, which I suggest is a matter of shame for Unionists. I have yet to see a contingency plan from the UK for what would happen if they oversaw a calamitous exit from the EU. In contrast to the EU's mechanisms, the UK fails to allocate spending based on need and instead ploughs its infrastructure investment into already vastly wealthy areas at the expense of those desperately in need of it.

UK membership of the EU has also played an important part in driving social justice, be it in protecting people from discrimination based on age, sex, race, religion or disability, in maternity and parental leave entitlements, or in the right to paid holidays and working hours limited to 48 hours a week.

As a net exporter, the Welsh economy benefits hugely from the single market and its 500 million consumers. The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) gave an important statistic about the importance of export trade to the Welsh economy.

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman is making a passionate case for Wales remaining in the European Union. However, can he reconcile that with the fact that his party held street stalls in my constituency to argue that the European Union, in a trade deal with America, would sell our NHS? That is hardly a case for staying in.

Jonathan Edwards: I was not going to mention the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, but the hon. Gentleman has led me to it. He knows that

[Jonathan Edwards]

there are genuine concerns about how TTIP could impact on public services, and about the privatisation of public services. That is one of my concerns about the European Union—I am not an unconditional supporter because it has fostered those liberalising policies that successive Westminster Governments have introduced for our public services. The fear is that TTIP could be a Trojan horse for promoting those liberalising policies even further, especially in public services. That is why I believe that the Welsh Government should have a veto on whether the UK Government sign up to TTIP. I am also somewhat sceptical about the European Union because of its treatment of the Greek people in their hour of need recently.

Although I will vote to remain, I believe that the Prime Minister's current tactics are dangerous and ill judged. Project Fear 2, and the use of all the assets of the state to ramp up risk and anxiety, may prove to be a short-term success in securing a vote to remain in June. However, a gaping wound will be created when people feel that they have been cheated and bullied. As we see in Scotland following Project Fear 1, the battle might be won from a Unionist perspective, but ultimately the war will be lost. If the UK Government's position is to settle the European question, they need to fight a positive campaign, and as I have outlined, there are numerous things that they could say.

I welcome the Secretary of State's decision to delay the introduction of the Wales Bill following pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft measure. I am pleased that the Secretary of State seems to have agreed to remove the necessity tests from the Bill. I hope that he has taken note of the excellent work in the Cardiff University/University College London report, which stresses that the model itself makes the necessity tests unworkable, rather than the choice of words, "necessary" or otherwise.

I also welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has agreed to shorten the list of reservations significantly. However, as always, the proof of the pudding will be in the detail of the Bill when it is published. He will know from the pre-legislative scrutiny that two reservations in particular make the Bill unworkable—the reservations of the criminal law and private law mechanisms. While I am encouraged by his promise to shorten the list, his reluctance to accept the evidence on the need for a distinct jurisdiction leads me to believe that he will not remove criminal law and private law from the list.

Indeed, the Welsh Affairs Committee, which has a Tory majority and is chaired by one of the most prominent anti-devolution MPs, accepted that creating a distinct legal jurisdiction would

"provide a solution to issues associated with the reservation of civil and criminal law and necessity clauses."

When redrafting the Bill, and the list of reservations in particular, the Secretary of State should ensure that each and every reservation is individually justified. I believe that the Secretary of State is serious about creating a long-lasting devolution settlement and I share his ambition, but unless he fights against his devo-sceptic fringes, he will just be yet another Secretary of State for Wales who creates yet another failed devolution settlement.

The context of the rewriting of the Bill has also been changed by the decision to cut more than a quarter of Welsh MPs. If the UK Government want to make those

cuts to Wales's representation, they must give the National Assembly the same powers as the Scottish Parliament—the number of Scottish MPs was cut following transfer of powers. That means full transfer of responsibility over energy and the Crown Estate, full income tax powers, transfer of policing and criminal justice, the legal system, transport, air passenger duty, and the rest of the provisions in the Scotland Act. The Government cannot expect those responsibilities to remain with the UK Government and Westminster with only 29 Welsh MPs. That would create a gaping democratic deficit.

I want to turn my attention to one economic project in Wales about which I have not had the opportunity to comment in any great detail to date—the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. Despite Wales being one of the most advantageous locations in Europe for renewable energy, just 10.1% of our electricity is generated from renewable sources. That compares with 32% in Scotland and 14.9% for the UK as a whole. Despite Wales being home to the second highest tidal range in the world, and 1,200 km of coastline, we are lagging behind on tidal technology. I understand concerns about the proposed financing model. Proponents of the contract for difference strike price model argue that the Swansea lagoon is nowhere near as big as the planned Cardiff and Colwyn bay lagoons, and that therefore the strike price on a per megawatt basis seems high. However, it must be considered as a long-term investment that will eventually deliver multiple lagoons across the UK.

Funding green energy through a CFD effectively passes the cost of upfront investment on to the consumer, who inevitably will see their bills go up. If I were in the shoes of the Secretary of State, I would make the case that the Treasury should invest in the project by bringing it on to the books directly, as happens for transport infrastructure such as HS2 in England. Raising money on the bond markets has never been cheaper, with 50-year bonds at a negative rate and 10-year bonds at less than 1.5%. Those rates are available only to the Government and not the private sector. Using an old-school financing method—direct public investment—as opposed to an ultimately far more costly financing scheme such as CFD, will be far cheaper in the end for the public, and the UK Government should be honest with the people of Wales about that.

The Treasury will be aware of my early-day motion tabled earlier this week, which calls for a specific Welsh public sector pooled pension fund. Instead of letting the pension assets of Welsh public sector workers be pillaged by a super pooled asset fund based in England, why is the Wales Office not ensuring that Welsh assets are pooled at a Welsh level to invest in Welsh infrastructure such as the lagoon? I recognise, however, that that model would require a CFD. Confidence is the magic trick in any economic policy, and moving forward quickly on the proposed lagoon will be a massive confidence boost for the south and west of our country, stimulating further economic investment and growth.

4.36 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important St David's day debate, and on his work to champion the steel industry. Today he mentioned not just the steel industry, but the need for

clear and consistent messages from the UK Government if we are to encourage more investment from a range of different industries.

The right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) emphasised the importance of transport links to the economy of north Wales. That theme was taken up by many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) who suggested the need to upgrade the busy M6, and to think beyond Crewe for HS2 so that it serves Chester and north Wales. Along with other Members he stressed the importance of staying in the EU, particularly for the success of big companies such as Airbus, as well as a host of other companies in his constituency and over the border.

The hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) reminded us that Gordon Brown was right in keeping the UK out of the euro, and the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) made a strong case for the EU, mentioning peace, political stability, social justice, economic matters, and the fairer distribution of resources from which Wales benefits. My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) explained why it is important to campaign for proper links to Heathrow airport and to support its expansion, and he made a strong case for the need for better rail electrification to Wales. He also referred to the Wales Bill, and the fact that the Secretary of State was not here.

The hon. Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) spoke of the Cardiff city deal, as one would expect, and of the importance of interesting young people in science and innovation. My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) spoke of the Wales Bill and thanked the Welsh Affairs Committee for all its hard work on that. He also pointed out some of the considerable problems with the Bill. The hon. Member for Gower (Byron Davies) mentioned the importance of the cockle industry and of getting to grips with the causes of those cockle deaths. We must get more information so that we better understand exactly what is happening.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) talked about the need to get on and secure the tidal lagoon project and the jobs for the area. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) also mentioned tidal power, referring to the eternal nature of the tide. He stressed again the importance of the Welsh language. My predecessor as Llanelli MP, Jim Griffiths, was the first Secretary of State for Wales. I know he would very much have approved of my hon. Friend's speech today.

How could I possibly skip over what my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) said about the Severn bridge tolls? That issue is absolutely crucial for us across the whole of south Wales. She emphasised the point about the end of the concession. When is it happening and what will the reduction in price be? We want something much more substantial than the mere reduction in VAT.

The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) mentioned dairy farming. I am sure he will be supporting the farmers' march in London on 23 March. We shall certainly be speaking with one voice with them on the need to increase the powers of the Groceries Code Adjudicator to get a fairer price for our farmers. He also spoke of how the ground rose up around St David,

propelling him above the crowd. We wondered today whether the Secretary of State is showing himself as a reverse St David, disappearing into the earth and appearing for only a few minutes at today's debate—that is utterly disgraceful, I have to say. This comes in the week when he has treated the House with complete disdain by announcing a major U-turn on the Wales Bill at a press conference in Cardiff and refusing to come to the House to answer questions. Does the Secretary of State for Wales not think that a debate on Welsh affairs and the Wales Bill are worthy of his time?

I can only assume that the reason the Secretary of State is hiding in the Wales Office is that he is as embarrassed as he should be that his flagship constitutional Bill has run aground. What we saw on Monday was quite remarkable: large parts of the Bill that the Secretary of State was defending to the hilt just last month have now been binned. This amounts to a major change in policy in the one piece of proposed legislation for which his Department is responsible. It is shameful that he was more than happy to take questions from journalists but not from Members of this House whose constituents deserve to know what powers their Assembly will have. The Wales Office even tweeted on Monday to suggest that MPs should be happy to wait until today's Backbench debate to have their say. I hope he is listening.

It is a shocking discourtesy to Members and is reminiscent of the arrogance the Secretary of State has shown towards the Welsh Government and to those who have disagreed with him. Let us not forget that shortly before we met at the Welsh Grand Committee, he said those of us who dared to challenge his rosy view of the Bill had given up on the Union. We were told that we had basically gone and joined Plaid Cymru because we suggested that the necessity test should go, the rules on ministerial consent should change and that the list of reservations should be drastically reduced. Now, he apparently agrees with us. Has the Secretary of State had a last-minute conversion to the separatist cause, or does he recognise that his hysterical comments were just a desperate attempt to deflect from the shambles of his draft Bill?

I am glad the Secretary of State has seen sense and will not now push ahead with a deeply flawed piece of proposed legislation, but let us not pretend that all this is business as usual. It is not a normal part of pre-legislative scrutiny to then go on and dump the Bill, and nor is this an example of a Secretary of State in listening mode. He wanted and fully intended to go ahead with a Bill that was complex, unworkable and which rolled back the powers of the Welsh Assembly. He only changed course when it became clear that literally no one supported him.

The Welsh Affairs Committee, with its Conservative majority, has produced an excellent report on the draft Bill. I would like to place on record my thanks to the members of that Committee for all their hard work. Their report, like the report of the Assembly's Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee before it, shows that the Secretary of State has mismanaged the process from start to finish. Instead of producing a Bill with a robust set of reserved powers, he allowed Whitehall free rein to decide which powers it thought Wales should have. That resulted in 34 pages of reservations, covering 267 areas. How could the Secretary of State possibly have thought that this was the clear and lasting devolution

[Nia Griffith]

settlement that he himself promised? We are now told he wants to reduce and simplify the reservations, but why did he not do that to start with? Is it because he did not actually know what was in his own Bill? How else can he explain saying to the Welsh Affairs Committee:

“When I read through the list of reservations I can see for myself that there are things where I think, you know, ‘For goodness’ sake, why is that being held back as reserved?’”

We have a Secretary of State who did not do his job. He did not make sure that the draft Bill was fit to be published, and that is what has led to this wholly unacceptable state of affairs. We are told that the Bill will now be presented sometime in the next Session, but there are reports that this current Session of Parliament will run until after the European referendum. That means we will not see the Bill until July at the very earliest, with a real possibility that it will slip into the autumn.

So in the Secretary of State’s absence—well, I see him here now and perhaps he will listen—will the Minister respond for him and tell us when he expects the Bill to be published and when its provisions will take effect? Is it not the case that the Assembly will now have to wait even longer before having these powers devolved to it, because of this avoidable delay? In light of the Welsh Affairs Committee’s stinging criticism of the fact that “the final Bill will be significantly different”

to that which they have been scrutinising, will the new Bill be submitted to the Committee for pre-legislative scrutiny?

I cannot help feeling that if the Secretary of State had spent less time attacking those of us who disagreed with him and more time fixing his Bill, this unnecessary delay could have been avoided. I hope that the Secretary of State will be able to produce a Bill that delivers the powers he promised, but his abysmal record so far hardly fills me with confidence.

On Monday, the Secretary of State also made reference to the Barnett funding floor, which we Labour Members welcome, although we recognise that it makes virtually no difference at a time when the Government are cutting the budget of the Welsh Assembly. In light of recent argument about a fiscal framework for Scotland, we now need to establish a framework for Wales that will underpin our future funding arrangements for the long term. The Smith Commission made it clear that Scotland should suffer no detriment from the transfer of tax-varying powers to Holyrood. It is imperative that the same principle is used in relation to Wales and that any arrangement is subject to review to ensure that it provides a stable financial settlement. Can the Minister update us on what progress has been made?

The Secretary of State and I have our differences, but I think we agree that we want to move past the debate about the process of devolution. We need a Bill that establishes a strong, fair and lasting settlement that achieves what the Welsh people want—a Welsh Assembly, a Welsh Parliament with the powers to make a real difference to the lives of people of Wales.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and other Members

on contributing to today’s important debate in Westminster’s calendar—one that underlines the role that Wales plays within the United Kingdom. I welcome all the contributions of right hon. and hon. Members, and I will do my best to cover as many points raised within the limited time remaining.

The debate has been extremely wide ranging and has covered issues across the spectrum of the constitution, the European Union, the economy, public services, the tidal lagoon, the railways, the northern powerhouse and many other issues. I shall canter through as many as I can, but I want to spend some time on the Wales Bill in order to respond to the questions from the shadow Secretary of State for Wales and others. I shall address some other points, too.

Let me start my opening remarks by saying that Wales is in a good place. I am optimistic about our future. As a Government, we have been determined to make a difference to all parts of the UK, and while the job is not complete and there is always obviously more work to be done, we have taken positive action that sets the scene for a bright outlook for Wales. We are determined to work constructively with the Welsh Government, and whatever rhetoric we hear from individuals within Cardiff Bay, we are determined to respond in the measured fashion that the people of Wales deserve.

We want to secure our economic recovery, which was our greatest challenge when we came to office in 2010. Members will remember that unemployment was rising and for too many young people there was little prospect of employment, with the UK and Wales in a precarious financial position. Few Members, however, have mentioned the funding floor, so I was grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) for doing so. This has been called for by Members for well over a decade, and it is only a Conservative Administration who have delivered it—and within the first year of their Parliament.

Glyn Davies: Previously, throughout my time in this Parliament and, indeed, in the Welsh Assembly, the Barnett deficit dominated every discussion, and was often raised by Opposition Members. Now we are in balance. Fair funding for Wales is one of the Government’s biggest achievements, but it is not being properly recognised by everyone.

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for emphasising that point. The 115% rate of Barnett consequential is extremely important—it entirely meets the criteria in the Holtham demands—but one would almost think that Labour and Plaid Cymru Members were disappointed that we had actually delivered on something that they had been calling for. They would far rather be shouting from the sidelines, calling for it in the hope that we would not deliver it. When we respond in a positive way and deliver for the people of Wales, there is complete silence.

Jonathan Edwards: Obviously the Barnett formula is a step forward, but does this not underline the danger of using opaque terms such as “fairness” and “non-detriment”? In my view, a fair funding settlement should be based on need rather than serving to prevent further injustice. As the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) pointed out, the key aspect of non-detriment is the fiscal framework.

Has the Minister any idea of the preferred index for which the Welsh Labour Government are arguing with the Treasury? It is clear that different mechanisms will have vastly different outcomes.

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman has made some important points. It is, of course, up to the Labour party to explain its position. All I know is that Labour called for this for decades, we responded within a year, and since then there has been complete silence on the Opposition Benches.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy was extremely upbeat about Wales's economic prospects. It is true that, since 2010, the number of people in work has risen by 89,000, unemployment has fallen by 35%, the youth claimant count has fallen by 61%, and Wales has experienced faster growth per head than any other nation or region of the United Kingdom outside London. The hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) spoke of the importance of getting people into work. This is action, and this is where it is happening.

We have been getting behind Welsh businesses, and there are 22,000 more small and medium-sized enterprises in Wales than there were in 2010. The hon. Member for Aberavon mentioned the steel sector. I know that he spoke to the Secretary of State and the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise earlier today about the issues facing the steel industry and, in particular, the communities around Port Talbot, but I hope he will recognise that the Government have gone a long way towards meeting the five asks from the steel industry.

One of those asks was a cut in business rates, which were mentioned by some Opposition Members. That is a devolved matter, and something that the Welsh Government could do. The energy-intensive industry compensation package has been delivered, as has the provision of more time in which to comply with the EU's industrial emissions directive. As for EU-level action on anti-dumping, the UK Government are leading the pressure that is being exerted in Brussels. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will recognise that, along with a range of other measures that we have taken.

Stephen Kinnock: The Minister was going OK until he got to the bit about dumping. I am sorry, but we cannot let that one go. There are two key facts. The British Government are the ringleader of a group of member states that is blocking the scrapping of the lesser duty rule, which would make a huge difference to the ability to impose tariffs on unfairly dumped Chinese steel. They are also the chief cheerleader for Beijing in Brussels when it comes to giving market economy status to China, which would also dramatically reduce the scope. It must be recognised that, in respect of those two points, it is a case of abject failure.

Alun Cairns: I am sorry to hear that response, which raised two issues. The first is the confusion over market economy status. Russia has market economy status, but that does not prevent the European Union from introducing tariffs or prevent it from taking action. The other measures that the hon. Gentleman mentioned would take three years to introduce. We want to take action before then. We want to continue to be proactive. We want to work with the hon. Gentleman, the Welsh

Government and the communities in and around Port Talbot and Newport, because of the importance of the steel industry to them.

In 2014-15 there were 102 inward investment projects in Wales, 98% of which were supported by UK Trade & Investment. That demonstrates the role that the UK is determined to play in supporting the Welsh economy, and in working with the Welsh Government.

The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) mentioned welfare reforms. Welfare reforms are very important to getting people back to work, but we cannot pick one element individually. We need to look at the wider package, such as the national living wage, which would increase the incomes of 150,000 people in Wales by 2020. That will make someone working full time on the national living wage £4,400 better off, on top of the tax cuts that they will receive as a result of the increase in the personal allowance.

The Cardiff city deal was mentioned by many hon. Members, most notably my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams), who has spearheaded and championed that cause and been persistent at every turn. He has been relentless, first as a candidate and now as a Member of Parliament, in pressing Ministers on this issue. Let me make it clear that we want this deal to be signed as quickly as possible and we are determined to press those involved in order to develop a world-class deal. We want Wales to look outwards and we want it to involve the private sector. We want the city deal to be a world beater in what it delivers. Hon. Members should recognise the fact that the spending review has already announced our "in principle" commitment to support a new investment fund, and earlier this year the Chancellor committed £50 million to establish a UK compound semiconductor centre as a down-payment on the city deal.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) talked about ensuring that north Wales was recognised and about the importance of the northern powerhouse, a subject that was also raised by the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson). There was a focus on the importance of rail links, and I hope that bringing the HS2 investment forward by six years will provide great opportunities for mid-Wales, north Wales and Cheshire through the links to the northern powerhouse. The hon. Member for City of Chester talked about local government reorganisation and the need to look towards Wales. I would also say that local government in Wales needs to look across the border. I think that it does so, but the Welsh Government need to recognise the fact that it is an administrative border and that the way in which people lead their lives means that they cross that border in a much more open way.

I could also go on at length about the investments that the prison in north Wales and Hitachi's involvement at Wylfa will bring. Much has been said about the tidal lagoon project in Swansea. The Tidal Lagoon Swansea Bay company has recognised the strength of the review and welcomed it. I wish that hon. Members would reflect on what they are saying in this context and support the company rather than seeking to undermine the project, which could involve a significant investment.

In the time remaining, I want to talk briefly about the Wales Bill. We said at the outset that it was a draft Bill and that we wanted to be pragmatic and to use pre-legislative

[Alun Cairns]

scrutiny positively. Given some of the negative points that have been made, however, I want to say that we will take absolutely no lessons from the party that gave us the Government of Wales Act 2006 and the convoluted and complex legislative competence order system, which has led to a great deal of legislative confusion. We are determined to get this right, and this pause needs to be taken in the positive spirit in which it was intended.

There have been calls to adjust the necessity test, but we plan to go further and to remove it. We will look at the list of reservations, but it also gives clarity. I encourage members to look at the Scotland Bill, which also has quite a long list of reservations, but there have been no complaints because of the clarity that it provides. Many people are calling for a distinct legal jurisdiction, but that would effectively mean a separate legal jurisdiction. That would be dangerous for Wales, in relation not only to the legislative process but to investment. We are also determined to work constructively to clear up the mess that we inherited with the pre-commencement orders. We want to get this Bill right, and we are being pragmatic. If we ploughed ahead, we would be criticised. We are being criticised just for pausing. It seems that, according to Labour Members, whatever the Wales Office does, it cannot win.

4.59 pm

Stephen Kinnock: I should like to thank the entire House for an excellent debate today. We have covered a wide range of issues including the economy, the EU, the Wales Bill, the Severn bridge toll, road and rail, city deals and public services. The red threads that run through all these subjects are the ideas of partnership, investment and solidarity. We know that we need to work together with the European Union and across the UK, and we hope that we will see that spirit of partnership from the Government, alongside investments to enable us to take our economy forward to a brighter future. I thank the House for this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Welsh affairs.

Diabetes Care

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gavin Barwell.)

5 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to debate this important matter. I begin by declaring my interests as a type 2 diabetic and chair of the all-party parliamentary group for diabetes. In 2007, I founded the diabetes charity Silver Star, and I am an active and passionate supporter of Diabetes UK and JDRF—the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation—both of which provide secretarial services to the APPG. I would argue that we currently have the best diabetes Minister we have ever had, and I am glad to see her on the Front Bench today. I would like to thank her and her diabetes tsar, Jonathan Valabhji, for all the work that they do.

Diabetes is one of the most important health challenges facing the NHS and indeed the world. Sometimes we get immune to the facts, even though they are so devastating: 3.5 million people in the UK have been diagnosed with diabetes; 700 people a day are diagnosed with the illness; by the end of this debate 15 more people will have been diagnosed with diabetes—that is one every 2 minutes; and it is estimated that by 2025 some 5 million people in the United Kingdom will have diabetes.

Despite the good intentions of the Government, the passion of practitioners and the interest of many Members of this House, I am worried that the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diabetes is not high enough on the agenda. One in five hospital admissions for heart failure, heart attack and stroke are people with diabetes. Diabetes is responsible for more than 135 amputations a week, four out of five of which are avoidable. Diabetes is the leading cause of preventable sight loss and the most common cause of kidney failure. Every year, more than 24,000 people die prematurely due to diabetes.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I echo my right hon. Friend's comments about the Minister. He cites statistics, and on the amount of money that is spent on diabetes, £7 billion of the NHS budget is spent on dealing with the avoidable complications to which he has just referred. Yet Department of Health spending on research into diabetes through the UK's Medical Research Council is just £6.5 million, which is by far the lowest level of almost any developed country. Does he think there is a connection between those two things?

Keith Vaz: My right hon. Friend, who is a great campaigner on this issue, is right to have raised this, because we need to spend much more on diabetes research. One way of doing that is to make sure the funds are available for the excellent researchers and academics we have in this field, because research has indicated that there is an unacceptable and unexplained disparity in diabetes care in our country. We are failing the very people we are trying to help. Secondary complications are largely avoidable through better care, and we need to ask why this is not being provided. Although the NHS currently spends approximately £10 billion on diabetes, it is estimated that 80% of these costs are spent on dealing with complications. The time for conferences, seminars and good words is over—it is time for a new deal for diabetics.

Earlier this year, the Public Accounts Committee published a report on the “Management of adult diabetes services in the NHS”, and I would like to thank those on the Committee for their very hard work. The report found that astonishing variations still exist across clinical commissioning groups: the percentage of patients receiving all the recommended care processes ranged from 30% in some areas to 76% in others; and the percentage of patients achieving three treatment targets ranged from 28% to 48% in different areas between 2012 and 2013. As well as this postcode lottery, the figures were even worse for type 1 diabetic patients.

In response to my recent written question, the Minister acknowledged that there is no specific budget allocation for public health services related to diabetes. It is up to local authorities to

“assess local needs, prioritise and deploy available resources accordingly.”

I believe that is wrong. My own health and wellbeing board was unable to tell me how much it has spent on diabetes awareness. It should be able to do so. I welcome the Government’s inclusion of diabetes in their proposed clinical commissioning group improvement and assessment framework. That is a vital step in the development of a cohesive national diabetes strategy.

There has been much discussion about how effective the framework will be, and whether it will be released on time. We are already disappointed that the publication of the childhood obesity strategy has been delayed, a pertinent issue of concern for me and many other Members, including the Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). We need an assurance from the Minister today that both the framework and the childhood obesity strategy will be published before the start of the summer recess.

The burden of care for diabetes is currently left overwhelmingly to one group: the GPs. It is unrealistic to expect GPs alone to manage this. We acknowledge that GPs are under increasing pressure, and the demand for their services far outweighs the supply. In some places, it takes weeks to get an appointment. The financial incentives given to GPs are clearly not working. Some 16% of GPs’ contracts is supposed to be spent on incentives, with 15% of this sum being directly allocated to diabetes testing. That equates to £94 million, yet an estimated 549,000 people have type 2 diabetes, but remain undiagnosed. A recent study by Pharmacy Voice found that 40% of GPs would like more support for their patients in managing diabetes. We need an action plan from NHS England that will assess the practical support that clinical staff need to care properly for their patients.

We are often told that it takes a village to raise a child. That phrase was recently given re-emphasis by Hillary Clinton. In my view, it takes a whole town of healthcare professionals to deal with the diabetes tsunami. Instead of placing the entire burden on GPs, we need to utilise a network of different professionals to attack the diabetes epidemic on all fronts in an efficient and cost-effective way.

At an international conference organised by the all-party group last month, we heard evidence to that effect from specialist GP Dr Paul Newman, endocrinologists Dr Sam Rice and Dr Abbi Lulsegg, diabetes nurse Sara Da Costa, diabetes specialist dietician Julie Taplin and

lifestyle expert Emma James. However, we did not have time to hear from other parts of the network—the podiatrists, ophthalmologists and pharmacists. Their enthusiasm knows no bounds, but they are limited by the availability of funds and the lack of specialist staff. We must mobilise our political will to give them the support that they so desperately need.

Diabetes specialist nurses are vital in the fight against diabetes. Evidence shows that these nurses are cost-effective, improve clinical outcomes and reduce the length of patient stays in hospital. I am extremely concerned that the number of trained diabetes specialist nurses has stagnated. The latest national diabetes in-patient audit stated that one third of hospital sites still have no specific diabetes in-patient specialist nurses. With the predicted increase in diabetes cases to 5 million by 2025, it is alarming that forward-thinking plans to train such nurses are not being put in place now. We need a commitment from the Minister that there will be future provision for diabetes specialist nurses.

Community pharmacies are ideally placed to provide care at a time and in a place convenient to patients. The NHS diabetes prevention programme could be a great opportunity to get community pharmacies involved in supporting GPs and other healthcare providers. Janice Perkins, the pharmacy superintendent of Well Pharmacies, advised me that this could be done as part of a care plan package, where appropriate tests are provided to the patient based on their personal need, without their having to access numerous sites.

The proposed cuts to the community pharmacy budget could see the closure of up to 3,000 sites. My local pharmacist, Rajesh Vaitha of the Medicine Chest in Leicester, informed me that up to 60 out of 227 sites could close in Leicester alone. The closure of these pharmacies will have an adverse effect on patients and will place greater pressure on our already strained health infrastructure. Pharmacies are on the high street, and no appointment is needed to see the pharmacist. Like many patients, my late mother Merlyn, a type 1 diabetic, had great faith in her local high street pharmacist. I believe that the cuts to community pharmacies could be shelved if pharmacies were properly utilised in diabetes care.

Last Friday I visited the Steno Diabetes Centre in Copenhagen. Steno is a world-leading out-patient facility that cares for 6,500 diabetics a year. It is a one-stop centre for diabetics, with the main focus on prevention and secondary complications. The Steno centre is run by a team of remarkable diabetes specialist nurses led by Professor John Nolan. This is extremely cost-effective—the centre has an annual clinical budget for 6,500 patients of £9 million. Steno has reduced avoidable blindness in its patients by 90%—a service that is provided by a team of just six nurses and one ophthalmologist. The centre’s foot clinic has reduced avoidable amputations in the past 10 years by 82%. The savings from avoiding just two amputations funds the entire foot clinic’s annual budget. The Steno centre is an ideal model of how diabetes care should be facilitated. I urge the Minister—not that I want her to spend too much time abroad—to look at the incredible work that is being done there and bring a network of such centres to the United Kingdom.

In my own constituency, we are very fortunate to have not only the best football team in the country—many thanks to West Ham, Swansea and Liverpool for what

[Keith Vaz]

they did last night—but the Leicester Diabetes Centre, a centre of true excellence in diabetes care. It is one of the largest facilities in Europe for clinical research into diabetes. Run by the dynamic duo of Professor Melanie Davies and Professor Kamlesh Khunti, it provides an innovative partnership between the NHS and academia—the very people in whom we should put more faith and behind whom we should put more funds, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) said. We are extremely fortunate to have such experts, but we need more centres of excellence.

We need an holistic approach to public health, tackling the medical complications of diabetes and the contributory lifestyle factors that increase the prevalence of type 2. Other countries have taken a lead on this issue. Dr Francisco George, director general for health in Portugal, told me that data sharing is one thing we can do. I have also heard from Dr Pablo Kuri Morales, the Minister responsible for health promotion in Mexico, that a sugar tax actually works. Press speculation is that the Prime Minister has shelved the sugar tax until after the European Union referendum. In my view, the two matters are entirely separate, so why can we not have a sugar tax now?

I have been vocal in my support for a sugar tax and for clearer labelling of sugar content. Industry leaders such as Waitrose and Asda have made commitments to reduce sugar in their products, but I am afraid that the Government's responsibility deal, which pledged to do all kinds of things, has not had much effect in reality, as recent reports by Professor Graham MacGregor and Action on Sugar have shown. We are, however, fortunate to have an NHS chief executive—Simon Stevens—who has imposed his own 20% sugar tax across the NHS, and that is an important start. I call on the Minister, when she returns to Richmond House, to ban high-sugar products from the canteens in her own Department.

I recently visited a brilliant juvenile diabetes centre in Tangiers, which was based in the Centre de Santé Saïd Noussairi. I nearly wept when I saw young type 1 diabetics having to rely on charitable funding just to get their daily insulin injection—something we can get absolutely free from our NHS. Yet, astonishingly, even in our country, whose healthcare system is the envy of the world, we have stark variations in diabetes treatment and unfocused resources.

We have world-leading medical professionals, nurses, healthcare professionals and researchers who are capable of doing, and willing to do, so much more, provided they get the funding and are backed by an iron political will. That is why we need to achieve a new deal for diabetics, and now is the time to start.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): I should start by saying that, as a Spurs season ticket holder, I shall dwell on the kind words of the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) about my time in office and ignore his cruel jibes about what can only be described as a disappointing night last night.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this important issue to the House for another debate. He has rightly issued a number of challenges to me and the

Government, and it is vital that we keep up the drumbeat of debate, which is key to making sure that we keep this serious and increasingly prevalent disease on the agenda.

Fantastic work has been done by the right hon. Gentleman and other members of the all-party group, by the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), who is also in the Chamber, by the Silver Star charity and by so many others. There is very high awareness of the issue in Parliament, and I will come back to what more we might be able to do to mobilise Members even more on this important subject.

As the House will be aware, tackling diabetes is of great concern to the Government. The Department of Health is committed to preventing type 2 diabetes and to tackling the variation the right hon. Member for Leicester East highlighted in the delivery of care, because we, too, want the best possible care for those with diabetes.

There were encouraging signs from the latest national diabetes audit that progress is being made in some important areas of management and care. For example, there are clear trends of improvement in blood pressure control for people with type 1 and type 2 diabetes and in glucose control for type 1 diabetes. It is also reported that a far greater number of people are being offered structured education within a year of diagnosis. However, I will come back to structured education, because it is uptake, not offer, that I am interested in.

The report again highlighted a concerning and continuing issue of variation in care process completion and treatment target achievement for people with diabetes. I am particularly troubled by the statistics on younger people and those with type 1. The audit found that in 2014-15 just 39% of people with type 1 diabetes received all eight care processes compared with 59% of those with type 2. There is an even greater contrast with regard to age range.

Mr George Howarth: As the Minister will be aware, because I have discussed it with her before, there is a specific group of young type 1 diabetics who manipulate their insulin intake to achieve rapid weight loss. Will she give some thought as to how that group, which is relatively small, can be supported to get out of that problem, which is life-threatening?

Jane Ellison: I will certainly take that issue away and reflect on it, and we will speak about it again.

For people under 40, only 27% with type 1 diabetes and 41% with type 2 received all care processes, compared with 58% and 65% respectively for those aged between 65 and 79. I have some sense of why that is, but it does highlight the challenge we face. Encouragingly, 77% of those newly diagnosed with type 2 diabetes were offered structured education, but again the percentage was lower for type 1. That is clearly unacceptable, because everyone with diabetes should receive the best possible care regardless of age, postcode or the type they have been diagnosed with. That is why, in our 2016-17 refresh of the mandate to NHS England, we have made tackling variation in the management and care of people with diabetes a key priority over the lifetime of this Parliament.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that we need consistently early diagnosis? Early intervention is particularly important in diabetes care,

as it saves the NHS from unnecessary expenditure in the long run, and, just as importantly, saves patients from unnecessary suffering.

Jane Ellison: That is absolutely right. I am going to talk about the national diabetes prevention programme, which goes to the heart of the problem. When I spoke to the all-party group, I mentioned the conveyor belt that can start with weight in childhood developing into type 2 and go through to the serious complications that have been alluded to. At all points along that continuum, there are things we can do, and must be doing, to make life better for people with diabetes.

Because of the mandate, diabetes is now right at the heart of NHS England's agenda. We want it to lead a step change in preventing ill health and supporting people to live healthier lives. Our 2020 goal is for a measurable reduction in variation in the management and care of people with diabetes. However, there is some way to go, so this debate is an opportunity to update the House on some of the areas where we are going to make progress.

We have increased transparency through the creation of the Healthier Lives website, which is a major online tool from Public Health England. I encourage Members who have not looked at it to do so. It highlights variation in the prevalence and treatment of diabetes, allowing clinical commissioning groups and GP practices to compare how well they deliver diabetes care and so drive improvements and iron out variation. I will come on to the support that we are offering them as well.

The CCG outcomes indicator set provides clear comparative information. As was said, it will soon be replaced by the improvement and assessment framework, which will have two diabetes indicators aimed at reducing variation in the achievement of the NICE treatment targets and the referral and take-up of structured education. Consultation on the framework has just closed, and we expect it be published in the summer. It goes to the heart of tackling variation and the cohesive approach that was spoken about.

The NHS Right Care programme is a very practical approach to tackling variation that uses the "Atlas of Variation". In the case of diabetes, NHS experts help CCGs and other local health system partners to make the step change they need in some areas to improve care, because transparency alone is not enough if we do not offer people support and hands-on advice. In Slough, for example, huge improvements have been made through a clinical mentorship programme that has upskilled healthcare professionals in general practices. That has resulted in an increase in patients who have had their blood glucose, blood pressure and cholesterol controlled. The Right Care programme will be rolled out across CCGs nationally by 2018.

I urge the all-party group on diabetes and the right hon. Member for Leicester East to continue to engage colleagues. It is absolutely right that Ministers are brought to the House and scrutinised about what we can do, but the very nature of our health system and the variation under discussion are also highly susceptible to pressure at local level from well-informed Members and senior councillors. I encourage him to continue to engage Members in asking the right questions at a local level.

Keith Vaz: I will be brief, because I know that the Minister has a lot to tell us. When Members of Parliament write to local health and wellbeing boards, it would help enormously if they were able to tell us how much they spend on diabetes awareness. They cannot do that at present.

Jane Ellison: Part of the challenge is because much of the effort that is put in relates to the preventive agenda and the contributory factors. That is one of the challenges in teasing such figures apart. However, I will reflect on whether we can do more in terms of health and wellbeing boards.

To incentivise improvements in the treatment and care of children and young people with diabetes, the best practice tariff for paediatric diabetes provides an annual payment for every child and young person under the age of 19 with the condition, providing that 13 standards of care are met. One of those standards relates to structured education. As the right hon. Member for Leicester East and for Knowsley know, I am passionate about making changes to the way in which we do structured education. We know that it works and that it is very good when people do it, but we also know that a lot of people are not accessing it. I am looking really hard at how we could take a new and radical approach, including whether there are any tech solutions, and I look forward to reporting back on that.

Our ambitions extend further than creating a level playing field. We want the management of and care for diabetes to be driven up right across the board in order to improve outcomes. The NHS is working with a number of other organisations to help to promote services that are integrated around patients' needs across all settings. It is implementing a customer service platform to empower patients with diabetes to self-manage by booking their own appointments, managing their prescriptions, monitoring the care they have received and viewing their personal health records.

I fear that time will not allow me to touch on prevention in as much detail as I would have liked, but I want to emphasise just how seriously we take it. The right hon. Member for Leicester East has outlined the reasons why it is important, including the escalating figures and how much the rising tide of type 2 diabetes associated with lifestyle will cost the NHS in the future. The factors can be modified, and one of the most powerful weapons in our armoury is the NHS diabetes prevention programme, which is the first national type 2 diabetes prevention programme to be delivered at scale. Its aim is to help people identified as at the highest risk of developing type 2 diabetes to lower their weight, increase physical activity and improve their diet through intensive lifestyle intervention programmes. I am pleased to inform the House that the first providers will be announced by the NHS shortly, and the programme will move ahead.

The programme will also link to the NHS health check programme. Almost 3 million NHS health check offers were made in 2014-15 and almost 1.5 million appointments taken up. That is vital for first awareness and my constituency knows how important early diagnosis can be as a result of the checks carried out by Silver Star when it visited us.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about other important referral routes, including engagement with pharmacists, and I will pass on his concerns to the Minister for

[Jane Ellison]

Community and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who has responsibility for community pharmacies.

The right hon. Gentleman criticised the responsibility deal, but I think it has achieved a lot. We have made some important gains working in voluntary partnership with industry, such as the voluntary front-of-pack nutritional labelling scheme, which has greatly empowered consumers to know what is in their food. That accounts for about two thirds of the market for pre-packed food and drinks, but I accept that the challenge is to go further.

We will announce more about our childhood obesity strategy this summer. We will also monitor the impact of NHS England's proposal for the introduction of a sugar tax on the NHS estate. It will be interesting to see the results of that consultation. The Sugar Smart app has empowered 1.6 million consumers to date to know more about what is in their food.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman again for bringing these important issues to the House. I am absolutely sure that we will discuss them again, because this vital agenda is right at the heart of the Government's health programme.

5.30 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Westminster Hall

Thursday 3 March 2016

[MR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Offshore Oil and Gas Industry

1.30 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the offshore oil and gas industry.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, for this important debate. I am grateful to the hon. Members for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for the work they did in helping to secure it.

The North sea oil and gas industry is a significant employer in my constituency, with Lowestoft and its port being an important service centre. It is important to have this debate now as the industry faces major challenges that need to be addressed urgently. Further fiscal measures need to be introduced in the Budget on 16 March, and the debate provides us with an opportunity to consider what such measures should be as well as the industry's longer term framework.

First, the industry must survive. We must then ensure that everything possible is done so that it can thrive. We owe that to those who work in what is in many respects a dangerous industry, to their families, to the communities from which they come and to those businesses who are making investment decisions in a risky and unpredictable market—particularly so at this time—to give it that sustainable and, I think, exciting future.

The oil and gas industry on the UK continental shelf faces serious challenges. It is fighting for its very existence and tens of thousands of people's livelihoods are on the line. About 75,000 jobs have gone in the past 15 months, primarily due to the collapse in oil prices and the increasing maturity of the UKCS as an oil and gas producing basin. The industry is drowning in a tsunami of oil and gas supply just as demand is cratering around the world.

In mid-2014, oil was trading at in excess of \$100 a barrel, but today the price is between \$30 and \$35 per barrel. At the beginning of the year the combined market value of 112 publicly traded oil companies—the entirety of the UK's oil and gas industry excluding Shell, BP and GP—had the same value as Marks and Spencer: £7 billion. Two years ago, just one of those companies, Tullow Oil, was worth more than Marks and Spencer: it had a market value of £8.2 billion.

Oil & Gas UK's recently published activities survey for last year confirms the serious nature of the situation. While production on the UKCS rose by 9.7% in 2015 to 1.64 million barrels of oil equivalent a day, revenues fell by 30% between 2014 and 2015 to £18.1 billion, and although the industry has been successful in achieving significant cost reductions and efficiency improvements,

43% of the UKCS oil fields are likely to be operating at a loss in 2016 at prevailing prices. Oil & Gas UK estimates that, in the southern North sea, 51 fields may cease production by 2020. That is a third of the fields in that area and equivalent to 51 factories closing their gates.

Oil and gas companies are cutting almost all of their discretionary expenditure to survive in a \$30-a-barrel world. Intense global competition for capital and contraction in expenditure is leading to a major downturn in activity and subsequent job losses across the sector. There is concern that the situation will get worse over the coming year as companies in the supply chain complete contracts commissioned in better times and the insulation provided by price hedging taken out by many operators disappears. The industry is used to working with great uncertainty and risk, but with greater market volatility and lower prices likely to prevail for much longer augmented by the challenges of working in a mature basin, there is a need for a more robust framework. There is a moral imperative as well as a business imperative to manage the industry better.

Some might say that, with all those challenges, why does it matter? It really matters. The industry is vital to UK plc. Despite the job losses, 375,000 people are employed in the industry, its supply chain and ancillary service industries, with those jobs concentrated around Aberdeen, on Tyneside and Teesside, and in East Anglia around Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft. If we do nothing, in effect we will be hollowing out those communities.

There will also be a knock-on effect on other areas of the economy such as steel production in manufacturing and in the City, where oil and gas company shares figure prominently in many pension funds. The industry has also built an integrated supply chain that is the envy of the world, which produces exports worth an estimated £39 billion a year. We have great depths of knowledge and expertise built on decades of experience that we must nurture and cherish, not throw away.

In 2014, UK oil and gas provided 68% of the UK's total primary energy and, in the same year, 45% of the oil we used came from the UKCS, 48% of natural gas came from UK natural gas production and the industry provided £2.2 billion in taxation to the Treasury, though that was the lowest figure for 20 years. The situation has deteriorated in the past 18 months, but, despite the serious challenges, the UK offshore oil and gas industry has a vital role to play in the next 30 years. There are numerous reasons for that.

First, energy security must be a priority for the nation. We need to be able to maximise production of oil and gas at home to reduce our dependency on imports in an increasingly uncertain world. Secondly, while 42 billion barrels of oil equivalent have been produced from the UKCS in the past 50 years, there are known reserves of 20 billion barrels of oil and gas to be recovered from our offshore waters. Of that, there are 8 billion barrels of natural gas. As the Secretary of State set out in her reset speech for energy policy in November, gas has a key role to play in keeping the lights on in the immediate future. Recovery of those reserves, and hopefully others, is a prize worth fighting for.

Thirdly, the Secretary of State in her reset speech also set out an exciting future for offshore wind, an industry that is bringing exciting opportunities to East Anglia. Offshore oil and gas in many respects complements

[Peter Aldous]

offshore wind because their supply chains overlap. The transition to a low-carbon economy will not take place overnight, and oil and gas production on the UKCS has a vital role to play in securing a smooth transition and helping to build another world-class industry of which Britain can be proud.

Fourthly, I do not wish to be unnecessarily negative about another technology, but we must be realistic about the role that onshore fracking will play in the immediate future. It will have to overcome planning hurdles, and it should be pointed out that in the US they have known about large tight gas fields since the 1930s. They are working those now because new technology has made that viable. In the UK, first we must establish the extent of those fields and then we must assess their full economic viability and establish the infrastructure to service them. We already have that infrastructure in the North sea, so it makes sense to make best use of it.

While the industry's challenges have come into stark focus in the past 18 months as the price of oil has plummeted, its structural defects have been evident for some time. That is why the previous Secretary of State, Ed Davey, instructed Sir Ian Wood to conduct a review. Sir Ian published his findings in February 2014. They were endorsed across the industry and across this House, and form the basis of much of the Energy Bill. His main recommendations were to commit the industry to the principle of MER—maximising economic recovery from the UKCS—and, to achieve that, to create a new arm's-length regulatory body to provide effective stewardship and regulation. That body is the Oil and Gas Authority, which is the cornerstone of a new strategy: a tripartite approach of industry, the OGA and Treasury working together. The OGA will promote collaboration, which is vital to ensure that infrastructure is used and shared on a fair basis and that decommissioning takes place at the right time, not prematurely, which would undermine the objective of MER. The OGA will give greater security to those working in the industry.

Some might say that Sir Ian wrote his report in a different time, when the industry was not facing the acute challenges it is today, and that his recommendations are out of date. I disagree. The framework he recommends provides the industry with the best chance at survival and at realising its potential over the next 35 years. Time is of the essence, as Sir Ian stated in his report, and it is vital that the Energy Bill receives Royal Assent as soon as practically possible in the next few weeks.

Sir Ian stressed the importance of the industry collaborating. I will come back to that theme quite a lot over the next few minutes. It was a theme taken up by Deloitte in its recent publication, "Making the most of UKCS: Collaborating for success", which highlighted that all too often in the past, collaboration in many oil and gas companies has been left to a few heroes—the few trusted individuals who

"actively look for opportunities to collaborate and ensure that their partners share the benefits."

Deloitte points out that

"companies should do more to foster a collaborative environment through leadership, targeted strategies, allocated resources and personal objectives linked to rewards. Successful collaboration

depends on encouraging workforce to focus on the end-result, sharing goals and empowering staff to accept compromise, rather than systems and processes."

Deloitte adds that while there are good examples of collaboration, there are clearly opportunities for improvement for both operators and those in the supply chains, which should be doing more to

"improve financial incentives and contractual terms to encourage collaboration."

It adds that

"operators especially need to improve in areas that foster innovation—such as seeking out new ideas and solutions, or implementing change effectively."

It is vital that instead of a few individual heroes, there is a whole legion of them operating throughout the industry.

I will provide a quick comic interlude. On Saturday, on the eve of the Oscars ceremony, the actor George Kennedy died. He won an Oscar in 1967 for his role in "Cool Hand Luke". For people of my generation, he was perhaps better known for what was a less challenging role in acting terms, playing Carter McKay in "Dallas", in which he spent most of his time fighting with the Ewings for control of both Ewing Oil and WestStar Oil. While "Dallas" was glamorous fiction, it parodies what some people say the oil industry used to be about: aggressive competition and greed descending into criminality. Those days, if they ever existed, are long behind us.

The ethos that must be installed across the industry going forward is one of collaboration—collaboration between the OGA, industry and the Treasury, with the OGA providing the framework for that collaboration. We now have a regulator with the same bite as its counterparts in Norway and the Netherlands. That collaboration must involve industry, building on the significant progress it has made in the past year in reducing operating costs from an average \$24.30 per barrel to \$20.95 per barrel. Yesterday, at the Southern North Sea conference in Norwich, the ambition of reducing costs to \$15 per barrel was stated. One operator, in what I should emphasise was very much an isolated case, explained how it was achieving costs of \$7 per barrel.

In this tripartite approach, the Treasury needs to deliver its side of the bargain, providing a taxation framework that shows real confidence in the industry's long-term future and helps to attract global footloose investment. However, collaboration must not stop there; it must permeate the industry and beyond. Operators must collaborate with operators. That is evidenced by the partnership currently being operated by Faroe Petroleum, Petrofac and Eni Hewett, about which I also heard yesterday.

Trade organisations must also collaborate with one another, which again was evidenced yesterday in Norwich by the signing of a memorandum of agreement between Oil & Gas UK and the East of England Energy Group. Operators must collaborate with their service providers, building long-term partnerships and learning lessons from other sectors such as the aviation and car industries. Small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the sector have a proven track record of driving innovation and achieving efficiencies. Operators now need to work with them.

Finally, the sector needs to work with other sectors, in particular the offshore wind sector, with which it has a great deal in common. The oil and gas industry post-Piper Alpha has a good track record of operating safely in what is a hazardous and dangerous environment. That must never be compromised, but one has to ask: is it necessary to have two separate regimes—one for the oil and gas industry, and one for the offshore wind industry? Going forward, collaboration must underpin everything. It is probably too late for the Budget in under two weeks' time, but for the autumn statement, consideration should be given to introducing measures that encourage collaboration—for example, tax breaks and incentives to carry out seismic work that can lead to new discoveries.

Alongside the implementation of Sir Ian's recommendations and the move towards a more collaborative approach to business, changes to the fiscal regime are imperative, not only to get over the immediate challenges the industry faces, but to provide a framework to attract global investment. That is already acknowledged by the Treasury. Its "Driving investment" plan, which came out in December 2014, recognised that substantial improvements in the oil and gas fiscal and regulatory landscape, including a reduction in the overall tax burden, are required for the UKCS to remain globally competitive and to attract international capital.

When the "Driving investment" plan was published, the oil price was around \$60 a barrel. Given that the price is now in the range of \$30 to \$35 a barrel and that the observed impacts of prevailing low oil prices and the depth of the downturn in the UKCS are considerable, those improvements are even more imperative. There are huge pressures on company and project financing, and more job losses and company defaults are a real worry. Further fiscal measures are now required as a matter of urgency to support the industry, and I urge the Government to bring such measures forward in the forthcoming Budget.

The package included in the March 2015 Budget was very much welcomed by the industry and should now be the foundation for further measures. Such additional measures would also help the industry's supply chain and therefore meet the second principle in the "Driving investment" plan: revenues. In setting further reforms, we must have in mind the requirements of the secondary industries. I would therefore be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister, along with her Treasury colleagues—I am delighted to see one such colleague, the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury here today—included Oil & Gas UK's proposals in the Budget. I will not go through them, because Members will have seen them, but they set out the situation clearly and speak for themselves.

In addition, Oil & Gas UK has requested two non-fiscal measures to be introduced. First, access to finance is a major problem at the current time. That could be overcome to a large degree by the introduction of a Government loan guarantee scheme, which would help companies to access affordable working capital, which is vital for their survival in the downturn. Constraints on expenditure and an increasing unwillingness among finance markets to lend are currently resulting in a liquidity crunch across the sector, which is driving a further downturn in activity.

It is also very important, out there in the real economy in the regions in which we operate, for businesses and their representatives to talk to their banks, to explain their problems and to work with them. The feedback I am getting in East Anglia is that at the moment the banks are being responsible, but in other sectors in the past—whether it was the dairy or the house-building industry—when times have got difficult, the banks have sometimes panicked.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I was at a meeting last week with a local supply chain company, which said it was finding it difficult to get finance and that although a number of banks were saying to Government that they are still lending, they were saying to local oil companies, "We are not lending to oil right now."

Peter Aldous: It is very helpful to have that feedback. I raised this at the New Anglia local enterprise partnership oil and gas taskforce meeting last week, and the feedback I got from people was that they had spoken individually to all the banks in the region and that the banks were being co-operative. However, it can, of course, vary from region to region, and that is what we have look out for.

I have talked about the short-term measures. Secondly, in the longer term, the Treasury needs to work with the industry on producing an overall road map for fiscal change. That would include not only the fiscal changes in this Budget, but a longer-term blueprint for further reductions in the fiscal burden as the basin matures. That would help to provide greater clarity for all those working in the UKCS at a time of uncertainty, and it would boost investment and hopefully give confidence to banks. In short, the industry needs its own long-term economic plan.

It is also important that local initiatives are put in place to support people and businesses at this uncertain time. The New Anglia LEP oil and gas taskforce, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) and I are members, has developed a package of measures to provide advice and support to businesses and their workforce. The taskforce commissioned research that showed that 26 companies have filed for administration in the Lowestoft and Yarmouth area between April and October 2015 and more than 1,000 people directly employed—that is, directly employed people only—in the industry have been made redundant, with many companies asking staff to take unpaid leave or salary reductions. As a result of that research, the taskforce has agreed a package of measures prioritising two areas.

First, for oil and gas businesses, free initial face-to-face assessments will be provided, followed by, if required, a 50% discount towards a more intensive support package that will be provided by specialist consultants. That will include advice on diversification, restructuring and alternative growth opportunities, as well as on developing business plans. Those discounts will be funded by Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils and by Waveney District Council and Great Yarmouth Borough Council, which have set aside £80,000. In addition, the LEP is modifying its growing business fund grant scheme to support and sustain future business plans, with £250,000 being set aside.

[*Peter Aldous*]

Secondly, those losing their jobs are being provided with support to retrain, find alternative employment or maintain their industry certificates. Assistance will be provided via Jobcentre Plus to ensure that displaced workers are properly supported to access new job opportunities in the local area. The taskforce is also working with local colleges and training providers to ensure access to relevant training courses.

It is important to acknowledge those in the New Anglia LEP and the East of England Energy Group who have worked tirelessly to come up with this package, as well as the four councils and the LEP for providing the funding at a time when their budgets are under great pressure. It is right that such packages are worked up locally, so that they are tailored to the specific needs of those in the local areas, but there is a role for Government. First, they should co-ordinate such initiatives across the country—I understand that Scottish Enterprise is doing something similar, although I am not aware of the position in the north-east and in the north-west. Secondly, if the schemes are a success but the downturn goes on for longer, the Government should look to provide the funds for these initiatives to continue.

If you will bear with me for a few minutes, Mr Walker, I am getting towards the end of my speech. Let me say a few words about the urgent need for a regional plan for the southern North sea, on which the OGA has started work. Sir Ian Wood recommended that regional plans should be developed for the different areas of the UKCS. There is a vital need to do that in the southern North sea, where there are significant potential reserves of gas remaining to be recovered. That is evidenced by the Cygnus find—the largest gas discovery in the last 25 years; work is due to start later this year—and the potential of the Tolmount discovery. With gas continuing to play a key role as the main fuel source for UK electricity generation, this plan is important to maintain security of supply.

Today, gas is very cheap and it is readily shipped around the world in liquefied natural gas form. Seventy per cent of gas is currently imported, but much of it is from countries that have an unpredictable political outlook. However, the gas price is increasingly volatile and we need to have our own domestic source of supply. Although the southern North sea still has significant potential, it is particularly vulnerable to premature contraction and decommissioning. We need to ensure that the existing infrastructure is fully utilised and not placed at risk, and that licences are in the hands of those prepared to invest.

The price of gas used to be closely tied to the oil price. With the rise of shale gas in the US, that is no longer the case, and I am advised that there is now a closer link to something called the “Henry Hub”. That leads one to consider whether there should be a different fiscal regime for gas in the southern North sea. Industry opinion is divided; some say that the fuel should have its own tax framework, whereas others say that would be complicated and that we need to move to a simpler system. On balance, I am coming round to favouring the latter, but I urge the Treasury to look at this issue closely.

Although the southern North sea is a mature basin and, in many respects, we are embarking on the final chapter of oil and gas recovery on the UKCS. In some

respects this voyage is a new venture, with a new business model built on a cornerstone of collaboration. Up until now, the big oil companies have led the way in pursuing innovation, efficiency and cost reduction. With the industry in future likely to be made up of a larger number of smaller businesses, a new way of harnessing the drive for innovation needs to be found. The offshore wind catapult has been very successful in promoting innovation and driving down costs. I would be grateful if the Government considered setting up a similar catapult for the oil and gas industry.

In conclusion—I sense I have tried your patience for a little too long, Mr Walker—the North sea oil and gas industry is a great British industry, which has given so much to the UK over the past 50 years. It is currently facing extreme challenges, but it can play a key role for the next 35 years. That key role involves keeping the lights on, providing good and exciting jobs and making a significant contribution to GDP—to Great Britain plc. Three ingredients are required for it to do so: the right regulatory framework—Sir Ian has provided us with that particular framework, which we now need to move forward with—the right fiscal framework and, above all, a spirit of collaboration.

1.59 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I apologise that, having left a Bill Committee to speak in this important debate, I will have to return to the Committee when I have spoken here. I hope that the Ministers and other hon. Members will excuse me.

It is difficult to speak after my friend the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who encompassed so much of what I want to say. I thank him for taking the lead at the Backbench Business Committee to help to secure this debate. My friend the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and I were both pleased to support this timely application. The hon. Gentleman's passion for oil and gas and his great knowledge of the subject were well demonstrated in his very thorough speech. He has left little for us to add, except to express our own passion for our regions and describe how we are affected by the downturn in oil and gas.

I am sure the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, has heard, and indeed heeded, many times the points that are being raised today. I thank her for re-establishing the cross-party oil and gas group, which functioned so well in the last Parliament after being established by the then Secretary of State. It helped to promote fabrication in a way that brought jobs to Tyneside particularly, and that was very welcome. I reiterate the appreciation and relief that the group has been re-established. The Minister intends the group to focus on improving the competitiveness of the UK fabrication sector in this very hard climate. I am sure our next meeting with the fabrication forum will be fruitful. The way the hon. Lady chaired the first meeting shows that we will have a busy and productive time ahead.

Cheaper oil at the pumps is welcomed by the majority of people in this country, but the dramatic fall in oil prices is a disaster for industries in places like Tyneside. Twenty years ago, our shipbuilding industry finally closed with the loss of the great Swan Hunter on the

Tyne. Many workers were left with no jobs, but others were able to secure a future by transferring their skills to the offshore oil and gas industry. Instead of the building of great oil tankers, we saw with awe the fantastic platforms that dominated the skyline, amazing all who saw them. It was a wonder they ever got off the river, but they did. That was a new era which we hoped would last a long time, but given the way things are, that does not seem likely. I hope there will be some reversal of that fortune.

In my Adjournment debate on this issue just over a year ago, I quoted the then chief executive of Oil & Gas UK, who said at the time of the organisation's 2015 activity survey:

"This offshore oil and gas industry is a major national asset."

More relevant than that is the fact that, for each of us taking part in this debate today, the industry has a special relevance to the economic prosperity of our communities. Over the past few years, I have followed the fortunes of the oil and gas industry via the success or otherwise of businesses on the Tyne—companies such as Barrier, W.D. Close, SMD, Shepherd Offshore Services, Wellstream and OGN, the last of which I have worked with most regularly. I will say more about OGN to show how its fortunes mirror those of the oil and gas industry generally.

In 2012, when I asked the Prime Minister to consider tax incentives in the Budget, the workforce at OGN stood at around 1,500. Last year, that workforce stood at 2,500, thanks to a contract for fitting the EnQuest producer FPSO—floating production, storage and offloading vessel. That contract, secured with the help of the cross-party oil and gas group, was completed last March, and sadly, in the last few months, despite valiant efforts by the company to find work, the yard has shed all those jobs. Men and women in my community of Wallsend are out of work, despite being highly skilled.

I take this opportunity to commend the Department for Work and Pensions on the helpfulness of its rapid resource team. The Department commended OGN for letting the team have access to workers long before the nail was in the coffin, with the result that many of the workers have been able to upskill or transfer skills to get different employment. That should be noted in these hard times.

In a letter to the Chancellor in December 2015 about the future of the UK continental shelf, Dennis Clark, the indomitable chairman of OGN—everyone in the business has probably met him at some point—stressed that the way forward was to improve the long-term investment potential of the North sea and that this had to be done by larger operators because smaller ones are struggling. As ever, Dennis believes that there needs to be an overhaul of the tax structure to help North sea operators. In his letter to the Chancellor, he highlighted the fact that in some mature fields like Forties and Beryl, in-field drilling supported by 3D and 4D seismics has resulted in identifying and exploiting new reservoirs. He believes that that could mean there is even more oil than we think in the North sea. He urged pursuing this course of action to be a focus of attention for the newly formed Oil and Gas Authority.

Announcements made by the Government in January will certainly help the industry in these hard times and are welcomed, but the importance of the Government's support for the industry is strengthened not just by

comments from people in the industry such as Dennis Clark, but because of the 2016 activity survey, which was published last week by Oil and Gas UK. I commend the industry's efforts and success in reducing operating costs and increasing production, as set out in the report, but I am very concerned that the survey outlines the fact that exploration is at an all-time low, with little sign of improvement. According to the survey, this year only £1 billion will be approved for investment in new projects compared with £8 billion per year in the previous five years. It can only be described as soul-destroying that, despite efficiencies and resulting successes, because the price of oil has fallen 70% since summer 2014, it is likely that 43% of UKCS fields will be operating at a loss, further deterring exploration and investment.

The UK still has up to 20 billion barrels of oil and, as my friend the hon. Member for Waveney said, can provide a secure source of energy for our country for years to come. That should not be forgotten. I agree with Oil & Gas UK that we must exploit to the full the advantages that come with having a mature province on our doorstep. That must be made known worldwide. Let us exploit our skills, technology and engineering. We cannot waste this resource—that would be a travesty.

The Minister will be aware that Oil & Gas UK has made Budget representations to the Treasury in a bid to help our industry to survive. I particularly note the idea of making loans to enable the industry to have money to invest. Fabricators like OGN in north Tyneside need to see that investment is taking place; otherwise, they will have no hope.

I started by speaking about how the fortunes of the industry are mirrored in OGN. In the last few days, OGN has sent a letter to the unions advising that it will have to market the site. It hopes that it may get a last-minute reprieve by going into the offshore wind industry, because it has the capacity, skills and ability to do that. I know that the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, who is here today, has promised to meet OGN to discuss some of the things that are causing it problems there.

It is great that the industry is looking forward; it is terrible that more than 2,000 jobs have been lost in recent months. We cannot even imagine what it is like for people who work in these industries, who were highly paid and usually able to enjoy quite a good lifestyle, being reduced to not having an income and perhaps having to work away from home. At the moment, people are able to work in their local communities, but if they lose that job and are fortunate enough to get another, it could be on the other side of the world. That is a loss socially as well as economically to our communities.

I ask the Minister of State to continue on the road that she has started on, to make the case for oil and gas and to plead with the Exchequer Secretary to listen to the recommendations that have been made by Oil & Gas UK and all the hon. Members who are representing the interests of their communities here today.

2.11 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. With my fellow MPs, I am pleased that this debate was chosen by the Backbench Business Committee and I appreciate the fact that it agreed that the debate could be held today.

[Kirsty Blackman]

I represent Aberdeen North, which is obviously one of the places most heavily affected by the current downturn. Last summer, when we were first meeting oil companies and talking to industry bodies about what was happening in the oil and gas industry, they were talking about the oil price being “lower for longer” and about being cautiously optimistic about the future. There has now been a shift in the feeling: it feels as though the price will be lower and lower for longer and longer. They are not talking just about being robust at \$60 a barrel; they are talking about being robust at \$50, and there are even whispers about people trying to be robust at \$40. It has become a completely different feeling, even in the few months since the summer, because the global oil price is so unpredictable and it is not something that we can do anything about. One industry leader, when asked the other day what we could do about the oil and gas price, said, “Hope.” That is the only thing that we can do about the price.

There are other things that can be done, though. I want to talk about the situation in Aberdeen and how we are feeling now. I read an article from a couple of years ago that said that about 40,000 people were employed directly in the oil and gas industry in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. Aberdeen is a relatively small city; only 225,000 to 250,000 people live there, so if 40,000 are directly employed in the oil and gas industry, that is a massive proportion of our employment.

I grew up in Aberdeen. It was always the case that the dads of people I knew were away offshore, working in the oil industry. Now, people I know are themselves away offshore, or their husbands are away offshore, working in the oil industry. It is every second or third family. The oil and gas industry is not a small employer in the city; it is massive. I was talking to Scottish Enterprise the other day, and it reckons that there have been 10,000 direct job losses in the industry.

Looking more widely, Aberdeen and Grampian chamber of commerce did a survey last November that found that hotel occupancy was down by 15%. The people working in hotels are finding themselves squeezed as a result of the downturn; those are indirect job losses. Housing sales in Aberdeen are down by 14% in the course of a year. Taxi drivers are complaining like crazy—they always complain, but they are complaining particularly about the downturn. One of the local food banks made money by selling fruit to companies. Those companies are no longer buying that fruit because they have cut back on the extras, so the food bank, as well as seeing extra people coming through the door, is suffering on the basis that it does not have the revenue streams that it had before. We are not just talking about direct job losses in the oil and gas industry in Aberdeen; this is a real issue for our whole city.

When oil and gas operators were surveyed in November, 85% of them foresaw further redundancies in 2016. This is not the end of the story for Aberdeen; the bottom has not been reached yet. We do not know what the oil price will do in 2016, but we are pretty sure that it will not get back up to \$100 a barrel.

The job losses are a major issue, but there are many people in Aberdeen who have never worked in the oil and gas industry. Despite it being so important for our city, there are many people who have never had those

high salaries and who have always struggled. Because we had the industry and the high salaries, they have had to struggle against massive house prices and, for example, a pint of beer in a pub in Aberdeen costing much more than it does down the road in Dundee. Having struggled with all those issues, the knock-on impacts from what is happening in the industry now are hitting them even harder, even though they never had the high salary beforehand to back them up. Therefore, this is a very big issue for our city—for our micro-economy in Aberdeen.

I do not want to carry on being quite so gloomy. There are patches of light—good things happening in the industry and in the wider economy in Aberdeen. We are seeing a degree of resilience in Aberdeen. Aberdeen has been through downturns before. It has not been through any big ones in the times that I can remember, but it has been through downturns before; we have suffered before. One big issue that we are struggling with involves those companies that are becoming market leaders in things such as decommissioning. We are now what is called a super-mature field in the North sea and we are getting very good at and ahead of the curve on things such as decommissioning, but there are issues.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) mentioned the banks. Although the banks say that they are lending, the people from the companies I have been talking to say, “Yes, the banks say that, but they are not actually following through and it is not happening.” There is an issue there. The banks are not lending to the companies, so the companies are in a shakier situation financially, so they are less likely to get money from the banks. If the Government showed confidence in the oil industry and made it clear that they would support the long-term future of the industry, we would get out of the current cycle of banks refusing to lend and then the companies not being so financially viable—and on and on.

The Scottish Government are doing a huge amount to try to inspire confidence in Aberdeen and to make people realise that things are good in Aberdeen. The Scottish Government, along with the UK Government, have signed the city deal, with each putting in £125 million for the city. The Scottish Government are also putting in extra money that will particularly benefit the city. They are putting in £254 million of infrastructure investment, which is additional to the Haudagain roundabout improvements—people who have been to Aberdeen have probably heard about the Haudagain. Also, there is the Aberdeen western peripheral route, which has been on the books—in the pipeline—for an awfully long time. Basically, in Aberdeen we do not have a bypass—our current “bypass” goes through the city. The new road will actually go around the city. It is a huge infrastructure project and it is doing its bit to help the economy and increase confidence in north-east Scotland.

We in Aberdeen have been shouting for many of these infrastructure improvements for a very long time, and now they are finally coming through. I am particularly pleased to see that measure of confidence from the Scottish Government. There has been a slight measure of confidence from the UK Government, I agree, but we would like more. We would like more support for the industry in general and for Aberdeen in particular.

I have spoken about confidence and the effect that that will have on things such as the banks. There are a couple of other issues. What if the big companies

decide that the North sea is too difficult? Many of these companies are global companies. They can choose to invest elsewhere; they can choose to put their money elsewhere. That is bad for the UK because the UK does not get the tax take anymore, but something that is a major problem is if people start to decommission too early. If people know anything about the infrastructure of the North sea, they know that if we start to decommission one place, the satellites are scuppered and further out fields are less viable as a result. This is what the maximising economic recovery report was about. If we think about it purely in fiscal and financial terms, it is hugely important to push decommissioning out as far as possible, to maximise the amount of money that the Treasury will take, to increase jobs for the long term and to become the market leader in the supply chain and the decommissioning sector.

What can the Government do about the fiscal regime? We would really like them to look at the supplementary charge and at the tax regime around late life assets, to ensure that assets can be transferred to smaller companies that can prolong the life of the assets to get as much as possible out of the fields before choosing to decommission. Also, any pressure that the Government can put on the banks actually to lend, rather than just to say that they are lending, would be fantastic.

I have another wee ask for the Government although it is not really for either of the Ministers present to answer. Will the Government ensure that the jobcentre gives my guys the correct advice when they walk through the door? There are lots of things going on for people who have been made unemployed in the offshore oil and gas industry. I am sure that my hon. Friends will talk about Scottish Enterprise's taskforce. Jobcentre staff need to know all that information, so that when somebody walks through the door, they can give them all the information about the taskforce and about where to go for extra training.

Aberdeen has not been in this situation before. We are talking about highly skilled people, some of whom have never been unemployed in their lives. They need to be given the right support because we cannot afford to lose them from the oil industry or from Aberdeen. People are making the choice to go to Dubai and to other countries to support their families financially, but we do not want to lose them and their expertise from this country. We do not want them to have to go to another industry if there is a job opening in the oil and gas industry here. If there is a job opening in renewables—fantastic—we can get them moved to that field and improve our standing in it. We need these people to be pointed in the right direction to make our economy, particularly our micro-economy, as prosperous as possible

Every company and industry body that I have spoken to thus far is cautiously optimistic about the OGA. Everybody says, "It looks like the OGA is going to do the job that it is setting out to do. Let's see if it follows through." The Government have backed the OGA and I hope that they continue to do so. We will continue to back the OGA and support it in whatever way we can because its work is vital and it has been very good at listening thus far.

What about the legacy? What happens to Aberdeen? In Aberdeen, we are good at a number of other things. We are getting particularly good at biopharmaceuticals, which is terrible because I cannot spell it—every time I

try to write it down, I have a major problem. We are very good at food and drink, and are world leaders in nutrition. Apparently, we are getting very good at big data, which I will have to learn about very quickly because I do not know much about that. There are two world-class universities in Aberdeen. In transferable skills from the oil and gas industry in a city that has been a world leader in innovation, we will be top of the pile when it comes to renewables, especially if the Government support and give investors confidence in renewables in general, and particularly in Scotland.

I appreciate the chance to have this debate and to talk not only about the offshore oil and gas industry, but about Aberdeen, which I cannot help but talk about whenever I stand up to speak.

2.23 pm

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, in what will be a brief contribution. I congratulate the hon. Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon), who is my very good friend and neighbour, on securing this debate on an important and timely subject. They have made a strong case for the industry; I will concentrate very much on my locality.

Hundreds of jobs in my constituency depend on the oil and gas industry, where times are, to put it mildly, very tough. Sixteen years ago almost to the day in this very Chamber, I initiated a debate on the plight of the shipbuilding and offshore industry on the River Tyne, because there were similar concerns about jobs being lost and an ageing workforce. We feared losing skills but, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside said, the offshore industry has provided some continuity. The situation at the time was alleviated by the then Government, who placed warship orders on to the Tyne. Of course, that is not an option for any Government when it comes to the oil and gas industry, because no Government procure rigs or jackets. The common theme in that debate, as in this one, was the vital importance of jobs and the concern at the loss of jobs, whether those jobs were in Waveney, Aberdeen or North Tyneside.

As MPs, in our surgeries and postbags, we receive letters and emails often from the wives and partners of men who work in the industry and who have lost their jobs. The importance of jobs was well understood by the former owner of Swan Hunter, Jaap Kroese, who asked me, following that debate 16 years ago, to chair the then new North East Maritime and Offshore Cluster. I am sad to say that he died at the end of last year. Although he was Dutch, he was an honorary Geordie for the way he championed the maritime industries on the River Tyne, and we shall miss him very much indeed. In all the work that was done, his emphasis was, "Can we bring jobs to our communities and can we safeguard jobs in our communities?"

Those involved in the offshore oil and gas industry—those in fabrication and those who work offshore—in the north-east face serious challenges. The decline, as the hon. Member for Waveney said, partly reflects the maturity of the industry in the North sea, but the scale and speed of job losses reflect the collapse of oil prices. The situation requires action now on a number of

[*Mr Alan Campbell*]

fronts. In these particular circumstances we need action, but we also need to ensure when we emerge from this period that companies are competitive, so that the North sea remains competitive and we can keep those jobs.

There is a role for the Government. A number of measures in the Energy Bill currently before Parliament are very welcome indeed. In particular, the establishment of the OGA is important. Of course, the immediate opportunity comes with the Budget, where steps are needed to further alleviate pressure and boost investment. I will not go through each of the tax measures—I could not even if I tried—but I was very pleased that, until a moment ago, the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, was in the debate. I am sure the industry is talking to the Government, and I do hope the Government are listening.

I want to make one general point and one specific point about the tax framework. It seems that although there have been changes—I accept that the Government have done a great deal to help—the overall tax regime has not really kept pace with changes in the price of oil. It cannot be right that a tax regime with supplementary charges reflects a time when oil prices were higher than the \$30 to \$35 or so that they are now. I hope the Chancellor has at the forefront of his mind the need to take action to create a tax environment more in keeping with the current situation than the one that prevailed earlier.

A specific area that I hope the Chancellor will look at—and which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North—is the issue of asset transfer. If companies wish to leave the North sea, we need to ensure that it is easier than it is now to transfer assets, whether to companies that are already in place or, indeed, to people who want to enter the oil and gas fields. Sometimes, those are acorn companies. In my experience, they are people who have worked for bigger companies and who see an opportunity for applying technology in a better way. They are welcome additions and we should not put any barriers in their way. If it were possible to transfer decommissioning tax relief with the asset, that may boost activity, and that would come at little or no cost to the Treasury.

If the Treasury is to play its part, so too must companies. Many are trying to reduce costs below the point at which it is necessary to get a profit if oil is \$30 a barrel, but that leaves margins very tight indeed. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside said, if the price of oil remains at its current level for the rest of 2016, almost half of North sea oil fields will operate at a loss, and that simply is not sustainable.

Advanced Industrial Solutions, which I am pleased to say is an expanding company in my constituency, is working hard, particularly on skills training, but also on supplying equipment and components to the oil and gas industry, especially the offshore industry. By working with major companies, it is cutting costs without cutting standards or cutting health and safety, which is the kind of collaboration that the hon. Member for Waveney mentioned at a local level. The company is upskilling workers for a time when the industry recovers—as we hope it will—or at least for a time when oil prices begin to rise again. It is also upskilling workers who have

worked in the offshore industry for new and emerging industries such as onshore and offshore wind turbines and the construction industry. Many jobs that can be done offshore are valued in those industries and in construction. My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside and I watched people being upskilled to use complicated rope methods of painting and repairing. If people can use those skills offshore on rigs, albeit in a more dangerous situation, they can use them in construction, and on onshore and offshore turbines too. Such skills are very transferable.

Sometimes, the cost of training is paid by employers, but often it is paid either by employees or by former employees who, if they have been made redundant, pay for it from their redundancy or from their own savings. If someone is willing, has worked hard and saved money, and wants to upskill because they want to work hard again, make money and pay taxes, it cannot be right that the course they go on to upskill is subject to VAT. It just does not make sense that we are putting VAT on such businesses. I understand that any Government will say that once VAT is on, it has to stay on, but—this is my plea—we have previously reduced VAT in some situations. I would ask the Government to consider that.

Finally, I have followed carefully what the hon. Member for Waveney is trying to do. I said earlier that my debate was 16 years ago, which sadly makes me an elder statesman, if that is the right phrase—it is simply code for getting on a bit. I am slightly cynical when I hear the word “taskforce”, which is a bit like “action plan”, where the emphasis is on the plan and often not on the action. I honestly hope that he will be successful with his taskforce, and I wish him well. I am interested in the Government’s view on taskforces and whether they favour the establishment of taskforces locally, or whether it is up to local areas themselves and that the Government do not have a view. Should such taskforces be focused on skills? Previously, in 2000, I would be knocking on the door of the regional development agency and saying, “What are you going to do about retaining skills, and how are you going to show the world that the River Tyne is a centre of excellence for shipbuilding, and for the offshore industry, too?” I am not convinced that the local enterprise partnership is as well placed or is set up in that way. Even if it is, I wonder whether the Government will consider extra resources in some areas for taskforces, perhaps based on local enterprise partnerships, because some areas have been affected worse than others.

I reiterate: we need action, and we need action now. We may talk about the price of oil, about millions and billions of barrels left in the North sea, and about billions of pounds of investment, but ultimately it comes down to jobs. We have to be doing, and be seen to be doing, everything we can to safeguard those jobs, because they are some of the most highly skilled and dangerous jobs, and they are done by some of the most hard-working people I know.

2.34 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and to speak in this debate, Mr Walker. I am the Scottish National party Member for Livingston, which does not have an obvious connection with the oil and gas sector, although we

have some businesses down the supply chain, and many of my constituents work in the oil and gas sector, as do people across the country.

I spent the last three years of my career before coming to this place working in the oil and gas industry in Aberdeen. I spent seven years of my working career in Aberdeen and the north-east of Scotland, so it is an area and an industry that is close to my heart. I will take a little walk down memory lane, as it is appropriate to the topic. I spent the last three years of my career in the service sector. I worked for a year in a subsea company and then for an asset integrity and construction company. The last company I worked for was the biggest supplier of people power and scaffolding offshore. From speaking to many of my friends and former colleagues, many of whom have lost their jobs, I know the impact of job losses on family life and on communities, which is substantial. We have heard extensive information about the industry today, but it is always important to remember that there are lives behind every job loss and every company shutdown, but there is also hope, because there are so many people in this industry.

We talk about the UK's exports and how we are not doing as well as we could, but we do not just export products and innovations; we export people. I have travelled to a number of countries and cities across the world, and in every oil and gas city, whether it is Houston, Abu Dhabi, Dubai or Perth, I hear an Aberdonian accent, which is a fact. Aberdonians have worked for generations in the oil and gas industry, and they have been exported all over the world. Scotland has a long tradition of innovation. I think it was Arthur Miller, the American writer, who said that Scotland invented the modern world. Well, it is true that Aberdeen and the people of the north-east of Scotland pretty much invented the oil and gas sector and many of its technologies and innovations.

I worked with one guy in my last company called Jim Chalmers, who worked on the hook-up of the Brent Delta, which was the platform for which Brent crude was named. Before I left, we were working on the decommissioning of that platform. He has literally spent his entire career in the sector and in the industry, and he has some frankly incredible stories to tell. He also lost many friends in the Piper Alpha disaster, which I will mention later.

On global markets and pressures, we have seen market oversupply and a trading war between shale oil and the middle east. That has put pressure on oil, causing it to drop to a 12-year low, although it is bouncing back somewhat. Lower and lower for longer and longer, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said, will be the norm. I have been to many Oil & Gas UK events over the years, and the business breakfast I went to last week was one of the most entertaining and informative. An independent analyst, Beth Mitchell, talked about some very dry and technical information with significant wit and flair, so I pay tribute to Oil & Gas UK not just for the way it presented its activity survey but for the way that Beth presented the information. One thing the activity report drew on was the challenges and pressures put on the shale industry and how the industry has responded in the US. The industry has developed new innovative technologies. It has gone back and re-fracked wells and has been able to

operate at a much lower price than anybody had expected, which has been causing additional pressure. She highlighted how the oil and gas industry could learn from that.

As we approach the Budget, I follow everyone in saying how important it is that the Government listen. One key thing that happened in a recent Budget announcement was the cancellation of the carbon capture project, which was a huge blow for us in Scotland and the north-east. I understand that the Government have their books to balance, but we are looking to maximise recovery and to do all we can for this sector, for the energy industry and for innovation and new technologies. It was a hammer blow to the north-east of Scotland and to Scotland's industry, and we urge the Government to reconsider this technology and the removal of the investment.

I have spoken briefly about innovation. I will touch on a couple of innovations with which I was directly and personally involved. One of them, at the subsea company I worked for, was called the autonomous inspection vehicle. For those who know what an ROV is—a remotely operated vehicle—an AIV is tethered to a boat, and it goes around inspecting in areas too dangerous for divers. The company where I worked developed one that was tetherless. It was basically a remote-controlled car under the sea, which was incredible technology. The company put in a lot of investment, and the company with which it had partnered, SeeByte, developed the technology. SeeByte was a spin-off from Heriot-Watt University.

Interestingly, just before I left, I got news that SeeByte, which had been a Scottish firm, would be sold to an American firm. That was particularly disappointing, because we see it over and over again: companies in Scotland and the UK get to a certain level, and there is just not enough angel or equity investment to get them over the line to the next step, so they go to, or are bought by, American firms. It was disappointing to see that happen. I know that there have been changes to innovation grants. We have gone from grants to loans, and we are now hearing companies talking about moving abroad. That is disappointing, and I urge the Government to rethink.

The other technology was called ERBAS, or extended reach breathing apparatus system. A couple of guys in a workshop came up with a piece of technology to help the guys—they are largely men—who go down the leg of a platform. For those of us who cannot imagine it, I have a friend whose father was one of the last coal miners in Scotland, and then went on to work in the oil industry at Sullom Voe in Shetland. He said that although he had been in a roof fall in an underground coal mine, he had never been as scared as he was going down the leg of a platform. The technology that the company developed was to stop those guys having to carry their air. Instead, they could make a free descent, plugging in as they went, so they could breathe going down and coming back up. The company was investing in the technology and trying to get it to take off, but was unable to get external investment.

Those are just a couple of examples, but they are significant. Companies across the oil and gas sector are developing similar technologies every single day, and we need to do as much as we can to support them and their opportunities.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) have discussed access to finance. My hon. Friend is making a powerful point about how innovation requires financing. Does she agree—I am sure she does—that access to finance is critical to maintaining that drive for innovation?

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree. It is critical that we send the right message not just to the industry but to the markets that we are there for them and will invest in the technology. Again, as our exports drop, we must consider how we can do better. This is an area where we are leading the world, and we must invest.

Another innovation developed was the rebreather. As I am sure many Members remember, there was a series of helicopter accidents in the North sea, and in August 2013, a helicopter went down off the coast of Shetland. I was part of the emergency response team for my company at the time; sadly, we lost someone in that accident. That experience changed me and everybody else involved, and I will certainly never forget it, but the industry's response—we had the support of Oil & Gas UK, the police and all the various bodies—was incredible. It showed the industry's robustness and ability to respond. Ultimately, getting in a helicopter is pretty much the only method of transport for people who work offshore. The industry's response—developing a new breathing system and new ways to get people offshore—was important, because the accidents put significant pressure on production and on the ability to get people out and back safely.

I will touch briefly on the apprenticeship levy, which was introduced by the UK Government to deliver 3 million more apprenticeships. We welcome anything that can deliver more apprentices. However, there is a lack of clarity on the issue and a concern in the industry, which I have raised and will meet the Minister about shortly, regarding double charging. Some parts of the industry are already paying a levy to the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board for apprentices.

I urge the Government to do all they can to ensure that the levy is clear, concise and simplified, and that it delivers what it promises. Scottish Ministers have had concerns about the lack of consultation, and they are still not clear how the new body being created will work. It is important that people do not end up being put into apprenticeships that are not real apprenticeships but low-paid jobs. We must do our best to get young people into this important sector and many others. I welcome the Minister's willingness to meet me, and I thank the Aberdeen and Grampian chamber of commerce, which has done a lot of work to bring together people in the oil and gas sector on that issue.

Oil & Gas UK's operating expenditure report for 2017, the activity survey, says that the industry has made substantial progress. We must commend it on reducing operating costs, with total operating expenditure falling by around 15% to £8.2 billion. The industry has the wit and will to do so. Clearly, innovation comes not only in technological form but in terms of expenditure. Under massive pressure, the industry has led the world in innovation. We must do all that we can, in terms of the tax regime and the field allowances that Oil & Gas

UK has called for, to reform the special taxes paid by the industry, to promote investment and maximise capacity during the downturn.

Other hon. Members and I recently met the Underwater Centre in Fort William, which trains divers across the globe, particularly in the UK and Scotland. We must remember that diving is one of the most dangerous jobs that anybody can do. The Underwater Centre told us that the average age of a diver is now more than 50. What is happening is that although people are still coming through for training from Scotland and the UK—less so globally—the centre is seriously concerned that when the upturn comes, not enough people will have been invested in and not enough divers will have been trained, and we will get back into the same cycle that we have seen before, in which only certain people have certain skills, and companies must pay a fortune for them. I saw it happen in the industry when I was there: people were paid phenomenal salaries for specialist skills, because we had not had the foresight to invest in training.

I come to the work that the Scottish Government have done with Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Development International. I know from having tried to open an arm of a business in Norway—and succeeded—how important Scottish Enterprise and SDI were. They gave us support and financing to attend, for example, the Offshore Northern Seas conference in Norway and get business, and helped us understand how to operate in a different country. The Scottish Government have been doing everything that they can to support the industry in its time of need. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon set up a jobs taskforce in January 2015 in collaboration with Scottish Enterprise, chaired by its CEO Lena Wilson. It is only fair to pay tribute to Lena Wilson, who has done a huge amount of work on the issue. She has worked tirelessly with the Oil and Gas Authority, Oil & Gas UK and many others.

The Scottish Government are also running an “adopt an apprentice” scheme through Skills Development Scotland to re-employ any modern apprentices in the industry who have lost their jobs or apprenticeships. On 1 February 2016, the Scottish Government announced £12.5 million for oil and gas innovation and further business support, including £10 million in Scottish Enterprise funding to help reduce the risks associated with carrying out research and development and enable access to specialist exports to help kick-start innovation projects in Scotland.

Finally, I would like to make a point about health and safety or, as it is often called in the oil and gas sector, HSSE or HSSEQ—health, safety, security, environment and quality. The right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell) also mentioned it. At a time when costs are under such huge pressure, it is important that health and safety are not compromised. I have seen the results personally, and had to deal with incidents. The industry has come a long way since Piper Alpha. It is hugely innovative and it continues to invest, but it is important that we send the message that health and safety must not be compromised in these difficult times.

In conclusion, there is a huge amount being done by Government, by industry bodies and all across the sector, including by companies and individuals, but we have to send the strongest message possible that this industry has a prosperous future and that we need to do

all we can to support it. The oil and gas industry matters and the message that we have to send to our banks and to investors is that it is open for business and is here to stay.

2.49 pm

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker.

What can I say that has not already been covered today? Many people who work in the oil and gas sector live in my constituency of West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, and those in my constituency who do not work in the industry almost certainly have a family member who works in it. I have close friends and family who work in the industry, for Shell, KCA Deutag, Technip, Conoco, Total, Stena and shipbrokers attached to the industry, or even in Aberdeen harbour itself. I said in my maiden speech that I would argue for better support for the industry, and along with my colleagues from the north-east and my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) I have done so and will continue to do so.

The recent drop in oil prices that has been described today has had a big impact in the north-east. It has affected not only those working directly in the oil and gas sector but those working in hospitality, leisure, tourism, food and drink, and many more. At one time—indeed, very recently—in Aberdeen, it was said that it was cheaper to get a hotel room in the city at the weekend than it was during the week, because of the number of business people staying in Aberdeen during the week.

That is why I welcome the recent investment that has been made in Aberdeen city and shire through the city region deal, and additionally from the Scottish Government. I am particularly pleased about the money earmarked for key projects such as the Laurencekirk junction in my constituency and—to my further delight—for broadband infrastructure.

I also welcome the support that has been provided through the Energy Jobs Taskforce and the Transition Training Fund to those who have lost their jobs, which will allow oil and gas workers to retrain as teachers in STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths. Local institutions in the north-east are also pitching in to lend their support to the sector, with unemployed oil workers being offered a 20% discount on energy-related postgraduate courses at Robert Gordon University.

It has been said that there is a moral imperative to help the oil and gas sector, and I agree with that. Oil and gas workers, particularly those who work offshore, have to spend weeks at a time away from their families, living in one of the most inhospitable places that I can think of. That puts considerable strain on families and communities. These workers have to take a survival course just to go on their commute to work and, as has been said by my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston, there are often accidents on those journeys.

Consequently, when we ask for support for the industry, we do so because we recognise the sacrifices that are made by the men and women who are on the rigs, day in and day out. We recognise their hard work, which has brought billions to the UK Treasury. So, when the

industry faces hard times, as it does just now, it should be able to expect support from the UK Government to get it back on its feet and to restore confidence in it.

The oil and gas industry is incredibly innovative and entrepreneurial, with whole businesses in the supply chain being created out of simple solutions to all manner of problems faced by the industry. Last Friday, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and I visited an international company that started as an idea in a garden shed. It is that kind of company that make the oil and gas industry so unique and so important.

I cannot speak about the oil and gas industry in my constituency without mentioning Westhill, which is the global centre of excellence in subsea engineering. It is also known as “SURF City”, which refers to “subsea umbilicals, riders and flowlines”—I do not really know what that means either—and it also does a lot with remotely operated vehicles, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston.

The subsea sector has pioneered game-changing technology and innovative thinking during the past 40 years. The theme for this year’s Subsea Expo was “Time for Transformation”, which aimed to recognise how the industry needs to change, including considering what can be done more simply and more effectively.

The last day of Subsea Expo was about encouraging young talent in the industry. Led by OPITO, which is the oil and gas skills body, the “Energise Your Future” campaign inspired secondary school students to engage with the oil and gas industry and find out more about the opportunities available within it. That campaign, along with initiatives such as the Energy Schools Challenge, allows young people to gain an insight into the industry, show off their general knowledge and get heard on the great Northsound 1.

Finally, the Industry Awareness Week, which will take place in Aberdeen in June, follows the Oil and Gas Authority’s call-to-action paper and allows young people aged 16 and over to engage with different areas of the oil and gas industry, showing the next generation the career choices that are available in the industry. As the oil and gas industry looks to become more innovative and efficient, it may be that it is the younger generation who will come up with the solutions to ensure that it survives and thrives.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call Mr McCaig to speak.

2.55 pm

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Me? Right. [*Laughter.*] Thank you, Mr Walker, for calling me to speak. I was not quite expecting to be called and there are other people in the room who I assumed were speaking before me; clearly, I assumed wrongly.

I commend the hon. Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon), and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), for securing this debate at the Backbench Business Committee. One of the unique frustrations of having the privilege of being my party’s Front-Bench spokesperson in this area is that I could not add my name to those of the Members who secured the debate, such is the importance of this industry to my constituency,

[*Callum McCaig*]

to Scotland and—as we have heard today—not only to large regions of the United Kingdom but to the United Kingdom as a whole.

We have heard from the three key areas: Aberdeen; north-east England; and south-east England. We have heard of distinct challenges facing these areas and we have heard accounts in different accents from the different areas, but let us be clear that those of us here who represent these areas speak with one voice about what is required.

I add my backing to everything that has been said about support for the industry. For all of us who represent constituencies with an oil industry, whether job losses in the industry are in Aberdeen, East Anglia or the north-east of England, we all feel them. They are hugely damaging to communities and it is incumbent upon us to do everything we can to secure the bright future that I believe this industry has; with the right support, I am absolutely sure that it will have a bright future.

The hon. Member for Waveney made an absolutely superb speech to kick off this debate, covering the issues in great detail: the challenges; the opportunities; and the solutions that exist. Let us be clear—the Government do not have the silver bullet that is the cure to the industry's ills, but they have a significant remit in terms of tackling those ills.

There are three key areas around which there are challenges facing oil and gas. The first is price, which we can do nothing about. The second is the industry's costs, which the industry is doing its bit on; it is doing it well, but that will result in job losses as money is taken out of the system. Nevertheless, that process is required to get the industry to that bright future. And the third factor is tax.

It may seem slightly perverse that at a time when companies are not making profits and when taxes are not flowing into the Treasury that we should be calling for tax cuts, but it is precisely at this time that we need to call for tax cuts and it is at this time that they will not come at great expense to the Treasury. It will not cost the Treasury anything, or it will only cost the Treasury little, to make tax cuts, but the benefit of making them will be substantially felt in the wider economy, as they will support employment and unlock the finance that we have talked about, which in turn will drive the innovation to support our supply chain in delivering the changes, the innovation, the skills and the expertise that this industry is already world-class in and world famous for.

[*PHILIP DAVIES in the Chair*]

What is at stake here? As we have heard, the industry has produced 42 billion barrels. The reasonable estimate is that there are another 20 billion barrels left. Even if we do nothing, a number of those barrels will be produced; the investment has gone in and the existing platforms will continue to produce. The projects that are in development at this stage will happen.

However, a considerable amount of those reserves that are left in the North sea might not be extracted, and if they are not extracted the cost will fall upon us all. There would be a loss of jobs, particularly in the

areas represented by those of us who have spoken today. That would have a knock-on impact on the wider economy—the supply chain that stretches the length and breadth of these islands.

Kirsty Blackman: Specifically on the point about the barrels that are still to be extracted, does my hon. Friend agree that some of them are in more difficult types of field and so are more difficult to extract? The innovation, the research and development and the funding towards that are therefore hugely important for those fields.

Callum McCaig: I agree wholeheartedly. The make-up of the North sea is different from what it was and what has gone past. As well as the innovation and expertise, there is also the infrastructure that is already there, as a number of Members have mentioned. Once that is gone, there are fields that will go from being marginal on the positive side to being marginal on the negative side or just entirely uneconomic.

Returning to the point I was making on the missed opportunities, every single barrel of oil that we do not produce from the North sea we will need to get from somewhere else. We import oil and gas, and we should not underestimate the importance that being an oil producer has for the UK's balance of payments, which, frankly, are not great as it is. If we have to rely more on imported oil and gas for our supply, it will further exacerbate that issue. If we miss the opportunities to further develop and support the supply chain, the ability to provide the project management, skills, expertise and technology will go with it as oil and gas is exploited in other, perhaps more favourable basins. The prizes are clear: jobs, energy security and support for our balance of payments and exports. Those huge prizes are there, and if the industry is given the right support, they can and will be obtained.

The Prime Minister has talked about building a bridge to the future, and that is necessary and required. The same turn of phrase has been used by my colleague, the Scottish Government's Energy Minister, Fergus Ewing. We have left a period of very high oil prices, but as day follows night, oil prices will go up. None of us can predict when that will be, but at least until now it has been the case that they have always gone back up again. The difference in supply and demand that we are talking about is not huge, but the impacts that that has over a sustained period of time change the price and make it far more volatile and far lower.

It is a curious situation, but Aberdeen is probably one of the few places in Europe where the local radio stations tell their listeners what the oil price is. At the end of every bulletin, the newsreader will say something like, "Oil trades at \$36 a barrel"—folk are happy with \$36 a barrel, because it is better than the \$29 a barrel it was at. That is strange, and on the face of it that seems like a slightly useless snippet of information, but it signifies how important the industry is to the city that I am proud to represent.

What would a tax cut do? It would provide the clearest signal that the Government can offer that they believe in the future of oil and gas and will do everything they can to ensure that that future is realised as well as possible. We are talking about a multibillion pound investment in a platform 40 or 50 miles out into the

North sea, and that is a significant investment. That investment is likely to have a lifespan well in excess of 20 years—potentially, it is 30 to 40 years. In the time that that field will be looking to make its money back, the oil price will go through many ups and downs, but when many international companies are looking across the globe at where to invest their ever-shrinking piles of capital—the oil industry globally is facing a crisis of investment—we need to be at the most competitive we can be. Part of that is the skills, innovation and expertise that I am absolutely certain we have, but that change in the headline rate of tax over the lifespan of a field can put the decision from being, “We do not proceed,” to, “Yes, let’s press the button and go ahead and develop this field.”

Reducing the headline rate of tax is the clearest single way that we can boost the efforts in exploration and in developing the fields that we know about, and it will provide the clearest way forward on the bridge to the future. It will require people to invest. Whether that is companies using the strength of their balance sheet—some are doing that, buying up other operators and such like—or whether it is borrowed money, if we can de-risk the investment decision as much as possible, there is a greater chance that someone will invest that money in the UK continental shelf, as opposed to one of the other basins.

Stuart Blair Donaldson: Does my hon. Friend agree with the assessment of Oil & Gas UK that to transform the basin, the UK continental shelf needs to become the most attractive mature oil and gas province in the world in which to do business? That is not just one of the most, but the most attractive place to do business.

Callum McCaig: I agree with my hon. Friend and Oil & Gas UK on that. The North sea, particularly at Aberdeen, benefits from being the best place to live to work in the oil and gas industry, but it needs to be the best place in terms of the assets and the tax regime.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend also agree that another reason for having the best possible tax position is that the existing companies, particularly the smaller companies in the North sea sector, are under threat from the international credit rating agencies that, since Christmas, have been downgrading them? That worsens those companies’ ability to raise capital. Anything that puts confidence into the companies and keeps their credit ratings high gives confidence for the longer term.

Callum McCaig: Yes, absolutely. The international creditworthiness of the companies is fundamental to their access to finance. Speaking to the financial providers and asking that they look favourably on the sector because it has the support of Government would have an automatic benefit for their creditworthiness. Were we to do that, it would be a win-win in the clearest sense.

We should be looking to do an awful lot more exploration, and reducing the headline rate of tax is the best way of doing that. There is undoubted potential to the west of Shetland and in the Atlantic margins, but we should not give up on the core parts of the North sea, whether that is the central North sea or the southern North sea. I met with representatives of Statoil earlier

this week, and they were discussing a field where they have found 2.8 billion barrels of oil and gas. That is next to the Oseberg field in the Norwegian sector, but it is in one of the most heavily explored areas of the Norwegian continental shelf. The exploration that happened in large parts of the UK side of the line happened a long time ago. The advances, whether those are in drilling technology or seismic technology, mean that we should be looking to go back around some of the old ground to see what we have left there. There is a chance that there will be significant finds, and we need to ensure that that exploration is properly incentivised, so that the companies going out to look for oil and gas get as big a return as possible. That will make it economically viable.

The asks are on tax and access to finance, as we have heard. There is a key point on the transferability of tax liabilities when it comes to decommissioning. The ability to bring new players into the market is important. Each time there has been a downturn in the North sea, there has been a reconfiguration of the companies operating, and largely speaking that has been positive. We have gone from the big US companies to the majors to the middle-ranking players, and we are perhaps looking to go to smaller players still. Those at the cutting edge of innovation are the smallest companies. Their bread and butter is making the most of ageing or smaller fields. They can devote their time, expertise and capital to doing that and getting it right.

Finally, I want to talk about Aberdeen. It has felt the impact, and my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen North and for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine have touched upon the impact on our constituents. It has been significant and for many of them it has been painful. However, on the investment made by both Governments, the city deal shows proper collaborative working. Although I am disappointed that it is not bigger, there is no politician who has ever represented anywhere ever who has not wanted more from the Government when it comes to financing. I recognise it is a significant commitment. The work to establish the oil and gas technology centre is a smart use of money and builds on the expertise that is already there within our universities, making sure that we make that box a little bit more clever.

Investment in infrastructure in Aberdeen is hugely important. When we discussed the issues of oil and gas a year or more ago at the beginning of the downturn, the previous head of Oil & Gas UK said that Aberdeen was part of the problem in terms of the competitiveness of the North sea and in terms of our infrastructure, both physical and digital. Steps are under way to put that right, but we cannot rest on our laurels, and we have to up the pace of investment in infrastructure to unleash the potential that Aberdeen has.

There has been much talk about the tax regime. Again, we welcome the efforts made in last year’s Budget. I read this morning that the head of Oil & Gas UK had described the tax cuts as “so last year”, but I think the headline writer has taken a bit of a liberty because, having read the article, I am disappointed to say that she did not say that. However, because she did not, I shall. What was done, although important, was done last year; there need to be efforts this year. The Budget is coming upon us. It was welcome that a Treasury Minister was here for the opening remarks; he has not missed much by not staying to hear what I have to say.

[*Callum McCaig*]

I know the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, understands the industry and is well regarded there. I hope that she is having conversations with her colleagues in the Treasury around the same issues; I would expect nothing less.

Time is of the essence. We are at a crossroads here. There is a future for the North sea, and the Governments in Westminster and in Holyrood should make every effort to make sure that that future is the brightest possible. That requires action in the Budget and I very much hope that we will not be disappointed.

3.12 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) not only on securing this important debate, but on conducting it with such evident good sense. That is not something I always experience on occasions such as this, but everybody in the debate this afternoon has spoken the most extraordinary good sense about the circumstances of the North sea and its future, and what our imperatives should be over the next period to make sure we get the best possible out of the North sea for the long-term future.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell) have emphasised, this is about jobs, about UK plc for the future and about the question of investment in a smart and different way that recognises the different realities of the North sea. It is about efficiency and making sure that the North sea remains a really good place to invest in because it works to the best of its capacity and ability for its own future. As hon. Members have reflected, circumstances are different now and will probably always be different. So we are not just talking about a circumstance of the moment; rather, this is something we need to think about for the much longer term.

I am not remotely as well versed in “Dallas” as the hon. Member for Waveney, but I recall that one particular series turned out to be a dream and they got on with business in subsequent series. That is not where we are now as far as the North sea is concerned. Obviously, we face circumstances right now in which, as hon. Members have reflected on, Brent crude is trading at the mighty high price now of \$36 a barrel, up from \$29 just recently, but it was \$50 or so before the new year and much higher than that before then. Many industry experts are stating that that circumstance, albeit with some changes, is likely to remain with us for a long time to come. It is not thought likely that we will see sudden, volatile spikes and rising prices—that it will all turn out to be a dream and we will be back to business as it was. It is a different series of circumstances.

There is a second set of circumstances. The North sea is indeed a mature basin. That does not mean there is not a lot to do, not a lot to find, and not a lot to exploit. However, the reality is that we are two thirds to three quarters of the way through what there is in the North sea, and what will be there for the future is likely to be of a different order from what has been there in the past. A recent Oil & Gas UK report looked at the

number of marginal fields that were discovered some time ago and are still there waiting to be exploited, but which are not at the moment likely to be exploited, because there are infrastructure problems in terms of access to those small and marginal fields—there are most certainly considerable investment problems in getting people to invest in and exploit those fields in the way they should be over the next period. It is likely that the 300 discoveries that Oil & Gas UK talked about—mostly of under-50 million barrels of oil equivalent—will be followed by other small discoveries.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North is right that it is possible that there remain considerable discoveries within the areas that have already been exploited. I think it is possible, but it is probably more likely that there will be a large number of much smaller discoveries. We have to be clear about how we go about exploiting and supporting them, and making sure we get the best out of them over the next period. The hon. Member for Waveney emphasised that collaboration is absolutely essential over the future period. The assumptions made some while ago about who should do what to whom in relation to the North sea will be different. All sorts of collaboration will be needed, in equipment, infrastructure, joint working and standardisation. A whole range of things will be necessary to ensure that exploitation can be undertaken in the best possible way.

That also means something else—something that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth mentioned. He emphasised the question of asset transfer and how we should make things as easy as possible when existing assets have been under-utilised, or even when people have decided they no longer want to be part of the process. Not only should it not be difficult for asset transfers to take place; there should be mechanisms to make a transfer as smooth, efficient and productive as possible, so that the collaboration proceeds in the best way.

With a very mature field, there is the inevitable issue of decommissioning, which the hon. Member for Aberdeen North mentioned. On the one hand, bearing in mind that there is about £35 billion to £50 billion of decommissioning to be undertaken in the next period, there may be a temptation to say, “That is a new industry in its own right; let’s all get going on decommissioning. It will be important for jobs.” It will be important for jobs, but if there is an emphasis on decommissioning instead of the collaboration necessary to secure the exploitation of the fields in the next period, we will live to regret it fundamentally. That is precisely because, as the hon. Lady said, we have the benefit in the North sea, particularly in relation to exploiting additional small fields, of a mature infrastructure, which can come to the aid jointly of a number of the new discoveries and explorations. If in the mean time we decommission the nodes that would lead to that potential support, we will not just take away the installations; we will shoot ourselves firmly in the foot as far as future discoveries and activities are concerned.

I welcome what is being done under the aegis of the Oil and Gas Authority, which is being set up in its final form under the Energy Bill, towards ensuring that the process works well and that there will be proper consideration, before decommissioning is undertaken, of alternative uses for that infrastructure, and not just in future exploitation.

George Kerevan: On the point about decommissioning versus future exploration, the hon. Gentleman might like to know that Denmark has gone for the future development strategy, and this year had a successful seventh round of issuing new licences for prospecting in its sector of the North sea.

Dr Whitehead: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that information, which emphasises what the prospects can be if the process is undertaken carefully. I do not say that there should not be decommissioning, because clearly there will be a substantial amount to undertake, but it should be undertaken in the full knowledge of what is in store if it is not done carefully and of whether there may be different uses in future for elements of what is in the North sea, particularly for carbon capture and storage and gas storage. The infrastructure could assist with that in the future, establishing jobs and skills for the long term, when different circumstances may apply.

The theme that has come out of this afternoon's debate on the future of the North sea is collaboration. As for what we and the Government should be doing, what has emerged is that support needs to be given now for careful investment in collaboration, and for establishing the circumstances for a bright future in the North sea, in the context I have set out. One of the investments that the Government have already considered is the question of joint seismic work for possible explorations, whose results will be publicly available—a point that highlights collaboration in exploration for the future. Investments and assistance with that approach in mind seem to me to be the most important way forward.

In the light of the good sense and harmony that have prevailed this afternoon, I should perhaps not venture down this route, but I wonder whether I should remind the House that as late as 2011 Her Majesty's Treasury imposed a windfall tax on North sea oil and gas, by putting up the supplementary levy from 20% to 32%. One thing I must say to the Treasury about future arrangements and assistance for the North sea is: "Don't do that ever again."

Peter Aldous: I was a relatively new Member at the time and remember distinctly the unsettling impact that that measure had on the industry, because it came completely out of the blue. This is a risky business anyway, so it really knocked confidence. To be fair—I remember exactly what happened—the Treasury got the message from that very clearly. I remember attending the conference in Aberdeen that September, and the present Secretary of State for International Development, who was Economic Secretary to the Treasury, was surrounded by people from the industry. She brought the message back here, and it has been here ever since. We need to build on the new regime that we have had since then.

Dr Whitehead: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, which reminds us of the circumstances in which that began and the lessons learned fairly early on. Certainly, over the past year or two the Government's activity and their approach to taxation and investment in the North sea show that the lesson was taken on board. I just want to make sure that we build on it. We should bear in mind the need for investment, to

bring new players into the field and ensure the longer-term certainty and security of those investments for the future. Perhaps some kind of floor and cap investment arrangement might be undertaken, whereby, should volatility return to the North sea, there would be guarantees for the Government and, if it does not, there would be guarantees for the investor.

We need to think about new forms of investment for new times in the North sea to make sure that its long-term legacy will be that it did its best for UK plc, both for the jobs and skills that now exist, which it is vital to retain, and in making sure that the UK was fuelled as well as possible. I hope that it will be entirely uncontroversial if I conclude by saying that we are engaged in a joint enterprise that it is in all our interests to get right.

3.29 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I echo the hon. Members for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig) and for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) in saying that the good and unusual thing about this debate is that we are all on the same page. We all absolutely agree that the oil and gas industry is vital for the United Kingdom. It is currently in great difficulty, but we are all united in our determination to do everything we can to see it get through this period and continue to thrive.

I was slightly concerned to hear the hon. Member for Southampton, Test raise the question of joint enterprise and mention "Dallas" in the same speech. We will of course all remember the question, "Who shot J. R.?" I would not like to think that there was any joint enterprise whatever.

Callum McCaig: I should make it clear to the Minister that some of us are not old enough to remember "Dallas". [*Laughter.*]

Andrea Leadsom: I take that extremely personally. That is going to cost the hon. Gentleman chocolate raisins in our next debate—he knows what I mean. I am watching him very closely.

Like other Members, I was delighted that my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury was able to join us for much of the debate and hear the views of several Members on the needs of this important sector. The North sea is a mature basin, yet it is still meeting the equivalent of around 65% of the UK's oil demand and 55% of its gas demand. As many Members have said, there is no doubt that oil and gas will remain central to the UK's energy mix as we make the transition to a low-carbon economy in a cost-effective way for consumers, so investing in domestic oil and gas production is essential. It helps to reduce our reliance on energy imports and provides a significant input to our economy, supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs directly and indirectly.

As all speakers have pointed out, over the past year oil prices have continued to fall, dropping to below \$30 a barrel earlier this year. The impact of the fall on the industry was reported last week in Oil & Gas UK's annual activity survey, which also indicates that investment in new projects has fallen from approximately £8 billion

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

a year over the past five years to an expected £1 billion in the coming year, and that the number of wells drilled to explore for new reserves is low. It is therefore vital that industry and Government step up and respond to the challenges facing the industry.

I assure all Members that the Government are committed in their support for the industry and have already made significant changes to the fiscal regime. In the March 2015 Budget, the Chancellor introduced a £1.3 billion package of reforms, including reductions to headline rates of tax, a new investment allowance and £20 million of funding for seismic surveys to support exploration. In fact, no other Government have made fiscal changes as extensive as the UK's in response to falling oil prices. Both the Government and the Oil and Gas Authority will continue to listen to the industry's views on further reforms in this area, but, as the Wood review made clear, fiscal changes are not the only solution to the issues the industry currently faces.

Several Members, including the right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), spoke about the need for fiscal measures to be taken in the next Budget. I hope that he and others were reassured by the presence of my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary. The changes announced in the 2015 Budget were obviously significant. Several large projects have already gone ahead as a result of them, such as Maersk's Culzean project—an investment of £3 billion in the UK, supporting 6,000 jobs—and BP's eastern trough area project, which is a £670 million investment. In response to the March 2015 Budget package, the then CEO of Oil & Gas UK, Malcolm Webb, said:

“These measures send exactly the right signal to investors. They properly reflect the needs of this maturing oil and gas province and will allow the UK to compete internationally for investment.”

That is what we were setting out to achieve, and I think those measures were very well received.

Members have highlighted what the industry is asking for: that we address the remaining fiscal barriers to late-life activity; that we abolish the supplementary charge, or at least reduce it by 10%; that we bring the rate of the investment allowance for offshore expenditure in line with that for onshore expenditure; that we temporarily remove all special taxes from exploration, so that only basic corporation tax will apply for all discoveries made over the next five years for the whole life of the field; and that we introduce a Government loan guarantee.

The Government have been building on the evidence gathered at working groups that met over autumn 2015. The Treasury, supported by the OGA, is conducting internal analysis of the findings of the three workstreams on barriers to exploration, infrastructure access and new entrants for late-life assets. As usual, should the Chancellor make any decisions, the announcement and implementation of any changes to the tax regime will follow the fiscal policy-making process. I hope that that reassures Members, but they should understand that I cannot make any further comments. It is not a matter for me anyway, but the Budget is coming the week after next.

In addition to looking into and undertaking further fiscal reform, the Government are supporting the industry in a number of other ways. The OGA has been established as an independent regulator and asset steward for the UK continental shelf. The Energy Bill before Parliament will provide the OGA with the powers it needs to maximise the economic recovery of oil and gas from the continental shelf. The OGA is working with the industry to identify opportunities to reduce costs, and good progress has already been made, with Oil & Gas UK's recent activity survey showing that production rose by 10% in 2015, while production costs fell by a third. That is an impressive achievement.

As the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) pointed out, we have recently re-established the cross-party oil and gas group, and we are aiming to promote the competitiveness of the offshore fabrication sector. Our first meeting, in January, was very productive. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), the hon. Member for North Tyneside and other Members for their involvement in the forum. As the hon. Lady mentioned, our next meeting will be with fabricators, and we will be looking at new opportunities not only in the traditional oil and gas sector but outside it.

Supporting the industry's supply chain is crucial at this time, as it is a vital and integral part of the UK oil and gas industry. As those Members who have constituents who work in the industry and others who themselves have worked in the industry will know, it has suffered job losses and revenues falling by around a quarter last year. We must acknowledge that. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) asked whether enough is being done about job losses. I can tell her that in intergovernmental ministerial meetings, and particularly in the work I am doing with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise, we are examining what more can be done to view the energy sector holistically to see how job losses in the oil and gas sector can be a win, not only for offshore and onshore wind but, for example, for the new nuclear efforts. We are looking at what more can be done to provide new opportunities in the energy sector.

Despite the low oil price and the downturn of work being contracted offshore, there are steps we can take to support our supply chain and put it in the best position to win contracts. The OGA is actively involved in promoting future success through its supply chain strategy and board, for which unlocking new investment and future work is a priority. The OGA is working closely with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and with industry to make sure that companies remain competitive. The Government are working to further develop mechanisms to provide greater transparency about upcoming business opportunities to companies in the supply chain.

I am delighted to be able to inform Members that over the past few days I have held meetings with several offshore wind developers to emphasise to them that I want to see them do more to make the industrialisation of the UK offshore wind supply chain happen. In particular, the industry needs to work collaboratively to deliver a UK jacket foundation solution and competitive UK tower solutions. Successful delivery of towers and jacket foundations will create opportunities for fabricators and enable people with the right skills to transfer across to the offshore wind sector.

In the past 48 hours, I have met a couple of developers, one of whom told me that they have been very successful in winning overseas offshore wind business by using onshore Aberdeen-based oil and gas consultants with expertise in engineering, if hon. Members can follow that tortuous thought process. Rather than using offshore wind consultants, wherever they are based, they are using the UK's long-established expertise in onshore oil and gas to win overseas wind business. That is important, and we need to do more to promote that interesting opportunity.

I am working with my hon. Friend the Minister for Skills to develop a national college for wind energy to provide people with the right skills to work in the sector. I had a meeting yesterday with a number of hon. Members from across the House to talk about what more we can do to get it up and running. Retraining is required if we are to take the people who lose opportunities in the oil and gas sector into offshore and onshore wind and other renewables sectors. There is a big opportunity there.

The UK has a strong record on manufacturing jackets and topsides for offshore wind substations. The majority of those items are manufactured in the UK. Sembmarine SLP Ltd, which won a contract from Siemens Transmission and Distribution in 2014 to design, engineer, procure, project manage and construct its platform's jacket substructure and topside, has begun fabrication. The offshore transformer station, which is being constructed at SLP's yard at Lowestoft on the Suffolk coast, is providing work for up to 300 employers for the next 21 months. I encourage all hon. Members—I know they are already doing this—to work with Ministers, cross-party groups and the OGA to look at other opportunities in the energy sector, not only on direct workforce re-engagement but on supply chain opportunities. That is really important. The Government and the OGA are continuing to work with initiatives such as the Scottish energy jobs taskforce and the New Anglia local enterprise partnership to support those who have already, sadly, lost their jobs. We need to continue that work.

In addition to those measures, during his visit to Aberdeen in January, the Prime Minister announced a package of measures to support the industry, including £20 million of Government funding for a second round of new seismic surveys to unlock new exploration activity in the UK continental shelf, which is the lifeblood of the basin. That funding, together with the OGA's flexible and pragmatic licensing strategy for frontier and mature acreage, is designed proactively to influence and incentivise exploration on the UKCS. To back genuine innovation, the data from those new surveys will be made publicly available and £1 million will be allocated to fund innovative uses of data to unlock new fields. That additional investment will help to accelerate the drilling of new wells, which will replenish our reserves and lead to new infrastructure projects.

In addition, £700,000 is to be invested in the development of world-class 3D visualisation facilities at the Lyell centre at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. The appointment of a new oil and gas ambassador will help to ensure the best possible access for UK companies to markets overseas, promote the North sea around the world and boost inward investment. The new strategy to maximise the economic recovery of offshore oil and gas in the UK will, subject to the will of Parliament,

come into force soon. I share the sense of urgency of my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney, who rightly pointed out that that needs to happen as soon as possible.

In addition to all those measures, Innovate UK is set to launch an energy game-changer, which will make £1.5 million available to encourage innovators, microbusinesses and small and medium-sized enterprises from outside the energy sector to come up with radical solutions and disruptive technologies in response to challenges set by the energy industry. The Natural Environment Research Council will also allocate an additional £1 million investment in the successful oil and gas centre for doctoral training, led by Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. Aberdeen University is another core partner. That further investment will enable the programme to be extended for another year and will take the total number of PhD students funded under the scheme to 120 by 2017.

The Government are committed to supporting regional development. Aberdeen is Europe's energy capital, and has rightly received a package of investment through the Aberdeen city region deal, which included funding for an oil and gas technology centre that will help to strengthen the UK's position as a global centre of expertise for offshore oil and gas and encourage future investment in the UK. However, that is not the only area that contributes to the industry. Although Scotland supports 45% of the UK's oil and gas jobs, largely in and around Aberdeen, 55% are located in England, with concentrations in the south-east, the north-west, the west midlands and the north-east. Those areas all support thousands of highly skilled and well-paid jobs. I was very pleased that my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning was able to join us for part of the debate and that he lent his support for our doing all we can to ensure the success of the sector. It is crucial that we have a joined-up approach across the Government, the OGA, industry and the regions.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney made clear, the southern North sea off the coast of the east of England is a vital part of our industry. For that reason, we are moving forward with our regional development plans. This year, the OGA will carry out an evaluation of the potential for transforming the southern North sea into an energy hub.

As many hon. Members pointed out, although the industry faces challenges, we must remember that there are still opportunities out there. It is definitely not all doom and gloom. As Sir Ian Wood pointed out recently, there is still a huge prize out there. There are still up to another 20 billion barrels of oil equivalent to recover, and 10 new developments will come online in the next two years, which will create much-needed jobs. There is a strong portfolio of new projects in the planning stage just waiting for an upturn in the oil price.

Kirsty Blackman: Sir Ian Wood also said recently that we needed drastic changes to the fiscal regime to ensure the oil and gas industry's future.

Andrea Leadson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for reminding us of that. The Budget is coming up soon, and I am sure Ministers are listening to what she has to say.

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

Production on the UK continental shelf rose by 10% in 2015 to 1.64 million barrels of oil equivalent a day. Almost 43 billion barrels of oil equivalent has been recovered so far, and there are up to 20 billion barrels—about a third—to be recovered. The UK remains the second largest producer of oil in Europe after Norway, and the third largest producer of gas after Norway and the Netherlands. The UK remains in the top 25 of global producers of oil and gas—for oil we were 21st in 2014, and for gas we were 22nd in 2014—despite the decline in production in recent years. The opportunities remain, and we still have every chance of success.

Although we wish to avoid premature decommissioning, it is a big business opportunity for the future, and £1 billion is already being spent per year. Many suspended wells are waiting to be permanently abandoned. We hope to stimulate that market and, in doing so, provide a valuable market for the supply chain. The OGA will publish a UKCS decommissioning strategy that will enable the UK service sector to become a hub for decommissioning and help UK firms to be ready to capitalise on the huge opportunities that are coming in the years ahead. That will be supported by the National Environmental Research Council, which is also investing up to £1 million in a cohort of new projects to support the development of expertise in the UK on decommissioning and its environmental management. With that proactive approach, we seek to position the UK so that it can be an early mover in that emerging market and establish a highly competitive and capable new sector.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney and the hon. Members for North Tyneside and for Aberdeen North for bringing this important debate to the House. The discussion has been constructive and I have listened with enormous interest to what right hon. and hon. Members have had to say. I congratulate the hon. Members for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson), but particularly the hon. Member for Livingston. She has a huge amount of experience in the oil and gas sector and it was interesting to hear her contribution. The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine spoke of the importance of oil and gas to Aberdeenshire, but their importance has also been made clear by Members representing other areas.

There is no doubt that the industry is facing particularly testing times, not only in the UK but globally. As I have outlined, the Government are working hard with the Oil and Gas Authority and the industry to provide the right support to this vital sector during the current oil price crisis. There is of course more to be done, and I assure right hon and hon. Members that the Government will continue to do all they can to support this great British industry during these challenging times.

3.50 pm

Peter Aldous: This has been a collaborative debate, so we are hopefully starting off here as things will move on. Over the past 50 years, we have perhaps taken the industry and what it produces in terms of our energy security for granted, and I sense that the Treasury automatically ticks off an enormous great dividend

from the industry in the Budget every year. Then, when we have a shock to the system, we suddenly realise how important the industry is to the UK. We also need to focus on how important it is to the areas that are represented around this Chamber. If we do not get it right, we will hollow out those communities. The area that I represent is perhaps a little better off than other areas, in that our economy is a little more diversified, but the effects could nevertheless hit hard if we do not get this right.

The foundations have been laid over the last 18 months or so. The Treasury is in listening mode and my hon. Friend the Minister from DECC is in listening mode. They get it. The setting up of the Oil and Gas Authority has been so important. The Budget 2015 laid down some important foundations, and the Prime Minister delivered the right measures and packages during his visit to Aberdeen in January. I know that we cannot say much about the Budget that is coming up in two weeks, but it is important for the future of the industry that we get both the short-term measures we need to get through this particular challenge and retain the infrastructure, and the clear long-term message that this is the place to invest. People have invested here over the last 50 years and we want them to invest with confidence over the next 25 to 30 years.

I picked out three themes from today's debate. The first is the importance of finance and bringing the banks with us. Secondly, innovation will be important moving forward. The industry has been innovative over the last year or so. It perhaps took things a little bit for granted up until then and was not the industry that it should have been, but it has responded. I listened at the conference in Norwich yesterday and the industry is full of ideas for moving forward. Finally, we need to send out a message of collaboration. I see the fabrication yards in my constituency daily—I suspect that the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) and the right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell) see such things daily, too—but they go from feast to famine. I see the marvellous things being built and the lights shining on them at night. It makes me feel good; and then, all of a sudden, they are gone. We go from feast to famine too often. If we can build a spirit of collaboration, we could perhaps get the yards to have a steady book of orders. They could then invest in skills and infrastructure to make themselves world class. That is what we need to achieve.

If we look at this in terms of seasons, I sense that oil and gas production on the UKCS has rapidly moved out of summer and now faces autumn. Perhaps one good thing about climate change is that we get Indian summers. We want to secure a long Indian summer for the industry—Indian summers sometimes last into November. What I do not want is a harsh, bleak winter arriving too early.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the offshore oil and gas industry.

3.55 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 3 March 2016

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Business Impact Target

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid):

I am today publishing the Government's target in respect of the economic impact of new regulation on business for this Parliament, along with related matters as required under section 21 of the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015 ("the Act"). The current Enterprise Bill will extend the scope of the target to include statutory regulators, as well as Ministers. This statement takes account of that proposed extension.

Business impact target^[1]

The Government's target is for a saving of £10 billion to business and voluntary or community bodies from qualifying measures that come into force or cease to be in force during this Parliament.

Interim target^[2]

The interim target covers the savings to be achieved from qualifying measures that come into force or cease to be in force in the first three years of this Parliament. The Government's interim target is a saving of £5 billion.

Qualifying regulatory provisions^[3]

Under the Act, the measures that are in scope for the business impact target are described as "regulatory provisions". That includes both legislation, and the activities of regulators—meaning Ministers, and in due course statutory regulators.

As with the one-in, two-out system that operated in the last Parliament, the Government must designate the categories of regulatory provision that are to be scored against the target ("qualifying regulatory provisions"). Qualifying regulatory provisions are those that do not fall within any of the exclusions set out below.

(a) Exclusions carried over from last Parliament

A number of the categories of regulatory provision that were excluded from the one-in, two-out system in the last Parliament will also be excluded from the business impact target. The exclusions are:

Regulatory provisions that implement new or changed obligations arising from European Union regulations, decisions and directives, and other changes to international commitments and obligations, except in cases of gold-plating.

Regulatory provisions specifically relating to civil emergencies.

Regulatory provisions concerning fines and penalties, and redress and restitution.

Regulatory provisions that promote competition (where these result in an increase in a direct net burden on business).

Regulatory provisions that enable delivery of large infrastructure projects.

Regulatory provisions that implement changes to the classification and scheduling of drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, or to national minimum wage hourly rates, where these follow the recommendations of the relevant independent advisory body.

Regulatory provisions relating to systemic financial risk.

(b) New exclusions applied in this Parliament

The remaining exclusions arise from the extension of the target to include regulator activity, and one legislative measure (the national living wage) where the offsetting measures—changes to national insurance and tax—are also excluded from the target under the Act.

In order to capture all relevant regulator actions the statutory definition of a regulatory provision is drafted in such a way that every action of a regulator in the discharge of its statutory duties potentially falls within scope. The exclusions are intended to ensure that the qualifying provisions scored under target are focused on regulator policies and practices rather than day-to-day activities. Certain activities related to economic regulation are also excluded. The exclusions are:

Regulator casework including specific investigation and enforcement activity, individual licence decisions, and individual advice.

Education, communications activities, and promotional campaigns by regulators, including media campaigns, posters, factsheets, bulletins, letters, websites, and information/advice helplines.

Policy development by regulators, including formal and informal consultations, policy reviews, and ad hoc information requests.

Changes to the organisation and management of regulators, except for those resulting from legislative changes or another policy change that is a qualifying regulatory provision.

Regulatory provisions applying to certain business activities of operator(s) of a network or system where the operator(s) are deemed to be a monopoly or to have significant market power, specifically:

regulatory provisions that concern the terms upon which access is provided to those networks and systems; and

regulatory provisions that concern effective network and systems operation and co-ordination.

Regulatory provisions that are price controls, except for the introduction of price controls to previously unregulated activities, or removal of pre-existing price controls.

Changes to industry codes, except those arising from regulator action or new legislation.

Regulatory provisions that introduce the national living wage^[4].

Methodology for the assessment of the business impact target^[5]

The impact of each qualifying measure will be assessed on the basis of its equivalent annual net direct cost to business (EANDCB) measured in 2014 prices and with a 2015 present value base year. The contribution to the business impact target will be the sum of the EANDCB over the first five years for which the measure will be in force, or the sum of the EANDCB over the full lifetime of the measure for measures that are in force for less than five years.

The EANDCB is an estimate of the average annual net direct costs to business in each year that the measure is in force. It is calculated as the present value of the net direct cost to business divided by the sum of the discount factors appropriate for the length of time the measure is in force. The discount rate used is determined by the Green Book.

Direct impacts are those that can be identified as resulting directly from the implementation or removal/simplification of the measure.

^[1] As required under section 21(1)(a) of the Act.

^[2] As required under section 21 (2) of the Act.

^[3] As required under section 21(3)(a) of the Act.

^[4] Future annual changes to the national living wage that do not follow the recommendations of the Low Pay Commission will be in scope for the target.

^[5] As required under section 21(3)(b) of the Act.

[HCWS574]

Green Investment Bank

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid):

In June 2015, I announced plans to move UK Green Investment Bank plc (GIB) into the private sector. The company's success means there is strong market interest in GIB from private sector investors and 100% Government funding is no longer needed.

The company fully supports this move which will give GIB the freedom it needs to grow and increase its impact with access to much more capital than if it stayed in Government hands. And it will further demonstrate that green investment can be profitable for mainstream investors and is not just the preserve of Government.

Today, I am formally launching a sale of GIB by inviting expressions of interest from bidders. Any parties interested in acquiring GIB are now invited to come forward. Interested parties will need to respond to a bidder information form which is being published today on the gov.uk website.

I am today laying a report to Parliament on the proposed disposal of shares in GIB with information on the kind of disposal intended, the expected timescale for the disposal, and our objectives for the disposal. This report is provided in fulfilment of provisions in the Enterprise Bill and is also being provided to Ministers in the devolved Administrations.

The report includes details of our plans to create a special share in GIB as part of the sale process. This will provide protection of the company's green purposes following a sale by granting the independent holder of the share the right to approve or reject any proposal to change the green purposes of GIB. I first announced these plans in Parliament on 2 February, when opening Second Reading of the Enterprise Bill. Details were also set out in the Government's response to the Environmental Audit Committee's December 2015 report on the future of GIB which was published the same day and further details are provided in letters from GIB chairman, Lord Smith of Kelvin and from Baroness Neville Rolfe, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills—copies of which will be laid in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS573]

DEFENCE

Successor Submarine Assessment Phase

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): The Government were elected with a manifesto commitment to build a new fleet of four successor

ballistic missile submarines. On 23 November 2015, the Government announced in the strategic defence and security review (SDSR) that the Successor submarine programme would cost £31 billion, and that the first boat was expected to enter service in the early 2030s. We will also set a contingency of £10 billion.

As part of his statement on the SDSR, the Prime Minister announced that we needed to implement a number of changes to the Successor submarine programme, which included plans to invest more than £600 million in the design phase.

I am today confirming our plans to invest £642 million to supplement the current Successor assessment phase of £3.3 billion. This will bring the total assessment phase commitment to £3.9 billion as announced in the SDSR, and will provide a sound foundation for the next phase where we will be taking a staged investment approach.

The assessment phase has identified the need to invest now to prepare for an efficient and effective submarine build. The £642 million will be spent on facilities at BAE systems in Barrow, essential long lead items for the four submarines and the nuclear propulsion programme.

In the UK, a number of key suppliers directly support the delivery of the Successor submarine programme who, in turn, depend heavily on a network of hundreds of sub-contractors. The Government's further investment in preparation for a four boat Successor fleet should be welcomed by all suppliers as helping to secure vital skills for the UK in the long term.

[HCWS576]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

EU Environment Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): I will attend the EU Environment Council in Brussels on 4 March, along with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Climate Change, Lord Bourne,

The Scottish Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Dr Aileen McLeod MSP, will also be attending Council.

Following adoption of the agenda, the list of "A" items will be approved.

Under non-legislative activities, the Council will debate the EU action plan for the circular economy and the follow-up to COP21 (climate change). There will be an exchange of views on the European semester/annual growth survey 2016 and the contribution of the environment and climate to growth and jobs. The Council will adopt a draft statement on endocrine disruptors.

Over lunch Ministers will be invited to discuss the ratification of the Paris agreement (climate change).

The following items are due to be discussed under any other business:

Energy transition—promoting environmentally friendly forms of energy in the EU.

Implementing the 7th environmental action plan.

Minamata package (i) proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on mercury, and repealing regulation (EC) No 1102/2008; (ii) proposal for a Council decision on the conclusion of the Minamata convention on mercury.

Real driving emissions (RDE).

EU action plan on wildlife trafficking.

Innovation deals.

[HCWS575]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): A meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council took place on 25 February, which I attended on behalf of the UK.

The Council began with a discussion on the European Commission's proposal for an amendment to the Schengen border code to make systematic checks on EU citizens mandatory at external borders. In response to calls from member states, the Council agreed a six-month transitional period for implementation at air borders.

While the UK does not participate in the border elements of Schengen, I welcomed the action by the Schengen states to introduce systematic checks on EU citizens including at airports. This is something the UK already does. However, I noted two other areas where further action is needed to strengthen the external border. First, to further improve the exchange of information on the Schengen information system on entry bans and immigration data. Secondly, following the attacks in Paris, I urged the Commission to promote the phasing out of non-biometric, non-machine readable documents and to support member states to bring their identification documents into line with International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) standards. The Council agreed a general approach on the Schengen border code measure.

This was followed by an update from the presidency on the proposed draft regulation on the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Given the UK's position in relation to Schengen we will not participate in this measure, but I highlighted the importance of the UK being able to co-operate effectively with the future European Border and Coast Guard, in line with the support the UK has provided previously to Frontex, while also ensuring that the new agency did not impact on non-Schengen states' border controls. The presidency is now aiming for a general approach on this proposal at the April JHA Council, with political agreement with the European Parliament by June.

Finally, there was a discussion on migration, as a follow-up to the European Council. The Commission called for efforts to avert a humanitarian crisis in Greece. The Council received an update on the recent Vienna conference, and the steps some member states had taken to manage the movement through the EU of illegal migrants, and to ensure that public order and security were maintained. A number of member states highlighted the importance of implementing decisions already taken in line with February European Council conclusions, and pointed to the new NATO mission as

a means to reducing flows at the source. Member states also discussed the importance of ensuring registration of all migrants on arrival. I welcomed the new NATO involvement in the Aegean, and noted that policies based around redistribution would exacerbate the pull factor and would not help prevent secondary movements. I highlighted that the EU also needed to consider whether the current EU and international migration frameworks were adequate for tackling abuse.

The discussion on migration continued over lunch, which was also attended by the deputy Turkish Interior Minister and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. There was consensus on the need to support the action under way to reduce flows across the Greek-Turkish sea border and to implement the EU-Turkey action plan.

[HCWS578]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Building a Prosperous and United Community: Progress Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): Today the Government and Northern Ireland Executive have published a progress report on the Northern Ireland economic pact. The "Building a Prosperous and United Community: 2016 Progress Report", highlights our successes since the economic pact was first signed in June 2013. I have placed a copy of this report in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Government and the Executive continue to work together to advance our shared aim to strengthen the private sector and rebalance the Northern Ireland economy. The economy is growing, there are 46,000 more people in employment today than in 2010, wages are up more than 5% over the year, and exports are up 4%.

Through the economic pact the Government and the Executive have helped deliver the Corporation Tax (Northern Ireland) Act 2015. This provides the legislation to devolve rate-setting powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly. The commencement of these powers is subject to the Executive demonstrating that their finances are on a sustainable footing for the long term. Through the Fresh Start agreement the Executive reaffirmed their commitment to take the necessary actions to demonstrate this and also set out its intention to have a Northern Ireland rate of 12.5% from April 2018.

Through the joint ministerial taskforce on banking and access to finance the Government have worked with the Executive to help deliver approximately £60 million in finances to Northern Ireland businesses. The Green Investment Bank has now committed to invest over £70 million to projects in Northern Ireland and over 450 start-up loans have been approved in Northern Ireland.

The Executive continue to make use of the additional borrowing the Government made available through the economic pact including to improve facilities at integrated primary schools and increased provision of shared housing. Last month the Ministry of Defence announced its intention to gift 59 surplus properties to the Executive.

These properties will be used to increase the provision of shared housing and the Ministry of Defence will continue to explore whether it might be possible to transfer further surplus properties in the future.

The progress report also sets out the British-Irish visa scheme is now operating allowing recipients to travel to both Ireland and Northern Ireland on the same visa. There has now been approval for Government funding for a space propulsion test facility in Crossgar as well as a further €5.5 million for engine design in Northern Ireland. Furthermore the report sets out that Northern Ireland will significantly benefit from the Government's regional air connectivity fund.

The economic pact sets out a new approach for the Government and the Executive to work more closely on our joint objectives. We will continue to work hard towards rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy and building a shared future.

[HCWS577]

TRANSPORT

Light Dues 2016-17

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Government are focused on delivering maritime sector growth in the United Kingdom. This includes enhancing Government leadership and creating a supportive environment that will enable the sector to thrive. The vital work of the general lighthouse authorities, which provide and maintain marine aids to navigation around these islands, forms part of this vision.

Continued real terms reductions in the three authorities' running costs in the UK means that I am able to reduce light dues by a further penny, to 38p per net registered tonne, on 1 April 2016. This will be the third successive year in which the UK light dues rate has been cut, and means that light dues have fallen by 20% in real terms since 2010.

The Government are committed to providing long-term stability for light dues payers, so they can plan budgets effectively. To support that objective, I have set the UK general lighthouse authorities new five-year efficiency targets, succeeding those set in 2010, which require net running costs to continue falling in real terms, by on average two percentage points below the retail price index.

Ships using our busy waters depend on the effectiveness of the service provided by the general lighthouse authorities as much as their efficiency. As the authorities continue

to work assets harder, harness new technology, and procure goods and services collaboratively, our common aim will be to reduce the risk to navigation and the cost of doing so effectively.

[HCWS572]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will take place on 7 March 2016 in Brussels.

The Council will be invited to seek a general approach on the proposal for a Council decision on guidelines for employment policies in member states.

The Council will be invited to adopt draft Council conclusions in response to the Commission's strategic engagement for gender equality, the Commission's list of actions to advance LGBTI equality, and the 2016 annual growth survey. The Council will also be invited to adopt the draft joint employment report.

There will be policy debates on the European semester, for a contribution to the March European Council, and on the progress towards a new skills agenda for Europe.

Regarding the implementation of the country-specific recommendations, there will be a contribution from the Employment Committee (EMCO) on labour market segmentation and contractual arrangements.

The Council will be asked to endorse the key messages from EMCO on the way forward regarding the implementation of the youth guarantee.

The European Commission will make presentations on the 2016 country reports and the labour mobility package. The presidency and European Commission will make a joint presentation on social dialogue and the tripartite social summit.

Under any other business, the presidency will present information on legislative issues currently on their agenda. The Commission will present information on the European pillar of social rights, the state of play regarding the European social fund and youth employment initiative implementation, the employment and social dimension of the Energy Union, and the Istanbul convention on violence against women. Information on the 2016 work programmes of EMCO and Social Protection Committee will be presented by the committees' respective Chairs.

[HCWS571]

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