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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 20 April 2016

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Inward Investment

1. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage inward investment in Northern Ireland. [904512]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): Before I answer the question, I would like to convey my condolences to the family of Adrian Ismay, the prison officer who sadly died as a result of a terrorist attack in the period since our last Northern Ireland questions. I would like to extend the same condolences to the family of Michael McGibbon, who was brutally murdered in north Belfast, in an attack that has all the hallmarks of a paramilitary assault.

To encourage inward investment in Northern Ireland, the Government have reduced UK corporation tax to the joint lowest in the G20 and legislated to enable the devolution of rate-setting powers to Northern Ireland. Working with the Executive, we are also making progress on the establishment of a new enterprise zone near Coleraine.

Maria Caulfield: I echo the sentiments of condolence expressed by the Secretary of State, and I thank her for her reply. What benefit does she think this inward investment will bring to the local economy of Northern Ireland? In particular, what steps are being taken to ensure that all communities will benefit from it?

Mrs Villiers: There has been significant investment in Northern Ireland in recent years, and it continues to perform beyond many parts of the United Kingdom. Recent good news includes 110 new jobs for Cookstown from CDE; 74 new jobs in Belfast from HighWire Press; and about 70 new jobs in Fermanagh and Omagh. Invest NI reports that it has promoted 37,000 new jobs since 2011 and delivered £2.6 billion of investment to the local economy, benefiting all parts of Northern Ireland.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I thank the Secretary of State for her answers so far. She will be aware that key Northern Ireland companies such

as Allstate and Almac have had to look outside Northern Ireland to recruit suitably skilled staff in recent times. Has she any suggestion as to how we might ensure a suitable supply of potential staff who are skilled up to take advantage of opportunities offered by inward investment?

Mrs Villiers: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that a skilled workforce is crucial for attracting inward investment. Northern Ireland has an excellent workforce, with many highly-skilled individuals, but there is always more that can be done. The UK Government have invested significantly in apprenticeships, which is reflected in Barnett consequential to the block grant. I know that apprenticeships are also something the Northern Ireland Executive take very seriously, and they are delivering many of them.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that airport connectivity is a vital tool in attracting inward investment? Given that Dublin has announced that it will be increasing its airport capacity by 2020, is it not time Her Majesty's Government took a decision on airport capacity in the south-east of England?

Mrs Villiers: Yes, the Government will be making a decision on the expansion of airport capacity in the south-east in due course. We are clear that new capacity is needed and that a decision will be made shortly.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): May I personally thank the Secretary of State for the efforts she made in helping to secure a £67 million contract for the Wrights Group in Ballymena, which was very well received there, and for the work she did behind the scenes in securing that contract? Like me, is she appalled, however, by the scare stories and scare tactics being deployed by the remain campaign, which are turning people away from investment because they are scared of the consequences and all this hate activity that is going on? Will she, like me, ensure that, irrespective of the outcome on 23 June, every effort is made to make sure that moneys released to the United Kingdom will be used to attract inward investment in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Villiers: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and his comments on my role in relation to the Wrightbus contract. I did press Transport for London hard to go through with that contract, because I think it is important for job opportunities in Northern Ireland and so that we can have great buses for my constituents. On his question about the referendum, I think it is important for all sides to address the facts of the debate in a measured way, so that on 23 June the people of this country can make a judgment based on the objective facts of the situation.

Terrorism

2. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the level of the threat of terrorism in Northern Ireland. [904513]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): The threat level from terrorism in Northern Ireland continues to be severe. Although many attacks

are disrupted and prevented, the callous murder of prison officer Adrian Ismay highlights the lethal nature of the continuing threat. The UK Government remain vigilant on combating terrorism, giving our full support to the Police Service of Northern Ireland and MI5 in their crucial work to keep people safe in Northern Ireland.

Henry Smith: I join in the condolences to Mr Ismay's family. In addition to domestic terror threats in Northern Ireland, what assessments has the Secretary of State made of international terror threats to the Province?

Mrs Villiers: My hon. Friend will appreciate that that is a Home Office lead, but it is something that I discuss regularly with the Home Secretary, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Ireland Justice Minister and other relevant people. The Government take the matter extremely seriously, as the threat from international terrorism is severe. That is one reason why the strategic defence and security review made such a strong commitment to investing in our intelligence services and counter-terrorism spending, which includes a 30% real terms increase in counter-terrorism spending over the course of this Parliament.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I join the Secretary of State in her words about the killing of Adrian Ismay and also in relation to the brutal slaying of Michael McGibbon, a father of four who was shot on Friday in my constituency. Clearly, that was an atrocious event. Will she join me in commending the courageous words of Mr McGibbon's widow who has called for people to stand together against these paramilitary terrorists who carried out this atrocious attack? Does she agree that it is vital that we all unite against terrorists from all sides and that we get on with implementing the provisions to tackle paramilitaries in the "Fresh Start" agreement?

Mrs Villiers: I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Gentleman's statement, Mr McGibbon's widow is an incredibly brave woman. The circumstances of Mr McGibbon's death are deeply tragic and heartbreaking. I know that the whole House will feel for his family at this time, and it is utterly unacceptable that, in modern Northern Ireland, there are still people who believe that they can take the law into their own hands and administer this violent, brutal treatment of individuals such as Mr McGibbon. It is utterly unacceptable. I agree with him that everyone in Northern Ireland should join the widow in this case and condemn that horrific and brutal murder.

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her answer. Will she also take on board the fact that a number of prominent republicans have been arrested in North Belfast recently, including some out on licence? It is important that she reassures the community that she is keeping under review the terms in which people who are under licence are out on the streets, particularly Sean Kelly, the Shankill bomber. Does she also agree that there is great concern in Northern Ireland about the Attorney General's decision to order a review into the actions of the Royal Ulster Constabulary when it stopped a terrorist from carrying out a terrorist attack? Will she look carefully at that and speak to colleagues about it?

Mrs Villiers: I agree that it is very important to take seriously revocation of licences. There is a very clear legal framework for doing that. Where there is evidence that a licence should be revoked, it is considered with the greatest seriousness. I also agree that it is vital that we press ahead with full implementation of the "Fresh Start" programme to eliminate the lingering influence of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. The time for those groups has passed. They were never justified under any circumstances and any tolerance of them in Northern Ireland today is to be condemned. In relation to the last point about the public prosecutor's direction, that is a matter for the independent prosecutors.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What is the Secretary of State's assessment of the terrorist threat from dissident republican groups to mainland Great Britain?

Mrs Villiers: The threat level is not as severe as it is in relation to Northern Ireland. It continues to be the case that dissident republican groupings have aspirations to mount attacks in Great Britain, but the indications are that their main focus continues to be Northern Ireland, and the Government will remain vigilant in doing everything they can to protect people, both in Northern Ireland and in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am deeply sorry that Adrian Ismay became the 31st prison officer to be murdered in Northern Ireland, and I do hope that a memorial garden for prison officers will soon be completed in Northern Ireland. The question I want to ask the Secretary of State follows on from the second question of the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds). The Secretary of State will know that I have already written to her requesting a meeting to discuss why Sean Kelly's licence has not been revoked. Gina Murray, a very dignified lady, whose only daughter was murdered in the Shankill Road bombing, wishes to have a meeting with the Secretary of State to discuss the reasons why his licence has not been revoked. Will the Secretary of State consent to that meeting?

Mrs Villiers: I am certainly happy to have that meeting. In terms of timing, we might have to be careful about the interaction with the decision that I might need to make over the coming days and weeks, but I am sure that we can have a meeting on this matter at some stage.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Despite much progress in Northern Ireland, there remains a terrorist threat, as we saw with the shocking murder of prison officer Adrian Ismay, whose funeral the Secretary of State and I attended. I associate myself with the remarks of the Secretary of State and we send our sincere condolences to Adrian Ismay's family and colleagues. The Secretary of State will also know that there have been explosives found, bomb-making equipment discovered and murders north and south of the border. Will the Secretary of State tell the House whether, in her opinion, these individuals are acting alone or as part of a more organised and co-ordinated terror group?

Mrs Villiers: A number of groupings are active in relation to the terrorist threat in Northern Ireland. They tend not to be terribly cohesive and are subject to

increasing and regular splits. They have connections both north and south of the border and, were it not for the dedication and effectiveness of the PSNI and its partners in MI5 we would see these individuals mounting attacks resulting in tragedies such as that which has befallen the family of Adrian Ismay in such despicable circumstances.

Vernon Coaker: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply. She will know that in recent days in Northern Ireland there have been two terrible shootings, one with fatal consequences—that of Michael McGibbon. I associate myself with the remarks made by the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) and with the words of the widow. Our hearts go out from this House to all the families and those affected. The PSNI says that the attacks have all the hallmarks of paramilitary assaults, so on the streets of this United Kingdom we have shootings and murders linked to paramilitary activity. It is both sickening and totally unacceptable. Will the Secretary of State tell us more about what happened, and what action she, the PSNI and others will take against those who have no respect for human life or the rule of law?

Mrs Villiers: The hon. Gentleman chooses his words correctly; this is absolutely sickening. I feel that this case could be like a number we have seen over recent decades in Northern Ireland and be the point at which people there say that this is completely and utterly unacceptable. The police investigation is progressing, with an individual charged with murder, but it is also imperative, as the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) said, that we implement the “Fresh Start” agreement proposals, including progress on the strategy that the panel is coming up with. We need to ensure that people have the confidence to come forward and give evidence against these individuals. That has been a persistent problem in gaining convictions, as people are afraid to give evidence in such cases. As a society, we need to do all we can to support and encourage people so that they are able to come forward and give evidence to bring these people to justice.

Mr Speaker: We are extremely grateful to the Secretary of State.

Export Licences: Agricultural Producers

3. **Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on waiting times for Northern Irish agricultural producers to obtain export licences. [904514]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Ben Wallace): Too often the biggest barrier to exports of agricultural goods are health and inspection regimes in destination countries. One of our main efforts involves trying to develop the market to China and other countries and that is why the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been working closely with Department of Agriculture and Rural Development officials and industry to collate information and to address any concerns from destination countries, hopefully cutting out the delays in gaining export health certificates for Northern Ireland suppliers.

Ms Ritchie: Does the Minister agree that although getting an export licence and getting approvals for Northern Ireland food produce already takes too long, the wait for Northern Ireland farmers would become ever longer if we were to leave the European Union and had to renegotiate our trade relationships with some of our nearest neighbours within the European common market?

Mr Wallace: It is certainly in the interest of Northern Ireland farmers and all farmers across the European Union that they have access to new markets across the rest of the world. That is one reason why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is, as we speak, in Washington lobbying hard for more access for UK farmers to sell their beef into the United States. We should recognise that the United Kingdom can do it, but if we do it alongside the EU in things such as the EU-US trade treaty we will gain more markets for our farmers and they will go from strength to strength.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Minister will know that one obstacle for the agri-food sector, especially the meat industry, is BSE and swine flu certificates. Will he ensure that his Department works hard with the veterinary division to achieve that? We sometimes put all our eggs in one basket with China, but there are many other countries out there with which we can do business.

Mr Wallace: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. He is right. That is why, as I said earlier, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is in America, trying to get the BSE legacy issues removed so that we can access American markets to sell our beef, which will be great for our beef price. We need to learn from the Republic of Ireland, which has managed to forge ahead with milk exports around the world, which is why it has a better milk price than our dairy farmers.

EU Referendum

4. **Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the parties in the Northern Ireland Executive on the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU; and if she will make a statement. [904515]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Ben Wallace): Ministers have regular discussions with the Northern Ireland parties on a range of issues. The Government's position on the EU referendum is clear: the UK will be stronger, safer and better off remaining in a reformed European Union.

Susan Elan Jones: Many of us were interested to see a survey by a highly reputable Northern Ireland business organisation which suggests that 81% of businesses support continuing EU membership. Why does the Secretary of State think she is right on that issue and those businesses are wrong?

Mr Wallace: The CBI Northern Ireland, 81% of the membership of the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, and the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association all believe that remaining in the

European Union is good for Northern Ireland business and good for the economy. That is why the Government believe we are better off in.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): May I join in the condolences that have been expressed by the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, and may I add condolences to the family of Sister Clare Theresa Crockett, the nun from Derry who was tragically killed in the earthquake in Ecuador? Has the Minister heard how many of us are so appreciative of the difference that EU membership has made to the border economy and not just to funding in Northern Ireland under programmes, but to funding models? Has he heard others say that that will be dwarfed by the bounty that we will receive as money is redirected to Northern Ireland instead of Brussels? Does he believe there is a crock of gold at the end of the Brexit rainbow?

Mr Speaker: A ministerial answer of one sentence would not be disorderly.

Mr Wallace: Northern Ireland benefits extremely well from money that it receives from the European Union. There is no pot of gold at the end of the Brexit rainbow, so I suggest that we get on and focus on what is right for Northern Ireland, which is remaining in the European Union.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): If the UK does decide to leave the EU, there will be an annual £9 billion hole in the EU finances. As other eastern bloc nations look to join to get more slices of a diminishing financial cake, what opportunities does the Minister believe Northern Ireland companies would have in those circumstances to export to Europe and beyond?

Mr Wallace: The first thing we should recognise is that Northern Ireland business does not agree with the hon. Gentleman and believes that it should remain in the European Union. If people voted to leave the European Union, from 24 June Northern Ireland businesses would unfortunately have to deal with instability for the next two years, which would damage their market.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It will not have escaped your gimlet-eyed gaze, Mr Speaker, that those of us on Opposition Front Bench are united on the subject, but for months we have had uncertainty about what will happen to the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic in the tragic event of Brexit. Two Sundays ago Lord Lawson popped up on the "The Andrew Marr Show" to say we would have a border. Leaving aside the irony of that coming from a French resident whose policy was to shadow the Deutschmark, may we have some clarity on what will happen to the border? Are there any revelations that the Minister would care to share with us?

Mr Speaker: Far too long.

Mr Wallace: On 24 June the border will still exist. However, if the United Kingdom chose to leave the European Union, it would step outside the customs union, which would inevitably affect trade across that

border on which Northern Ireland is significantly dependent, because of more bureaucracy, more checks and a slowdown of trade.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I appreciate that the Secretary of State must feel quite lonely in Belfast these days, given that her views on Europe are not shared by the overwhelming majority of the population of Northern Ireland. Can we get to the bottom of the question of Brexit and the border? Her colleague, Nigel Lawson, the former Chancellor, said that leaving the EU would mean rebuilding the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Three days ago she said that that was not the case. They cannot both be right.

Mr Speaker: Far too long.

Mr Wallace: One thing myself and my right hon. Friend are completely united on is that there will be no return to barbed wire and watchtowers should we leave or remain in the European Union. What there will be, however, is a Northern Ireland that steps outside the customs union, and that would inevitably affect the free flow of trade across the border.

Exports

5. **David Rutley** (Macclesfield) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on increasing the level of exports from Northern Ireland.

[904516]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): Fixing the public finances to keep interest rates low and deliver economic stability is a crucial part of the Government's efforts to promote exports. We are also using our diplomatic network around the world to promote exports from Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

David Rutley: Is my right hon. Friend aware that UK Trade & Investment and Economist Intelligence Unit information shows that the career aspiration young people want to fulfil most by 2020 is to run their own business? What steps are being taken to help them achieve their aspirations and to become first-time exporters in the UK and Northern Ireland?

Mrs Villiers: To do that, we are delivering economic stability, and we are cutting national insurance contributions for 3.4 million self-employed people. We are also working with the Northern Ireland Executive through the economic pact to deliver things such as our start-up loans programme for young entrepreneurs and through the taskforce on access to banking, which has delivered £60 million in business finance.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): At a meeting yesterday involving the oil and gas group, Harland and Wolff from my constituency railed against the religious observance of EU regulations that is required of it, unlike its competitors across the European Union. How can we redress the balance so that it can compete equally with its competitors across the European Union?

Mrs Villiers: The Government are certainly doing all they can to ensure that the UK, including Northern Ireland, is one of the most competitive places in the world to do business, which is one reason why we have reduced corporation tax. We are bearing down on

unnecessary regulation. I will certainly look into the matters the hon. Gentleman raises in relation to the industry.

Voluntary Sector: Legacy of the Past

6. **David Mowat** (Warrington South) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the role of the voluntary sector in dealing with the legacy of the past. [904518]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): In working to build consensus for the Stormont House agreement institutions on the past, I have held a number of very constructive meetings with voluntary groups who support and represent victims, as well as with victims themselves.

David Mowat: The Secretary of State will be aware of the reconciliation work performed by the Peace Centre, which is based in Warrington. Support is given to those on both sides of the Irish sea affected by terrorism, although the majority of the funding is provided by the Irish, not the UK, Government. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and members of the Foundation for Peace to discuss whether we can do more on this issue?

Mrs Villiers: I would be very happy to do that. I enjoyed my visit to the Peace Centre, and I have the highest regard for the work done by the centre and its various programmes to support the victims of Northern Ireland terrorism and other victims.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): How much cognisance—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. We are discussing matters appertaining to the victims of terrorism, and that matter must be treated with respect, as must the hon. Member.

Tom Elliott: How much recognition and cognisance does the Secretary of State give to victims' groups representing innocent victims in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Villiers: I have met a wide range of groups representing victims in Northern Ireland. It is very important that we listen to their point of view in attempting to reach a consensus on how we best address the legacy of the past and establish the Stormont House institutions.

Tourism

7. **Tristram Hunt** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support tourism in Northern Ireland. [904519]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Ben Wallace): The promotion of tourism to Northern Ireland is primarily a devolved matter, but the Secretary of State and I take every opportunity to support it. The new British-Irish visa scheme in China and India will enable visits to both Ireland and the UK, including Northern Ireland, on a single visa of either country, thus encouraging tourism, business links and inward investment.

Tristram Hunt: According to Lord Lawson, the chair of the increasingly absurd Vote Leave campaign, a British vote to leave the European Union would result in the return of border posts and passport controls between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. What modelling has the Minister done on how that might affect the £750 million tourism industry in Ulster?

Mr Wallace: I do not think I need to do much modelling; we should let the businesses of Northern Ireland speak for themselves. They believe it would be wrong to leave the European Union. The free flow of tourists between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is good for Northern Ireland, good for the island of Ireland and good for the United Kingdom economy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Whenever I visit the Milwaukee Irish Fest, I hear that when people travel to Dublin and to Shannon airport, they holiday only in southern Ireland. What discussions is the Minister having with Tourism Ireland to ensure that people come to Northern Ireland and enjoy our tourism facilities, which are much better than those in the south?

Mr Wallace: The single biggest challenge for Northern Ireland tourism is advertising its great offerings. The British Open golf championship will be held in Portrush in 2019, and other events include the North West 200, the Ulster Rally, the Giro d'Italia cycling event and the Balmoral show. If we can tell people that those events are out there and that they are on, more people will come north from the south.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Will the Minister consider joining up the Northern Ireland tourism strategy with that for the rest of the United Kingdom, so that we can work together rather than just with Ireland?

Mr Wallace: In all tourism, the best thing to do is to play to our strengths. I will certainly explore that option, and I am also keen to make sure that tourism in the Republic of Ireland dovetails with the offering in Northern Ireland, so that we can encourage people into both Dublin and, indeed, the north of Ireland. We also look forward to, I hope, capitalising on the next series of "Game of Thrones", which is due out very soon and was filmed in Northern Ireland, north of the wall.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904562] **Nigel Adams** (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 20 April.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, and in addition to my duties in this House I shall have further such meetings later today.

Nigel Adams: On her 21st birthday in 1947, a young woman declared that her whole life, whether long or short, would be dedicated to the service of our nation. Nobody could possibly argue that Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II has done anything other than fulfil her promise to the nation with dignity and grace.

People across the country will be marking the Queen's 90th birthday tomorrow in many different ways. Many right hon. and hon. Members will have joined their women's institutes in the Clean for the Queen initiative, tidying up our neighbourhoods. Some will raise a small glass and many will have a proper knees-up tomorrow.

When the Prime Minister next has an audience with the Queen, will he pass on my best wishes and those of the whole House to our remarkable monarch? Long may she reign.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Prime Minister: I am very glad that my hon. Friend has raised this matter. I will certainly pass on his best wishes and those from right across Yorkshire. Tomorrow is an important landmark, not only for Her Majesty the Queen, but for our country and for the Commonwealth as a whole. She has served our nation with such dignity and ability for so many years—64 years—on the throne. It is right that the House will have the opportunity tomorrow to pay tribute to what she has done, and I know that the whole country and the whole House will want to join me in saying, “Long may she reign over us.”

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am also looking forward to wishing her a happy birthday tomorrow, but until then, could the Prime Minister explain why he is intent on forcing good and outstanding schools to become academies against the wishes of teachers, parents, school governors and local councillors?

The Prime Minister: The short answer is that we want schools to be run by headteachers and teachers, not by bureaucrats. That is why we support the policy. We also support it because of the clear evidence of academies. If we look at converter academies, we will see that 88% of them are either good or outstanding, and schools started by academies see a 10% improvement, on average, over the first two years. The results are better, education is improving and I say let us complete the work.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister has not managed to convince the former Chair of the Education Committee, his hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), who said:

“Current evidence does not prove that academies raise standards overall or for disadvantaged children.”

Why is the Prime Minister ignoring evidence of Select Committee Chairs, and so many others, on this issue?

The Prime Minister: The results speak for themselves. Under this Government, 1.4 million more pupils are in good or outstanding schools. Let me take the right hon. Gentleman to a school near where he lives. Let us try the Downhills primary school, which is not far from his constituency. It was in special measures and taken over by an academy, and two years later it was a good school. The question I put to the Leader of the Opposition, and to so many other Labour MPs, is this: why do you want to stand on a picket line under a banner saying “Save our failing school”?

Jeremy Corbyn: As the Prime Minister well knows, every teacher, parent and pupil wants the best that they can get for their schools, and a good education system.

Many are concerned about top-down reorganisation. If he will not listen to the former Chair of the Education Committee, will he listen to his hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince)? He said this:

“if a school is well governed, well run and performing well, it should be left alone and allowed to do its job.”—[*Official Report*, 13 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 445.]

Will the Prime Minister explain why good school leaders should focus their time and resources not on educating children but on arbitrary changes imposed from above?

The Prime Minister: Let me make two points on that specific issue. I would say to outstanding or good schools that they have nothing to fear from becoming academies, but a huge amount to gain, and we want even outstanding or good schools to be even better. In truth, academies and greater independence, and letting headteachers run their schools, has been hugely effective. This is something that was started by the Labour Government and given rocket-boosters by this Government. We have seen massive improvements in our schools because of academies, and we say, “Let's get on with it, finish the job, and give all our children a great opportunity.”

Jeremy Corbyn: I am sure the Prime Minister is aware of the views of people in Oxfordshire on this issue. Councillor Tilley, the Conservative cabinet member for education in the Prime Minister's county, said:

“I'm fed up with diktats from above saying you will do this and you won't do that.”

The Prime Minister claims to be an advocate of devolution. Is he not concerned about criticisms from his hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady), who says that

“there is little accountability or parental involvement”?

Does the Prime Minister understand the anger that so many people feel because a system that they do not want is being imposed on them and on what are often already very good if not outstanding schools?

The Prime Minister: It is always good to get a lecture on diktats from someone whose press secretary is an avowed Stalinist, but I will pass over that. Creating academies is true devolution because we are putting power in the hands of headteachers and teachers. Of course we will find people in local government who want to keep things exactly as they are, but one of the reasons I so strongly support academies is that when they fail, they are intervened on so much faster. Local authority schools are often left to fail year after year after year, and I think that one year of a failing school is one year too many. Let us encourage academies, build a great education system, and have opportunity for all our children.

Jeremy Corbyn: Last week, I spent an interesting afternoon at a local school in my constituency. I visited Duncombe primary school, which is a good to outstanding school, and I had a long discussion with the headteacher, parents, parent governors, and year 6 pupils. The year 6 pupils were very interesting. Hawan, Tasnia, Eamon and Maryanne asked me to ask the Prime Minister: why are you doing this? They love their school, and they like it the way it is. They do not want any top-down reorganisation. He has not even convinced the former Education Secretary, Kenneth Baker, who said that he

does not “quite know why” the Government are doing this. What is the Prime Minister’s answer to those smart pupils in year 6?

The Prime Minister: My answer to those pupils in year 6 is very much the answer that the right hon. Gentleman gave. I have been following his tour of the school, and this is what he said:

“I want to see a family of schools and I want to see them properly funded.”

Of course, with our reform to the national funding formula, there will be fair funding right across the country. With our plans for academies, there will be genuine families of schools that choose to group together. Here is the point about outstanding schools. Not only will they be able to get better, but in groups of academies, they will be able to help other schools to improve. That is why we need this reform: to make good schools even better and to help to raise the aspiration of all. That is what it is all about.

Jeremy Corbyn: We appear to be heading into some kind of fantasy land. The Institute for Fiscal Studies states that school spending

“is expected to fall by at least 7% in real terms”

in the next four years—the biggest cut since the 1970s. So why on earth is the Prime Minister proposing to spend £1.3 billion on a top-down reorganisation that was not in his manifesto? Teachers do not want it, parents do not want it, governors do not want it, headteachers do not want it and even his own MPs and councillors do not want it. Can he not just think again and support schools and education, rather than forcing this on them?

The Prime Minister: Let me answer the question about spending very directly. We protected spending per pupil all the way through the last Parliament and all the way through this Parliament. We are spending £7 billion on more school places to make up for the woeful lack of action under the last Labour Government. That is the truth on spending.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about fantasy land, and I think the Labour party this week entered fantasy land. The Labour party is abandoning Trident in Scotland and it has selected in London someone who sits on platforms with extremists. When I read that the Labour party was going to ban McDonnell from its party conference, I thought that was the first sensible decision it had made, but it turns out that it was not the job destroyer that the Labour party wanted to keep away from its conference; it was one of Britain’s biggest employers. No wonder Labour MPs are in despair. Frankly, I’m lovin’ it.

Q3. [904564] **Mr Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend whether he agrees with the Treasury forecast issued on Monday, which warns that if we stay in the European Union, there will be 3 million more migrants by 2030? Last year, my right hon. Friend and I were elected on a clear manifesto pledge to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands. How will we be able to deliver on that pledge unless we leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister: The point about the Treasury forecast is that it takes the Office for National Statistics figures and the Office for Budget Responsibility figures and it does not alter them; it is trying to make a very clear and pure argument—backed by the Governor of the Bank of England yesterday—that shows what would happen if Britain left the EU. There is a demand out there for independent and clear statistics, and that is exactly what the Treasury has provided.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): It is believed that the recent murder of Glasgow shopkeeper Asad Shah was religiously motivated. This week, Christian, Jewish, Sikh and Ahmadiyya Muslim faith leaders launched a campaign across Scotland entitled United against Extremism. Will the Prime Minister join me and colleagues from all parties in supporting the aims of that campaign to support and foster understanding and stand up to extremism?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly join the right hon. Gentleman. This was an absolutely shocking murder. What it demonstrates, and what his question hints at, is that we need to stand up not only against acts of appalling violence such as this, but against the extremist mindset that sometimes tries to justify such events and other such outrages.

Angus Robertson: I am in total agreement with the Prime Minister. The murder of Asad Shah is just the most recent example of sectarian extremism targeting the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in the UK, including reports of Ahmadiyya being refused employment, businesses being boycotted, schoolchildren being bullied and shunned, and people such as Aamer Anwar who have worked to bring faith leaders together facing death threats. Does the Prime Minister agree that such extremism is totally unacceptable in a country where we believe in free speech and religious tolerance? The time has come for all community and all faith leaders of all religions to stand up against extremism.

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree that faith leaders can play a huge role in standing up against extremism and I welcome what they do, but we need to be very clear about what we are facing. The attack on Ahmadiyya Muslims by other Muslims demonstrates once again that what we face is not some clash of civilisations between Islam and Christianity or Islam and Buddhism. What we are seeing is a small minority within one of the great religions of our world, Islam, believing that there is only one way—a violent, extremist way—of professing their faith. This is a battle within Islam, and we have to be on the side of the moderate majority and make sure that they win it. We have to really understand what is happening, otherwise we will take the wrong path.

Q6. [904567] **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): The future of services provided by Paignton hospital has been thrown into doubt this week by news that the clinical commissioning group and the local trust are about to launch a consultation that could see it closed with no replacement. Does the Prime Minister share my concerns, and does he agree that it is vital that services are replaced and that the trust and CCG justify their actions?

The Prime Minister: I am aware of the draft proposals concerning Paignton hospital. I understand that no decision has yet been made. The plans are due to be considered by the clinical commissioning group's governing body. Let us remember that these bodies are now, by and large, clinically-led, and I think that is important. Decisions about what services are required will be taken by that group, but if there are significant changes, they still have to meet four key tests: support from clinical commissioners, strengthened public and patient engagement, clarity on the clinical evidence base and support for patient choice. All those things have to be satisfied.

Q2. [904563] **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The air in our cities is both toxic and illegal, with diesel fumes contributing to 800 deaths a week—that is 40,000 a year—so why is the Prime Minister, instead of removing the most heavily polluting vehicles from our streets, lobbying the EU in Brussels, with the Mayor of London, to weaken plans to improve our air quality and save lives?

The Prime Minister: We are investing in better air quality. Since 2011, we have committed over £2 billion to help bus operators upgrade their fleets. We have seen air quality improve between 2010 and 2014, with emissions of nitrous oxides coming down by 17%. When it comes to these standards that we all have to meet, we are working with our car industry. I want a strong car industry in Britain. I am proud of the fact that it has recovered so strongly that the north-east of England now makes more cars than the whole of Italy and that we are a major investor in and builder of diesel engines, but we are going to make sure that it has the resources it needs to meet the higher standards that are set out.

Q7. [904568] **Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is a truth universally acknowledged that fish and chips taste best on the beaches of Skegness, and that is why 4 million people visit those beaches every year. Does the Prime Minister agree that we should work with the Environment Agency, the local enterprise partnership and local councils, build on the work of this Government that has brought jobs and growth, and extend the tourist season and build a billion-pound coastal economy by the end of this decade?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why I announced the five-point plan for tourism last year to encourage people to visit UK resorts—both people from overseas and British people—and that is exactly what is happening. Is it not interesting that in the week when we on this side of the House are supporting fish and chips, those on the other side of the House are banning McDonald's?

Q4. [904565] **Sue Hayman** (Workington) (Lab): More than 2,000 people have signed a petition, started by Allison's Chemist in Cockerthorpe in my constituency, calling on the Government not to cut the funding of community pharmacists. Given the major reports last week regarding the actions of Boots, which now faces investigation by the regulator, is it not time that the Prime Minister and his Government supported independent

pharmacists, such as Allison's, which are a vital lifeline for our community and help to keep our high streets alive?

The Prime Minister: We are supporting rural pharmacies—there is a specific scheme to help there—but in the last five years there has been a massive increase in pharmacy spending. As we make sure that as much of the NHS's resources as possible go to the frontline—the doctors and nurses, the operations and the A&E we want—we have to make sure we are getting value for money in pharmacy, while also protecting the rural pharmacies the hon. Lady speaks about.

Q10. [904571] **Christopher Pincher** (Tamworth) (Con): Given his earlier important comments, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is the duty of all Members to condemn without caveat all extremism and never to share a platform with any extremist?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we are going to condemn not just violent extremism but the extremism that seeks to justify violence in any way, it is very important that we do not back these people or appear on platforms with them. I am concerned about Labour's candidate for Mayor of London, who has appeared again and again and again—

Jeremy Corbyn: Disgraceful.

The Prime Minister: The leader of the Labour party says it is disgraceful, so let me tell him: the right hon. Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan) has appeared on a platform with Suliman Gani nine times; this man supports IS. He even shared a platform—[*Interruption.*] The Opposition are shouting down this point because they do not want to hear the truth. Anyone can make a mistake about who they appear on a platform with, and we are not always responsible for what our political opponents say, but if someone does it time after time after time, it is right to question their judgment.

Q5. [904566] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): News overnight of a management and worker buy-out at Tata Steel Port Talbot will bring hope to the 18,000 people whose livelihoods are supported by the company across the supply chain. It is critical that the UK Government provide all the support they can. Will the Prime Minister become the company's head of sales and meet personally with Port Talbot's 20-biggest customers, who make up about 50% of its sales, to ensure that no orders for Welsh steel are lost?

The Prime Minister: We will certainly do everything we can to help the company, including with its customers, during this difficult time. Right now, we are talking with the board of Tata to make sure we answer all the questions it needs answered, because we want to have a proper sales process, with proper buyers coming forward. We want to be very clear that the Government are prepared to support that process and the outcome, and that is exactly what we will do.

Q14. [904576] **Charlotte Leslie** (Bristol North West) (Con): The EU's security is only as strong as its weakest border, so does the Prime Minister share my concerns not only over Chancellor Merkel's apparent legitimisation of President Erdogan's reservations about freedom of

speech but crucially over her decision to liberalise restrictions on Turkish visas, given that that country has such a porous Syrian border and such booming identity fraud? Is he concerned that currently Chancellor Merkel seems to be outstripping everyone in making the case for Brexit?

The Prime Minister: First, it is certainly true that a country in the Schengen zone is only as strong as its weakest border—that is absolutely right—but we, of course, are not in the Schengen zone. Secondly, the Schengen zone has decided to offer visas to Turkish nationals, but we have not made that decision, and will not be making that decision. Let us remember, however, that a visa is not a right to go and live and work or reside; it is a right to visit, so let us also be clear that Turks with visas visiting Schengen countries do not have those rights or the right automatically to come to Britain. It is very important to get this clear.

Q8. [904569] **Mr John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): In the last hour, we have had the devastating news that British Gas proposes to close its Oldbury site, with the loss of 700 jobs. Will the Prime Minister instruct his Ministers immediately to contact the company and the unions and to arrange urgent meetings either—preferably—to save these jobs or, if that proves impossible, to establish a taskforce to create alternative opportunities for this loyal and hard-working workforce?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. I heard the news shortly before Question Time. We will make sure that a ministerial taskforce is available to talk to the company and the local community and to provide assistance in terms of retraining and other things.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Mrs Thatcher used occasionally to organise seminars for Ministers, with senior academics, for colleagues like me whose knowledge of modern science, she thought, needed to be improved. Will the Prime Minister contemplate similar seminars for some of his senior and very respected Cabinet colleagues with businessmen on the nature of international trade in today's world, because some very respected figures appear to believe that one simply turns up and sells goods and services that comply with British-made rules, and that they do not have to comply with any rules agreed with the country to which one is selling. Will he include some of the many businessmen who are putting investment decisions on hold now because of the uncertainty about Brexit after 23 June, which illustrates the dangers we would run if we made our whole future trading arrangements with the outside world as uncertain as some people are trying to make them?

The Prime Minister: I always listen very carefully to my right hon. and learned Friend and will consider such seminars. I hope they will not be as frightening as seminars sometimes used to be under Margaret Thatcher. I remember that one of the very first times I met her, I was responsible for trade and industry research. She asked me what the day's trade figures were and I did not know. I have never wanted the floor to open up and swallow me any more than at that moment.

The point my right hon. and learned Friend makes, which is absolutely right, is that just because we have friendly relations with a country does not mean that we automatically get good trade relations. We are very pleased that President Obama is coming here this Friday, but it is worth noting that even though we have the friendliest relations with the United States of America, we currently cannot sell beef or lamb to it. The point is that we do not just need good relations; we need nailed down trade arrangements.

Q9. [904570] **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): At the Budget, the Chancellor announced the creation of a northern schools strategy, which I broadly welcome. However, I am concerned that all the progress that that might make could be reversed by the forced academisation plans. Why are the Government pushing those plans, which parents in my constituency do not want—plans that even a former Tory Education Secretary describes as plain daft and unnecessary?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman should wait for the outcome of the review that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has set up. The point I would make is that some schools that have been failing for year after year have been left in that state by local authorities. We have found that the way to help succeeding schools fly and failing schools to improve is to have academies. The evidence is right there in front of us. That is why we are so keen on progressing this.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): One reason why my right hon. Friend led this party to victory at last year's general election was our pledge to reduce immigration to the tens of thousands. Can he therefore tell us, further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope), why the Office for Budget Responsibility projects immigration to be above 200,000 a year for the rest of this decade? By what assumptions did it reach that figure, and can he give us some details?

The Prime Minister: To give my right hon. Friend some details, the OBR did not take into account, for instance, the agreements we have just reached with the European Union over welfare and other immigration restrictions. The Treasury document is very clear that it is not about making all sorts of different assumptions about variables, but takes a very clear set of statistics established by the OBR. That is why it was interesting when the Governor of the Bank of England came out and said that it was an analytically robust process. As for the detail, it does not take into account the agreement that we reached in Europe.

Q11. [904572] **Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In 2009, Michelle Samaraweera was brutally raped and murdered in Walthamstow. Since 2011, a man who is wanted in connection with that crime and seven other counts of sexual violence in my constituency has been evading extradition from India. There have been more than 30 court appearances to date and another one is planned for tomorrow, yet despite the severity of the crime and the delay in those proceedings, there is no record of any ministerial or diplomatic representations from either the Foreign Office or the Home Office. Will the Prime Minister personally commit today to putting

that right and to raising the matter directly with his counterpart, Narendra Modi, so that we can finally seek justice for Michelle?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give the hon. Lady that assurance. The British Government always raise all these individual cases if that is what the victims want us to do, just as we raise cases where there are British people stuck in the Indian justice system. I was not aware of the specific case, but if she gives me the details I will make sure that we raise it appropriately.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): With the President of the United States visiting the UK later this week, may I ask my right hon. Friend to raise the issue of the Chagos islanders? In a report last year, the Government rightly concluded that the islanders have a right of resettlement. Given the US military presence on Diego Garcia, will he raise the case of US assistance for the right of return of the Chagos islanders to the British Indian Ocean Territory?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly discuss that issue, and it is right that my hon. Friend raises it, because many Chagossians live in his constituency of Crawley. What he said is not entirely correct; the National Security Council and the Cabinet have been looking at the situation of the Chagos islanders and reviewing all the options for how we can help with their future. Those discussions have taken place and obviously we need to come to a conclusion about the best way forward.

Q12. [904574] **Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab):** Some people think that the worst case that has been made so far to vote to leave the EU is the claim that England is an island. Will the Prime Minister tell the House the worst argument that he has heard from the Brexiters?

The Prime Minister: I think it is probably that we would get out of the Eurovision song contest. Not only would that be incredibly sad, but given that Israel and Azerbaijan, and anyone anywhere near Europe seems to be able to enter—[*Interruption.*] Australia, too, so we are pretty safe from that one.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend point out to President Obama that in a series of European Court judgments such as those in the cases of Davis and of Schrems, using EU data protection laws and the EU charter of fundamental rights, the EU has established its jurisdiction over our intelligence data and sought to prevent our intelligence sharing with the United States? Will he therefore warn the President that if we vote remain, far from gaining influence in the EU the United States will lose control and influence over her closest ally?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the President will take all of these calculations into account before saying anything that he might have to say. Let me just make two points. First of all, this decision is a decision for the British people, and the British people alone. We are sovereign in making this decision. Personally, I believe that we should listen to advice from friends and other countries, and I struggle to find a leader of any friendly

country who thinks we should leave. My second point is that, when it comes to the United States, it is worth looking at what so many Treasury Secretaries have said, going back over Republican or Democrat Administrations. It may not be the determining factor for many people—or indeed for any people—but listening to what our friends in the world say is not a bad idea.

Q13. [904575] **Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op):** The average property price in my borough of Hackney is £682,000, the median lower quartile rent for a two-bedroom flat for a month is £1,500, and overcrowding and demand for social housing are the highest I have seen in 20 years. Will the Prime Minister tell my constituents how on earth the Housing and Planning Bill is going to help them?

The Prime Minister: It is going to help them because we are building starter homes for the first time for people to buy, we are extending the right to buy to housing association tenants so they can buy homes—[*Interruption.*] I notice Lady Nugee giving us the benefit of her wisdom, but many people in her constituency would love to buy a council house or a housing association house. We also have the Help to Buy scheme, which is helping many people get on the housing ladder, and shared ownership as well. All of those things will help. Since 2010, 101,000 homes have been built in London, including 67,000 affordable homes. We need to build many more and to make them accessible to people who work hard and do the right thing. That is whose side we are on.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): On a slightly environmental note still, woodland is much valued—not least for recycling much of our hot air—and ancient woodland is especially valued. With only 2% remaining, it is as precious as the rain forests and its biodiversity cannot be replaced. The Prime Minister has 331 ancient and veteran trees in his constituency; does he agree that this precious habitat ought to be protected in line with heritage sites and national monuments?

The Prime Minister: I am very lucky to have in my constituency an ancient forest, the Wychwood forest, which probably contains many of the trees that my hon. Friend mentions. I shall look carefully at what she says. Perhaps the most important thing we can do is to make sure that we plant more forests, trees and woodland, on which this Government have a very good record.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said recently and rightly that politics in Northern Ireland was on a more stable footing than it has been for some time. For our part, we will continue to offer strong leadership for a better future in Northern Ireland. People in Northern Ireland are, however, concerned about a two-sided approach to the past, as exemplified by the decision taken this week to investigate a police officer who bravely stopped an IRA bomber from trying to kill police officers at a police station 25 years ago. Does the Prime Minister agree that we have to get behind our security forces, praise them for the work they did in Northern Ireland and not persecute them as we go forward?

The Prime Minister: Let me first pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman and his Members of Parliament and Assembly Members. It is right to say that politics in Northern Ireland is more stable and, frankly, more productive than it has been for many years. Obviously,

these issues around the acts of the past still cause a huge amount of pain and difficulty on all sides of the debate. One thing we have to hold on to is the fact that we have an independent and impartial justice system.

Border Force Budget 2016-17

12.37 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement setting out the details of the Border Force Budget for 2016-17.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): The first priority of government is the safety and security of its citizens, and the Government have always made the integrity of the UK border a priority. We will never compromise on keeping the people of this country safe from terrorism, criminality and illegal immigration.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will publish the Treasury main supply estimates in just over an hour's time, setting out estimated budget allocations for the whole of government, including Border Force, for the financial year 2016-17. In advance of those figures being laid in the Library, I can inform Members that these estimates will show that the indicative budget for Border Force is £558.1 million in 2016-17—a 0.4% reduction in overall resource spending compared to the supplementary estimate for 2015-16. At the same time, we will increase capital spending at the border by just over 70%, from £40.1 million in 2015-16 to an estimated £68.3 million in 2016-17. That means that Border Force spending is, to all intents and purposes, protected compared to 2015-16, with increased capital investment to improve the technology at the border, to improve security and intelligence and to strengthen control.

Over the next four years, we will invest £130 million in state-of-the-art technology at the border. Since I became Home Secretary six years ago, we have pursued an ambitious programme of reform at the border to keep this country safe. In the last Parliament we abolished the dysfunctional UK Border Agency, set up by the last Labour Government, and made Border Force directly accountable to Ministers within the Home Office. Since then, Border Force has transformed its working practices, command and control and leadership, and we have invested in new technology such as e-gates at airports and heartbeat monitors at freight ports to improve security, prevent illegal entry to the UK, benefit passengers and deliver efficiencies.

At the same time I have worked closely with my French counterpart, Bernard Cazeneuve, to secure the juxtaposed controls in Calais and Coquelles, reduce the number of migrants attempting to reach the United Kingdom, and safeguard UK drivers and hauliers travelling through those ports. We have developed a robust, intelligence-led approach to organised crime at the border, working closely with the National Crime Agency, which we established in 2012. We have supported greater collaboration between counter-terrorism police and Border Force, while increasing counter-terrorism budgets to prevent foreign fighters from returning and dangerous terrorists from travelling to the UK.

These reforms are working. Border security has been enhanced. Border Force continues to perform 100% checks on scheduled passengers arriving at primary check-points in the UK. When passengers are deemed a threat to public safety, we can and do exclude them from the UK, and 99,020 people have been refused entry to

the UK since 2010. We are disrupting more organised crime at the UK border than ever before. In the past year, Border Force has seized nearly 8 tonnes of class A drugs, more than 2.5 times as much as in 2009-10. Meanwhile, legitimate passengers and hauliers of goods continue to be provided with excellent levels of service.

The Government remain committed to making further investments when necessary to exploit new technology and strengthen controls. As a result, Border Force will grow more efficient year on year, while improving security for the safety of citizens, businesses and the country as a whole.

Andy Burnham: Finally, an answer—and yet another U-turn—from the Home Secretary. Let us be clear: it is Labour pressure that has brought her to the House today, and Labour pressure that has made her back down on her planned deeper cuts in the UK border. Just as we forced her to U-turn on police funding, we have now forced her to U-turn on the Border Force budget. She has spent the last two weeks ducking and diving, refusing to answer questions that I put to her in the House and that the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), put to her senior officials—I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his determination. Why could the Home Secretary not answer our questions? Because she has been furiously back-peddalling for the last two weeks, and patching up holes in the Border Force budget.

Let us be clear about what has just been announced to the House. The Home Secretary has announced a revenue cut in the Border Force budget. Let me put that into context. She has announced a budget of £558 million. In 2012-13, the budget was £617 million. It has fallen by more than £50 million on her watch. That is this Home Secretary's record on border funding. How can she justify it when the terror threat has been increasing all the time? Will she guarantee, on the back of the budget that has been announced today, that there will be no cuts in the number of front-line immigration officers, and that officers will not be replaced by less-trained staff?

The bigger question, however, is whether the budget that the Home Secretary has announced is anywhere near enough. Today, a group of the most eminent police and counter-terrorism experts have written an open letter saying that attacks in Paris and Brussels must be

“a wake-up call for the British Government”

on lax border security.

Worryingly, the letter reveals that the National Crime Agency has evidence that people-traffickers are now specifically targeting weaker sea ports. I have repeatedly warned the Home Secretary about that. Will she accept the call from the group of experts for a review of border security, and for extra resources to plug the gaps?

Those gaps are very real. A whistleblower working at the port of Immingham, the country's largest freight port, has been in touch with me to reveal that the staff of ferry companies, who are carrying out the Home Secretary's border exit checks, are simply not trained to do it; that the passports of lorry drivers are not checked on arrival by anyone; and, worst of all, that school leavers are now being recruited to check passports,

replacing experienced border officers. Border security on the cheap: that is the reality of what is happening at Britain's borders today, under this Home Secretary. It is the direct consequence of the cuts that she has already made in the UK border during her time in office—and, unbelievably, she wanted to make even further cuts in the border before we in the Labour party stopped her.

The Home Secretary has spent the last two weeks running scared, scrambling for loose change behind the back of the Home Office sofa; but, worse, she has weakened our borders, has damaged our security, and is only now pledging to stop the cuts. On an issue of such importance to the British public, she is going to have to do a lot better than this.

Mrs May: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that in so much of what he said he simply does not know what he is talking about. He talks about U-turns on funding, but the only such U-turn we have seen is from a Labour Front-Bench team that now claim to have wanted police funding to remain steady and not to be cut when they actually suggested that police funding could take a 10% cut.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about border security and the National Crime Agency, but I remind him that it was the coalition Government and me as Home Secretary who set up the NCA. The reason why we have a border command that is looking at serious and organised crime across our borders is because of what the Conservatives have done in government. Labour did none of that in 13 long years.

I remind the right hon. Gentleman, who was of course at one time a Home Office Minister, that it was under Labour that we saw the creation of the dysfunctional UK Border Agency that we had to abolish. We had to change how we dealt with such issues. Under the last Labour Government, there was no operating mandate at the border, and as people came through the primary checkpoints, they were not all getting the necessary 100% checks. We have enhanced security and will continue to do so.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents in Kettering are concerned that we should have the most secure and safest borders possible. While it is true that many illegal immigrants are stopped in lorries in France and on arrival in Britain, far too many illegal immigrants are still in the backs of lorries when they go down the A14 past Kettering towards the north of England or wherever. What more can the Home Secretary do to reassure my constituents that we are going to get even tougher on and stop illegal immigration, which also has a security implication?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is important that we continually review our processes for screening people as they cross the border, and that we ensure that we are stopping people who want to come here as illegal immigrants. That is one reason why we have invested tens of millions of pounds in security at Calais and Coquelles to ensure that it is harder for people to get into lorries to come across the border and harder for them to access the channel tunnel. It is also why we continue to look at improvements in technology that may enable us to put in place equipment that is even better at detecting people when they try to stow

away in such vehicles. However, we cannot do that once and expect it to cover everything; we have to keep going at it, which is exactly what we are doing.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): This has been a sorry saga, and it is still not quite clear why the senior civil servant was so evasive before the Home Affairs Committee. What exactly was the hold-up? The Border Force budget requires careful scrutiny and attracts significant public interest. What will the Home Secretary do to make the process for deciding the budget more transparent in future?

What lies underneath the issue is that a fantasy net migration target and budget cuts are leading the Home Office down the path of targeting exactly the wrong people, using the wrong policy levers. Unable to enforce existing immigration rules properly, the Home Office introduces ever more draconian rules, clamping down on skilled workers, students, spouses and refugees. It is using landlords and landladies as border officials and giving immigration officers police powers. Meanwhile, other SNP MPs and I saw with our own eyes in Calais and Dunkirk at Easter how vulnerable children who have family here in the United Kingdom are left in the most disgraceful of conditions. It is immigration control on the cheap.

When will the Home Secretary fix her Border Force budget not to satisfy the ideological pursuit of austerity, but at the level necessary to command public confidence? When will she abandon the fantasy net migration target and set immigration policies in accordance with evidence instead of political expediency?

Mrs May: The hon. and learned Lady mixes up border security and checks with immigration. They are two different issues. She commented on the appearance of a senior civil servant before the Home Affairs Committee. When asked whether the director general of Border Force had been told what his budget was for this year, the individual replied:

“We know what funds the Border Force needs in order to deliver the plan for this year and Charles has them.”

On a related immigration issue, the hon. and learned Lady referred to the question she has raised previously, as have other Members, about the speed at which children in Calais who have family members here in the UK are being processed. We recognised that there was an issue, which is why we seconded somebody to the Ministry of the Interior in Paris to work on this and why we are now seeing people being processed in weeks, rather than months, and in some cases in days.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): There is nothing worse in this House than manufactured rage at a problem such as this, and I note that the shadow Home Secretary made not a single mention of praise for the excellent job our Border Force staff are doing, which members of the Home Affairs Committee saw in our visit to Calais and Coquelles—it is not through a lack of thoroughness that any drugs or people are getting through. Will she also acknowledge the need to be more flexible, given the increasing number of cases of independent vessels coming across the channel to the Sussex and Kent coasts, in particular? We need to be mindful of that, too.

Mrs May: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks, and I echo the comments he has made; our Border Force staff are working day in, day out to protect our border and they do an excellent job. He is right, however, that we always need to be flexible in looking at where people will try to enter the UK as we make ports such as Calais more secure. That is exactly what we are doing. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration has been talking to our Belgian and Dutch counterparts about access from ports in those countries into the UK. The whole point of some of the changes we have made in Border Force has been precisely to make it more flexible, in order to respond to need as it arises.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for the detail she has provided to the House today and I join others in praising the work of Border Force, especially the leadership provided by Sir Charles Montgomery. Will she deal with the practical points mentioned last week by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and today by the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone)? Will she confirm that there are 100% checks on every lorry entering this country, in order to deal with the security and immigration issues? Does she agree that although we have spent a huge amount of money in Calais, we have displaced this problem further into other ports in Europe, and without the co-operation of European partners—without them doing their bit—we will still get people coming into this country who should not be here?

Mrs May: The right hon. Gentleman referred particularly to the questions from not only my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) this afternoon, but my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). The point I made subsequently, outside this Chamber, to my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough is that we do undertake checks on lorries but that they vary, so different sorts of checks may be done. Different technologies are used, and in some cases we use dogs. A variety of types of check may be undertaken at the border for the lorries. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that, as I have just indicated in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), it is necessary for us to be looking at where there may be displacement of people trying to enter the UK illegally. That is precisely what we have been doing, particularly, as I said, with the Governments of Belgium and the Netherlands.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Cuts were made in January by Border Force to the maritime aerial surveillance capability. Has my right hon. Friend been able to reinstate that capability, which is crucial in detecting people who are trying to smuggle into our country and was instrumental in ensuring some of the successes to which she referred earlier?

Mrs May: I reassure my hon. Friend that we are maintaining the capabilities he talked about, but we are delivering them in a different way. He and I have discussed a particular contract that is no longer in place. What Border Force has done is look to see how it can work in a variety of ways to provide that capability, including, obviously, by working with the Royal Navy.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Last year, an asylum seeker was located in my constituency because the courts said it would be unsafe to relocate him in London. He subsequently committed a number of crimes and is now in prison. My constituents have had the burdens on our health service and on our schools of taking 500 asylum seekers and many others over the years. Will the Home Secretary tell me what moves she is making to ensure that there is a fair distribution throughout the UK of asylum seekers, given that there are 500 in my constituency and I believe there are none in either the Prime Minister's or Chancellor's? How many are in her constituency?

Mrs May: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, my constituency is not somewhere that normally takes asylum seekers, but I am pleased to say that it is taking some of the Syrian refugees under the resettlement scheme that has been put in place. The point is that we talk regularly with local authorities about where it is appropriate for asylum seekers to be dispersed to. Those conversations are continuing and I am pleased to say that a number of new local authorities have come on board. I also gently remind him that we have not changed the system of asylum dispersal; this is exactly the same system that was run by the last Labour Government.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Millions of pounds could be saved for the Border Force budget by having a more efficient removals system. What steps will my right hon. Friend be taking in the light of the findings of the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration in his report issued last month?

Mrs May: I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that we continually look at how we can improve our ability to remove people from this country. That is why we have brought forward changes in a variety of immigration Bills to enhance our ability to do that and, in particular, to make it harder for people to live illegally in the UK. The decisions put through in the Immigration Act 2014 to deal with people's access to driving licences, bank accounts and rented property are all having an impact in improving our ability to identify illegal immigrants and remove them.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On that point, how many more staff could be deployed to police our borders if the Government were to scrap the landlords' helpline and use that resource instead to more securely police our borders?

Mrs May: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to ensure the security of this country and have illegal immigrants removed from it, he should know that the measures we have put in place in the Immigration Act to ensure that people who are renting property are here legally are having an impact.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK has the strongest borders in Europe, partly because of the Government's investment in technology at our borders and partly because of the Conservative party's firm position that we should not join the Schengen system?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on that. It is crucial that we have not joined the Schengen system and that we will not do so. It means that we retain control at our borders.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Constituents who work on the docks in Grimsby have contacted me in the past few weeks because they are concerned about the level of security around the large transporter ships that arrive into Grimsby bringing millions of pounds worth of goods into the country. They raise those concerns from a humanitarian perspective, but can the Home Secretary assure my constituents that Grimsby's ports are adequately protected?

Mrs May: As I have indicated, we look at the border security at ports regularly to ensure that it is appropriate for the nature of the business those ports are undertaking. The hon. Lady refers to the humanitarian issue of people who may be being smuggled across the border in transporters, and I say to her that the people who are responsible for that issue are the traffickers who put illegal immigrants into those containers.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): There was indeed praise for my right hon. Friend from the shadow Home Secretary, although it was so below the radar that she might not have noticed it. She was accused of both back-peddalling and performing a U-turn, and I am not aware that it is physically possible to do both—although she has done neither. In praising the work that Border Force does on behalf of all of us in keeping our country safe, what role does she see the Investigatory Powers Bill, which is currently before the House, playing in assisting and strengthening the work of Border Force?

Mrs May: It is important that all our law enforcement agencies and those who are responsible for enforcing laws around security at our borders are able to access the various tools and powers that they need. That is why the Investigatory Powers Bill is so important, not just to our security services, but to a variety of law enforcement agencies. I note that one of the points in the letter in today's *Daily Telegraph* to which the shadow Home Secretary referred was the importance of access to communications data, which is precisely what we are trying to protect in that Bill.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I recently flew back into Gatwick from overseas, and it took me almost 25 minutes to get through the border. There were 15 desks for staff, only eight of which were open. As you know, Mr Speaker, I am a relaxed and patient kind of guy, and I am always happy to wait my turn, but families with children, business people and tourists from all over the world were there. What kind of a message does that send about the welcome to the United Kingdom and the efficiency of our Border Force, and how will this budget help to remedy those kinds of inefficiencies?

Mrs May: There are service standards for people coming through the border at our airports, and we meet those standards. These proceedings are very interesting because, on the one hand, people are calling for more

border security, and, on the other, the hon. Gentleman is saying that he wants to get through the border rather more quickly.

Mr Speaker: I can confirm that the hon. Gentleman always looks to be a happy chappie.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I can confirm that the shadow Home Secretary was quite right when he drew attention to the port of Immingham in my constituency because border staff there do have worries. The concerns of residents in the town and neighbouring areas have been heightened following reports last week that the National Crime Agency acknowledged that Humber ports were being targeted. Can my right hon. Friend give an absolute assurance that resources will be moved to protect the Humber ports if the NCA's analysis is correct?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend's point is important and one that I have responded to in reply to a number of questions, including that of the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee. When we created Border Force and took it out of the dysfunctional UK Borders Agency, we introduced more flexibility in Border Force's ability to move resources around the country. That is absolutely crucial so that we do not just have static forces at a number of ports and we are able to move them when there is a need to do so, which is exactly what we are doing in relation to the ports on the east coast, of which Immingham is one.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): As the Home Secretary knows, Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom with a land border with another country. As both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland lie outside Schengen, co-operation is key. Last week, a representative of Garda Síochána said that they felt hopelessly ill equipped and ill resourced to stand against the threat of terrorists entering the United Kingdom through their borders. Will the Home Secretary address the issue, and can she give any comfort about whether the budget involves proposals or resources to make that access point to the United Kingdom less vulnerable?

Mrs May: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are in regular discussions with the Irish Government about how to improve security at their external border because, obviously, there is the common travel area between Ireland and the United Kingdom. We have already done a lot of work with the Irish Government on data sharing and the sorts of systems that might support improved security, and we will continue that work.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): In contrast to some hon. Members who have spoken, I wish to pay tribute to the hard work and dedication of Border Force officers at Gatwick, especially with regard to their recent apprehension of terror suspects. May I have an assurance that they will continue to get the support that they need from the Home Office?

Mrs May: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. As I have said, we now have a Border Force that is more flexible and that is able to use its resources appropriately. The director general is continually looking to ensure

[Mrs May]

that resources are appropriate at ports and commensurate with the traffic that they are experiencing. He rightly praises the Border Force officers at Gatwick who, along with those elsewhere, do an excellent job.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): When will the Home Secretary make a statement on allegations that lapses under her watch allowed terrorists Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Mohamed Abrini to breach this country's border security?

Mrs May: I say to the hon. Gentleman that, of course, in terms of border security and stopping people crossing the border, what is important is not just that we have a border control, as we do by not being a member of the Schengen border-free zone, but that information is exchanged between the parties when that is available. That is exactly what we are working on to ensure that information is available at our borders when we want to be able to stop people.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): May I put it to the Home Secretary that I do not think that she has yet fully answered the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee about 100% checks on trucks? I accept the issue about flexibility, as we might have different situations in different places, but does she accept that there is genuine concern about security in ports up and down the country? How is the cumulative cut to the revenue budget of the Border Force compatible with providing the necessary level of security?

Mrs May: On that last point, I must say to the Labour party, as we have said before regarding a number of other areas, that it is about not how much money we have, but how we spend it. It is about ensuring that we are using money as effectively and efficiently as possible. Ensuring that we have an operating mandate that means that 100% checks on individuals are undertaken at primary checkpoints is something that this Government have introduced and that the previous Labour Government failed to do. All the trucks going through the juxtaposed controls are indeed screened.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Over Easter, a number of my constituents were incredibly frustrated at Manchester airport when they were queuing to go through passport control solely because that passport control was significantly under-resourced. What reassurance can the Home Secretary give that Manchester airport, which after all is our largest international airport outside London, will have adequate resources at its passport control? While she is looking into that, will she also look at the loophole at terminal 3 whereby passengers who transit from Heathrow and have their baggage sent directly through to Manchester do not have to go through a customs check?

Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman asks about the resources at Manchester airport. I can assure him that we regularly have discussions with Manchester airport about the traffic that is going through it and its requirements, and we judge the appropriate resources that are needed by Border Force. We fully recognise the significance of Manchester airport to which he refers.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): A recent watchdog study into Border Force at Manchester airport showed that one in four passengers from the sample taken got through the border inappropriately, that a whole Ryanair flight was recently missed, with 159 passengers receiving no checks whatsoever, and that £1.5 million was spent on sniffer dogs that—guess what?—sniffed out no class A drugs or terrorists. Meanwhile, business passengers and tourists are suffering interminable delays. The airport is suffering because of a lack of investment in Border Force. The Home Secretary might have protected the budget, but it is not making any improvement whatsoever to a very poor existing service. What does she say about that?

Mrs May: I will say to the hon. Gentleman exactly what I said to the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). As Manchester airport expands, we will talk to the officials there and discuss what resources they consider necessary. The issue of a misdirected flight to which he refers is something that we have taken up with Manchester airport with regard to the staff whom it has on the ground to deal with these flights. This is an important issue and we are very serious about how we deal with it.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I concur with the commendations of colleagues for the excellent work that is done by border staff, but numbers are also important—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. A rather unseemly exchange is going on between the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), who has just put a question and was dissatisfied with the answer, and the hon. Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) who, in the exercise of his duties as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Home Secretary, always feels compelled to display a level of fealty unsurpassed and indeed unequalled by any other Member of the House of Commons. That is not necessary. We all know of the fealty bordering on the obsequious that is on evident display from the hon. Gentleman on a daily basis, but it must not be allowed to interrupt the eloquence of the flow of the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins)—or even the flow of his eloquence.

Toby Perkins: I will endeavour to re-find myself, Mr Speaker.

The Prime Minister received a report from experts saying that 30,000 was the right number of Border Force members to protect our borders. Does that still reflect the policy of the Government, and can the Home Secretary tell us how many border staff we currently have?

Mrs May: The report to which the hon. Gentleman refers proposed the creation of an entirely new police force at the borders. When we came into government and looked at what was necessary, we decided to approach the issue in a slightly different way, creating the National Crime Agency and a specific border command within it. The staff operating at borders are not just Border Force, but border command from the NCA and special branch at the ports, and, of course, they also work with

immigration enforcement. For the first time in this country, we have a specific border command within the National Crime Agency.

BILL PRESENTED

PROPERTY OWNERSHIP IN LONDON (REGISTRATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Frank Field, supported by Mr David Lammy, Andrew Rosindell, Mr Gareth Thomas, Tom Brake, Siobhain McDonagh, Wes Streeting, Stephen Timms, Jon Cruddas, Stephen Pound and Mr Virendra Sharma, presented a Bill to require the creation of a register of owners of property in the Greater London area, including details of the name of the owner of each property and the name of the beneficiary owner in the case of properties owned by a trust or similar body; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May, and to be printed (Bill 163).

Forensic Linguistics (Standards)

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

1.10 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to place a duty on the forensic science regulator to establish a code of practice and conduct for the providers and practitioners of forensic linguistics in the criminal justice system; to make provision about the required scientific quality standards for the discipline; and for connected purposes.

Our children and young people face an enormous threat from being groomed by radical extremists and paedophiles, facilitated by the internet, social media and mobile technology. The Bill is therefore about the protection of vulnerable people, and it is about the monitoring and analysis of communications between people about whom we need to be really concerned: people who plot and scheme to do others harm; people such as paedophiles and extremists; and people who use modern technology as a tool in their evil business.

Last October, I led a Westminster Hall debate on the use of children as suicide bombers. We know that many of the techniques used in recruiting and grooming such children are the same as those used by paedophiles. We also know that there is software available that will identify the messages and language of groomers, and that, using a variety of tools, security agencies can match those to the voice and language patterns of known individuals. Forensic linguistics is a complicated and relatively new field. Linguistic evidence can involve science, social science and interpretation, and forensic linguistic analyses require a complex set of knowledge and skills. Presently, however, anyone—including you or me, Mr Speaker—can proclaim themselves an expert in forensic linguistics. Consequently, there is a considerable danger of substandard analysis being offered in a court of law.

We need a standardised qualification for analysts and a standardised set of techniques to give the courts confidence that such evidence can be accepted as more than just interesting background. The Bill does not represent sophisticated legislation, as compiling a statutory register would be relatively straightforward. The register called for by the Bill would not need its own regulator, as one already exists: the forensic science regulator. She is already working on including speech and audio analysis as a recognised speciality area, but as textual linguistic analysis draws on interpretative as well as scientific methods, it falls outside her current remit.

I would also draw attention to current codes of practice and conduct for forensic science providers and practitioners, and more generally for expert witnesses in the criminal justice system, that could be adapted to include the practice of forensic linguistics. For setting the accredited qualifications, there are academic institutions with evident authority in this area, such as the centre for forensic linguistics at Aston University. I personally thank the director of the centre, Professor Tim Grant, for his help in developing the Bill. I am also grateful for encouragement from the president of the Chartered Society of Forensic Sciences and the director of forensic services in Scotland, Mr Tom Nelson. The standard of specialist witnesses and forensic scientists themselves is

[Roger Mullin]

inherently protean—I know of some people who call themselves forensic scientists, but cannot tell the difference between the sensitivity of a test and the specificity of a test, let alone calculate its predictive value.

I have already said that speech and audio analysis and textual analysis are two different things. The problem for textual forensic linguistics is that many aspects of the work—the determination of meanings in messages, profiling the background of a writer and so on—are a long way from the laboratory-based paradigm. The closest we get to laboratory-based science is in comparative authorship analysis, for which methods are published and tested. The diversity of questions that forensic linguists address and the approaches that they take to those questions means that the forensic science regulator does not cover their work, so there is no way for high-quality practitioners to be identified and used and low-quality practitioners avoided.

There is a need for a mechanism to recognise what should count as quality work in textual forensic linguistics. That could be a register of individuals or methods, or both. The obvious person to hold that would be the forensic science regulator, but that would definitely represent an extension of her current role, hence the need for the Bill.

Where is the proof, however, that forensic linguistic analysis can work? In those cases in which forensic linguistic evidence has been allowed in court, it has proved particularly valuable. For example, it was used in the appeals of Derek Bentley and the Birmingham Six. In many instances across the UK, it has been used to determine the authorship of SMS text messages in murder cases. It has been used to extract the meaning of coded texts and slang terms used in internet chatrooms, often involving conspiracies to murder and child sex abuse conversations. Good forensic linguistic evidence has withstood appeal, yet this excellent work could be undermined due to substandard analysis by poorly qualified and unqualified practitioners.

Although it has strong roots in the UK, textual forensic linguistic evidence is increasingly accepted internationally. Examples of its use include successful appeals against murder convictions in Australia and cases of disputed wills in South Africa. In 1996 in the United States, textual forensic linguistic analysis was used to identify the writer of the Unabomber's manifesto as Ted Kaczynski, and he was subsequently convicted of running a bombing campaign across the country.

In the United Kingdom, too, textual forensic linguistics has been used in investigations of serious counter-terrorism cases. In 2004, for example, Dhiren Barot was arrested

in London and charged on the basis of linguistic evidence linking him to the writing of a conspiracy document. He later admitted to plotting to bomb the New York stock exchange, the International Monetary Fund headquarters and the World Bank, among other targets.

The United Kingdom's forensic science regulator role was created in 2007 by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). It is good that some progress has been made, but on this issue, Mr Speaker, it is time to put the regulator to work. The Bill would enable the statutory agencies to use information and evidence that they gather through the medium of forensic linguistics to protect more children from predatory adults, and to protect the British public from the likelihood of events such as those that happened recently in Brussels, Paris, Istanbul, Kabul and Pakistan. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Roger Mullin, Ian Blackford, Drew Hendry, Lady Hermon, John Mann, Michelle Thomson and Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg present the Bill.

Roger Mullin accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May, and to be printed (Bill 164).

ENERGY BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Energy Bill [Lords] for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 18 January 2016 (Energy Bill [Lords] (Programme)) and 14 March 2016 (Energy Bill [Lords] (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Message

1. Any Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.
2. Proceedings on that Message shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement at today's sitting.
3. The Message shall be considered in the following order: Commons Amendment No. 7, Commons Amendment No. 6, Commons Amendment No. 8, Commons Amendment No. 2.

Subsequent stages

4. Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.
5. The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement. (*Stephen Barclay.*)

Question agreed to.

Energy Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Lords message

After clause 79

ONSHORE WIND POWER: CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH
CERTIFICATES MAY BE ISSUED AFTER 31 MARCH 2016

1.20 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 7A.

Mr Speaker: With this we will consider the following:
Lords amendments 7B to 7S.

Lords amendment 7T, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendments 7U to 7W, 6A and 6B, 8A to 8C and Lords amendment 2A.

I must draw the House's attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendment 2A. If the House agrees it, I will cause an appropriate entry to be made in the Journal.

Andrea Leadsom: To deliver on our manifesto commitment, the Government remain determined to bring forward the closure of the renewables obligation to new onshore wind in Great Britain. This commitment is based on plans that were signalled well before the general election last year, and that should not have come as a surprise to hon. Members or to industry.

Back in March 2015, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matthew Hancock), then Minister for Energy and Climate Change, stated in this House:

"We have made it absolutely clear that we will remove onshore wind subsidies in the future".—[*Official Report*, 6 March 2015; Vol. 293, c. 1227-28.]

Prior to that, in December 2014, the Prime Minister, speaking of wind farms, stated in the House of Commons Liaison Committee:

"we don't need to have more of these subsidised onshore. So let's get rid of the subsidy".

We have been absolutely clear all along. The Government's policy is to bring forward the closure of the renewables obligation to new onshore wind.

To protect investor confidence, the Government have proposed a grace period for those projects meeting certain conditions as at 18 June last year, as outlined in the statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change on that date. The grace period provisions are intended to protect those projects that, at 18 June last year, already had relevant planning consents; a grid connection offer and acceptance of that offer, or confirmation that no grid connection was required; and access to land rights.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As my hon. Friend said before setting out that list of warnings, and as we discussed in Committee, the proposals were in our manifesto, which commanded the support of the British people. Does she agree that we are again on thin ice,

with the other place trying to interfere with the Government's agenda, which has already been voted on by the British people?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right. This is a manifesto commitment. Peers should listen to the manifesto commitment of this Government and respect it; that is normal practice, as I understand it.

The Government have taken action on a key concern raised by industry about an investment freeze. The clauses are therefore intended to ensure that projects that meet the core grace period criteria, and which were intended to be able to access the grace period as proposed, are not frozen out of the process. Since proposing this measure, the Government have continued to receive representations from industry suggesting that it supports and welcomes the proposals to address the investment freeze. The Government have also put in place a provision to ensure that an existing grace period for delays caused by grid or radar works will continue to apply.

We now need to get on and complete this Bill. As the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) said in Committee, speaking for the Scottish National party:

"We agree that swift passage of the Bill with clear and consistent RO grace period provisions is needed in order to provide certainty to investors in the onshore wind sector as quickly as possible. The renewables industry fears that the longer legislative uncertainty over RO closure persists, the greater the risk of otherwise eligible projects running out of time to deliver under the proposed grace periods."—[*Official Report, Energy Public Bill Committee*, 2 February 2016; c. 217.]

He is right.

In addition, these clauses give the Secretary of State a power to make regulations that would prevent electricity suppliers in Great Britain from using Northern Ireland renewables obligation certificates relating to electricity generated by new onshore wind stations and any additional capacity added to existing wind stations after the onshore wind closure date. This is a backstop power that would be used only if Northern Ireland did not close its RO to new onshore wind on equivalent terms to Great Britain.

Since our last debate on this issue, I am pleased to say that the RO in Northern Ireland has closed to large-scale new onshore wind stations with a capacity above 5 MW with effect from 1 April 2016. The Northern Ireland Executive are currently consulting on closing to stations at 5 MW and below.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): On the response of the Northern Ireland Executive, we are going into Assembly elections in Northern Ireland, so will the Minister confirm that this is almost too late for the present Northern Ireland Executive? She wants the Bill to be rushed through and completed, but we will not have a running Executive in Northern Ireland until at least a fortnight after the Northern Ireland Assembly elections.

Andrea Leadsom: I do not agree that we are rushing the Bill through; there has been an enormous amount of time for consultation and discussion. As I said, the Northern Ireland Executive are consulting on closing the RO to stations at 5 MW and below. I can assure all

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

hon. Members that the Government continue to engage with Northern Ireland with a view to effecting closure on equivalent terms to Great Britain.

Since our last debate on this policy in this House, the Government have introduced two further small changes to the Bill. These will provide for the provisions on the early closure of the RO to new onshore wind in Great Britain, the related grace period provisions, and the backstop power relating to the RO in Northern Ireland to come into force on the date that the Bill receives Royal Assent. Amendments 6A to 6B, 7A to 7S, 7U to 7W and 8A to 8C adjust the early closure date, previously 31 March 2016, to the date of Royal Assent. These changes are made in various places throughout clauses 79, 80 and 81, and to both the grid or radar condition and the investment freeze condition.

I was very clear in our last debate on this issue, as was the Under-Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change in the other place, Lord Bourne. The Government do not intend to backdate these provisions.

Before I speak to Lords amendment 7T and the Government's motion to disagree, let me again say that the Government remain committed to delivering our manifesto pledge to end new subsidies for onshore wind. The final policy, which was agreed at our last debate in this House, strikes the right balance between protecting consumer bills and addressing the concerns of the industry.

The Government do not agree that it is appropriate to include the provision in Lords amendment 7T. The Government want this part of the Bill returned to the state in which it left this House last month. The amendment inserted into the Bill in the other place would allow projects that did not have formal planning consent as of 18 June last year into the RO beyond the early closure date. That would include projects that had an indication from a local planning authority that they would receive planning consent, subject to a section 106 or section 75 agreement being entered into. It would also include projects where the local planning committee was minded to approve the planning application before 18 June 2015, but planning permission was not issued until after that date. To be clear, those projects did not have planning permission as at 18 June last year, so they do not meet the grace period criteria proposed by the Government.

1.30 pm

Mr Speaker, 18 June was set out as a clear, bright line, and we have continued to maintain that it is important as a clear cut-off and statement of intent to industry. Tampering with such an integral part of the early closure policy at such a late stage in its development simply will not do. Such a change would lead to an increase in deployment—an increase that runs counter to the intent of the early closure policy. The Government have a mandate to protect consumer bills from rising costs, and we must continue to maintain the clear, bright line that is so carefully set out in the Bill's provisions.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): What would this Lords amendment cost the average consumer, if the full 90 MW we are talking about were deployed?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the amendment is likely to reduce the predicted savings from early closure by something in the region of £10 million per annum, which is a significant figure, given that early closure of the RO is expected to save around £20 million a year in a central scenario, and as much as £270 million a year in the high scenario.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that this was one of the most popular policies in the pretty popular manifesto we put to the electorate? We therefore need to get on with implementing it, and the other place should recognise that this issue arose out of the election.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right: this is a key, popular manifesto commitment, and we are determined to implement it, as we promised the voters of this country we would last May.

Let me turn briefly to amendment 2A, which was agreed in the other place. The amendment simply seeks to ensure that the function of determining whether an oil field project is materially complete can be transferred to the Oil and Gas Authority. That function sits outside chapter 9 of the Corporation Tax Act 2010 but elsewhere within part 8, so it does not fall within the definition of “relevant function” under clause 2(6) of the Bill. It therefore cannot be transferred from the Secretary of State to the OGA by regulations made under clause 2(2). The amendment simply removes the reference to “Chapter 9 of” from the reference to part 8 of the 2010 Act in clause 2(6), ensuring that this important function can be transferred to the OGA. The amendment is purely technical, and seeks to put beyond doubt that all key oil and gas taxation functions can be transferred to the OGA once it becomes a Government company, as we have always intended.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The amendments we have received from the other place make a number of changes to the Bill. In most instances, as the Minister mentioned, those relate to the commencement of the closure of the RO. That is essentially because of the Bill's progress through Parliament and the potential charge of retrospectivity against the Bill. It is good that the issue has been rectified, and that the Government have confirmed that they do not intend to backdate the closure of the RO.

However, those changes point to the issue raised in amendment 7T, with which the Government have a motion to disagree. We need to be clear that the amendment is not saying that changing the closure date for the RO for onshore wind is wrong, although I continue to contend that it is. Contrary to the impression the Minister has given this afternoon, developers of projects did not realise that the closure date would be earlier than previously thought. Indeed, the so-called warnings before the general election, which she mentioned, were not about the early closure of the RO, but about future funding for onshore wind in general. Developers of projects knew that the RO would come to an end in March 2017, and many had spent several years—a long period—in the development process before the warnings were issued, and before the policy was put forward in the manifesto and, subsequently, the Bill. Having planned on the basis of the notion that the RO would come to

an end, they found out very late in the day that the goalposts had been arbitrarily moved, and that their investment was lost overnight as a result.

Nor is the amendment in any way contrary to manifesto commitments; it is not about the principle of the early closure of the RO, but about the grace periods that follow from that closure process. It is not saying that there should not be grace period exceptions for schemes that, for various reasons, might fall foul of the new, arbitrary cut-off date. By highlighting a small number of projects that have fallen foul of the cut-off date for very specific reasons, it is saying that grace-period schemes should be built on a reasonable level of equity and fairness, and should work within an understanding of proper reasons for exemption; they should not simply impose a few extended, but nevertheless still arbitrary, cut-off dates for projects.

Lords amendment 7T highlights a particularly egregious inequity in the grace-period scheme. This involves schemes that have, even according to the new guidelines laid down in the Bill process, done the right thing throughout by seeking and securing local support. As the Government said earlier in the passage of the Bill, it was to be the *sine qua non* of permission for the development of any onshore wind in the future that local communities should have the final say in decisions; schemes, it was said, should obtain support, perhaps through local planning approval, and should not, for example, seek to win an appeal on the basis of national determination, having been turned down at local level.

The schemes covered by the amendment fit exactly that description. They have determinedly gone through the local process and engaged with it, rather than standing back and waiting to progress through an appeal. They have won local community support, in each instance through the granting of a planning decision by the local authority. The only issue is that, having gone through that often lengthy process of local consultation, they find that the successful, locally supported outcome has, at the stroke of a pen, effectively been turned into refusal. That has happened because the final planning certificate has not arrived by the cut-off date because of issues relating not to the permission, but to details of section 106 agreements on community benefit or similar issues, or to section 75 agreements in Scotland—that is, issues that arise not as part of the agreement process, but because the agreement has been reached. As these schemes could not produce a final, formal planning certificate by the arbitrary date of 18 June, the scheme as a whole was lost.

Here is the timetable of one such scheme, the Twentyshilling Hill wind farm in Dumfriesshire. The planning application was initially made on 15 March 2013—a long time ago. It was approved by a planning committee, subject to a section 75 agreement, on 16 December 2014. It was not the fault of the wind farm applicant that the council took a few months to settle the section 75 application. Even so, the application was agreed on 17 June—again, before the cut-off date. However, despite the agreement being public and on the council website, the final certificate did not arrive until 1 July, making it null and void in the Government's eyes, as the Minister has stated.

In retrospect, it might have been wiser for those and other developers not to take too much time on, or give too much attention to, local agreement, but to instead

precipitate an appeal that they might have won. Indeed, when developers have done just that and the appeal decision has arrived after the cut-off date of 18 June 2015—we heard of such instances during the passage of the Bill—it has been accepted because of a provision relating to the grace period. The projects are deemed to have been okay all along and are allowed to proceed. That is frankly perverse, and it falls seriously short of the test of reasonableness and equity that ought to inform any grace period arrangement.

Lords amendment 7T relates to a small number of cases and seeks to restore a semblance of equity to the process. It is based on the principle that the Government themselves promoted as the basis for decisions on onshore wind applications. It is a principle for the future that, incidentally, Labour supports.

I shall explain the equity. If a local planning committee found in favour of a planning decision before 18 June, and the decision was arrived at via a process of consultation and community acceptance of the application, it should be covered by the grace period provisions. This small amendment would affect only about half a dozen schemes. In the overall scheme of things, it would make an insignificant inroad into levy control framework financial provisions, as far as the RO is concerned. It would, however, place a much-needed patch of equity on the grace period structure, and perhaps point the way to addressing seriously a future issue. That issue is this: are the Government intent on ensuring that onshore wind will be built in the future—it is, after all, the cheapest and most cost-effective renewable available—if local communities support the proposals, or do they intend to use national clout to override local wishes in pursuit of an overall closure of onshore wind, at least in England?

Accepting the amendment and finalising the Bill in this way would go a long way to restoring a principle that was supposedly central to the process for the future, and it would demonstrate to local communities that they really will be able to decide and not have their local wishes snuffed out by a fiat from the centre.

John Redwood: I hope that the other place will not delay this Bill further, because many people and parties in this House, and in the other place, wish it to go through to provide measures to help our oil and gas industry, which is struggling with the collapse in the world oil price and the consequent threat to jobs and prosperity that we would like to help alleviate.

I have two main reasons for strongly supporting the Government. First, they are absolutely right to say that our energy is too dear and that their measures are a contribution to tackling the problem of very expensive energy. A tragedy is unfolding in several of our industries, most recently in the steel industry, where the consequences of very high energy costs compared with those of our competitors around the world are manifest, especially the impact on output, profit, loss and loss of jobs. We desperately need to do more to tackle the problem of very expensive energy, so I admire the Government's urgency in tackling one of its sources. The subsidy withdrawal is entirely appropriate.

One of the problems with wind energy—this makes it a very high-cost way of offering generating capacity—is that back-up capacity needs to be built to generate the power by some other means, because there will be times of the day, days of the week and weeks of the year when

[John Redwood]

there is no wind. At such times, we are entirely reliant on the back-up power, and that requires a full range of back-up. There will always be extra costs involved with such an unreliable renewable source of energy.

On cost grounds, it is vital that we make rapid progress. I think that good notice was given—the election was notice enough, I would have thought. It was a prominent and popular policy. None of us was shy about debating it and we got a lot of support from many people.

The second main reason why I think the Government are right to take this action is that wind is so intermittent and unreliable. Therefore, if there is too much wind, the problems of managing and balancing the system become that much greater. As the Member of Parliament who represents the control centre on Bearwood Road in Wokingham, I am only too well aware of how its task is made much more expensive and complicated the more interruptible and unreliable energy there is on the system. The Government's measure will be a welcome check on that. It will help it to manage the system better and to provide more reliable power for industry.

If there is too much unreliable power on the system and that power goes down, it is industry and commerce that will take the hit. They will be asked to forgo the use of power when there is no wind, but when we are desperately trying to compete in a very competitive world, surely it is important not just to keep the lights on in people's households, but to keep the factories turning over.

1.45 pm

For those two powerful reasons—there are many others, but I will not detain the House with them—I strongly support what the Government are doing. I urge the other place to recognise how important it is for our national energy security and for the sake of the prices charged to our consumers, and, above all, to remember that it was an election pledge.

Callum McCaig: As is so often the case with learning about the workings of this place, sometimes I do not know whether something is a formal rule or a convention. I had assumed that “ping-pong” was a mere colloquialism, but I was surprised to learn from the Order Papers online that it is the formal name for this process. I was never very good at ping-pong when I was younger—I kept taking my eye off the ball, which could also be said of the Government, whose dogmatism in pushing this issue and continuing with ping-pong means that they are taking their eye off the bigger picture. I agree with the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) that the bigger picture for the Energy Bill, at every stage of the process, has been the establishment of the Oil and Gas Authority.

If we simply accept the Lords amendments, which I support, we could finish our deliberations on this Bill and be done with it. They are balanced and sensible and would deliver the pragmatic response that it is beholden on the Government to deliver.

Simon Hoare: I am sure that everybody has hugely pressing engagements, but given the importance of the OGA, and given the state of the oil and gas fields in the North sea, is the hon. Gentleman surprised at the absence of his party colleagues?

Callum McCaig: Sometimes it is better to know the answer to a question before asking it. A number of my colleagues are meeting constituents down from Scotland who suffer from motor neurone disease. Given the hugely debilitating impact that that illness can have on people, and given the impact that Westminster can have on welfare, it is important that a number of our folks are there.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): That is a very fair response, but it is also notable how few Scottish National party MPs were in the Chamber on Second Reading of this Bill, which relates directly to one of the great issues facing the hon. Gentleman's nation.

Callum McCaig: I started by saying that at one point in my youth I was guilty of taking my eyes off the ball. With these diversionary tactics, Conservative Members are well and truly taking their eyes off the ball. We could discuss who is here. It is disappointing that there are not many Members in the Chamber, and I am not sure proportionately how many Tories are present. I could do some back-of-a-fag-packet sums—that might appeal to them—but instead I shall persevere.

We are talking about 90 MW of onshore wind. The Minister said in Committee on 2 June that

“it is absolutely our intention to give local communities the final say on wind farm developments.”—[*Official Report, Energy [Lords] Public Bill Committee*, 2 June 2015; c. 76.]

Six of the seven schemes that have received planning consent are in Scotland. The committee dates were 24 November 2014 for West Benhar in North Lanarkshire; 11 December 2014 for Twentysilling in Dumfries and Galloway; 3 June 2015 for the Chruach extension in Argyll and Bute; 15 September 2014 for the Barlockhart Moor extension; 27 January 2015 for Poniel in South Lanarkshire; 24 February 2015 for Crookedstane in South Lanarkshire; and 5 June 2015 for the Melton Common wind cluster in Hull. Those were all before the Government's cut-off date of 18 June 2015.

As the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) suggested, if we are to put local consent at the heart of this issue, we must respect the outcome and will of local councils that decided to proceed with these schemes, but which through no fault of their own—or indeed of the developers—were not granted planning consent and a decision notice until after this decision. For the Twentysilling Hill wind farm, evidence to the Committee from the provost and chair of the Royal Burgh of Sanquhar and District Community Council, and the chair of Kirkconnel and Kelloholm Community Council stated:

“Our two Communities number nearly 5000 inhabitants, and, since the closure of the coal mines nearly 50 years ago, have stumbled from crisis to crisis. Despite the problems affecting our area, we are not dependent communities, and both Kirkconnel and Sanquhar can boast good public initiatives and an earnest desire to improve our lot through self-help. Windfarm monies will, at least allow local people the ability to take decisions which will improve the area in which we live.”

Twentysilling Hill wind farm has the potential to offer life-changing improvement to the lives and living conditions of the populations of Upper Nithsdale. That is local empowerment. We are talking about local consent and support, and Twentysilling Hill wind farm has unmistakably got the support of the communities in which it will be set. For the sake of a few points of

dogmatic principle from the Government, we are seeing that taken away through no fault of the community or the developer, but purely to persevere unnecessarily. I urge the Government to put their eyes back on the ball and allow the Energy Bill to proceed. If we go back and forth with ping-pong we risk delaying that further.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman is generous in giving way. Let me make a point that I also raised in Committee. I accept that there may not be time for this with some of these schemes, but on a point of principle, if the Scottish Government and the SNP wish to continue these schemes in Scotland, why will they not pay for them themselves?

Callum McCaig: Because there is no mechanism. We discussed that in Committee, and the hon. Gentleman voted against the mechanism that would have allowed that to happen. I do not see how that question focuses on the issue. If we want Scotland to receive support for such projects, that could have been provided.

James Cartlidge: On a point of correction, I seem to recall that the hon. Gentleman wanted Scotland to have the power, but that the Scottish Government were not going to pay for it. That is what we discussed in Committee—they were not prepared to pay for it.

Callum McCaig: There were two different aspects, and we had a number of debates. The hon. Gentleman asked how we would do something, but we cannot do it—pure and simple. Let me return to the nub of the matter. People would like pragmatic government, but we are seeing dogmatic government that dismisses the views of communities.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Callum McCaig: I am coming to a close. Such dogmatic government is making communities withdraw their support, and I urge the Government to show pragmatism today.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): It is a pleasure to listen to a message from the other place and to disagree with it wholeheartedly. A few hours ago the German Government decided that they want to withdraw subsidy from onshore wind schemes, for exactly the same reasons that we in this country are doing so. In previous debates and in Committee, I described my campaign to get this clear manifesto pledge from my party. I will not go through that again—I had only half an hour last time to describe the process and some of the things that I was after, and we are time-limited today—but it all stemmed from the Kelmarsh decision in my constituency.

Members in this place understand how important it is to represent their constituents, but I wish to tell some of those in the other place that it was not only one small village in my constituency that was affected by an onshore wind decision—Hanging Houghton, Brixworth, Draughton, Maidwell, Hazelbeach, Kelmarsh, Yelvertoft, Winwick, Crick, Lilbourne, Badby, Kislingbury, Guilsborough, Watford, West Haddon, East Haddon, Ravensthorpe, Great Oxendon and many more villages in my constituency were all affected by proposals for unwanted onshore wind farms. That is why at the end of

the previous Parliament, a letter to the Prime Minister was signed by 101 Members of Parliament in order to get this change. There was a long battle across the Floor of the House about whether we should be subsidising onshore wind, and a clear manifesto pledge by the Conservative party to stop funding it.

The hon. Members for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig) and for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) have highlighted small factors within the grace period, but this is a clear manifesto pledge and principle that people in my constituency wanted and expected me to fight for. I will not listen to those in the other House who are determined to bring party politics into this.

There are no Lib Dems in the Chamber today—there are too many anyway, but none of them is here today. Those Lib Dems who fought to reform and get an elected Chamber up the other end of the corridor are now using that Chamber to abuse the democratic process of this country. They know full well what they are doing. When Lord Wallace of Tankerness decided that he wanted to interpret the Conservative party manifesto, it was interesting that many Liberal Democrats who supported him had been defeated by people who supported that manifesto. They lost their seats partly because in their communities they could not defend the onshore wind turbines that the Conservative party had made a clear commitment to get rid of.

Callum McCaig: We are talking about a very small number of wind farms. I do not believe that those Liberal Democrats who would have been impacted by the wind farms that we are dealing with today would have lost to the Conservative party.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I know the hon. Gentleman said that he had a bit of trouble with conventions, and so, obviously, do some Members of the House of Lords. I am trying to remind them of a long-standing tradition and convention in this place, which is that when a party has a manifesto commitment to enact legislation, that legislation should not be overturned by those who are unelected down the other end of the corridor. If we consider who tabled the amendments and voted for this message to be sent to the Commons, we see a whole list of former MPs who lost their seats because of the manifesto that they are now trying to overturn from an unelected place.

I was involved with this manifesto pledge through to the point of delivery, and I sat on the Energy Bill Committee. I am pretty sure that I know what our manifesto pledge was, as did those who voted for it in my constituency—it was on my leaflets and plain for all to see. I wish to send a message to those down the other end of the corridor that they are dabbling with democracy. They are not just fighting for the principle of a grace period for six wind farms; they are determinedly fighting against a clear manifesto pledge by a governing party.

Dr Whitehead: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman had in his election leaflet details of the grace periods that would have been put in place as a consequence of the manifesto commitment. If those details were not in his leaflet, does he agree that the question of grace periods is not about the manifesto commitment, but

[Dr Whitehead]

about how that commitment might be made more palatable, as far as the transition is concerned? That is what we are debating today.

2 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is the sort of thing that I probably would have had etched into a stone for people to laugh at. The hon. Gentleman knows the answer. Of course, I did not have anything about grace periods in my local campaign leaflet that I sent to my constituents, because I thought that people would understand exactly what we meant when we said that there was no subsidy for onshore wind. I did not think that it was necessary to dance on the head of a pin for the sake of a simple party political point.

I end where I began. My constituents are desperate for the measure, and they are desperate for the measures to help the oil and gas industry. They are surprised that Liberal Democrats down the other end of the corridor are willing to play politics with the elected Chamber on a point in a manifesto on which they were heartily defeated. My constituents are annoyed by the fact that the matter has not become law already.

James Cartlidge: It was a great pleasure to serve on the Bill Committee. I hope that the House will not mind if I return briefly to the point made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig), because it is important to set the record straight. Before I give my reasons for supporting the Government, let me say that my recollection—I am happy for this to be clarified—is that in the Bill Committee, SNP Members tabled amendments to give them the power to keep the projects open but, when asked, they did not confirm that they would put up the money to support those projects. The justification that they gave related to the nuclear industry. As I recall, they said that it was quite fair for them not to have to pay for the projects because they have to pay for the nuclear industry, which they do not agree with. Thereafter, I asked them whether they would want to be cut off from the electricity supply that comes from the nuclear sector in this country, and the answer was no. As always, they want to have their cake and eat it—rather like the Mayor of London, although they do not make their arguments with as much grace as he does. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South has tried his best today, and I see that he has got some extra support to back him up.

My two reasons for supporting the Government are clear and along the lines of the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). The first relates to the simple principle of democracy and the position of my constituents, whom I have been sent here to represent. Overwhelmingly, my constituents support our policy on onshore wind, and they want it to be enacted in good time. Since I attended the Bill Committee, I have been out and about in the constituency, and the matter continues to come up. I recently addressed a meeting of the Stour and Orwell Society, a fine and upstanding group of ladies and gentlemen who are committed to preserving and protecting the natural beauty and heritage of the countryside in South Suffolk, particularly in the peninsula where the River Stour meets the Orwell. For anybody who wishes to come and

visit, it is a fine place and it is not particularly blighted by large constructions that will be affected by these changes. Overwhelmingly, the position of the constituency is that it supports the changes.

My second point relates to the Oil and Gas Authority, and it has been alluded to by my right hon. Friend and others. I simply want to say that we should not delay a Bill—[*Interruption.*] Does the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) wish to intervene?

Dr Whitehead: I simply want to make the point that we could finish proceedings today if the Government agreed to the amendment, and the Oil and Gas Authority could go forward with all speed, as everybody wants it to.

James Cartlidge: Absolutely. If the hon. Gentleman is willing personally to provide £10 million so that the taxpayer and electricity customers do not have to be so encumbered, I am sure that we can find a way.

We have a clear position. The Bill has not changed in respect of the fundamental decision to establish the Oil and Gas Authority. At one point on the day of Second Reading, the price of a barrel of oil was \$27.70. It is now around the \$40 to \$44 mark, so there has been some stabilisation, but that word has to be used carefully in view of what is happening around the world. Ambrose Evans-Pritchard had an excellent piece this week on continuing stability in Kuwait, and we see today in the *FT* that Saudi Arabia is starting to borrow from the markets. The price may go up, or it may go down again. The key point is that the outlook is uncertain. Enacting the Bill, with this new and respected regulator, will add stability and credibility to the sector at an important time. It is not a magic wand, and it will not immediately heal the problems that undoubtedly exist in this industry, which is vital for the United Kingdom, but it is a key part of our energy policy and proposition. That is why the Bill should become law as soon as possible.

This is basically about our national interest, which has, for many decades, been tied to North sea oil and to the energy sector. That is true not only of Scotland; in the East Anglian economy, a significant amount of output and a significant number of jobs come from the oil sector. I encourage all hon. Members to support the Government on this matter. Our reasons are clear. This is about supporting the energy sector and respecting the democratic will of the people of the United Kingdom.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I think we all hoped that the Energy Bill would by now have completed its progress through Parliament. It is a shame that it has not, especially because the closure of the renewables obligation for onshore wind was a clear manifesto commitment by the Government before the last election. That was a popular pledge, especially in my constituency, where opposition to wind farms in the Mendips and at Pilrow is widespread. It is difficult to explain to my constituents that that manifesto commitment, which the Government have a clear mandate to deliver, has not been enacted because of the intervention of the unelected Members of the other place.

That is especially true, as has been noted by a number of my hon. Friends, because the Opposition has been abetted in the House of Lords by a party that was roundly rejected in Somerset, in the south-west and

across the country. Not one of its elected Members has come to this Chamber today to justify the actions of their unelected colleagues in the other place. The illiberal undemocrats have a great deal to answer for. I want to congratulate the Secretary of State and the Minister of State on their forbearance in seeing the Bill through Parliament. I understand that the other day, the Secretary of State spent some time at the Bar of the other House eyeballing those who were delaying the legislation. Sadly, they had their way, and we are here yet again to debate it.

It is important that we do not allow the closure of the renewables obligation for onshore wind to be cast as anti-green. The deployment of onshore wind has been widespread, despite strong opposition in this place—with my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) in the vanguard—and in communities across the country. As a result of £800 million of subsidy, there are 490 operational wind farms and just under 5,000 operational turbines, so the measure is not anti-wind or anti-green.

The Government need to deliver their manifesto commitment to ensure that bill payers are not expected to foot the bill for the excessive deployment of this type of generation. Let us be clear. The Government are well on track to achieve 30% of electricity generation from renewable sources by 2020, and we should congratulate them on that. They are serious about decarbonisation and serious about security of supply, but they are also serious about keeping bills down. A line must be drawn somewhere, and the Government's decision on the matter is, in my view, entirely reasonable.

Let us reject Lords amendment 7T and stop the onshore wind industry impeding the progress of a Bill that, principally, establishes the OGA, with all its important functions in reinvigorating the UK's oil and gas industry, safeguarding hundreds of thousands of jobs, contributing billions to our economy and protecting an essential component of not only our energy security but, I argue, our national security. It is high time that we moved on with the Bill, and that the Lords accepted the will of this elected Chamber. It is time that we focused our energies not on onshore wind, but in using the Government's subsidy structure as a lever to encourage the technologies, such as offshore wind and new nuclear, that we envisage will be part of our energy mix for the next 20 or 30 years.

Graham Stuart: Will my hon. Friend give way?

James Heapey: I am just wrapping up, but I am pleased to give way.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is making a powerful and well-informed speech. Does he agree that although we are ending the subsidy for onshore wind, there will still be a role for it? We must continue to make sure that, while it is not subsidised, onshore wind does not lose out in comparison with the strike prices granted to other technologies.

James Heapey: I accept my hon. Friend's point to a degree. This is not the end of onshore wind in that onshore wind is not being banned, but is simply being told that it is time to find its own feet and to go it alone, where it can be sited in a permissive planning environment. I regularly drive up the M5 past the onshore wind turbines at Avonmouth, and one might argue that they

are entirely reasonable in that industrial setting. Provided turbines can be sited in a permissive place and they do not require any further Government subsidy, they may of course continue. However, it is important that the subsidy ends and that it does so with the passage of the Bill.

It is also important to note that the Energy and Climate Change Committee has recently begun pre-legislative scrutiny of the next energy Bill. There is a great deal in it that is quite exciting, in my view, so let us get this one done and get on with that one.

Graham Stuart: It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, in which there have been interesting speeches by Members on both sides of the House. On ending the subsidy for onshore wind, the whole aim of subsidy regimes for renewable technologies is to encourage costs to fall and to drive them down over time to the point at which they no longer need a subsidy. The Government put that in their manifesto.

I think a lot of this is down to Labour Members, because they would not listen to communities, such as my own, which felt that wind farms were being imposed on them that blighted their view of the landscape. The sense of a loss of control, even more than the imposition of the turbines themselves, created a great deal of resentment. We have ended up in a position in which the party that won a majority at the general election stood on a manifesto promise to end this subsidy.

The Government have made provision to ensure that onshore wind, where it goes ahead, has the support of the local community. I have said previously in the House, so I will not go on about it at too much length, that that issue should have been sorted out. If it had been sorted out sooner, we might not have had the backlash that has found its form—not least through the agency of my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris)—in saying, “We feel that this subsidy regime is imposing these turbines on us.” The permissions, not the subsidy per se, was the central issue, but we are where we are.

Further to my intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey), I want to make this point. Given that we now have an energy market in which the price producers charge for energy is far less than that at which anyone can afford to commission new production, we have a rather artificial market. I hope and expect we will make sure—I know Ministers are looking at this—that future regimes, for contracts for difference or whatever else, do not artificially block onshore wind from getting access to the market because of how pricing within that market operates. It is perfectly possible to ensure that there is no subsidy for onshore wind while ensuring that onshore wind alone is not deprived of access to the mechanisms that drive new commissioning for every other technology. I hope that Members on both sides of the House can agree to that. As long as communities have the final say on whether new wind farm capacity is brought into their area, and as long as onshore wind is treated no differently from other technologies, including fossil fuels such as gas, that is the situation we need to bring about.

John Redwood: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is quite difficult to attribute cost to stand-by power for wind? Wind uniquely needs such a power in a way that other forms of energy do not.

Graham Stuart: I agree that there are such issues. In his speech, my right hon. Friend did not reflect on the success of the Government. I know he is sceptical about both climate change and the Government's approach to this over the years, but what is undeniable is the way in which the cost curve has accelerated downwards. We were previously in a situation in which clean energy was ridiculously more expensive than fossil fuels, which poison the air and also have climate risks attached to them. We have therefore seen a real driving down of that cost. Onshore wind is now in a position where it should be able to compete on a level playing field with new gas-fired power stations; we will not of course see any more coal-fired ones.

2.15 pm

Whereas the price of offshore wind was £150 per MWh just a few years ago, we will now, as was announced in the autumn statement, see a ceiling of £104 or £105 per MWh. By the time we are into commissioning for the mid-2020s, we will be looking at a price of below £85 per MWh, which, as my right hon. Friend and other Members will know, is less than that guaranteed for Hinkley.

We are therefore moving to a world of renewables. As part of the reset, we will have an improved approach to encouraging storage and demand management. The roll-out of smart meters will be part of such demand management—I know that efforts are being made with National Grid to find the cheapest way to encourage major industries not to use energy at times when the grid is being pushed—as will interconnectors. We are therefore building the more intelligent system that will take cost out of the intermittent renewables sector at the same time as those renewables are cheaper in relation to their production costs, become more efficient and help us to meet our climate change objectives.

I am pleased to say that it is time we put this law in place and made sure that the Oil and Gas Authority can do its work. If there is an uptick in the oil price, as doubtless there will be, we will have an oil business in this country that is fit for purpose and efficient, and which can continue to deliver jobs in Scotland and elsewhere across the United Kingdom.

Andrea Leadsom: With the leave of the House, I shall respond to the debate. The Energy Bill will enact our manifesto commitments in two key ways. It will create the Oil and Gas Authority, which provides part of our continued support for North sea oil and gas. It will also implement the recommendations of the review by Sir Ian Wood, and we are doing everything we can to ensure the long-term survival and thriving state of this critical UK industry.

The North sea oil and gas industry has been the UK's largest industrial investor for many decades and has paid billions of pounds in corporation tax on production. However, as the basin matures, oil and gas become more difficult to access. We cannot and must not accept any delay in completing the Bill, because we need to give the Oil and Gas Authority the powers it needs to maximise the economic recovery of the UK's remaining oil and gas reserves. Industry and Government share the same ambitions and are working very closely together to manage the remaining resources effectively and efficiently.

I find it very disappointing that Opposition Members, who should know better, have suggested that by adding a mere £10 million extra per year to consumer bills, we can somehow achieve our aim of setting up the Oil and Gas Authority early. They should be ashamed of themselves. They should be supporting the Bill's speedy conclusion to Royal Assent for the sake of the oil and gas industry they all profess to support so enormously.

On the delivery of the Government's manifesto commitments on onshore wind, we promised to end new subsidies for onshore wind and to ensure that local people have the final say on where onshore wind is built. Opposition Members suggest that just because there is local agreement, it is fine to add to the bills of all consumers across Great Britain, but that is simply not the case. It is our duty as consumer champions—at least on the Government Benches—to keep down the cost to consumers, and that is what we will do.

Onshore wind has deployed successfully to date and is projected to meet our planned range of 11 to 13 GW by 2020, but we do not want to continue to provide subsidies where they are no longer necessary and where they are simply adding to the costs for energy consumers. We must seek the right balance between each of our three competing priorities: to keep the lights on; to keep bills down; and to decarbonise at the lowest possible price. Above all else, we want Members right across the Chamber to support these amendments so that we can get the OGA—

2.20 pm

One hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on consideration of the Lords message, the debate was interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83F). That this House agrees with Lords amendment 7A.

Question agreed to.

Lords amendment 7A accordingly agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker then put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83F).

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 7T.—(Andrea Leadsom.)

The House divided: Ayes 293, Noes 224.

Division No. 243]

[2.20 pm

AYES

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

Brady, Mr Graham
 Brazier, Mr Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Sir Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carmichael, Neil
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colvile, Oliver
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Davies, Byron
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Evans, Graham
 Evennett, rh Mr David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Marcus
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, Mr James

Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matthew
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Hopkins, Kris
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howlett, Ben
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Boris
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kinahan, Danny
 Kirby, Simon
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Pauline
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Lewis, Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lumley, Karen
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Mr Alan

Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Osborne, rh Mr George
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec

Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
 Swire, rh Mr Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Guy Opperman and
 Jackie Doyle-Price

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Alexander, Heidi
 Ali, Rushanara
 Allen, Mr Graham
 Arkless, Richard
 Ashworth, Jonathan

Austin, Ian
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Barron, rh Kevin
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berger, Luciana
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, Ian

Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blenkinsop, Tom
 Blomfield, Paul
 Boswell, Philip
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Burnham, rh Andy
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Chapman, Jenny
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Cox, Jo
 Crawley, Angela
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Dakin, Nic
 David, Wayne
 Day, Martyn
 De Piero, Gloria
 Donaldson, Stuart Blair
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Jim
 Dowd, Peter
 Dromey, Jack
 Durkan, Mark
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Esterson, Bill
 Farrelly, Paul
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Ffello, Robert
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Gapes, Mike
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Glindon, Mary
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lillian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hermon, Lady
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hunt, Tristram
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kerevan, George
 Kerr, Calum
 Kyle, Peter
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Mr Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCaig, Callum
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGarry, Natalie
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMahon, Jim

Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame M.
 Mulholland, Greg
 Mullin, Roger
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Albert
 Paterson, Steven
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pound, Stephen
 Pugh, John
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Robertson, rh Angus
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew

Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmer, Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Michelle
 Thornberry, Emily
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Watson, Mr Tom
 Weir, Mike
 West, Catherine
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Corri
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Jeff Smith

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 7T disagreed to.

Remaining Lords amendments agreed to, with Commons financial privilege waived in respect of Lords amendment 2A.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendment 7T;

That James Cartledge, Andrea Leadsom, Holly Lynch, Callum McCaig, Paul Maynard, Julian Smith and Dr Alan Whitehead be members of the Committee;

That Andrea Leadsom be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Julian Smith.*)

Question agreed to.

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Backbench Business

Daesh: Genocide of Minorities

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): We now come to the Back-Bench debate on the recognition of genocide by Daesh against Yazidis, Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities. Before I ask Fiona Bruce to move the motion, I point out that we will be very strict about opening speeches being no longer than 15 minutes, including interventions, and that there will be an eight-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions. I remind hon. Members that when interventions are taken and a minute or two is added to their speech limit, those minutes are taken out of speeches of Members lower down the speakers list. If people can be aware of that, I will be very grateful.

2.36 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House believes that Christians, Yazidis, and other ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and Syria are suffering genocide at the hands of Daesh; and calls on the Government to make an immediate referral to the UN Security Council with a view to conferring jurisdiction upon the International Criminal Court so that perpetrators can be brought to justice.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate.

Genocide is a word of such gravity that it should never be used readily. It is rightly known as the “crime above all crimes”. For that reason, it is incumbent on us to prevent the term from being devalued or overused. However, such caution must not stop us naming a genocide when one is taking place. The supporters of the motion are here to insist that there is overwhelming evidence that the atrocities of Daesh in Syria and Iraq should be recognised for the genocide they are and considered as such by the UN Security Council and the International Criminal Court. It will support similar resolutions of other leading international and legislative bodies.

There are only two possibilities for Members here. If the House is not satisfied that genocidal atrocities are being perpetrated, we must not pass the motion, on which I am minded to test the will of the House, but if colleagues believe that the depravities of Daesh are being undertaken with genocidal intent, we have already waited far too long to recognise it.

Yesterday evening, here in the UK Parliament, we heard the truly harrowing personal testimony of a brave 16-year-old Yazidi girl called Ekhlas. She was seized by Daesh from her home, along with others from her community in Sinjar in northern Iraq. At the age of 15, she saw her father and brother killed in front of her. She told of how every girl in her community over eight, including herself, was imprisoned and raped. She spoke of witnessing her friends being raped and hearing their screams, and of seeing a girl aged nine being raped by so many men that she died. Many young girls had their fragile bodies rendered incapable of pregnancy, and others who were far too young to be so were made pregnant. Horrifically, she spoke of seeing a two-year-old boy being killed and of his body parts being ground down and fed to his own mother. She told of children being brainwashed and forced to kill their own parents.

Fortunately, she managed to escape the prison during a bombardment of the area around it. Others are not so fortunate.

We heard from another woman, Yvette, who had come directly from Syria for last night’s meeting. She spoke of Christians being killed and tortured, and of children being beheaded in front of their parents. She showed us recent film footage of herself talking with mothers—more than one—who had seen their own children crucified. Another woman had seen 250 children put through a dough kneader and burnt in an oven. The oldest was four years old. She told us of a mother with a two-month-old baby. When Daesh knocked at the front door of her house and ordered the entire family out, she pleaded with them to let her collect her child from another room. They told her, “No. Go. It is ours now.”

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing forward this very important debate. She is making a powerful speech. Every year, Members of this House sign the holocaust book of commitment, making the pledge that that terrible genocide will never be forgotten. I have personally signed a pledge that I will never walk on by. Does she agree that today we have the opportunity to make sure that none of us walks on by as we see this terrible genocide unfold?

Fiona Bruce: I absolutely do. After the horrors of the holocaust, the words, “Never again” resounded through civilisation. We must not let them resound again.

Speaking to MPs at yesterday’s meeting, the young girl Ekhlas implored us:

“Listen to me, help the girls, help those in captivity; I am pleading with you, let us come together and call this what it is: a genocide. This is about human dignity. You have a responsibility. ISIS are committing a genocide, because they are trying to wipe us out.”

Genocide is an internationally recognised term, defined in the 1948 convention on genocide, to which we are a signatory as a country, as

“any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group...Killing...Causing serious bodily or mental harm...Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions...calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part...Imposing measures intended to prevent births...Forcibly transferring children”.

I put it to the House that not just one but every single one of those criteria was satisfied by the two testimonies yesterday.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Fiona Bruce: I will, but after that I will not take any further interventions because of the limitation placed on my speaking time.

Rehman Chishti: I applaud my hon. Friend for bringing this motion to the Floor of the House. She talks about using the term genocide; our international partners, such as the United States, its Secretary of State and House of Representatives, and the European Parliament have already said that the acts committed by Daesh amount to genocide. We should interpret international law in line with our key partners, who we are working with to defeat Daesh.

Fiona Bruce: I absolutely agree. We do not want to be behind but in the lead. Our country has a proud history of leading on human rights and ensuring that aggressors are brought to justice. We must do so in this case, too.

Yazidis and Christians have been targeted explicitly because of their religion and ethnicity. It is not just them, but Alawites, Shi'as, Shabaks and Mandaeans. The suffering of the two women I mentioned has been replicated countless times by other families, as we know from the statistics that we have all heard in this House. I have seen many reports documenting evidence of genocidal atrocities, as I am sure other Members have, from the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN assistance mission for Iraq and others—thousands of pages recording executions, mass graves, assassinations of church leaders, crucifixions, systematic rapes, torture of men, women and children, beheadings, and many other acts of violence so unspeakable that their evil seems almost fictional. But it is not.

Daesh is targeting specific groups precisely because of those groups' characteristics, and it has declared that, and that its acts have genocidal intent. For example, issue 4 of its online magazine "Dabiq" tells its followers that they will be held accountable if the Yazidi people continue to exist. As Lord Alton of Liverpool—I pay tribute to him for his work on this issue—has said, if we do not recognise this as genocide

"we might as well rip up the genocide convention as a worthless piece of paper."

As a consequence of the evidence meticulously collected by non-governmental organisations, activists and the UN, resolutions condemning the actions of Daesh's genocide have been passed around the world—as has been mentioned—by the Council of Europe in January 2016, the European Parliament in February and the US House of Representatives in March. Following that, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, made an announcement confirming the position of the US Government, stating that,

"Daesh is responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control including Yazidis, Christians and Shia Muslims. Daesh is genocidal by self-proclamation, by ideology and by actions".

If that is the position of the US Government, why is it not the position of our own?

In answer to that question, which has been raised many times, UK Government Ministers have repeatedly said that,

"it is a long-standing Government policy that any judgements on whether genocide has occurred should be a matter for the international judicial system rather than legislatures, governments or other non-judicial bodies."

In other words, whether this is genocide is a matter for the courts to decide; in this case, more specifically, it is a matter for the International Criminal Court. But—this is the crucial point of the motion—under the procedures relating to the ICC, it cannot make that judgment until it is requested to do so, and the only way that can now happen is if such a referral is made by the UN Security Council, of which the UK Government are a permanent member. That is why supporting the motion is so important. There is a circular argument here—a stalemate—which this Parliament needs to break. The motion before the House calls on us, as Members of the UK Parliament, to make a declaration of genocide, and then asks that the UK Government refer that to the UN Security

Council so that the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court can take action.

That prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, has already said, as long as a year ago, that she stands ready to take action, given a referral, saying:

"I remain profoundly concerned by this situation and I want to emphasise our collective duty as a global community to respond to the plight of victims whose rights and dignity have been violated. ISIS continues to spread terror on a massive scale in the territories it occupies. The international community pledged that appalling crimes that deeply shock the conscience of humanity must not go unpunished. As Prosecutor of the ICC, I stand ready to play my part, in an independent and impartial manner."

When so much suffering continues daily, can we wait any longer before doing all that we can to act against it?

I am aware that the UK Government are already involved in assertively tackling the aggression of Daesh and its poisonous ideology in many ways, not least through air strikes, cutting off finance and providing counter-terrorism expertise, as well as through humanitarian aid and information gathering. I commend the Government for that, but there can surely be no good reason for delaying the additional step of referring this to the UN Security Council with a view to conferring jurisdiction on the ICC to start its own unique procedures to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Some may ask what difference that would really make. It will make a real difference. Recognition of genocide brings with it obligations on the part of the international community to prevent, punish and protect. It initiates the process leading to the prosecution of perpetrators and makes it more likely that guilty individuals will be punished. It is often followed by a stronger international response both against the atrocities and in the provision of greater help for survivors with their urgent needs—something that is much needed in this case. It can facilitate reparations for survivors.

Recognising the actions of Daesh as genocide should therefore help inject further momentum into the international efforts to stop the killings. It would, I hope, lead to more active safeguarding of those members of religious minorities on the ground whose lives and very communities currently hang in the balance. It may also make potential new recruits—including those from the UK—think twice about joining Daesh, given the ramifications of being caught.

Recognition of genocide is not the only or the final action of the international community, but it is a crucial step, and one that we should make today. I recognise that conferring jurisdiction on the ICC requires the support of other members of the Security Council, but that should not stop our country from initiating the process. I add that there is precedent for the Security Council to establish a fact-finding committee of experts, so that all current evidence can be assessed and new evidence can be collected. If the motion is passed, I appeal to the Government to consider that recommendation at the Security Council.

I repeat: some may ask, "What difference will this really make?" I leave the final word to the young girl Ekhlas. To her, it would make all the difference in the world. When I asked her yesterday what her hopes were for the future, she replied,

"to see justice done for my people."

I ask Members to support the motion. In the final analysis, it is about doing justice and seeing it done.

2.49 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Between 2005 and 2010, I had the privilege of working for the fantastic Aegis Trust, which works both to commemorate and to prevent genocide.

It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is a distinguished Member of the House and a member of the International Development Committee, as well as a campaigner on human rights, particularly those of religious and other minorities. I agreed with everything that she said, which I believe has strong cross-party support. Like her, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the debate to happen. I hope that the hon. Lady will press the motion to a Division because we have an opportunity to send a really strong message from all parties that we believe that what is happening is a genocide and that the international system has a duty and responsibility to act.

In both Iraq and Syria, ethnic and other minorities have been in severe danger since the emergence of Daesh, and we have seen this once diverse region witnessing mass killings, rapes, forced conversions, and the destruction of shrines, temples and churches in the region. The hon. Member for Congleton spoke about the meeting she convened and chaired last night. I, too, listened to the powerful speech from Ekhlas, a young woman who has been through hell—something that no young person should ever have to go through. Sadly, this was not the first time that many of us have heard such testimony. Earlier this year, a meeting was convened by the hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who chairs the all-party group on the prevention of genocide, and the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) at which we heard from another teenage Yazidi woman, Nadia Murad, who had also been captured and imprisoned by Daesh. Nadia told us that she had been beaten, tortured and raped before, thankfully, she managed to escape. Her story shocked us in the same way that Ekhlas's story shocked us last night. Since her escape, Nadia has spoken here in Parliament, at the UN and with various Governments, including our own, simply to raise awareness of the plight of the Yazidis in general, and Yazidi women in particular.

Robert Ffello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I join others in highlighting the importance of this debate. Surely to goodness, though, making these poor people go through it all again when they have to provide their testimony to organisations seems harsh when those organisations should not need such persuasion. They should be capable of realising what is happening without needing to put people through the pain of having to repeat themselves over and over again.

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the evidence is there. I suppose that human testimony provides an important additional dimension, but he is right that the evidence is extremely well documented. It is estimated that more than 3,000 Yazidi women are being held against their will by Daesh.

A glance at the history of this region should surely lead us to learn some lessons today. A century ago, the Armenians and Assyrians suffered a genocide. I absolutely

agree with the hon. Member for Congleton that the policy of Daesh towards the Yazidi, Christians and other minorities amounts to genocide.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I fully intend to support and vote for this important motion. When I was in Syria two weeks ago, I interviewed about 23 or 24 people from various groups who had suffered, including Christians and Alawites. My key point in the debate is that not just Daesh was responsible, but Daesh and its allies. We should remember that when we come to bring these cases before the international court.

Stephen Twigg: The right hon. Gentleman's makes an extremely important point, which I hope will be elaborated during today's debate.

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I shall also proudly support the motion, and I hope that the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who made a powerful speech, will press it to a Division. We should follow the US Secretary of State and call this behaviour what it really is. The suffering of the Yazidis at the hands of Daesh is compounded by their suffering at the hands of the Assad regime. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we focus only on Daesh, we do a great disservice to those who are fleeing the horror of the Assad regime, whose suffering should count just as much and should demand as much attention from this Government?

Stephen Twigg: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that the Assad regime has unleashed appalling terror on its people. It is absolutely right to focus on it, as a number of us have made clear in previous debates. Before the debate on military intervention in Syria, I visited refugees in Jordan and heard at first hand the horror that they had experienced, usually at the hands of the Syrian regime, but sometimes at the hands of Daesh and their allies. Today's motion is a focused one that we can all unite in supporting, but it does not detract in any way from the importance of continuing to highlight the abuses of the Assad regime.

On the question of whether this is a genocide, let us be clear that Daesh gives the Yazidis a choice—of forced conversion, death or exile. I think that that amounts to the destruction of the foundations of the life of a group of people. United Nations international criminal tribunals have recognised sexual violence and sexual slavery, both of which we know are prevalent in Daesh's actions towards the Yazidis, as part of a genocidal process.

I want to raise a specific point about the importance of documentation. An estimated 25 mass graves containing the mortal remains of Yazidis murdered by Daesh in August 2014 have now been discovered in Sinjar in northern Iraq. These graves are not adequately protected and are being disturbed by a variety of people, including—perfectly understandably—the relatives of the victims, as well as local people and sometimes journalists. However, there is a risk that the evidence, and therefore our ability to identify the victims of Daesh, will be compromised. Yazidi campaign groups have called for the protection of the graves and an analysis of the mortal remains that they contain. An international response on this matter is needed, but has not yet materialised.

[Stephen Twigg]

The US Holocaust Museum has recommended a genocide designation partly to raise public awareness because, as its says,

“historical memory is a tool of prevention”.

The International Commission on Missing Persons is the leading organisation dedicated to addressing the issue of persons missing in the aftermath of armed conflict. In the aftermath of the war in Iraq, its Government set up a human rights ministry with a remit to consider the policy towards mass graves. Unfortunately, that ministry has been dissolved. It is clear to me that it is the ICMP that should respond to the challenge in Sinjar of identifying the victims and examining the mass graves forensically in order to preserve evidence, and I would be grateful if the Minister addressed that issue. The UK has a good track record of working with the ICMP, for example in Bosnia. Will the Government undertake to work with the ICMP and the Iraqi Government to help to protect these mass graves? It is crucial that these crimes are properly documented, especially if the motion succeeds and a referral for genocide is made to the United Nations. It is important to the families of the victims that those victims are identified as accurately as possible.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): For years, I collected evidence of Iraqi war crimes for an organisation called Indict. I was therefore involved with some of the mass graves in Iraq, many thousands of which still remain unexcavated because of security threats. I fully support my hon. Friend’s points. It is important to protect the mass graves because of the evidence contained therein.

Stephen Twigg: I thank my right hon. Friend and pay tribute to her decades of work on this crucial issue.

As part of our duty to recognise the genocide, we should prioritise protecting the evidence that will help us to bring those who are guilty of genocide to justice and to dignify the victims of these awful crimes. I support the motion and believe that the hon. Member for Congleton made a powerful case for why the House should urge the Government to refer the matter to the UN. I understand the Government’s position—I raised the matter with the Prime Minister a few weeks ago—but the way in which we recognise genocide is different from that of the Americans. The hon. Lady has come up with an intelligent and, if I may say so, ingenious way of ensuring that we get a positive response from the Government. Today’s debate also provides an opportunity for the House to send out a very powerful message on a cross-party basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) reminded us that every year in January we commemorate the Nazi holocaust. We have Holocaust Memorial Day because the message after the holocaust, at the end of the second world war, was “never again”. Tragically, since the end of the second world war and since the holocaust, we have had Cambodia, we have had Rwanda, and now we have what is happening as a result of Daesh’s actions against the Yazidis and others. We have an opportunity to heed that warning from the holocaust—“never again”—and to send the message to our own Government, and also

to Daesh and the wider international community, that we recognise this as genocide and want action to be taken against the perpetrators of that genocide.

3 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I support the motion and pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing this welcome debate.

It is profoundly disturbing that people in Iraq and Syria are being attacked for belonging to different religious and ethnic groups. Daesh has assassinated church leaders, committed torture, kidnapping, mass murders, sexual abuse and systematic rape, and brought about the sexual enslavement of women and girls. Daesh’s official propaganda videos and newspapers document its specific intent to destroy Christian and Yazidi groups in Syria and Iraq. Yesterday evening I attended a meeting at which I heard about the many cases that have been mentioned today by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), as well as about the use of former public buildings to imprison girls as young as nine, as well as women, for the purpose of systematic rape and to satisfy sexual lust.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that some of the women and girls who are abducted and then escape face stigma and discrimination when they return? Does he agree that those women and girls are victims, and that they should be given all the help and support that they need and deserve so that they can move on in life? We should also bring the perpetrators to justice.

Derek Thomas: I was left with that very thought after yesterday evening’s meeting—how can these girls and young women rebuild their lives and somehow find a place in society in which they can lead full and enriched lives? Considerable work is needed to support them.

The United Kingdom has a rich tradition of helping and advocating on behalf of the world’s most vulnerable people. Whenever a crisis or disaster occurs, the UK Government and the British people are quick to respond and lead the charge, providing humanitarian aid and financial assistance. Why is it, then, that despite being one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and having the responsibility of our unique role in the international community, we have been slow, and appear reluctant, to trigger the legal mechanisms in the international judicial system? The legal designation of genocide on the part of Daesh relies first on action by the UN Security Council and therefore requires the UK Government to show some leadership.

Since being elected, I have heard on several occasions that the Government consider the UK to be a world leader on human rights. That status risks being undermined by the apparent lack of willingness to recognise what is going on in Iraq and Syria as genocide, and to create an environment in which these acts can be prevented and the perpetrators punished. The United States Secretary of State John Kerry, the United States House of Representatives, the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe have

already described ISIS atrocities as “genocide”. It is time that the UK joined those countries in politically recognising the atrocities as such.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making good points. Does he agree that the principle of universal jurisdiction should apply to crimes against humanity that are so heinous that all states should take some responsibility?

Derek Thomas: I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Last November, I supported military action in Syria because our armed forces are able to reduce the capability and advance of Daesh, and the evil that it espouses. The debate on the day was about not just military action in Syria, but achieving a political solution in that area of the middle east. Surely recognising the behaviour of Daesh against minority groups—it is well documented and not disputed—as genocide is an important part of such a political solution.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): People talk about reconstruction, but should not part of that reconstruction involve the rehabilitation of these women, and some form of compensation for them and their families? As we heard earlier, in some communities, the stigma is there for a lifetime and cannot be got rid of. That applies particularly to Christians, who have been persecuted not only by Daesh, but in North Korea and other parts of the world.

Derek Thomas: The great challenge facing the international community is the question of how, once we have achieved peace in Syria and Iraq, we can secure it so that people can rebuild their own countries. I suspect that many people will never be able to move back to their countries simply because of their memories of the horrors that they have experienced. We as an international community must do all that we can to support those people, wherever they may end up rebuilding their lives.

The British people are horrified by what they hear and see regarding the treatment of these minority groups in Syria and Iraq, and they rightly expect the House of Commons to use whatever tools are available to work to bring that to an end and to achieve peace in this troubled part of the world. A tool that is available to us is a recognition of these evil acts as genocide, and our position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to enable the situation to be investigated by the International Criminal Court. People are being brutalised, raped and murdered, and we have a moral responsibility to seek justice for them.

3.6 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate, on her indefatigable work in this area, and on the way in which she opened the debate. I apologise for having missed the first few minutes of her speech. I am grateful to her for organising yesterday’s evidence session, to which every speaker so far has referred, and which included harrowing personal testimony about the horrors that Daesh is inflicting on people in Iraq and Syria whose religious outlook and faith are different from Daesh’s.

It is difficult to deny that what is going on meets the tests for genocide. Of course the bar is set high, and rightly so, but large numbers of Yazidis, Christians and Shi’a Muslims have been killed. It is clear—this point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg)—that that meets the test set out in the convention on the prevention and punishment of genocide, as it is action committed

“with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group”.

It is clear that that is what Daesh is seeking to do.

I think that Pope Francis was right when, last year, he described the killing of Christians in the middle east as genocide. As we have heard, the United States Secretary of State and the US Congress have recognised what is happening as genocide—last month, I think—and we should do so as well. We understand that the Government are likely to argue that it is for the judiciary, not Parliament, to make such a determination, but it is not clear to me—perhaps the Minister will be able to explain—what trigger for judicial action could lead to the view, which I think we all share, that genocide is under way. I hope very much that the House will agree to the motion, so that the Government can make the reference for which the hon. Member for Congleton has argued.

Mr Jim Cunningham: My right hon. Friend has asked a very interesting question. We should bear in mind that it was the allies who set up the Nuremberg courts. Governments can, in fact, get together and do something.

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is not clear to me how this can happen in the United Kingdom if the Government do not act. Last night we heard from a young woman, who has been referred to already, who had seen her father and brothers killed simply for being Yazidis. She herself had been raped and enslaved. She made it very clear in her evidence that what was going on was genocide, of Yazidis and also of Christians—she made it clear that Christians were included in the genocide—and as US Secretary of State John Kerry pointed out, it is certainly the case that Shi’a Muslims have been victims of genocide as well.

Rehman Chishti: The right hon. Gentleman says that Shi’a Muslims have also been killed by Daesh. Does he agree that Daesh itself has no religion, in that it kills Muslims who stand in the way of its warped ideology? Whatever a person’s faith, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, if they stand against Daesh, they will be killed.

Stephen Timms: I think the hon. Gentleman is right, but it is clear that Shi’a Muslims have been singled out. For example, in a prison just north of Mosul, nearly 600 were picked out from the rest of the inmates because they were Turkmen Shi’a Muslims, and were machine-gunned one by one. I hope that we can make a clear statement today that this is genocide, both to express solidarity with Yazidis, Christians and Shi’a Muslims who are the victims of this horrifying brutality, and to make clear our determination to ensure that those responsible face prosecution and a just punishment for what they have done.

I want to make some observations on how we can deal with the commitment to religious freedom that we all espouse. I recognise and pay tribute to the work of past and present Ministers on this, but we should be doing more. Others are doing more, and we should as

[Stephen Timms]

well. I commend to the Minister an idea that was in the last Labour party election manifesto: the Government should appoint a global envoy for religious freedom, who would report directly to the Prime Minister, and establish within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office a multi-faith advisory council on religious freedom. That would be an important way for us to acknowledge and publicly commit to the importance of British influence being wielded on this front, through the work of Ministers and the Foreign Office around the world.

The Canadian Government deserve credit for establishing an Office of Religious Freedom. It has had a positive impact, but I am sorry to hear that it is now being wound down. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom was established a long time ago, in 1998, and it is an attractive model, with commissioners appointed by the President and by the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. Last December, the commission called for the US Government to designate the Christian, Yazidi, Turkmen and Shabak communities in Iraq and Syria as victims of genocide by ISIL.

Nicola Blackwood (Oxford West and Abingdon) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a very good case. I entirely support the motion, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate. It is clear that ISIS is using rape as a strategic weapon of war. It is being used not only as a form of ethnic cleansing but as an unthinkable form of forced conversion. One victim recounted being shown an officially headed ISIS letter stating that any captured woman would become a Muslim if 10 ISIS fighters raped her. Will the right hon. Gentleman support my call to the Government today to assemble a specific preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative team to support local health and criminal justice teams in gathering evidence, so that these appalling crimes do not go unpunished?

Stephen Timms: I gladly support the hon. Lady's call.

The legislation in the US that created the Commission on International Religious Freedom also mandated the State Department to prepare an annual report on international religious freedom. The last one was published just a year ago, and I imagine that we are about to see the next one in two or three weeks' time. This means that the US Congress and Government have a serious and consistent deployment of effort to wield influence in favour of religious freedom around the world. We do that in a much more ad-hoc way; we should do it in the much more consistent way that the US example demonstrates.

I hope that the House will be united this afternoon in supporting the call by the hon. Member for Congleton for the Government to recognise what is happening to Yazidis, Christians and Shi'a Muslims in Iraq and Syria as genocide. I hope that we will be able to build on this, and that the Government will make a consistent commitment to religious freedom around the world.

3.14 pm

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for her great courage and compassion, and for

taking such a strong lead in this debate. I rise to support the motion calling on the Government to recognise the appalling acts by Daesh against the Yazidis, Christians and others as genocide. It bears repeating that genocide is defined as

"acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group".

Have we seen evidence of such intent? Yes, indisputably, in the kidnapping of women and girls; in torture, rape and sexual enslavement; in beheadings, crucifixions and mass graves; in the assassination of Church leaders and the desecration and destruction of churches, cemeteries and artefacts; and in the enforced conversions and the driving of people from their lands. We should remember the plight of the 40,000 Yazidis trapped on a mountainside in 2014, and the airdrops made to save them from certain death.

Yesterday, I heard first-hand testimony in this place from a very brave, scarred young woman who had escaped her captors. However, testimony comes not just from victims but through the self-proclamation of the perpetrators in thought, word and deed. How do they plead to the charge of the murder and subjugation of Yazidis and Christians? They claim credit.

This Government are committed to upholding human rights, supporting projects the world over and dedicating millions in funding to that end. Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right. I understand that what stands in the way of us formally calling Daesh's atrocities genocide is the question of legal standing. The term "genocide" is a legal definition and can seemingly be determined only by the International Criminal Court. So what can we do? We can call for evidence to be formally collected. We can call this in by referring the matter to the United Nations, so that it can give jurisdiction to the International Criminal Court. Daesh is indiscriminate in who it hurts, but it reserves particular cruelties for Yazidis, Christians and other minority ethnic groups. How best can we support those groups of persecuted people at this moment? We can call their suffering what it is: genocide.

3.17 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I was particularly struck by the contribution from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). If we do appoint a global envoy, may I suggest that my right hon. Friend's name be put forward? He held a similar position under Tony Blair, and I can think of no one better qualified. Much praise has already been given to the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and we should place on record the fact that in the short time she has been in the House, she has won for herself a reputation for great courage and determination as a defender of the weak, the poor and the defenceless. She has earned a great reputation, and she has done an enormous amount of good on these matters. She is ably followed by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in that regard. It is an honour to be speaking in a debate instigated by the hon. Lady. I am also glad to see two of the more humane Government Ministers on the Treasury Bench today. I am confident that they will respond in a way that reflects the emotion that is being felt right across the Chamber.

The hon. Member for Congleton listed the litany of horrors that we have heard, both last night and on so many other occasions. It seems almost otiose to repeat

them, but I shall recount one chilling and almost unbelievably brutal incident. A group of captured young men were lined up and made to strip to the waist and hold their arms up. Those who had no hair under their arms were considered young enough to be taken away, indoctrinated and turned into bombers or jihadists; those who showed signs of puberty or maturity were shot. The fact that anyone can act with such callous, utter brutality in this day and age is almost beyond belief. The fact that they do it in the name of a religion, the name of which means peace, is absolutely unforgivable, impossible to contemplate and utterly inexcusable.

To anyone out there who thinks that this ghastly, nihilist death cult can in any way triumph, may I say what a pleasure it is to see the Palmyra arch being erected in Trafalgar Square as a physical demonstration of our commitment? Daesh can crush, destroy, kill, rape or maim, but it will never, ever win. It will not be allowed to win, because if it does, darkness will descend on the earth and we will be in a terrifying place.

The motion is extremely well crafted and beautifully phrased—I do not want to heap overmuch praise on the hon. Member for Congleton, because she is already embarrassed—and using the definition within it is incredibly important. We are quite rightly concentrating on the horrific circumstances of the Yazidis, but let us not forget that Daesh has probably killed more Muslims than people from any other religious or ethnic group. It does not in any way defend or protect its co-religionists; it slaughters indiscriminately.

Robert Ffello: I gently take my hon. Friend to task for saying “indiscriminately”. Daesh does kill indiscriminately when it comes to some groups, but it absolutely discriminates when it comes to Christians and Yazidis, because it wants to exterminate them and completely eradicate them from the world.

Stephen Pound: My hon. Friend quite correctly takes me to task. I meant that Daesh’s slaughter was universal, but it does of course target some groups specifically.

At least one hon. Member present has been with me to northern Iraq, actually broken bread with members of the Assyrian Christian community, and seen the lives that they lived. Their lives were always difficult, but they were able to live and practise their faith in something approaching peace, even under the dark days of Saddam Hussein. To see those people now being hunted down, specifically discriminated against and slaughtered on the grounds of their faith is utterly chilling and terrifying. Is it not extraordinary how many of them refuse to recant or recuse, and how many say, “This is our faith”? In some cases, they die for that faith. That is extraordinary and testament to the courage that still exists. As for a specific genocide, the Jewish people are also being destroyed. The magnificent, huge Jewish community in Iraq that did so much for the country is being specifically hunted down and destroyed. We must never forget that whole groups of people are suffering.

This comes down to the word “genocide”. I have had so many debates on the Floor of the House about the Armenian genocide of 1915. I call it genocide, but I appreciate that the House chooses not to call the massacre of nearly 2 million Armenians a genocide because the word was not promulgated until 1948. In reality, however, we know it was genocide. To deny that recognition

through the use of the word to a group of people who suffered that way is a double discrimination. It is a double death, in many ways. Let us call this what it is: this is genocide, and Daesh must not be allowed to triumph and win.

What can we do in this House? We must of course make the reference to the United Nations, but I want to speak beyond this House for a moment. We are not in a hermetically sealed bubble here; we are the sounding board of the nation. People are watching us and listening to us, and it is possible that somewhere in the dark places of our cities and towns there are people who are tempted by this death cult. There may be people who, as an excuse for their own inadequacies or some compensation for their failures, like the idea that they can go and die gloriously for this twisted philosophy. I want to speak to those outside this Chamber for a second. If anyone watching thinks that the great religion of Islam is calling them to go and slaughter children or unborn babies, to rape, to loot or to murder, read the holy Koran, the hadiths and the surahs. They will not find those words in the holy book. If anyone out there huddled away in darkness actually feels tempted for a moment to leave this country, their city, or our community to go and kill before they die, please think. They have the gift of life at the present time. Hold that gift of life. It is too precious to throw away, as are the lives of others; their lives matter just as much.

Why are Christians, Muslims, Assyrian Christians, the Shabak, and Jews being persecuted in this way? What have they done to bring this Armageddon down on their heads? They have not in any way threatened forced conversions on people who subscribe to the ISIS-Daesh philosophy. This is a war of aggression that must be described by the one word—the only word—that describes it today: genocide. This House must speak to not just fellow legislators or the United Nations, but all those out there who are thinking about the issue, and who may be even remotely tempted to move into an area so dark, deep and desperate that only the worst and most serious word, one which describes the ultimate crime, accurately describes the full horror of what is happening to communities in Syria and Iraq. We all know what that word is. Let us be united in this House, and hopefully outside, and say that what is happening is genocide, and has to be recognised as such.

3.26 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I appreciate the contributions made by hon. Members so far, especially that of the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who made a powerful case. I thank the Backbench Business Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for allowing us to recognise in this debate that what we are seeing in parts of Syria and Iraq is the genocide of Yazidis, Christians and other religious minorities.

As we debate the nature of what is going on in Iraq and Syria, we must understand the nature of the organisation perpetrating the crimes. Daesh and its followers have a particular interpretation of Islam, which they use to attack those who do not subscribe to the same religion or interpretation of their religion, meaning that, in addition to the targeted persecution of Christians and Yazidis, Shi’ite Muslims are also killed and persecuted, as are many Sunni Muslims.

[Chris Green]

When the Sinjar disaster happened, 200,000 Yazidis were driven from their homes, with 40,000 trapped on Mount Sinjar, where they faced either slaughter by Daesh if they came down or dehydration and death if they remained. The number of Christians in Syria has dropped from 2 million to 1 million, and their number in Iraq has dropped from 1.4 million to fewer than 260,000.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Like other Members, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing the debate. The figures that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) cites are very much an example of the fact that Christianity is dying in its cradle, which is why so many of our constituents who are fellow Christians have contacted us about this genocide. Does he agree?

Chris Green: Absolutely. This is why many people in Britain are leading the debate, because they recognise this to be a genocide, and I appreciate that many, if not all, Members in this Chamber agree with so many of the British people.

Daesh is creating what it would deem to be the caliphate, targeting those who do not fit into that vision. We have seen the systematic persecution, torture, enslavement, rape, kidnap and murder of a number of groups solely because of their religious identity. Daesh's desire to establish a caliphate in the territory it holds is only a starting point; it is intending to draw many more Muslims from across the region, Europe and beyond. Clearly, Daesh is an expansionist organisation that has far greater territorial ambitions than to hold on to the land it currently has, and so, given the opportunity, it will take more land and subject more people to the systematic persecution and killing with which we have become familiar.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that this issue has many of the hallmarks of what we faced 75 years ago, in that Daesh is like National Socialism: it is not just a movement trying to take over one country; it is a movement trying to make a race and a belief dominant, and in doing so eliminate its opponents?

Chris Green: My hon. Friend is entirely right to speak of Daesh in this ideological way. People are getting caught up in this and are divorced from their humanity—the humanity they would have been raised with and that they see around them. More must be done to ensure that we tackle that extremism, be it online or from other sources.

The continued existence of Daesh means it will continue to be a draw and an inspiration if this caliphate does take hold and persist. To see that, we need only look at Libya, where Daesh-inspired terrorists kidnapped and beheaded 21 Coptic Christians—the anniversary of that was recently marked by a service in the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft.

Genocide is fundamentally about committing acts with the intent to destroy, in part or in whole, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. Although the classification of “genocide” is a matter of legal rather than political interpretation, for the international courts and the United

Nations Security Council, this is not simply a debate about semantics. Furthermore, it is important for the British people, through their Government and the media, to understand what is going on in the middle east. Does the term “human rights violation” really fit what we see happening to Christians in the region? Can the systematic and targeted attacks on the Yazidis really be understood by referring to them as one of a number of middle eastern “humanitarian crises”?

The UK is playing a leading role in a global coalition of 66 countries and international organisations responding to Daesh's inhumanity, but I join the voices of many in this House by asking the Government to make a referral to the UN Security Council. A referral from the Security Council is the only means by which the International Criminal Court can investigate and prosecute these acts of genocide. Genocide is understood by most to be the gravest crime against humanity, and this is what is being perpetrated by Daesh. We have a responsibility as a democratic nation to apply pressure to the international judicial bodies.

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): In an impressive speech, the hon. Gentleman has, like other Members, used the word “genocide” to describe the treatment of Christians and Yazidis. Does he think it would be helpful and possibly powerful if there were a vote on this motion, so that this House confirmed its definition of the treatment of the Christians and Yazidis as genocide?

Chris Green: I shall end by saying how much I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that this House needs to have a vote so that we can make that point loud and clear.

3.34 pm

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak on a motion that is of supreme importance to me personally. I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate and echo her thanks for the work done in the House of Lords in the past few years to bring this issue to the attention of the UK population and us in this place. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place.

I wanted to write a speech that would provide evidence that this was a genocide, but that has been covered by other Members, including the hon. Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) and for Congleton. Therefore, I will focus my remarks on my experience and why this subject is so important to me, and why it is so important to us as a humanitarian country—a country that believes in human rights.

As a Member of Parliament, I have, over the past eight or nine months, travelled to Rojava, in Syria, to the Kurdistan Regional Government region of Iraq and to Turkey. I have been to the refugee camps of the Yazidi people: I have been to the Nowruz camp in Rojava and to refugee camps outside Batman and Diyarbakir in Turkey. I have spoken to many men, women and children—Yazidis and Alevis—who have been affected by the actions of Daesh. Their lives have been inexorably and demonstrably changed by what has

happened to them in their communities and in their countries. It is that experience that brings me here to the Chamber today to speak and to show how what is happening is genocide.

I was in Rojava for eight days. I met members of the organisation Yekitiya Star, to which other Members have referred, in which Kurdish women—Muslims, not Yazidi women—work with Yazidi women to try to bring back those women who have been abducted, raped and brutalised. They have experienced barbarism. Those women who have had these terrible experiences—the worst experiences—are ashamed to return to their communities because of what has happened to them. Children of nine and 10 have been raped and impregnated. They are victims of a brutal system that demeans religions and demeans people. The system is about bringing them to account. Those women spoke powerfully to all of us who were there in Rojava. They told us that people from the Kurdish movement in Rojava were buying back women at auctions, using the resources of Rojava to bring women back from slavery. Sometimes they were found out. Sometimes Daesh worked out that they were trying to stop the enslavement by buying back the women. In such cases, those women disappeared. These are powerful stories of what is happening to women and men in that area.

I had a perfectly crafted speech to read out, but I have decided to speak freely. Yesterday, I listened to the testimony of Ekhlās, a 15-year-old who was abducted from her house. I will not paraphrase what she said, as I took down her words directly. I will read out her testimony, as her voice and the voice of the Yazidi and Alevi women deserve to be heard in this place. If anyone wants to intervene on me, could they do so now, as I will read out Ekhlās's words.

"There was a knock at our door. We were targeted because our religion and belief is different from theirs, and our humanity is different from theirs, because we believe in the Angel Taus. In our religion, we do not believe in rape. We do not believe that innocents should be killed, or that a child should be cut up and his mother forced to eat him. My father and my two brothers were killed in front of me. They took me away from my mother. He grabbed my arm and my leg and then he raped me. He was 32 years old; I was 15. After they raped me, they took my friend and they raped her. I could hear her shouting, 'Where is the mercy? Where is the mercy? There must be some mercy in their hearts.' They killed the men and they took the girls. Any girls over the age of nine were raped—like me. What does a nine year understand about sex or rape? What did she do to deserve this? I saw this nine-year-old girl raped with my own eyes, by not one man but several. I saw her die"

because her body could not handle the brutality.

"We saw a two-year-old boy killed, then ground in to meat and fed to his mother who did not know what she was eating."

Some younger girls were taken. She said:

"Some young girls were impregnated, and were only children. What are they going to do as pregnant children? There is so much brainwashing. Daesh tell you your religion and brainwash children".

They arm them, and they

"put them in front of their own parents and demand that they kill them. Listen to me, I am begging you. Listen to me, listen to what I am telling. Help us. I beg of you. Listen to me. Help the girls who are still in captivity. Let us all stand hand-in-hand and take a stand. This is a genocide against Christians and Yazidis"—

and others—

"This is about dignity, this is about humanity in dignity. If you are a mother, a father, a brother, a sister, a human, do not close your ears. I plead with you, please listen."

This is a genocide.

3.41 pm

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): That was a very moving speech by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry).

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate.

"We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women. If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves at the slave market."

That is Daesh. For the members of this death cult, the destruction of a way of life, an ideology and a set of beliefs that is not theirs is both their ultimate and sole aim. Daesh is self-defining as a committer of genocide. To achieve that, its members rape, enslave, and decapitate. Their victims are Muslims, Kurds, Yazidis and Christians.

The Syrian Centre for Policy Research estimates that in Syria, approximately 470,000 people have been killed either directly or indirectly as a result of the five years of civil war. What is most shocking is that the United Nations has given up estimating the number, because the numbers are so vast that it cannot provide verifiable statistics. Whatever the number of those killed, millions more have been displaced and lost. Each cowardly act of death and destruction is just that—a cowardly act—but put together, these acts make up a reign of terror, targeted at a specific group of people. This is the systematic murder—genocide—of the people who form these communities, the cultural heritage that has tied them together for generations and the values and beliefs that define them.

I heard first hand what Daesh do. I was lucky—or unlucky—enough to meet a young, brave Yazidi woman called Nadia Murad, in a meeting co-ordinated by my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), for which I give him credit. She had been taken by Daesh as a sex slave. Her race was justification enough for the horrific way in which she, her family and her community were mistreated and destroyed.

We failed to prevent genocide in Bosnia. In Germany, the Nazis were appeased while they targeted Jews. The death cult of misfits that we face now cannot be allowed to get away with this any longer. In Iraq and Syria, Daesh's statements have taken credit for the mass murder and persecution of Christians and have shown its clear intent to purge Christian communities from the area it claims as its own. As a country, we show a weakness by failing to acknowledge the extent of the persecution against Yazidis, Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities. We are failing the victims of deliberate and targeted persecution, where race, faith and gender are all the excuse that Daesh needs to find new and innocent targets for mass murder. If we do not recognise these acts as genocide, we effectively declare that we are not willing to take all action necessary to bring it to an end and to bring the perpetrators to justice, as they deserve.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): A week after the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) brought Nadia Murad to the House of Commons, I was fortunate enough to bring her to the Public Gallery here. In fact, she went up there with my wife who, incidentally, is the daughter of holocaust survivors. Afterwards, as I am sure the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber will agree, Nadia was so grateful.

[Robert Jenrick]

I could not understand why she was so grateful to us, but I think it was because she had faith in this House. She genuinely believed that we would act to help her and her people. She was not one of our jaded constituents. She thought that this House meant something, and that we would do something to help her and her people.

Nusrat Ghani: My hon. Friend is right. As the oldest democracy in the world, we have a responsibility to Nadia Murad also.

We would be complicit in overlooking the scale of criminality that is ongoing and largely unpunished. That is not a position that a country steadfast in its commitment to fairness, freedom and justice should be relaxed about. The UN Security Council's declaring these acts to be genocide is key to preventing the spread of terrorism and radicalisation, and it allows an international criminal tribunal to be set up to try the terrorists who are committing these heinous acts and to bring them to true justice. That is why I support the motion.

On 12 April, when the Minister was challenged on the issue, he said:

"I too believe that acts of genocide have taken place".—[*Official Report*, 12 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 165.]

I hope we can move on from that statement today.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. I was present when the Minister gave that response. Does my hon. Friend hope, as I do, that this afternoon the whole House will be given the opportunity to send a powerful message by voting and being united in that vote, and inviting Ministers and Parliamentary Private Secretaries—those on the payroll—to vote as well, to send a strong message that what is happening is genocide?

Nusrat Ghani: My hon. Friend makes a powerful statement. I, too, hope that is the case. Sending cross-party support today will also be a very strong message.

Previous generations have already struggled to explain Bosnia, Rwanda and the Nazi persecutions. Now it is our turn to decide whether we will have to explain to future generations what we did or did not do against the death cult Daesh. Historical memory can be a tool of prevention, but it is rare that society uses it in that way. Let us be the generation that does use it as a tool of prevention. The Nazis wrote history, the Bosnian Serbs wrote history, and Daesh is currently destroying and rewriting history all at once. Not satisfied with destroying the past and present of races, faiths and genders, it is destroying the future of those communities too. It is our collective job, as a member of the UN family of nations, to make sure that those communities are not just a blot of ink in the story of Daesh.

3.48 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani). I agree with every word she said. We have had a fantastic debate today and, like her, I hope the Government will support the motion so that we can move forward and ensure that action is taken as a consequence of the debate.

Many hon. Members have already congratulated the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on tabling the motion. She is to be congratulated. We should be proud that we are debating a matter of such importance in the House today.

We have a moral responsibility to speak out against the crimes of genocide that have taken place against Christians, Yazidis and other ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and Syria. We should be exercising that responsibility today by passing the motion, which calls upon the UK Government to make an immediate referral to the UN Security Council to grant the International Criminal Court the mandate to bring the perpetrators to justice.

As the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) recently reminded the House, the allied Governments made a joint statement on 17 December 1942 condemning genocide and committing themselves to bringing the Nazis to justice for their crimes. Just as we stood against genocide then and made sure that those responsible would face justice, we must show the required leadership today when faced with genocide in Syria and Iraq. The Government need to show leadership in pressing for recognition of the fact that genocide has taken place, and we must all reflect on why, on a moral, ethical and humanitarian basis, action must be taken.

Genocide is understood as the deliberate, systematic extermination of national, racial, political or cultural groups, and that is exactly what has been taking place. The ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria have seen the deliberate targeting of Yazidis, Christians and other minority groups. The Yazidi town of Sinjar was captured by Daesh in August 2014, and the seizure of the town and the surrounding districts unleashed the ethnic cleansing of the Yazidi people. A UN report tells us that 200,000 Yazidis were driven from their homes after the fall of Sinjar. At least 40,000 were trapped on Mount Sinjar; cut off by Daesh, these people were without food, water or shelter. As has been said, the choice for many was slaughter by Daesh if they fled or dehydration if they stayed.

The UN has estimated that 5,000 men were massacred and 7,000 women were enslaved in that action. The women captured by Daesh were sold into sexual slavery, and many were displaced throughout Daesh-controlled territory. As we have heard, the testimony of survivors—Yazidis and Christians—tells of the horrific and daily violence carried out against them, and that has been a deliberate policy on the part of Daesh.

Last night, as we have heard, a young Yazidi woman, Ekhlās, came to Parliament to tell her story. It was a most harrowing account of what had happened to her and her family—a graphic description of what has happened not only to her, but to thousands of other people in Syria and Iraq. Before Ekhlās spoke, she was introduced by a human rights lawyer, Jacqueline Isaac. Jacqueline spoke of the fear of the knock on the door by fighters from Daesh, which would lead to people being categorised into different groups, with murder, rape and hostage-taking commonplace. That is exactly what took place with the Nazis in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. That resulted in the UK Government signalling their intent in 1942 to bring the perpetrators to justice. If that was right in 1942, it is right in this House today, in 2016.

When we close this debate, I hope that the House and the Government will unite in supporting the motion, and that we can do the right thing for the Yazidis, Christians and other minorities who have suffered the wholesale removal of their communities from the region.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Does he agree that although these minorities are being persecuted because of their religion, the debate should not be about advocating one religion or another? This is about the basic human right for all of us to pursue any faith we choose or none. Does he recognise that there are many people of different faiths in the House, but that there are also people of no faith, who will defend to the bitter end the right of others to exercise their faith and to do so without persecution?

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend makes a good point, which has not been made so far. As a practising Christian, I am happy to accept everyone's right to express their religion, whatever it is, or none at all. It is important that in this Chamber today we stand up for everybody.

When Ekhlās closed her submission last night, she implored us to help—she said, “I’m asking for help.” Our responsibility to Ekhlās and everybody else means that we must heed that plea. What will we do for Ekhlās? We must stand up and support the call for the UN Security Council to confer jurisdiction on the International Criminal Court so that we can take action.

The peshmerga attacked the place where Ekhlās was being held, and she managed to escape, before being rescued by Yazidis. This brave young woman, who has faced so much and witnessed such utter horrors, wants to become a lawyer and to fight for women's rights. Maybe, just maybe, if she fulfils that ambition, she can play her part in the legal team that brings her persecutors to justice. We must help her and those like her who have suffered from the genocide.

The situation in Syria and Iraq is catastrophic and has led to one of the worst humanitarian crises we have ever witnessed. ADF International says that the number of Christians in Syria has fallen from 2 million in 2011 to 1 million in 2015. The number of Christians in Iraq has fallen from 1.4 million to 260,000.

Daesh has documented in its official propaganda its specific intention to destroy Christian groups in Syria and Iraq. In February 2015, Daesh seized 35 Assyrian Christian villages and kidnapped more than 300 Christians, with more than 1,200 fleeing to safety. Thirty-five villages were cleared and deserted in that one act alone.

The atrocities satisfy the criteria established in the convention on genocide. Recognising that genocide has taken place and signalling that those responsible will face justice is an important tool in the fight to defeat Daesh. We need to send a clear message to all the minorities that are being attacked that we are not going to abandon them. We and other nations must stand shoulder to shoulder at the United Nations and show our resolve.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I agree with my hon. Friend that the perpetrators of this genocide should be brought to justice in the International Criminal Court. Does he agree that there also needs to be an international effort to find the Yazidi women captured by Daesh?

Ian Blackford: I fully agree. The young woman we met last night is a perfect example of that: the actions of the peshmerga managed to free her and she got into the safe hands of the Yazidis. We need to support the

peshmerga and other like-minded people to make sure that we can get to safety the women and men captured by Daesh.

I hope that when the Minister sums up the debate, he makes it clear that the Government support the motion. Others have already taken a similar step. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recognised genocide in a resolution passed on 27 January. That was followed by a European Parliament resolution on 4 February, which recognised the crimes as genocide and sought a referral to the International Criminal Court. On 14 March, the US House of Representatives recognised the crimes against humanity and of genocide. Three days later, the US Secretary Of State announced that the US had determined that the Daesh actions against the Yazidis, Christians and other minorities constituted genocide.

Why have the UK Government been silent and why has no action been taken? The Foreign Secretary has said that the Government support the efforts of the International Criminal Court to end impunity for the most serious crimes of international concern by holding perpetrators to account, but the Court has to be enabled to do that, and the UN Security Council has to provide that enablement. We keep hearing about the importance of the UK's membership of the Security Council, so today is the United Kingdom's chance to show leadership and to take action—to stand up for Ekhlās and to respond to her plea for help for all those who have suffered. Are we going to do the right thing in 2016, just as we did in 1942, or are we just going to stand back, wring our hands and watch as Daesh reaps its bitter harvest?

The UK is a signatory to the convention on genocide. We have an obligation to recognise what has taken place. I hope and pray that this afternoon the House, collectively and united, does the right thing.

3.58 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): I join others in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on her tremendous efforts in securing the debate.

Words matter, and saying that Daesh is committing acts of genocide against Christians and Yazidis is not just a statement of fact, because it also forces us to realise that genocide is, unfortunately, an inherent part of Daesh's depraved operations. The acts that have been mentioned today, including the assassination of church leaders, systematic torture and mass murder, mock crucifixions, sexual enslavement and systematic rape, which the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) spoke about in shocking, appalling and powerful detail, are genocidal not just by consequence, but by design. That distinction is clear in Daesh's propaganda sheet “Dabiq”, the latest edition of which attacks any form of pluralism or tolerance as being in direct contradiction to its twisted view of Islam, stating:

“the death of a single Muslim, no matter his role in society, is more grave...than the massacre of every kafir on earth.”

The same article explicitly clarifies:

“Any disbeliever standing in the way of the Islamic State will be killed, without pity or remorse, until...governance is entirely for Allah.”

Such sentiments are incompatible with the presence of minority groups in Daesh territory, and we are seeing a

[David Warburton]

concentrated effort by Daesh not only to obliterate any minority presence, but to deny the cultural history of the territory that it seeks to occupy.

The number of Christians in Syria has halved, and in Iraq it has dropped from 1.4 million to just 240,000. Perhaps even more striking is that the historical settlement of 60,000 Christians in Mosul has entirely disappeared. Along with that, there has been a targeted destruction of sites, including St Elijah's monastery, historic libraries and any representational art. Edicts have instructed Daesh troops to engage in the wholesale destruction of any non-Islamic sites of worship.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an important point, and Daesh's ignorance and denial of the historical and cultural nature of the area is crucial. I studied the early caliphate, and in that period many leaders of the Muslim world described the classical world that they took over as a garden protected by their spears. Is it not tragic that Daesh's perversion of Islam is so different from the vision set out by those early caliphs?

David Warburton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is not only tragic but bizarre and unimaginable that Daesh has taken its own religion and turned it into something so distinctly different from what was intended.

Robert Jenrick: Last year I and several other Members persuaded the Government to create a £30 million cultural protection fund, and they are in the process of deciding the criteria for how that will be spent. Does my hon. Friend agree that some of the money should go to the heritage and sites of persecuted religious minorities, such as Christian and Yazidi groups in Syria and Iraq, to protect historic sites, churches and manuscripts for future generations?

David Warburton: I could not agree more. The cultural demolition is explicitly linked to the genocidal aims that we are discussing.

To say that Christians and Yazidis are victims of genocide is not to minimise the terrible suffering of others in the region. In a debate held on a similar motion in another place, Lord Bates was entirely right to point out that it is often Muslims who suffer the greatest brutality at the hands of Daesh. Over the past six months, the United States Congress, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the US Secretary of State have all declared that Daesh is committing genocide.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the bodies that have declared that genocide is being committed. Having heard from Daesh itself, and having been witness to so many young Yazidi women who come here to tell us their story, what more could it take for this House to form the view that this is genocide, and to have the courage to stand up and say so?

David Warburton: I agree with the hon. Lady, and the speech by the hon. Member for Glasgow East gave us an immensely powerful first-person perspective.

I completely understand the Government's approach, which is that a decision on whether the word "genocide" is applicable is for international judicial bodies, rather than Governments or other non-judicial bodies. However, as the open letter from a group of peers to the Prime Minister on 18 February stated,

"there is nothing to prevent Her Majesty's Government from forming and acting upon its own view".

A vote for the motion would begin the process of a possible referral to the International Criminal Court from the UN Security Council. It would send a signal to the perpetrators that they will be brought to justice and it would, perhaps most crucially of all, act as a spur to the other 127 signatories to the 1948 convention to add their support. An émigré writer of a previous generation who fled persecution said:

"Words without experience are meaningless."

The reverse is also true. When hundreds of thousands of people are suffering in such a way, we must apply the only word that is adequate for the job, and support this important motion.

4.5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Pakistan religious minorities, and of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief—for those with Christian beliefs, those with other beliefs and those with no beliefs, who the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) mentioned in his intervention.

The organisation that we are talking about has many names—IS, Islamic State, ISIL, ISIS and Daesh—and many guises but, above all, it is made up of systematic, psychopathic serial killers. The subject of the debate is clear: it is about ethnic and religious minorities such as the Yazidis and the Christians. I am pleased to see the Minister in the Chamber and look forward to hearing his response. We have talked about the matter this year on a personal basis. I hope that today Members will express ourselves clearly about what we wish to do regarding the word "genocide". We have heard many powerful, passionate and focused speeches, and I particularly want to highlight the speech made by the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who set the scene very well. I am pleased to have her not only as a colleague, but as a friend.

The Daesh atrocities rival any atrocity in modern history. Too many people turn a blind eye or offer only weak words, and some even attempt to rationalise Daesh's actions. Strong words have been spoken in the House today, and what this self-declared state is doing is absolutely disgraceful. Will it care if its actions are called genocide or not? No, it will not, but we in this House and in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland should set the bar for the rest of the international community by saying that this cannot go on without it being condemned to the utmost and labelled appropriately as what it is—genocide. I correspond with some 90 churches in my constituency, and they feel very strongly about this brutality, violence, depravity and evil. We must be ever mindful of the fact that those who survive physically are traumatised forever.

Islamic State militants are selling abducted Iraqi children at markets as sex slaves and killing other youth by means including crucifixion or burial alive. They are

given a “convert or die” ultimatum—that is genocide. Twenty-one Egyptian Christians were kidnapped in the Libyan coastal city of Sirte in two separate incidents in December 2014 and January 2015. In February 2015, they were beheaded on a Libyan beach in a chilling propaganda video produced by the self-declared Islamic State—that is genocide. After capturing the key strategic town of al-Baghdadi, which is just five miles from the al-Asad air base, Daesh rounded up 45 civilians from the town, some of whom were thought to be Iraqi security forces and their families, and burned them all alive—that is genocide.

On 10 June 2014, Daesh took some 600 male prisoners into the desert near Mosul in Iraq and initiated a mass execution. Approximately 30 men survived by rolling into the mass grave with the dead bodies. The pictures are absolutely chilling and call to mind terrifying memories of the worst genocide of the 20th century. A survivor recounts a Daesh leader saying:

“The Sunnis must stand on one side. The Shi’a, Kurds and Yazidis must stand on the other. If I find out that a Shi’a is among the Sunnis, I am going to cut off his head with a sheet of metal.”

Such words are spoken by those in Daesh who have a hatred for everyone who is not of their kind.

The men were interrogated about their beliefs, names, home towns and other details. Witnesses said that about 100 Shi’a prisoners were successful at pretending to be Sunni to escape further violence. The remaining Shi’a, Kurdish, Christian and Yazidi prisoners were then searched. Everything was taken from them: their money, their watches, their rings, their jewellery and their identity cards. One survivor said:

“The moment they made us give up all of our possessions, I knew they were going to kill us.”

The prisoners had been given no food or water for 24 hours, but Daesh militants promised them supplies as they drove deeper into the desert. When they arrived, the militants told them,

“you’ll have water in paradise.”

The militants then made the men kneel in a single line along the rim of a curved ravine six to 12 feet deep. They were asked to number themselves off, with each person forced to

“raise his hand and say his number.”

Survivors said that many of the gunmen were young. Some appeared nervous, while others were excited, including some who joked at the end of the count, when they shot the prisoners, that they had “a nice-size head”, and some who said that they were going to “eat well tonight”. That is genocide.

Further documented incidents include the 1,700 captives executed in Tikrit in Iraq, the 650 people executed in Mosul in Iraq, the 1,000 Turks who were massacred, including some 100 children, and the more than 2,000 women and children who have been kidnapped. In the UN’s words, this is

“systematic hunting of members of ethnic and religious groups”—that is genocide. Women have been raped and sold, and young boys have been executed. Girls have been enslaved for sexual abuse, and children have been recruited as suicide bombers. There are more than 1 million refugees, half of them children.

I am conscious of the time, but it might help the Minister—I hope it does—if I mention what has happened in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Assembly asked the Attorney General for Northern Ireland for direction on

“whether the violence currently being perpetrated against Christians and other minority religious groups (notably Yazidis and members of certain Islamic communities) by Daesh...in territory controlled by them in Syria and Iraq constitutes genocide within the meaning of the December 9 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, ‘the Genocide Convention’.”

He replied:

“If behaviour can be properly classified as genocide then a range of international law consequences ensue. The first of these consequences is the activation of the twofold undertaking by contracting parties contained in Article 1 of the Genocide Convention to prevent and to punish genocide. Article 1 reads as follows:

“The Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and to punish.”

The day of reckoning for Daesh is here. The Attorney General for Northern Ireland has said:

“it seems to me that actual or potential victims of genocide have a right to truthful acknowledgement of their circumstances and that governments are under a corresponding duty to make such acknowledgements...I have no hesitation in saying that the violence perpetrated against these protected groups does constitute genocide.”

I hope that the Minister will keep in mind the words of the Attorney General for Northern Ireland and what he has decreed in Northern Ireland because, legally, it might help the Minister to make a decision on this matter.

Amnesty International’s publication “Ethnic Cleansing on a Historic Scale: Islamic State’s Systematic Targeting of Minorities in Northern Iraq” details, with eyewitness testimony, several more Daesh atrocities in Iraq. At least 100 men and boys have been herded together and shot to death in Kocho. Scores of men and boys have been summarily executed in Qiniyeh. More than 50 men have been rounded up and shot dead near Jdali. The dead boys, the raped girls and the captive villagers gunned down for refusing to renounce their faith are the people who die every day at the hands of ISIS or Daesh.

This is not a horror movie—I wish it was. This is taking place just a plane flight away. It is time we called this what it is: it is systematic, it is calculated, and it is genocide.

4.13 pm

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): It is a great pleasure to take part in this extremely important debate. The Government must be in no doubt that if the motion passes on a vote, it cannot be ignored. Other Back-Bench motions come before the House, but this one is of the very highest seriousness and importance, and we will not let it be ignored. We will return to it again and again in this House until the Government properly make a justified referral to the Security Council.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)—she has already received enormous tributes, and she should receive more. She is very much the voice of the voiceless and a champion of human dignity. It must be said that the same is true of the noble Lord Alton, who is watching in the Gallery. He has done sterling work in trying to encourage, cajole

[Mr David Burrowes]

and entice the Government to do what is right in every sense. This is about being a voice. Indeed, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) made a passionate speech, not least by bringing to bear the voice of those with the harrowing experience of being the victim of the appalling actions of ISIS.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) mentioned the replica of the Palmyra arch, which hon. Members can see when they go up to Trafalgar Square. I had the privilege of seeing it unveiled. The head of antiquities from Syria made it clear that he was proud that we were able to stand in solidarity with the Syrians who have been the victims of appalling crimes. The replica of the Palmyra arch provides a declaration of that solidarity. Today, we are standing in solidarity by declaring that this is a genocide. However, he and the victims would want us to do more, and the motion will do more, because it has teeth and aims to ensure that there are legal obligations.

The hon. Gentleman said that the message of the Palmyra arch is that ISIS cannot win. The motion is about saying that it cannot win, that it needs to be held to account and that there must be justice. The head of UNESCO said that the destruction not only of the arch, but of churches, monasteries and shrines, which has affected many religious groups, is cultural genocide. These are war crimes and ISIS needs to be held to account. The Government have recognised that there needs to be an accountability mechanism for cultural destruction, which is why I look forward to the Queen's Speech including the belated ratification of The Hague convention and its second protocol, the purpose of which is to show that there will be accountability for cultural destruction.

It would be extraordinary if we ratified The Hague convention and provided for accountability for cultural destruction, but did not ensure that there was accountability for acts of genocide. We need to ensure that the declaration that ISIS cannot win, which is being made in Trafalgar Square, is made again today by our passing the motion unanimously. We must also take action.

I will not repeat the examples that have been mentioned, but they make the clear case that there is a deliberate and ruthless targeting not only of culture, but of history and people, whether they be Yazidis, Christians or other religious groups. There is kidnapping and enslavement. A recent UN report stated that at least 3,500 people have been enslaved. Many people have been executed—this is on jihadist websites—with that chilling demand, “Convert or die.”

We are not simply acting in solidarity or making a position statement. It is important that we hold the Government to account, as is our duty as parliamentarians. What have the Government done over the many months in which this demand has been made? There was a concern that the Government's response would have to be categorised as “walk on by”. I say that with sadness, but if one goes back to 16 December, the noble Baroness Anelay of St Johns gave a parliamentary answer in which she said:

“We are not submitting any evidence of possible genocide against Yazidis and Christians to international courts, nor have we been asked to.”

It would be extraordinary if our Government simply sat on their hands and did not make any referrals. There are obligations on the Government under the genocide convention to take a view and act upon it.

I welcome the fact that the Government have moved on since then. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who will respond to the debate, said this month:

“we are helping to gather evidence that could be used to hold Daesh to account appropriately.”

I ask him to confirm that the Government are doing that, and that they are referring evidence that comes forward to the Security Council.

How else could we categorise the Government's response? In some ways, they are going around in circles. As we have heard, the Minister has stated:

“We as the Government are not the prosecutor, the judge or the jury. Such matters are determined first in the international courts and in the United Nations Security Council”.—[*Official Report*, 12 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 165.]

However, such matters are not determined by the courts first and then in the Security Council; the Security Council has a key role to play. The Minister gave himself a way through this. The Security Council can make a referral, and that is what the motion is about. The Government cannot simply defer to the international courts and go around in circles.

Many noble Lords and eminent Queen's counsel wrote a letter to the Prime Minister making that very point, saying:

“there is nothing to prevent Her Majesty's Government forming and acting upon its own view.”

The Government have decided not to take a view for policy reasons—I do not understand exactly why—unlike other Governments and authorities. They could ensure that there was a referral through the Security Council mechanism, as a permanent member. I therefore repeat the question of those eminent Lords and QCs: why will the Government not

“reconsider its position and...clarify why it operates a policy of refusing to recognize acts of genocide, when so many other nations do not?”

That is the first question, but we cannot leave it at that. The Government have to ask themselves—the Minister has to explain—why they are not making proper plans and using their means to go to the Security Council to ensure that there is a referral to the International Criminal Court. Is the concern not necessarily about the evidence of genocide, but the legal consequences? Is it the concern, which was mentioned earlier, that this will, quite properly, have implications for victims, who at long last would have the assurance that there will be justice and that, if it can be achieved, they will see the perpetrators held to account before a court? Those people would also, importantly, have the opportunity to be recognised as victims so that there could be reparation and restoration—not in a digital form, as with the Palmyra arch, but in a real form for their lives that have been seriously damaged. There are also implications of settlement and safety for refugees, particularly from religious minorities, who are struggling to find proper routes of safe passage. Is that the Government's concern? Please assuage my fears and say that it is not.

Today we are making a declaration of solidarity. We are all saying to the Government that they must hold ISIS to account for the gravest of grave crimes, namely genocide. Be assured that we will not let the Government ignore the motion. They must take action for the good of all the groups we have mentioned, and the good of the whole civilised world.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I would rather not restrain this important and sombre debate, but I now have to reduce the time limit for speeches to five minutes.

4.21 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Like others, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for giving the House the opportunity to respond to the pleas that we have heard from a number of Yazidi young women who have come here to tell us not just of their experience, but of the plight of those like them who remain in captivity.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) gave a passionate speech, in which she quoted Ekhlās's words yesterday. I too had written down those words. As other Members have said, we have heard from Nadia Murad, who, in a meeting hosted by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and sponsored by the all-party parliamentary group on human rights, told us of her experiences. We also heard from Salwa Khalaf Rasha, in March. I pay tribute to all hon. Members who have hosted women witnesses who have come to give us their testimony: the right hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman), and the hon. Members for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Elluman), for Newark (Robert Jenrick), and for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who has such experience in the region.

This is what we heard from Nadia:

"Islamic State had one intention, to destroy the Yazidi identity by force, rape, recruitment of children and the destruction of holy sites they captured, especially against Yazidi women where they used rape as a means of destruction for Yazidi women and girls, ensuring these women will never return to a normal life. But it was not only me who suffered, it was a collective suffering. The Islamic State gave us two choices, convert or die. For those who accepted to convert, fearing for their lives, their men were killed, women were enslaved and children were recruited."

She went on to speak of the desperate journeys that many people tried to make. She not only appealed to us to recognise the genocide happening to her people—and other minorities, including Christians in Iraq and Syria—for what it is, but asked:

"Open your borders for my community, we are victims of a genocide and we have the right to seek a safe place where our dignity will be preserved. We request that to give Yazidis and other threatened minorities the choice to resettle, especially the victims of human trafficking, as Germany did."

Nadia wrote to us only this week, again not just asking us to recognise what the Yazidis are suffering as genocide, but asking the UK to undertake a programme similar to that in Germany, where 1,000 Yazidi women and girls were admitted for treatment and counselling on special two-year visas.

As I said, we also heard from Salwa Khalaf Rasha, who told us how she and other people contemplated suicide as they were being separated into different groups at 3 o'clock in the morning in a sports hall in Mosul, after a day of humiliating and molested travel by bus. They knew what was happening. She told us how, some days later after even more treatment like this, a 17-year-old girl, Gilan from Tal Afar, committed suicide. After she learned that Daesh had killed her family, she cut her wrists. In revenge, the Daesh terrorists took her dead body and threw it to the dogs.

We know from all that we have heard that this is indeed genocide. We should not be cavilling, quibbling or hesitating about this. We know that the depraved crimes of Daesh are unspeakable, but that should not mean that we should fail to call this the genocide that it truly is. According to the UN, genocide is killing members of a specific group, causing grievous harm, deliberately inflicting conditions designed to bring about the group's destruction, preventing births within the community, or forcibly transferring its children.

We know that those who are perpetrating these crimes are doing so to exterminate and extinguish a people. We know that they mean what they are doing to be genocide, with all its bloody and awful consequences. We know that those who are suffering from these terrible crimes know that it is genocide and know that it is meant as genocide. Why should we as a Chamber hesitate to say, "We know what the word genocide means, and we know it is being committed against the Yazidi people"?

4.26 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I agree with all of that, and I want to follow on directly from the speech given by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes). This is a vital motion and an important moment for the Minister. We want no more weasel words; we want him to accept this motion; we want him to accept what this motion calls for in clear and explicit terms, which is for the Government

"to make an immediate referral to the UN Security Council with a view to conferring jurisdiction upon the International Criminal Court".

The Government's attitude up to now has, I agree, been based on precedent, but I do not believe that precedent is enough in this case, given the horrors that are going on in the world. I would be delighted if the Minister—he can intervene now if he wants—accepted the motion on behalf of the Government. If he does, we have already won this debate, but there is absolutely no point in the Minister using his time to condemn Daesh, and mention all its appalling acts, only to say at the end of his speech, "I am very sorry, but because of legal precedent"—my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate, referred to the circularity of the argument—"the Government think it is for the court to take the initiative and that it is inappropriate for the British Government to take action."

Mr Burrowes: There is one person who is waiting, and who says that he is there, ready to play his full part according to the proper statute: the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. He is waiting for a referral from the Security Council so that he can investigate properly and independently and hold these people to account.

Sir Edward Leigh: Absolutely. I see in his place the Minister, who is listening to what we are all saying. I know that he is about to deliver a strong and powerful speech. I know that he will not just condemn Daesh, but say “Yes, we have listened to the debate in the House of Commons, and we will act by making a referral to the Security Council.”

Let us look at the facts and the pure legal argument, which has nothing to do with the motion. The criteria set forth in the 1948 convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide are absolutely clear. The crime is defined as acts

“committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”.

The convention then lists five qualifying conditions:

“(a) Killing members of the group;

(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

It is clear—it is blatantly obvious—that conditions (a), (b) and (c) are in effect, and that those things are going on in the areas under Daesh’s control. It is vital to recall that even if just one of those conditions is met, the declaring of acts as genocidal is allowed. On the basis of the clear legal criteria, there is absolutely no doubt that genocide is being committed. It is therefore the duty of Her Majesty’s Government, in terms of humanity and not just in terms of legal arguments, to do their duty now, to stop prevaricating, to accept the motion, and to refer this to the Security Council.

It would be intolerable for the Government to whip against the motion and force members of the payroll to vote against their own consciences, or abstain. It would also be intolerable if the Government, by some sleight of hand, allowed the motion to be agreed to, and then said that it was not binding on them. If the motion is agreed to—I sincerely hope that the Minister will not speak against it, and that it will not be whipped against—the House of Commons will have spoken, and the Government should act.

So many powerful speeches have been made, but the most powerful of all was by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry). Why was it so moving? Why was it so powerful? Because it consisted of the explicit personal experience of someone who talked about girls of nine being raped and killed by this murderous cult.

I myself have visited the area. Of all the Christian villages that I visited, 19 have been taken over by Daesh, and only one remains. We visited the tomb of the Prophet Nahum, and we saw what he had written:

“Your people are scattered on the mountains with none to gather them”,
and

“The gates of your land are wide open to your foes.”

Enough is enough. I call on the Government to act.

4.32 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I had not intended to speak in the debate, because, as we have just heard from the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward

Leigh), the speeches have been so powerful, so poignant and so compelling that I felt that I could not add very much. For many years, however, I gathered evidence of Iraqi war crimes, and in the Chamber, week after week, I argued for the prosecution of those who had committed human rights abuses, crimes against humanity, and genocide. I am happy to support the motion today, because the case has been made over and over again.

In September 2014, I raised the case of Yazidis in the Chamber, and in the same month, I tabled an early-day motion calling for action, which stated

“That this House is extremely concerned about the genocidal campaign being waged against minorities in Iraq”

by ISIS,

“and notes with alarm the evidence recently collected by Amnesty International about”

its

“brutal campaign to obliterate all trace of non-Arabs and non-Sunni Muslims that has turned the area into blood-soaked killing fields; is shocked by the barbaric treatment of Yazidi”—

and so on.

I met many Yazidis in northern Iraq after some of the peshmerga and campaigners for human rights there had rescued some of those women by buying them on the open market. They then called for additional assistance from us. We have given humanitarian assistance, but I think that we could have done much more. Many tears have been shed about the Yazidis, but I should have liked to have seen much more practical help given to the peshmerga to assist in the liberation of those thousands of women. Thousands of Yazidi women are still being held captive; we should be aware of that, and we should be ready to give whatever assistance we can.

I want to stress again the importance of collecting evidence. The Minister has said that questions of genocide “are determined first in the international courts and in the United Nations Security Council, but we are helping to gather evidence that could be used to hold Daesh to account.”—[*Official Report*, 12 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 165WH.]

I hope that he will tell us exactly how we are collecting that evidence. When I was chair of Indict, that organisation collected evidence over a seven-year period, and we were not assisted by the Government of the time. We had money from the Americans and from the Kuwaitis, but we had to do the work ourselves. When Saddam Hussein and Ali Hassan al-Majid were eventually brought to justice, that was done using some of the evidence that we had collected.

I would be grateful if the Minister would be very precise about the way in which we are assisting in collecting evidence today, because that will be extremely important. It was important in the case of the Iraqis that culminated in Saddam Hussein and Ali Hassan al-Majid being convicted of the crime of genocide. I hope that the House will support the motion today, and I hope that it will be put to a vote, because it is essential that we make it clear that this is the view of the House of Commons, and that there is no more delay.

4.36 pm

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I am proud to be a signatory to the motion, which was so ably moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), to whom tributes have rightly been paid. I would also like to pay tribute to those Members of the

other place who have made an enormous contribution to this battle. They include the noble Lord Alton, my noble Friend Lord Forsyth, Baroness Cox, Baroness Nicholson and many others. This is a big campaign across both Houses of Parliament on behalf of the British people, as the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) said.

The question that we have to decide today is whether Daesh could, as it were, be convicted by us of committing genocide. The United States thinks that it could be so convicted; that is the verdict of Congress and of Secretary of State Kerry. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), also takes that view, although his view has been tempered by his reference to the need for us to present evidence to the United Nations in order for prosecutions to take place. My view is that this debate, following the one that took place in the other place on 3 February, shows that the case that Daesh has been engaged in genocide has been made.

We have heard some powerful testimonies today. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) captivated the House with her speech. The hon. Member for Ealing North also provided the house with evidence. I nearly called him my hon. Friend; we are in fact very good friends. My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) set out the legal conditions that apply under the 1948 convention, and it cannot be the case that none of those five conditions has been met. It seems to me that they have been met in full.

Stephen Pound: I have one very quick question. If this is not genocide, what is?

Sir Gerald Howarth: That is a very good question. I have not had the privilege of meeting the people that so many hon. Members across the Floor of the House have met, but I have been extremely moved by the testimonies that have been recounted today. I do not see how any normal person listening to our debate could possibly come to any conclusion other than that this was genocide and is genocide to this day, and that Christians, Yazidis and others are being wiped out. As many hon. Members have said, those actions are intentional. They are not a by-product of some other policy. The intention is to wipe them out.

I want to be brief, so I will conclude by saying that there are three powerful reasons for taking action and why the Government should listen. First, we are a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, so let us refer this matter to ourselves. That should not be too difficult. We have an important role in the UN that we should fulfil. Secondly, to the great tragedy of this nation, our fellow citizens are unfortunately involved and are steeped in blood. They are complicit in this genocide. We therefore have a locus. Thirdly, we are a Christian country. Fellow Christians are being persecuted. We cannot, as my noble Friend Lord Forsyth said in the other place,

“pass by on the other side.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 March 2016; Vol. 769, c. 2157.]

We owe it to them to take action. As we will be reminding ourselves tomorrow, our sovereign is also the supreme governor of the Church of England. This is a part of our country.

I want to finish by referring to the words of my constituent Major General Tim Cross, who said when giving evidence in the other place recently:

“There can be no doubt that genocide is being carried out on Yazidi and Christian communities—and the West/international community’s failure to recognise what is happening will be to our collective shame in years to come”.

I hope that the Government will listen to the collective words of this House and the other place and act on the behalf of the British people against the appalling genocide of our fellow Christians and so many others.

4.41 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): In 1994, I was living a few hundred miles away from where nearly a million people were killed over the course of three months in a genocide in Rwanda. Both before the genocide and during it, the international community was too slow to act and too slow to recognise that crime against humanity. As a result, more people died than was necessary. This is another such occasion on which we have heard the evidence and need to say quite categorically that it is genocide. We should recognise that now. If not now, when?

4.42 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on bringing this important debate to the Floor of the House. Judging by the contributions that we have heard this afternoon, no one can be in any doubt whatsoever that this House believes that what has happened to the Christian and Yazidi communities of northern Iraq and Syria is genocide. What Daesh has been involved in is genocide, and we should not shy away from describing it as exactly that.

There have been some excellent contributions. I do not have time to highlight every one of them, but I want to point out one or two. It was welcome that the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), Chair of the International Development Committee, brought his considerable intellectual weight to the debate. The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) gave a compelling case for the situation to be called a genocide. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) told the Government that under no circumstances will the matter be allowed to be brushed under the carpet, forgotten or ignored. I was also extremely moved by the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry), who presented a personal and moving testimony. I heard that testimony for the first time last night, but it was equally moving to hear it again this afternoon. My hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) drew a parallel between what happened in Germany and Europe in the 1940s and what we are currently witnessing in Syria and Iraq.

Much of the debate has been harrowing and, at times, difficult to listen to, but it is important that the voices are heard. If we do nothing else, we owe it to the victims of Daesh’s barbarism and to those who have been subject to a level of depravity that sometimes defies comprehension that we hear what they have to say and listen when they call for help.

[Brendan O'Hara]

What are these people asking of us? It is simply that the Government of the United Kingdom recognise that what has happened to them is genocide and refer their case to the UN Security Council, so that the International Criminal Court can bring those who perpetrated these awful crimes to justice. That is not too much to ask. All the evidence is there to show that what is happening in the areas of Iraq and Syria that are under Daesh control is indeed genocide. Genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity often tend to be put into one basket, and sometimes there is a reluctance on the part of government to recognise that genocide is taking place, but I argue that we have not only a legal obligation, but a moral obligation to say that this is genocide. When we recognise in this way that these atrocities are being committed, we will be in esteemed company; the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, the United States Congress, US Secretary of State John Kerry and His Holiness Pope Francis have all recognised that this is genocide, and it is time we added our voice to that list—it is the very least we can do.

Genocide is a crime directed against a specific group of people because of what they are as an entity. The murders that inevitably follow are directed against people not because of who they are as individuals but simply because they are members of a group or a community. Genocide is not spontaneous—it is calculated, organised and planned. Genocide requires an intent to bring about the destruction of a group of people because of who they are or what they believe. That intent to destroy distinguishes genocide from other crimes. There can be no doubt that Daesh's treatment of Christian and Yazidi minorities, and other religious minorities in Syria and Iraq, meets that criteria, as Daesh set out with the intent to destroy any culture or religion that differed from theirs.

In the summer of 2014, Daesh seized the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. Almost the entire Christian community fled for their lives, meaning that for the first time in 1,800 years no Sunday mass was said in the city. As they fled, the Patriarch of Baghdad told the world:

“Christians have fled their villages. They are walking on foot in Iraq's searing summer heat. They are facing catastrophe and a real genocide”.

As we heard, the overall fall in the number of Christians living in Iraq is alarming. In 2003, there were a reported 1.5 million there but today there are barely 250,000, and the situation is similar in Syria. All of this is part of a deliberate, strategic campaign of fear designed to completely annihilate minority religious groups from the middle east.

Like my friend the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, I had the fortune and privilege earlier this year of meeting a remarkable young Yazidi woman, Nadia Murad. We met because a constituent of mine, Fiona Bennett from Oban, had been up late one night with her child who would not sleep. She turned her radio on and was moved by the story she heard. It was a story of a teenage girl from northern Iraq who had been kidnapped by Daesh. Fiona was so moved by what she heard that she decided to do something about it. She raised awareness of the plight of the Yazidis, raised funds locally and contacted me, as her Member of Parliament. Together with others in this House, we organised for Nadia to

come to the United Kingdom in February. I know that Members of both Houses attended that meeting and were all incredibly moved by her first-hand testimony. It was a harrowing listen and, if I may, I would like to share a few sentences from what she told us.

Nadia said:

“We, the women and children, were taken by bus from the school...They humiliated us along the way and touched us in a shameful way. They took me to Mosul with more than 150 other Yazidi families. There were thousands of families in a building there, including children who were given away as gifts. One of the men came up to me. He wanted to take me. I looked down at the floor. I was absolutely terrified. When I looked up, I saw a huge man. He was like a monster. I cried out that I was too young...He kicked and beat me. A few minutes later, another man came up to me. I was still looking at the floor. I saw that he was a little smaller. I begged for him to take me. I was terribly afraid of the first man. The man who took me asked me to change my religion. I refused. One day, he came and asked me for my hand in what they called 'marriage'. A few days later, this man forced me to get dressed and put on my makeup. Then, on that terrible night, he did it. He forced me to serve in his military company. He humiliated me daily. He forced me to wear clothes that barely covered my body...That night he beat me. He asked me to take my clothes off. He put me in a room with guards, who proceeded to commit their crime until I fainted.”

Tragically, as we have heard in this place, Nadia's story is far from unique. I, too, was there when Ekhlās gave her awful testimony last night.

Genocide is a deliberate and systematic extermination of a national, racial, political or cultural group. By any measure, what Daesh has been doing to the Christian and Yazidi minorities in Iraq and Syria is genocide. I urge the Minister to listen to the voice of the people, to listen to the voice of this House, to remember the barbarity suffered by the Christians and the Yazidis, and to declare that this is a genocide. Then we can start the process of bringing the perpetrators to justice.

4.51 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Let me start by congratulating the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Ffello) and for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on securing today's debate, and on all they have done to raise this issue inside and outside the House.

I also personally thank the hon. Member for Congleton for arranging last night's evidence session. Listening to the very harrowing testimony of Ekhlās touched all Members who were present. I also pay tribute to those Members in the other place who have been raising this issue for some time, including my noble Friend the Baroness Kennedy, who has led on the matter. There have been many excellent contributions in today's debate from both sides of the House. It appears that the House is united in its view about what the Government should do next.

I want to start by saying something about the nature of the crimes against the Yazidis and others. As we have heard from many Members across the House, Daesh has perpetrated the most heinous of crimes against the Yazidis as well as against other ethnic and religious

minorities, including Syrian Christians and various non-Sunni people in the area of northern Iraq that they currently control.

The crimes include mass murder, torture, enslavement and unimaginable sexual violence including systematic rape, often of children. Just returning to what Ekhlās said in her testimony yesterday, the thing that will stay with me is hearing about that nine-year-old girl who was repeatedly gang-raped. When her body could not take the brutality of the assaults any more, she was murdered in the most horrific of circumstances. These are crimes that most of us will struggle to comprehend. As we have heard today, these are not crimes that are being randomly perpetrated; they are organised crimes, deliberately targeted at particular ethnic and religious groups. Amnesty International has described these acts as ethnic cleansing on an historic scale.

Many Members have referred to the first-hand testimonies that they have heard from survivors and from those who have worked directly with survivors. I pay tribute to the unbelievable bravery of all the survivors who have spoken out to alert the world to the plight of the Yazidi population. Meeting survivors has really brought it home to me that this is not some historic event; it is an ongoing atrocity affecting thousands of people. The plight of those affected is highlighted by this quote from Mirze Ezdin, who had 45 relatives—all women and children—abducted by Daesh fighters. He described to Amnesty International the daily hell that this situation has wrought. He said:

“Can you imagine these little ones in the hands of those criminals? Alina is barely three; she was abducted with her mother and her nine-month-old sister; and Rosalinda, five, was abducted with her mother and her three brothers aged eight to 12. We get news from some of them, but others are missing and we don’t know if they are alive or dead or what has happened to them.”

Mirze’s case is far from unique, which is why today’s debate is so important.

I now want to comment on the specific definition of genocide. Although there is no doubt that the crimes that Daesh has committed are horrendous, the motion asks us to consider whether they reach the threshold of genocide. Genocide is not a term we use often; it is one that we reserve for the most heinous crimes and it has a specific meaning. For a set of crimes to constitute a genocide, they must include the killing or serious harm, including sexual harm, of a group of people who have a specific ethnic, religious or racial characteristic. Labour has consistently argued that the crimes committed by Daesh appear to reach that threshold, so it is right for the UK to refer the matter to the UN Security Council for final determination by the ICC.

I am therefore pleased to say that we will be supporting the motion this evening. If this House passes the motion, as I hope we will, it will be an historic moment. I have not been able to find another instance of the House of Commons formally recognising an ongoing conflict as genocide. As we have heard, similar motions have been already passed in the US House of Representatives and the European Parliament. In March, a UN panel concluded that Daesh might have reached the threshold, and the US Government announced that they considered the actions of Daesh to constitute a genocide—this is only the second time that they have recognised an ongoing conflict as a genocide.

Now I want to turn to the question of protection for the Yazidis. The designation of genocide is important, not just because we do it rarely but because it shows intent to end the atrocities and ensure that the perpetrators face justice. I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us on both of these points when he responds.

First, the Opposition seek an assurance that the Government will recognise the wishes of the House if this motion is passed this afternoon and will refer the matter to the Security Council for referral to the International Criminal Court. The Minister told the House last week that the UK was assisting in the collection of evidence, and of course we welcome that, but I should be grateful if he would lay out in more detail the nature of that technical support. My right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) raised this point. I would also be grateful for information on the issue of forensic investigative support and how that will be provided, which was also mentioned by the Chair of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg).

Secondly, I want to ask the Minister about the action the UK is taking to protect the Yazidis and other ethnic minority communities in Iraq. It is clear that all states have a duty to prevent genocide. Primarily, this responsibility sits with the state where the genocide is committed. Tragically, Iraq has failed to protect the Yazidis and other ethnic minority citizens, so it is right that the UK and other states should offer support to Iraq in the fight against Daesh. Will the Minister explain what specific action the UK is taking to assist in the protection of the Yazidis and to offer them security?

I also want to press the Minister on the humanitarian assistance given by the UK to the survivors of the Daesh attacks. Many Yazidis are now in refugee camps run by the Kurdistan Government in northern Iraq. These people are not classed as refugees by the UN as they are internally displaced, but we must recognise that they have been displaced from their homes and feel incredibly vulnerable. Will the Minister explain what steps the Government are taking to support these people? It is important to note that none of the people we are discussing today is eligible for relocation to the UK under the Government’s scheme, and I am extremely disappointed that the Government have consistently refused to offer sanctuary to any of these groups. There are compelling arguments for recognising the special needs of these survivors and their need for a safe space and specialist psychiatric support. This is particularly true for the women and children affected.

Already Germany has done so. A few weeks ago I met a Yazidi woman who had been enslaved, had escaped and was offered two years’ protection in Germany and—this is key—specialist psychiatric support. At Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions last week the Minister wrongly said that the German scheme required women to travel to Europe before they could access the scheme. That is not true. The German scheme takes women from the region. I hope the Minister will go away, reflect on what Germany is doing and offer the same protection to victims of what we all agree is genocide.

In conclusion, the people of this country do not walk on by when they see evil being perpetrated against fellow human beings. What is happening to the Yazidis

[Diana Johnson]

and others is evil. We want our country to stand up and declare solidarity with those people, and refer what is happening to the Security Council. We believe genocide is being committed, and I hope the whole House can come together this evening in support of the motion.

5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): This has been an excellent debate. Time prevents me from answering all the questions, so I shall do as I have done on previous occasions and write to hon. Members in detail. Some excellent ideas and thoughts have emerged, such as the protection of mass graves and the appointment of a global envoy for religious freedom. I will be in touch on those matters.

I begin, as others have done, by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing this important debate. I have listened, No. 10 has listened and the nation has listened to the will of the Chamber today. That is important. I commend the efforts of Members in all parts of the House who have worked tirelessly to ensure that the voices of those who have been murdered, persecuted or silenced by Daesh are heard.

The harrowing accounts that we have heard today of the brutal persecution of Christians, Yazidis and other religious and ethnic minorities are heartbreaking. Some of those communities lived peacefully side by side for generations before that barbaric organisation forced them to flee their homes. Daesh's crimes go beyond the horrors of rape and murder; it has destroyed a generations-old culture. The Government have repeatedly made clear our utter condemnation of the unspeakable crimes that Daesh commits against Christians, Yazidis and other communities, including Muslims, who still account for the majority of victims. We are working tirelessly to defeat Daesh and put an end to that violence.

This is not the first time that I have commented on this matter; it is the third time. I repeat what I said in Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions last week. I believe that genocide has taken place, but as the Prime Minister has said, genocide is a matter of legal rather than political opinion. We as the Government are not the prosecutor, the judge or the jury. Such matters are for the UN Security Council. However, we have a place—

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way.

We have a place on the UN Security Council. That is important. Any referral to the International Criminal Court by the UN Security Council will be possible only with a united Council and ideally with the co-operation of countries in which alleged crimes have been committed. However, I remind the House that when efforts were made to refer the situation in Syria to the ICC in 2014, that was vetoed by Russia and China. We expect that any Security Council resolution seeking to refer the situation in Iraq or Syria to the ICC against those countries could very well be blocked again, but further discussions are taking place. We are now in a different place from where we were in 2014.

Sir Edward Leigh: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way.

Although a UN Security Council referral to the International Criminal Court is one option, there are other potential options for bringing Daesh to justice. In the meantime, we are supporting the gathering and preservation of evidence that could in future be used in a court to hold Daesh to account. I believe there is a very strong case to be answered, but we must clarify what we mean by genocide. As other hon. Members have mentioned, this refers to acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, religious or racial group. However, we must also consider crimes against humanity, which refer to acts committed as part of a widespread, systematic attack directed against any civilian population. That includes murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, imprisonment, torture, rape, sexual slavery and other forms of sexual violence. Furthermore, war crimes refer to grave breaches of the Geneva conventions. It may transpire that all three cases apply in this instance.

That is why we will do everything we can to help gather evidence that could be used by the judicial bodies, who are the appropriate people to judge these matters, to make a judgment. It is vital that that is done now, before evidence is lost or destroyed. Ultimately, this is a question for the courts to decide; it is not for Governments to be the prosecutor, judge or jury. The Prime Minister also said:

“Not only are the courts best placed to judge criminal matters but their impartiality also ensures the protection of the UK Government from the politicisation and controversies that often attach themselves to the question of genocide.”

It is essential that these decisions are based on credible judicial process, but that does not mean that we wash our hands of this issue. Right now, our priority is to prevent atrocities from taking place, and that is why we are playing a leading role in the global coalition against Daesh. I make it clear that, in the long term, we must hold Daesh to account for the atrocities it commits. The evidence that we are helping to gather now will ensure that the perpetrators of these crimes always know that the threat of prosecution is hanging over them.

We should make no mistake: British and international justice have a long reach and a long memory. We will track down those who commit these acts and hold them to account, no matter how long it takes. It took over a decade to track down Radovan Karadzic, but last month he was finally convicted and held to account for his crimes.

The UK is taking a lead on the international response to this issue. In September 2014, we co-sponsored the UN Human Rights Council resolution mandating investigation of Daesh abuses in Iraq. Working with international partners, we are seeking ways to support the gathering of crucial evidence that can be used by the courts to hold Daesh to account.

We must ensure that Daesh is held to account for its barbaric crimes against the majorities and minorities involved—Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, Kurds and other groups. Ultimately, the only way to put an end to these crimes and to liberate the people of Iraq and Syria is to defeat Daesh. We must continue to expose it for what it is: a failing organisation that is losing territory, struggling to pay its fighters and betraying Islam in all it stands for.

On that note, as I said last week, if we look at the profile of any suicide bomber, from Bali to Sousse, we see that they are sold martyrdom by extremists as a fast track to paradise. People who have scant knowledge of the Koran are promised a ticket to heaven with little, if any, understanding of or service to God. If we are to defeat extremism and stem the churn of vulnerable recruits, we must all emphasise the importance of the duty to God in this life as well as the next. Indeed, the Koran forbids suicide.

As has been said or implied in the House today, the UK has the aspiration and means to play a significant role in world affairs. Our historical links, now forged into bilateral and regional interests, mean that we are expected not just to take an interest, but to show leadership on the world stage. We are seen as fair, knowledgeable and trustworthy. We are playing a leading role in defeating Daesh on the battlefield and in defeating its ideology. We will hold Daesh to account in the courts for its terrible crimes, no matter how long it takes.

5.9 pm

Fiona Bruce: At least 18 Back-Bench Members have spoken in this debate, and all of them, without exception, have not only supported the motion but made deeply moving and powerful speeches. We have today heard irrefutable evidence of genocide by Daesh in Iraq and Syria. The case has been made.

We have heard no good grounds for this issue not to be referred to the UN Security Council and the International Criminal Court. The fact that other members of the UN Security Council may veto a referral is no reason for our country not to show a lead. The fact that Russia and China vetoed a 2014 referral—which related to general action in Syria, not to the specific point of genocide by Daesh—should not prevent this country from making a referral.

Several Members have called for a vote. We should have one. We have heard many reasons why this matter should be referred to the UN Security Council. We owe it to the victims to seek justice for those who suffer, to show an international lead, to be a voice for the voiceless and to hold the perpetrators to account.

This motion is simple: it asks the Members of this Parliament to recognise the genocide that is taking place for what it is. Can anyone who has listened to this debate deny that? If there ever was a vote on a matter of conscience, surely this is one. It is a matter of life and death. If there ever was a vote that should be a wholly free vote for Members of this place, surely this is one. Payroll Members should not be asked to abstain. In spite of the fact that the number of Members voting will not be as it should be, I trust that the Government will accept the will of this House and take the action stipulated by the motion, which I hope will receive overwhelming support from Members across this House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 278, Noes 0.

Division No. 244]

[5.11 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Ali, Rushanara
Adams, Nigel	Allen, Mr Graham
Alexander, Heidi	Amess, Sir David

Ansell, Caroline	Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ashworth, Jonathan	Esterson, Bill
Atkins, Victoria	Farrelly, Paul
Austin, Ian	Ferrier, Margaret
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Field, rh Frank
Barron, rh Kevin	Fitzpatrick, Jim
Benn, rh Hilary	Fleelo, Robert
Berry, James	Flint, rh Caroline
Blackford, Ian	Flynn, Paul
Blackman, Bob	Fox, rh Dr Liam
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Foxcroft, Vicky
Blenkinsop, Tom	Gapes, Mike
Blomfield, Paul	Gethins, Stephen
Blunt, Crispin	Ghani, Nusrat
Bone, Mr Peter	Gibson, Patricia
Borwick, Victoria	Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Glass, Pat
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Glindon, Mary
Brady, Mr Graham	Goodman, Helen
Brennan, Kevin	Grady, Patrick
Bridgen, Andrew	Grant, Mrs Helen
Brown, Alan	Grant, Peter
Brown, Lyn	Gray, Mr James
Bruce, Fiona	Green, Chris
Bryant, Chris	Green, Kate
Burden, Richard	Greenwood, Margaret
Burgon, Richard	Griffith, Nia
Burnham, rh Andy	Gwynne, Andrew
Burns, rh Sir Simon	Hamilton, Fabian
Burrowes, Mr David	Hammond, Stephen
Cadbury, Ruth	Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Hayes, Helen
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Hayman, Sue
Cash, Sir William	Heald, Sir Oliver
Caulfield, Maria	Heaton-Harris, Chris
Chapman, Jenny	Hendry, Drew
Cherry, Joanna	Hermon, Lady
Chope, Mr Christopher	Hillier, Meg
Cleverly, James	Hoare, Simon
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Clwyd, rh Ann	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Coaker, Vernon	Hollern, Kate
Cooper, Rosie	Hollobone, Mr Philip
Cooper, rh Yvette	Hopkins, Kelvin
Cowan, Ronnie	Howarth, Sir Gerald
Cox, Jo	Huddleston, Nigel
Crawley, Angela	Hussain, Imran
Creagh, Mary	Jackson, Mr Stewart
Creasy, Stella	Jarvis, Dan
Cruddas, Jon	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Cummins, Judith	Johnson, rh Alan
Cunningham, Alex	Johnson, Diana
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Jones, rh Mr David
Dakin, Nic	Jones, Gerald
Danczuk, Simon	Jones, Graham
David, Wayne	Jones, Mr Kevan
Davies, Byron	Jones, Susan Elan
Davis, rh Mr David	Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel	Kawczynski, Daniel
Donaldson, Stuart Blair	Keeley, Barbara
Double, Steve	Kennedy, Seema
Doughty, Stephen	Kerr, Calum
Dowd, Jim	Kinnock, Stephen
Dromey, Jack	Kyle, Peter
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Lavery, Ian
Duncan, rh Sir Alan	Law, Chris
Durkan, Mark	Lefroy, Jeremy
Eagle, Ms Angela	Leigh, Sir Edward
Eagle, Maria	Leslie, Chris
Edwards, Jonathan	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Efford, Clive	Lewis, Mr Ivan
Elliott, Julie	Loughton, Tim

Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Mann, John
 Mann, Scott
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Mr Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCaig, Callum
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCartney, Jason
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGarry, Natalie
 McGinn, Conor
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMahan, Jim
 Mearns, Ian
 Menzies, Mark
 Mills, Nigel
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Mulholland, Greg
 Mullin, Roger
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 Nuttall, Mr David

O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Albert
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Paterson, Steven
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Percy, Andrew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Philp, Chris
 Pound, Stephen
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pugh, John
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Simpson, David

Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmer, Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Sturdy, Julian
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, Emily
 Throup, Maggie
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Trickett, Jon
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen

Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Vickers, Martin
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Weir, Mike
 West, Catherine
 White, Chris
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Corri
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Wishart, Pete
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Woodcock, John
 Wragg, William
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 David Warburton and
 Derek Thomas

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:
 Michael Tomlinson and
 Kevin Foster

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House believes that Christians, Yazidis, and other ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and Syria are suffering genocide at the hands of Daesh; and calls on the Government to make an immediate referral to the UN Security Council with a view to conferring jurisdiction upon the International Criminal Court so that perpetrators can be brought to justice.

Record Copies of Acts

5.25 pm

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House disagrees with the conclusion of the House of Commons Administration Committee's First Report of Session 2015-16; welcomes the view expressed by the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General that government funds would be available to pay for the continued use of vellum for printing Acts of Parliament; is unwilling to amend or resile from the terms of the Resolutions agreed by both Houses on 12 February 1849; and accordingly instructs the Clerk of the House to convey to the Clerk of the Parliaments that the House of Commons has withheld its consent to the use of archival paper rather than vellum for the printing of record copies of public Acts of Parliament.

The motion is in my name and those of 43 colleagues from both sides of the House. If it is passed, it will send a strong message to the other place—the House of Lords—that its unilateral decision to end the ancient practice of using vellum to record Acts of Parliament is not accepted by this House. If that occurs, I very much hope that the other House will listen carefully to the views of this place. We have moved from a matter of grave significance to the world and to humanity—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman. It is most discourteous of Members to gather at the end of the Chamber when someone is trying to make an important speech.

Mr Gray: I am most grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am not certain whether my speech can be described as important, but I am nevertheless grateful to you for your flattering remark.

This debate is of less importance than the previous one, and I make no complaint about losing some time to that debate, which was about something of very grave concern to the world. None the less, this matter is important in terms of symbolism and for a number of other reasons, which I will return to in a moment. I feel no shame in bringing forward this matter.

I intend to be reasonably brief, not least because the main arguments in favour of saving vellum for the future have been laid out this week in an outstandingly good article in that outstandingly good magazine, *The House*. Unfortunately, because that magazine is printed on paper, those arguments will disappear within a matter of a year or two. If it were printed on vellum, they would still be in existence some 5,000 years from now. It is therefore important that I advance the arguments in a way that future generations will be able to remember.

I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who has fought this battle for a very long time, and her Labour colleagues who, in 1999—the last time this matter was raised—were resolute in defeating the House of Lords. I also pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster). As a member of the Government, he is probably unable to speak in the debate, but I know his support for William Cowley and sons in his constituency, the last remaining vellum manufacturer, is second to none. I believe that his

neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), is hoping to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, to speak on the company's behalf.

I would be the first to accept there are a great many more important matters that we should discuss in this place. I would not have wished to discuss the use of vellum were it not for the fact that the House of Lords unilaterally, without consulting us, decided to discontinue it. All I am seeking to do in the debate is to assert our right as the House of Commons to have at least a say in the matter. If we have a Division later and the motion is defeated—if the House of Commons decides to agree with their lordships to abolish the use of vellum—so be it. However, it is right that Members should have a say about how our laws are recorded for future generations, as we did in 1999, 1849 and throughout the generations.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): My hon. Friend might not be aware of this, but I, as a fellow member of the Administration Committee, have changed my view on this matter, and I now very much agree with him because I believe that this change would be a false economy. We must hang on to this tradition and cherish it.

Mr Gray: It takes a big politician to say that they have changed their mind, and my hon. Friend is indeed a big politician. I pay tribute to him for being ready to change his mind.

Three broad arguments are advanced by those who would abolish the use of vellum, each of which can be easily dealt with. The first and main argument is the cost of using vellum to record our Acts of Parliament. It is alleged that the cost of printing Acts on vellum comes to £103,000 per year, whereas doing so on paper would cost £30,000 per year. The House of Lords therefore says that the saving would be in the order of £70,000 per year. However, I have been thorough in my research, and I have been in touch with the Archives and Records Association of the UK and Ireland. Its chief executive, Mr John Chambers, who is the authority on these matters, tells me that the cost of printing on vellum is identical to that of printing on paper. The cost of printing the laws of this land is approximately £56,000 per annum and the cost of vellum is a relatively small amount on top of that. In other words, the saving by changing to paper would be, at best, perhaps £10,000 or £20,000 a year.

William Cowley and sons, the last vellum manufacturers and printers, tell me that the most they have ever been paid in a year was £47,000, and that was a year when we made far too many laws in this place, including too many long ones, so it cost more to print them. If we keep ourselves under control, pass fewer laws and keep them short, the amount that we pay to William Cowley and sons will be even less than that £47,000.

Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just the laws of the land that are printed on vellum? Such things as the Torah scrolls that are used by members of the Jewish community are printed on vellum. If the sole provider of vellum in this country were forced to close because of the House of Lords stopping our use of vellum, that might inconvenience other people and force them to

[Michael Ellis]

source their items from outside this country—assuming that they are not already doing so, which they might well be.

Mr Gray: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good and important point to which I will return in a moment.

We think that the figures produced by the House of Lords are pretty bogus and that the difference in cost, if there is one, will be marginal. In any event, I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General has announced that if there are any extra costs to be borne, Her Majesty's Government, not this place, will bear them, which I welcome. I was also delighted that the shadow Chancellor indicated his support for the motion in discussions with me. He has authorised me to say that a Labour Government would also seek to fund the cost of vellum.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): In addition to the cost of vellum, there is the matter of the printing machinery, which is due to be replaced. Does the hon. Gentleman have an idea of the cost of the contract that would be required and the length of time the contract would need to be in existence to recoup that expenditure?

Mr Gray: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising an extremely important point. She is quite right that if some complicated piece of machinery were required at great cost, meaning that it would take us years and years to pay that off, it would be important to take that into consideration. However, the fact of the matter is that any corner shop—any printer in the land—can print on vellum. I have been informed by printers—there are two in my constituency who would be delighted to do it—that the £56,000 that is currently spent is a great deal too much, and that they would do it for significantly less.

Melanie Onn *rose*—

Mr Gray: The hon. Lady will have a chance to make her points later. I am interested that she is apparently opposed to the motion.

The difference in cost will be pretty marginal, so let us move on to the substance of the matter. If we were to change to paper, I would be very surprised if the cost was as low as the House of Lords has indicated. The county of Hereford has announced this week that it has just opened a new archive centre at a cost of £11.5 million. Paper, of course, requires all sorts of special care over the years, whereas vellum, as can be demonstrated by a glance at the records in the Victoria Tower, survives for generations—hundreds of years—without any care whatsoever. It can be put in a cupboard and it will be as good as when it went in.

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): When I last had a proper job, I worked in local history publishing. We published John Morris's translation of the Domesday Book and relied heavily on other archives, such as materials in the parish chest, that were written on vellum. I will not ask my hon. Friend to comment on whether I would be much the poorer had those things been written not on vellum but on paper, and it had

disintegrated, but does he agree that we would be much poorer as a nation in our understanding of our history had such things been written on paper?

Mr Gray: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. Were I a nimble enough speaker, I would leap from the place where I am in my speech to the point to which she refers. However, I will talk in a moment about the things we have today because they were made of vellum but which we would not have if they had been made of paper.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned the debate in 1999, when Mr Brian White raised the issue, as a Milton Keynes Member, because the factory would have had to close. I made the point in that debate that down the other end of the building, there was an Act of Parliament dated 1497 that was on view to the public. It was not a facsimile or a replica; it was an Act of Parliament—it bore the sovereign's signature and it was legible. We know that vellum lasts 500 years, but we do not know that any other material will last 500 years.

Mr Gray: My hon. Friend makes an extremely strong point.

The third argument that is sometimes advanced by those who are opposed to vellum is that this is some sort of animal rights or animal welfare matter because of the use of calfskins in making vellum. The answer to that point is that the calfskins are picked up from the abattoir. The calves are killed for the purpose of being eaten, so there is absolutely no animal welfare consideration of any kind at all. Indeed, we could argue that reusing the calfskins is a much more environmentally friendly approach.

In contrast to those three—rather weak, in my view—arguments in favour of abolishing vellum, there are three vastly stronger reasons for keeping it. First, vellum has for centuries been used for documents of significance and importance. University graduation certificates have always been on vellum, as have certificates of long service and military commissions. Every law in every Commonwealth Parliament throughout the world is on vellum. In America, West Point graduates get vellums. Knighthoods are on vellum, as are peerages. Any decent, important document that we have uses vellum. When we give a certificate to our Lord Mayor for his long service, it is always on vellum. Why should we be uniquely downgrading the laws of the land and saying that they are not important enough to be on vellum, despite the fact that our university graduation certificates are?

Secondly, vellum is hugely more durable than paper—there is no question about that at all. It cannot be crushed and it cannot be torn up. Of course, we are not allowed to use visual aids in this Chamber, Mr Speaker—I would not dream of doing such a thing—but I can show that it is true that vellum cannot be crushed or squashed, because it comes out just as it was before its crushing. It cannot be torn or burned, and it is not affected by water. It is durable in a very real sense.

As some of my hon. Friends have mentioned, we have good examples of how vellum has survived without any maintenance at all. It lasts for up to 5,000 years; by comparison, the maximum that can be achieved for the highest quality archival paper is 200 or 300 years.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Perhaps my hon. Friend will be interested to hear the opinion of a former colleague of mine, Mrs Meg Ford, who is the head of books and manuscripts at Christie's and one of the world's foremost experts in this field. She advises the great collectors who spend millions of pounds purchasing books and manuscripts. She emailed me to say:

"Vellum surely is the strongest, most durable writing material. Maybe there is some newly invented material lined with graphene, but if the choice is between even the best paper and vellum, vellum will win."

Mr Gray: My hon. Friend speaks with passion from a position of great expertise, and he is absolutely right. When I was going through my personal archives recently, I was interested to come across my grandfather's certificate as a graduate of Edinburgh University. I have it here—this is not an aide-mémoire, Mr Speaker. He graduated in engineering in 1903, and his certificate is absolutely as it was when it was first printed. It has simply been sat in a cupboard in my family's house for 120 years, and it is as good as new.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the great campaign he has run on this issue. Is it not slightly ironic that the year after we celebrated the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta—a document that is essential to our constitution and was written on vellum—their lordships are considering doing away with vellum? Is he aware that while the laws in the Republic of Ireland are written on vellum, I am not aware of any plans to scrap that tradition there?

Mr Gray: They have plenty of cows in Ireland, as we do in this country, and my hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Had Magna Carta been written on paper, it would have been lost by around 1465, before the birth of Henry VIII—it would not have survived to his times. Let us think of other great documents such as the Dead Sea scrolls, the Lindisfarne gospels and the Domesday Book—all were written on vellum. The Codex Sinaiticus in the British Library was commissioned by the Emperor Constantine in 350 AD. We can look at it today and turn its pages; it is exactly as it was when it was written, and it is as clear as anything. Can one imagine a piece of paper from 350 AD surviving? The oldest complete bound book in Europe, the St John's Gospel, was put into the coffin of St Cuthbert in the year 687 in Durham cathedral, and it can still be read today as clearly as when it was written because it is on vellum. The use of vellum guarantees that no matter what happens in the future—war, floods, riots or anything else—Acts of Parliament will be preserved for all time.

The third reason why I think it vital to maintain vellum is that William Cowley and sons in Milton Keynes, the last remaining manufacturers of vellum, supply services to the British Library, the Bodleian and records offices up and down the land. If the parliamentary contract is withdrawn, there is at least a chance that the firm's six employees would no longer be there, meaning that everyone who requires vellum services would have to go to America, because there are no other vellum manufacturers in Europe.

Why on earth, for the sake of some £20,000 a year, if that, should we be considering doing away with a craft of this kind? Why would we want to close down an ancient business? Why should we be considering changing

a 1,000-year tradition of this place? Why should we downgrade Acts in the way that is suggested? To me, it is beyond understanding. If Members care for the traditions of this place, if they care for crafts and if they care for Acts of Parliament, they will join me in the Aye Lobby today.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Many Members wish to participate in the debate, so there will have to be a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, which will be open to review, depending on progress. We must start with five minutes with the intention of not exceeding that limit.

5.41 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) on securing this afternoon's debate, and on spearheading the opportunity for this House to voice its concerns about the decision taken by the House of Lords and the House of Commons Administration Committee to end the centuries-old practice of printing Acts of Parliament on vellum.

My involvement came about after the issue was brought to my attention by Patricia Lovett—calligrapher, illuminator, vellum-user, and vice-chair of the Heritage Crafts Association. She was concerned about the impact on an important heritage craft in this country. It was our shared hope to see this decision reversed when the matter was first considered back in October, when the Administration Committee recommended that the Commons agree to the renewed request by the Chairman of Committees in the Lords that we print record copies of public Acts not on vellum, but on archival paper. This House, however, was never consulted on this, and neither was the sector on which the change would have the greatest impact—nor indeed were the wider public, who might have an interest in the future of this heritage craft.

It was with great dismay that, two months ago, we were informed that the printers had been given a 30-day notice to cease printing on vellum, with no public announcement or dissemination of this decision to parliamentarians; I found out from Patricia Lovett, as I said. That led to my point of order on 9 February, in which I raised my concerns about this shady back-room deal between the Commons authorities and those in the Lords.

After the points of order raised by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire and me, the Minister for the Cabinet Office intervened with the welcome news that the money necessary to continue printing on vellum would be found from Government coffers. Although I genuinely thank the Minister for his support for our campaign, I really think that printing, preserving and protecting our own archival history through our own budgets is a matter for Parliament.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): Let me make it clear at this stage of the debate that this is very much a matter for the House. Although we on the Treasury Bench offer our support, it remains a matter for the House.

Mrs Hodgson: That saving grace is very welcome.

[Mrs Hodgson]

Many of us from different parties might be described as strange bedfellows in this debate, but we have come together on this issue because we agree that the continued use of vellum is part of recognising our heritage and traditions. The Palace of Westminster is to undergo a potential £7 billion refurbishment to conserve this place for future generations to use, visit and admire; how can anyone argue for a saving that is so small by comparison, without considering what we would lose?

Our most important documents have been printed or written on vellum, from the Magna Carta to the Domesday Book and a piece of important north-east English history, the Lindisfarne gospels. All these historical manuscripts have been preserved for posterity because they were printed on vellum. They have lasted through the ages due to vellum's durable qualities, which have ensured that future generations can appreciate and respect our shared history. Surely the legislation that we make here is worthy of this small additional cost. These are the laws of our land, and they should have the status and respect that is implied when they are printed on vellum. As Paul Wright from William Cowley said on the Jeremy Vine show last year, "If it is precious, put it on vellum."

The crux of my concern about the change is the debate about the costs of printing on vellum. Both the Administration Committee and the Chairman of Committees in the House of Lords have claimed that ending the use of vellum would save Parliament, and the taxpayer, an average of £80,000 per year, but that figure has been disputed. William Cowley has said that, according to its books, the sale of vellum to Parliament is worth £47,000 per year. My question is: where does the proposed saving of £33,000 come from?

There is also concern about the use of archival paper. As we have heard, vellum manuscripts have lasted for centuries, and archival paper has not been proved to have that kind of longevity. There is talk of 250 years and of 500 years, but it must be borne in mind that those are estimates, not facts. It is a fact, however, that vellum lasts longer, and I therefore cannot support a switch to the inferior medium of archival paper.

Parliament is an important beacon of our history and heritage, and the fact that Members of either House can so easily dismiss a centuries-old practice is deeply worrying. We should remember that William Cowley is our last remaining vellum maker here in the UK. If it were to lose its contract with Parliament, that could be detrimental to the future of this heritage craft, and those who wished to buy vellum would have to look to other countries. It would not be just our medals that we would be buying from France. That is why I hope that today we can finally save vellum for good.

5.46 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) on initiating the debate. It has forced me to do an awful lot of homework and get hold of some real facts and figures, so that I can pass them on to the House as they have been presented to me.

Vellum has been used to record Acts of Parliament for only about 170 years. The oldest surviving parliamentary records are on parchment, which is a very similar material.

The oldest surviving archival paper records date back to 1510, which is just 13 years short of the date of the oldest parchment record. Those paper records are the manuscript journals of the House of Lords. It appears to me, on the basis of viewing and research, that records kept on vellum and those kept on archival paper in the same environment last equally well.

Mr James Gray: My hon. Friend is trying to make a distinction between vellum and parchment, but they are, of course, the same thing. The "Oxford English Dictionary" defines vellum as fine parchment.

Sir Paul Beresford: I am obviously talking too quickly, because, in effect, that is what I said: they are much the same.

Mr Gray: I beg my hon. Friend's pardon.

Sir Paul Beresford: Before 1849, all Acts were written out by hand on rolls of parchment, in exquisite handwriting; it is really worth seeing. The motion refers to a resolution of both Houses dated 12 February 1849. At the core of that resolution was a proposed move from beautiful handwritten copies to the then cutting-edge innovation of printing. Perhaps my hon. Friend wishes that we could return to handwritten copies on vellum, as they do look beautiful. In 1999, the House of Lords announced that it wished to cease printing public Acts on vellum, having ceased to print private Acts on it in 1956. Two copies of each Act of Parliament are printed on vellum. One is kept in the Parliamentary Archives, and the other is sent to the National Archives.

The amount of money that would be saved by a move from vellum to archival paper has been disputed, but in the grand picture of public expenditure, it is not enormously significant. It is worth observing that we expect the saving to be more than the salary of a single Member of Parliament, which many of us probably consider not to be that great anyway. The National Archives has helpfully informed Parliament that it does not require vellum, and as it is part of the Minister's departmental portfolio, I must take notice of that.

Vellum is an extremely expensive material, requiring an expensive and specialised form of printing. The cost of printing the Acts of 2014-15 on vellum—I asked about this specifically, in order to try to get it right—was approximately £107,000. The cost of using even the most expensive parchment-style paper would have been £8,000, a reduction of 92%. Unfortunately, however, the challenges associated with printing on vellum do not stop there.

As was pointed out by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), there are precisely two surviving printing machines that print double-sided on vellum to the standard that is required—note: to the standard that is required. One is in a museum, and the other is owned or utilised by the contract printer, but to put it colloquially, it is on its last legs and is probably being held together by Sellotape. Therefore, if the decision were made to continue to print public Acts on vellum, my opposite number in the House of Lords would have to provide a business case for a contract with the firm that was prepared to construct a new printer. The cost of that would leave Parliament contracted to a single supplier, which would negate the normal practice of competitive tendering.

Michael Ellis: If we put that one supplier out of business, it is not just parliamentary Acts that will be affected. I understand from the Office of the Chief Rabbi that the Torahs used in this country are not in fact made here, but if that one supplier were to close down because Parliament stopped using it, Torahs and many other non-parliamentary items would not be able to be made here, and the work would have to be exported elsewhere.

Sir Paul Beresford: I have not had words with the Chief Rabbi, but I can assure my hon. Friend that we have made inquiries and we are just one of the contracts for this particular contractor. If we stopped using him, his profits would go down but he would not close.

During these complex discussions, the Minister for the Cabinet Office came along with his chequebook. I was surprised, as someone who has enthusiastically endorsed his admirable policies on cutting out waste, reducing red tape and improving Government efficiency. His Department believes that we should be “digital by default”, but that is a little different from what he is now talking about. A similar approach has been taken by the House; we also have everything digitised.

However, it is a legal requirement that quality prints of the original Acts be certified by the Clerk of the Parliaments in the House of Lords—the legal authority. Moreover, most modern Acts of Parliament are brought into force by statutory instruments at some point after receiving Royal Assent, and no statutory instruments are printed on vellum. The relevant information is available digitally.

I have huge respect for the Minister’s campaign, as he is aware. I must point out that we digitally store the Acts, and that he has ensured that if anything were to happen to the paper or vellum archive, the Acts could be reprinted.

Mr James Gray: My hon. Friend talks about the cloud. How confident is he that the cloud will be here in 5,000 years, when vellum most certainly will be?

Sir Paul Beresford: I will not be here in 5,000 years; my teeth will have gone long before that. However, my hon. Friend’s question ignores the fact that there will be progress. I doubt that we will be storing anything in the form that we do now, be it on vellum, on paper or digitally. There will be another way.

I was encouraged by the Minister’s offer to cover the cost of printing on vellum. For a moment, I thought he was offering a blank cheque to pay for all the printing in the House of Commons, because it would be logical to extend the offer in that way. I am not particularly well educated on the constitution, however, and it was pointed out to me forcefully that it would be inappropriate for the Government to play that kind of role in the business of Parliament. Of course, the Minister and the Cabinet Office could choose to fund the purchase of the material, the equipment and the managing of the contract, as well as the long-term storage, if they wished to produce their own copies on vellum from the digital records. Unfortunately, the record of Acts produced by Parliament, on whatever medium is chosen, are the legal authority. The Minister has been gracious in his benevolent offer, but it is not appropriate.

The printing of Acts over many years has changed as time and technology have progressed. We have moved from parchment to vellum to paper, and from handwriting to printing, all of which now have a digital back-up. The only recent backward step that I can think of has been the Ed stone, but that was just an unfortunate incident. I conclude simply by noting that, of the two Houses, it is the one that we would expect to make a stand purely on tradition that is suggesting to the House of Commons that we should progress.

5.54 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I am afraid that I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford). I congratulate the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) on securing this debate and on ensuring that it has been held after the previous debate was postponed. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for doing so much to raise the issue’s profile.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): On the subject of paying tribute, we should formally acknowledge the extremely important role played by Brian White, MP for North East Milton Keynes from 1997 to 2005, who took us through this whole business in immense detail and won the argument and the vote that kept vellum.

Dr Blackman-Woods: It is important that we acknowledge Brian White. Indeed, I will go on to say something about the industry in his constituency that he protected.

It is perhaps because I have a truly magnificent cathedral in my constituency that is over 1,000 years old that I feel strongly that tradition is important and that we should continue to record Acts of Parliament on vellum. The existence of so many beautiful old buildings in Durham has reinforced my belief that we should treasure our heritage and look after it for future generations, something which this country has unfortunately not always been good at. For example, beautiful Victorian terraces have been ripped down, apparently in the name of progress, for new blocks of flats that are demolished just years later because of poor construction and, most critically of all, their not being fit for purpose. We run the risk of doing something similar with vellum.

Our lack of respect for heritage is equally apparent in other areas. For example, we have lost many of our folk songs, dances, music, poetry and other aspects of our culture, because we have not kept them alive by using them. Were it not for champions of their causes, we would have lost many others altogether. We can be a champion for vellum today.

Rebecca Harris: Both Houses of Parliament will soon enjoy the ceremony and tradition of the Queen’s Speech. Does the hon. Lady agree that it would not be a favourable idea to save money by getting the Queen to make a webcast from her sitting room?

Dr Blackman-Woods: The hon. Lady makes her point extremely well.

When it is proposed that vellum must be discontinued because there is a cheaper alternative, I start from a perspective of great scepticism. Why should we change the practice when it has served us so well for centuries?

[*Dr Blackman-Woods*]

The issue is close to my heart because of the Lindisfarne Gospels. Everyone here will know their relevance to the north-east and to my Durham constituency. Produced in around 700, the gospels were written and painted on vellum, without which the gospels simply would not be with us today. Not just old relics, they are important living texts for our understanding of the culture and heritage of the north-east and elsewhere. When last on display in Durham a few years ago, over 100,000 people viewed them in just three months, most of them paying to do so.

Vellum is needed in the restoration of our ancient texts and for the recording of a range of important documents not only in the UK, but abroad. I hope that this House and the other place will take steps to protect the industry that supports that restoration, not put its future viability at risk by discontinuing the use of vellum. I pay tribute to the former Member of Parliament for North East Milton Keynes and the current Members of Parliament for Milton Keynes for trying to support and keep the industry alive.

I rarely agree with the Minister for the Cabinet Office, but I did when he told *The Daily Telegraph*:

“Recording our laws on vellum is a millennium long tradition, and surprisingly cost effective. While the world around us constantly changes, we should safeguard some of our great traditions and not let the use of vellum die out.”

I strongly agree with him on that and I hope that in this House today we can send a strong message to their lordships that they should think again about this decision.

I am not against modernisation—indeed, I think the House of Lords could do with some of it—but we need to get the balance right. Things do have to change, but we also need to preserve what is important about our past. Acts of Parliament fall into that category, and we should continue to use vellum. I hope that we all vote in support of that today.

6 pm

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I should declare an interest, not only as a part-time historian who spent a large part of his youth burrowed away in the National Archives researching Tudor history, but as the chair of the all-party group on archives and history. The group has more than 100 members in both Houses, and has been fortunate to have as its secretariat the Archives and Records Association of the UK and Ireland, the leading professional body for archivists, record managers and conservators in these islands. The ARA has about 2,500 paid-up members, who have naturally raised concerns over the possible change in the recording of Acts of Parliament from vellum to archival paper, which I wish to reflect in my speech.

There has been a lot of debate on this issue and strong feelings have, naturally, been expressed. That is entirely understandable, as vellum, and parchment, its sheepskin cousin, is at the core of our national heritage. Vellum has been used to record some of the most important events in the history of these islands, not just Acts of Parliament. It is still actively used by our conservation community to repair and extend the life of our existing ancient manuscripts. Vellum is also a highly practical material. It is durable, accessible and much more resistant to fire and water than any kind of paper.

It is also an alkaline material. Paper is more fragile, and it is acidic and deteriorates much more quickly over time.

Michael Ellis: Does my hon. Friend agree that the even the highest quality archival paper is going to last only about 300 years, and even then it would cost a lot to maintain in the right humid conditions, whereas vellum can be kept just about anywhere on a shelf and will last 5,000 years?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: with vellum, we know it will last. It has already stood the test of time, as any historian or archivist will verify, through its continued existence over centuries. With paper, we can only guess how long a printed version will last; it depends on precisely what paper is used, what ink is used and how the resulting document is stored.

Sir Paul Beresford: I had better repeat what I said earlier. In this House we have been recording on parchment equivalent since 1497 and on paper from 13 years later. Having looked at the paper, the parchment and the vellum, I can say that they look the same.

Chris Skidmore *indicated dissent.*

Sir Paul Beresford: My hon. Friend is shaking his head, but I suggest he goes and looks.

Chris Skidmore: I want to talk from my own professional experience as a historian. Someone who goes to the National Archives and tries to order up SPI—the state papers of Henry VIII—will find that they are not allowed to do so. They will only be able to look at those on microfilm, because the paper is so fragile that it will crumble if touched. I have opened boxes and been amazed at how many documents have still not been looked at, but I know that paper from the 15th and 16th centuries is so fragile that it would crumble to the touch, and often those documents have to be returned unopened. That is not the case with vellum. People can order up stuff that is still in its original leather bag. It will be filthy but it remains there and people can study it, using ultraviolet light. That is the contrast I have seen as a historian. What if in 500 or 1,000 years’ time future generations of historians have this problem? It is simply not true to equate paper and vellum.

Europe’s leading expert on the subject, Dr Henk Porck of the Netherlands national library, has gone on record as saying that current ageing tests for paper

“cannot be reliably predicted by means of the present artificial ageing tests.”

When it comes to printing our country’s laws, arguably our most important documents, we need to ensure that we have a clear assurance that the materials they are printed on will last the test of centuries, as vellum has. Paper-printed Acts of Parliament may last a long time—I do agree that they last a significant amount of time—but it is not long enough, and we need all the details of what is being proposed.

There has also been significant debate about the cost of using vellum and the prospective savings from printing future Acts of Parliament on paper. On 19 January, in a letter to the Archives and Records Association, Lord Laming, the Chairman of Committees, explained

that the cost of printing Acts of Parliament is about £103,000 a year, yet we know, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) has said, that the only remaining UK firm involved in this, William Cowley Ltd in Milton Keynes, receives a maximum of £47,000 a year from selling vellum to Parliament. That means that associated costs are around £56,000 a year. Lord Laming stated in his letter to the ARA that the expected cost of printing future Acts on paper, including the paper itself, is around £20,000 a year, so there is still a discrepancy between £20,000 and £30,000. It would be good to know precisely what the saving is meant to be.

We know from specialists in the sector, including the ARA, that the cost of printing on vellum and paper should be roughly the same. It has been confirmed to the ARA by specialist printers, including the Gregynog Press and the Westerham Press, that current costs of printing on vellum could be achieved for much less. People who work with vellum say that printing techniques have come a long way in recent years. They add that letterpress, litho and screen-printing are all used successfully for vellum and parchment, and they should know. Yet the Chairman of Committees has said:

“Vellum requires a specialist and time-consuming printing process, and uses equipment which is not used for any other purpose. It is firmly expected to be significantly cheaper to print on quality archival paper.”

We have a difference of opinion here. First, will the Chairman of Committees set out the proactive efforts that he and previous incumbents have made to consult members of the heritage community on printing as it relates to vellum? Secondly, will he explain how often the contract for printing Acts of Parliament on vellum has been put out to tender, and—if known—what bids came in? Thirdly, will he publish the full cost-benefit assessment that he and his colleagues have carried out on this matter? We need this in order to give the issue proper scrutiny in this place, and for wider public transparency.

We all want to see value for money, but we should also be aware of false economies. Parliament should not subsidise vellum manufacture, but we should be mindful of the future cost of archival facilities, given the fragility of paper and the potential risk of damage to such important documents. We should also consider the impact on our conservation sector if the current Cowley contract is stopped.

Vellum, like sheepskin parchment, has played a key part at key points in the history of these islands in recording our most important events. Its continuous use over centuries should cause all Members to pause in sober reflection on the fact that we, as legislators, are the inheritors not just of a tradition of preserving our laws on vellum, but of a seamless legal tradition that goes back centuries. George Macaulay Trevelyan once wrote:

“The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are to-day, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing after another, gone as utterly as we shall shortly be gone as ghost at cock crow.”

We, too, will be gone. We will be replaced by new generations of Members, and become footnotes to the past. If we are to govern in prose, we should at least allow ourselves, in our responsibilities to generations to come, to be reminded that the poetry of history matters.

6.7 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): People watching this debate from outside will be convinced that this House is completely out of touch. We are talking about a vanity project. We could save £100,000 if we retain Acts of Parliament digitally. We do not need this project. The Paymaster General is very generous with taxpayers' money and he has offered to pay that money. He was equally generous last year when he gave £3 million to Kids Company three days before it went bankrupt. That was another vanity project that was run by Mrs Batmanghelidjh, who was the poster girl of the big society. So, there is money for vellum. There was also money to save an organisation that did great harm to the people with whom it dealt and that was run by a confidence trickster, but it had the imprimatur of the big society—the Government stunt at the time.

Those outside can look at the decisions that we took on 2 March and at the way we have treated people in dire financial distress. Most of the Members who have spoken today on this matter voted in favour of taking £30 a week from the meagre budgets of disabled people.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman remember that we are talking about vellum and record copies of Acts?

Paul Flynn: We are talking about the priorities of this Chamber. Those outside will ask what on earth we are talking about, when we could not pay that money to the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign pensioners—the 2.7 million of them who have paid into their pensions and are being cheated. There is no money for that, but we save the vellum. What are we doing about the 500,000 overseas pensioners whose pensions are frozen? They paid all their dues. There is no money to give them justice, but there is money for the vellum. I think that people outside will certainly see that, and that we have one law that applies to ourselves—to our own vanities, our own history. It is history; there is no modern justification for using vellum now. This is part of the traditions of this place that should have been dumped along with top hats and quill pens.

Robin Cook tried to do it—it was an obvious saving. Remember the pressure we put on outside bodies to save money and make efficiencies. When we have a very sensible proposal from the House of Lords for an efficiency that will save £100,000, we turn it down because of sentimental, confused thinking, as though we were still living in past ages. It has no relevance for the future whatsoever.

Michael Ellis: I think that I have heard the hon. Gentleman refer in the past to the Chartist movement and to other historical aspects of this country. Vellum does not only record positive things. Vellum in society—history—records positive and negative things. If he hates most of the history of this country—perhaps he does not—does he not want to record that history, whatever it says?

Paul Flynn: I cherish the history of this country; I cherish the Book of Aneirin, Y Gododdin, presumably written on vellum:

“Gwyr a aeth i Gatreath
Godidog oedd eu gwedd”.

[Paul Flynn]

That goes back to the early centuries, before English existed as a language. Of course we treasure the past, and our heritage, but it has nothing to do with this century. We have other ways of maintaining a record. How precious are what we think of as these glorious words we produce, the prose of the laws that we pass. In 13 years of Labour Government, 75 laws were passed by Parliament and went through the whole process but were never implemented fully—never. They are rubbish; they are litter. Another such Bill at the moment, on psychoactive drugs, will do positive harm. I am afraid that we commit this sin. It is said that when there are crises, dogs bark, children cry and politicians legislate. Much of our legislation—the Bill on psychoactive drugs is an example of this—has no right to be preserved in any way. That will be regarded in the future, when the harm the legislation will do is obvious, as a vanity and an extravagance.

There are many outside who feel the austerity implemented mercilessly by that Government over there, who have taken large sums from people's meagre incomes, with no attempt to make a case for that and no debate on it that makes sense. We have cut and cut again, and those people who are in financial distress will look at this House and laugh, and say, "There they go again: out of touch, looking after themselves and wasting huge sums of money—£100,000 for the parchment, £47 million for Kids Company—and for what?" Those on the Government Benches can say, "Oh yes, we have done that," but we have 3.7 million children in poverty. We are not talking about them tonight, but we have saved the vellum. Contemptible.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), I should emphasise that I am looking to call the shadow deputy Leader of the House at approximately 6.35 pm. I simply make the point that interventions are perfectly orderly and proper, but if there is a profusion of them colleagues on the list wanting to be called to speak will not be called. I am afraid colleagues will have only themselves to blame, to put it as bluntly but politely as I can. Let us help each other.

6.14 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I am glad to have caught your eye, Mr Speaker, in this important debate.

I start by adding my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) on putting the case so powerfully. I am happy to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for her work, and also to Brian White, the former Member for North East Milton Keynes, for his championing of the cause. Brian has just announced his retirement from Milton Keynes Council and has given many years of dedicated public service. I am happy to pay tribute here to all the work that he has done for this cause and many others.

My reason for speaking has been mentioned—Milton Keynes is home to the last British producer of vellum, William Cowley, founded in 1870 and family-owned throughout, which currently employs six people. It is in the constituency of the Under-Secretary of State for

Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), who, if he were not bound by ministerial responsibilities, would be hoping to speak in the debate. My comments can be amplified by him.

It is rather ironic that the home to one of the oldest traditions and industries in this country is located in the borough that is perhaps the most modern, the newest of new towns, the innovator of matters digital, autonomous pods, smart cities and the rest, but we are very proud to have it in Milton Keynes. Although I am a great believer in innovating digital technology, records and so on, I believe that we should preserve for all time the laws of this place on an indestructible material, and not run the risk that everything gets wiped out one day by some cyber-attack. I take comfort from the fact that we will have a permanent record here.

We should not take a risk with one of the oldest industries. Most nations of the world use vellum from William Cowley to record their national history for future generations or to create documents and works of art. Britain is the world's foremost authority on vellum. We should not underestimate the disbelief in other countries that we are even considering ending its use. Should we decide today to turn our backs on vellum, we are likely to consign another traditional craft to the history books. It will lead us to import more from overseas. It risks supplies to other bodies, as my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) eloquently pointed out.

I cannot see good reasons to abandon the practice. Vellum is cost-effective. There is an opportunity cost if we move to other sources. Vellum does not require intricate monitoring of storage. There is no need for expensive systems of microbiological or insect control. It is non-combustible, so there is no need for expensive non-water-based fire prevention systems. It is 16 times more durable than the highest quality paper available. I represent Milton Keynes, but I come from Scotland. Thrift is important and I abide by the old adage, "Buy cheap and you buy often." Vellum is eco-friendly. It is, as we have heard, a by-product of the meat and dairy industry. The skins not used for vellum would otherwise have to be incinerated or go to landfill. It avoids tree felling and the use of chemicals to treat the paper.

We should protect our heritage and tradition of skilled craftspeople. I cannot see a problem that needs to be fixed by abandoning the use of vellum. I therefore hope the House will enthusiastically back the motion in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire.

6.18 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I have been fortunate enough to represent Inverclyde in this House for almost a year. In that time I have welcomed a number of constituents to the parliamentary estate not only to give them a tour of these historic buildings, but to show them how this Parliament operates. While guiding my constituents through the Royal Gallery and Central Lobby, I have often thought that the Palace of Westminster would make a magnificent museum.

I am not against tradition and today I am proudly wearing my Innerkip Society tie. The Innerkip was established as a charitable organisation in 1798, and for over 218 years has survived to do its good work in the Inverclyde community by adapting and moving with the times.

Politically, Westminster means different things to different people, but this Parliament has had an undeniable influence on the history and culture of the UK's nations over the centuries. Those centuries have led to the development of many important traditions, and I hope we can all agree that the history of any elected Chamber is worthy of respectful consideration.

However, I would caution that we should not let grand architecture and fine paintings distract us from the primary purpose of this building—as a functional centre of governance. It will be apparent to some Members that the UK Parliament does not always convincingly carry out that purpose. We need only look at the outdated estimates process, the antiquated upper House's unelected bishops and hereditary peers or this Chamber's box of complimentary snuff to see that every tradition is not worth continuing. Indeed, as Woody Allen said,

“Tradition is the illusion of permanence.”

It is in that context that we are here today to consider whether it is appropriate to continue recording public Acts of Parliament on vellum. Perhaps it is unsurprising that the modernisers in this debate are those advocating the use of paper—a writing material that has been available in Europe since the middle ages. Westminster politics has never been known for its ability to quickly adapt to changing circumstances.

Those arguing in favour of the continued use of vellum have cited its durability as one of the most important aspects of its use. I understand the point that original copies of records should survive so that future generations can enjoy them. I suggest, however, that the UK Government flatter themselves if they think that, 500 years hence, schoolchildren will clamour to visit this Parliament, eager to see an original copy of the Speed Limits on Roads (Devolved Powers) Act 2016. Whether or not legislation is written down on paper that is replaced over subsequent generations is inconsequential; it is the idea, principles and continued effectiveness of our laws, not the means of recording them, that are most worthy of our attention.

As Members are aware, the National Archives are one of two locations in which vellum copies of new public Acts are stored, and the National Archives, too, take the practical view that archival-quality paper is sufficient to maintain the public record.

Ultimately, there are risks associated with any form of recording, whether vellum, archival paper or full digitisation. We should be wary of anyone claiming that there is any one foolproof method of storage. Lack of foresight and unpredictable events have led to the destruction of records before and may do so again. It is worth remembering that the vellum records in the House of Commons archive were destroyed by fire in 1834, with the House of Lords records surviving only because they were housed in a separate building. Many nationally significant paper records have also been destroyed—particularly during the blitz.

Digitisation has also had its difficulties, as evidenced by the BBC Domesday project, which ran from 1984 to 1986, but which faced technological difficulties just 15 years later. My personal preference is for a combination of archival paper and digitisation. After all, the increased accessibility as a result of digitisation has undoubtedly improved the transparency of our public records.

I am sympathetic to those who argue that discontinuing the use of vellum would negatively affect the UK's sole

remaining producer. I would never argue lightly in favour of a measure that negatively impacted on the employment of any Member's constituents.

None the less, Westminster is not a museum. It does not exist to propagate tradition for the sake of tradition. We are here to govern, to pass laws and to do so in a way that reflects the UK's nations as they are today—not as they were in the past. For too long, this Parliament has doggedly refused to enter the 21st century. I therefore urge colleagues to vote against the motion.

Finally, if anyone from digital services is listening, could they please pop into my office and fix my printer? I have a sheet of vellum stuck in it—apparently vellum is not compatible with the 21st century.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry that I must now, with immediate effect, reduce the time limit on Back-Bench speeches to three minutes, but I do so with the purpose of trying to accommodate everybody.

6.24 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I rise to support my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray), who has been fighting the good fight to maintain the 1,000-year tradition of using vellum for the printing and preservation of Acts of Parliament. I confess that I have a vested interest: I successfully took a private Member's Bill through this place and it became an Act of Parliament. However, you will be pleased to hear, Mr Speaker, that there will be no jokes about Peter Pan and Wendy this evening.

When I first came to this place, I was—I often still am—bemused by its many traditions, but they are an integral part of everything that makes this place the mother of all Parliaments. The use of vellum is one such tradition. In a world of fast-moving technology, which we have heard about this afternoon, and of improvements in printing and processing techniques, and document storage, I agree that it is only right to review the practices for printing record copies of public Acts. Some might call me a dinosaur, but I do not think that there is anything wrong with holding on to a tradition of history.

Printing on vellum is a long-standing tradition. Record copies of public Acts have been printed on vellum since 1849. Vellum is far more durable than paper, even archival paper. Without vellum, as we have heard, we would not have Magna Carta, the Domesday Book, the Lindisfarne documents or many other important historical documents.

Time is pressing, so I will conclude my comments there, except to add that the anticipated savings do not justify a departure from this long-standing tradition. Although the world is, indeed, changing, it is important that we do not lose some of our great traditions, so we should not let the use of vellum simply die out.

6.26 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Traditions are an important part of our country, our way of life and, indeed, our Parliament. Without them, this House would be a duller, drearier place. As we know from history, once traditions are torn down, it is all but impossible to revive them.

[Mr Ranil Jayawardena]

On the question of vellum, I am tempted to defer to Edmund Burke's view of society as a contract between the living, the dead and those who are not yet born. I have no wish to deprive future generations of the ability to touch and smell the records of their past. In fact, we have a duty to our descendants to leave behind an abiding physical record of our laws and customs, just as our forebears, in their turn, did for us.

Without doubt, vellum is the natural document to last the ages. Without vellum, we would not have the Domesday Book, nor would we have been able to mark more than 800 years of Magna Carta, with all the historical significance that the four surviving 1215 copies added to our celebrations in Odiham in my constituency and elsewhere. It is entirely due to vellum that awe-inspiring texts such as the St Cuthbert Gospel from the 7th century have survived for so long. Even by the most generous estimates, the archive paper that the other place has proposed as a substitute to vellum has nothing like its lifespan.

As our methods of documentation move into an increasingly digitised world, we will gradually lose the ability to experience historical artefacts and to immerse ourselves fully in the study of the past. Every time a dusty volume is replaced by a PDF, and every time a print newspaper transfers to the internet, we gain something—our lives become more efficient and the pursuit of knowledge becomes easier—but we also lose something: the tactile elegance, the timeless simplicity and the physical permanence of record-keeping.

When it comes to preserving this valuable tradition, I believe that Paul Wright, who works for the vellum manufacturer, put it best when he said, "If it's precious, put it on vellum." If we in this House have the confidence to make and enact laws, we must also deem them worthy of preserving through the ages.

6.28 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): I wonder whether we are belittling ourselves slightly. Yes, vellum is almost immortally permanent and—from the Domesday Book to the equally wondrous Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2016—has faithfully freighted and defended its contents. If we ditch it for a ream of A4 80 gsm paper, or whatever it might be, our descendants will watch as the laws governing them gradually putrefy, wither and dissolve. Yes, that might be an advantage for many things, but is not this about more than a practical issue?

I am sure that hon. Members will agree that every day we sit in this place and hear soaring flights of Ciceronian oratory from both sides of the House. This place bears witness to an indefatigable tide of facts, figures and predictions, all of which are dispensed with rhetorical clusters of clauses and sub-clauses nesting like Russian dolls, and held up with towering eloquence. Is it not fitting for the laws, Bills and Acts in which those words are made manifest to be conveyed and preserved in a manner worthy of their breadth and nobility?

I am sure hon. Members will remember "Gulliver's Travels", in which one Lilliputian inspired awe in the others because he was taller than his peers by the breadth of one fingernail. We must not be guilty of the same—of thinking small and measuring ourselves against one

another instead of taking the wider view and the historical perspective, and reflecting the enormous historical significance and distinction of this place.

We have faced this hurdle before when, with great irony, the distinguished and noble Members of another place sought to end a millennium-long tradition. While balancing precariously on a quivering tower of ritual custom and convention, they thrust their ancient swords in the direction of another small part of our heritage, and their efforts were thwarted. I, for one, hope we will resist them again.

In this place, the thought ought to be not, "Can we make do?" but, "Can we do no better?" I am delighted that so many Members support this motion. As negligible as a politician is, and however much today's Lilliputian thoughts might seem perishable, it is incumbent on us today to uphold their imperishability.

6.31 pm

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow that Ciceronian example of oratory from my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) and the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on their work.

I wish to address a point that I feel has been somewhat overlooked: these proposals represent the thin end of the wedge, and a general direction of travel away from physical storage and towards a digital-only future that I would want to avoid. I was concerned to read in a written answer from 9 November last year that in addition to reassurances that archive paper is a sufficient replacement for vellum—a claim I dispute—further reassurance was offered that Parliament maintains a comprehensive database of legislation, both "as originally enacted" and "as amended" on the website www.legislation.gov.uk. I took that as a sign that some think that web-based archives can be the equivalent of hard copies, but they are not, for the simple reason that technology evolves far too quickly to serve as a permanent record for any sensible length of time. New and "better" devices and file formats come on the market every month, and it takes only a few years for technology to become redundant. If I handed you, Mr Deputy Speaker, a copy of your maiden speech from 1997 on a floppy disk, would you be able to access it readily? I doubt that you would, and let us not even begin thinking about transferring documents between PC and Apple formats.

Many computer devices that are sold now do not even feature CD-drives, such is the fashion for online storage—the "cloud". While online storage might be the current flavour of the decade and it works fine for now, such is the pace of change that I ask whether we can really expect information to be stored sufficiently in that format in 10 or 20 years, let alone in 500 or 1,000 years. If we are not cautious, we could soon be facing a new digital dark age in which accessing digital files from a few years earlier will prove trickier and trickier.

Sir Paul Beresford: One difficulty is that although the law is printed on vellum, its implementation is done through statutory instruments, which are printed on paper and kept digitally. The other interesting thing

that I have found—being old enough—is that digital records are changed and moved as we go on with digital invention.

William Wragg: My hon. Friend raises a number of interesting points, although whether we should print the deliberations of statutory instrument Committees on vellum is a moot point.

I simply warn about this digital dark age that will soon be sweeping over us. We should resist the change and hold on to an established, prestigious, and time-tested physical form of record storage—the premier form of record storage which, of course, is vellum.

I am fortunate enough to have the honour that my private Member's Bill has been passed by the House. It is currently making its way through the other place but, if these proposals go ahead, I could add to that honour the somewhat more dubious one that should my Bill receive Royal Assent, it could become one of the last few Acts of Parliament to be recorded on vellum.

Sir Paul Beresford: May I inform my hon. Friend that since 1956 that has been what happens? I am sorry, but if he gets his Bill through, it will not be on vellum.

William Wragg: I am hugely disappointed. I wonder whether I would be able to ask the fine procurer of vellum in the constituency of the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), to print the Act. I would be happier to forgo the honour of having my Act of Parliament printed on vellum if I knew that future Acts would be printed on vellum.

Mrs Hodgson: As a point of clarification, I also promoted a private Member's Bill that became law, and it is printed on vellum. I have seen and held it, and it is definitely vellum. It is private Acts, not private Members' Acts, that are printed on paper.

William Wragg: I am grateful for that helpful intervention from the hon. Lady, who is extremely learned in these matters. In conclusion, I say to the House that our predecessors in this Chamber resisted the change proposed by the other place in 1999, and I urge Members to do so again today.

6.36 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Anybody who is watching BBC Parliament today will be completely confused about why the House is spending the best part of two hours debating whether to continue spending £100,000 a year printing laws on goatskins. I am surprised that this is how we are choosing to spend precious time in the Chamber. When there is a refugee crisis in Europe, the country is facing a huge decision on whether to remain in the EU, and child poverty and homelessness are increasing, surely we could be putting this sitting to better use. It is embarrassing that time limits had to be imposed on speeches in the previous debate on genocide by Daesh against ethnic and religious minorities so that we could debate this motion. I am also quite surprised that the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who is normally so eager to tell us of his prudence with taxpayers' money, has said that the Government will find—

Mr James Gray: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The hon. Lady indicates from the Dispatch Box that the time for the previous debate, which was a grave and important debate about Daesh, was curtailed to accommodate this debate. That is not correct. I went to great lengths to say that the previous debate could continue for as long as was desired, because this debate was much less important.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): That was not a point of order, but the hon. Gentleman has put it on the record. The problem is that I am struggling to hear because of the shouting.

Melanie Onn: If the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) had listened, he would have heard that I said that there were reductions in the time that people had to speak, which is a perfectly valid point—

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Melanie Onn: I will finish my sentence before I give way.

I am surprised that the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who is normally so eager to tell us of his prudence with taxpayers' money, has said that the Government will find the extra money for this with no problem. I thought that the Government had a long-term economic plan, but it can hardly be called that if money can be found down the back of the sofa whenever it suits the Government politically.

Robert Jenrick: When I heard that the hon. Lady was opposed to the proposal, I took the liberty—I hope she does not mind—of looking up whether there are any important documents from the town of Grimsby that are printed on vellum and would not have existed had they been printed on paper. It turns out that in Grimsby town hall there are 14 boxes of them including, from 1227, the charter creating the town of Grimsby; from 1256, the charter granting the town of Grimsby its right—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Sit down, Mr Jenrick. *[Interruption.]* I suggest you sit down—*[Interruption.]* Order. Mr Flynn, I certainly do not need any help from you. I say to you, Mr Jenrick, that the Minister is desperate to come in. By all means make the point, but you cannot read a list as though it is the phone directory to tell me what is there or not. We have got the message; let us get on.

Melanie Onn: I am delighted that the hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) takes such a close interest in Great Grimsby's fantastic history. However, we are talking about today, not the 1200s.

The Minister has said that the process is surprisingly cost-effective, and the hon. Member for North Wiltshire has said that keeping vellum costs little or nothing. However, the cost to Parliament of producing vellum in 2014-15 was £107,000. As the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) mentioned, using the most expensive parchment paper would cost just £8,000. You know what they say, Mr Deputy Speaker: “£100,000 here, £100,000 there—it soon starts to add up to real money.”

[Melanie Onn]

The Lords Committee cited a more conservative estimate of a saving of £80,000 a year from scrapping vellum. However, that does not take into account the renewal of the printing contract, under which the cost is likely to be greater than under the current arrangements, and nor does that take account of the cost of producing and printing the mammoth HS2 hybrid Bill, should that ever pass into law. At 49,000 pages long, I hate to think how many goats it will take to produce two copies.

Mr James Gray: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Melanie Onn: This expense is simply to continue a tradition because that is the way it has always been—that seems to be the only genuine argument that has been presented for continuing to print Acts of Parliament on vellum. A much more important tradition is the 800-year-old one that all Members of this House are equal, which the Government ended when they introduced English votes for English laws in such a shoddy way. Conservative Members were willing to let go of that tradition, and I see no reason why the tradition we are debating today is more worthy of retention.

The Minister and other hon. Members have said that vellum should be kept as it is the only way to maintain physical copies of Acts of Parliament for the long term, but the Parliamentary Archives contains paper records that date back just as long as vellum ones. The manuscript journals of the House of Lords, which date back to 1510, have been printed on paper, but the oldest vellum record is an Act of Parliament from 1497, which is a difference of only 13 years.

I know that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire likes to remind everyone that if Magna Carta had been printed on paper, it would have been lost in about 1465, sometime before the birth of Henry VIII, but we are not talking about Magna Carta. As the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) pointed out, we are talking about the Coinage (Measurement) Act 2011, the Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013, the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 and every other Bill that is passed in this place. I might also point out that there was a greater need to print on vellum at the time when Magna Carta was drafted, given the surprise emergence of computers and the internet since the 13th century.

Several hon. Members raised concerns about the future of William Cowley, which is a serious point because that company currently provides the vellum for Acts of Parliament.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Melanie Onn: We support this industry and agree that it is worth maintaining—[*Interruption.*] In response to the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), I am not giving way because I have only two minutes left before the speech from the Minister, who wants to take 13 minutes to make his point clear.

We support this industry and agree that it is worth maintaining, but the company produces thousands of pages of vellum every year and its contract with Parliament is only a small part of its business. The company's general manager has said that the loss of the contract

with Parliament would be “nothing”, and I think that we should accept his expert opinion.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office said to *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday:

“Printing vellum copies of laws...provides a durability we cannot guarantee in the digital world, as we simply cannot know how easy it will be to read today's data in a decade, let alone in a millennium.”

What absolute rubbish! One minute the Cabinet Office brags about

“building new digital services so good people prefer using them to the old paper versions they replace”,

and the next it says that it is all going to be unreadable in 10 years' time. If we follow his logic, everything should be printed on vellum, not just Acts of Parliament.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire and the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) have claimed that to ditch vellum would be to downgrade the importance of the law of the land. As very few people are actually aware of laws being printed on goatskin in the first place, I can only think that they must be talking about the effect on themselves and their Conservative colleagues. If they believe the law would no longer be important after the change to manuscript paper, people might want to keep an eye on them.

I find it particularly surprising that the hon. Member for North East Somerset, who has written an article in *The Daily Telegraph* today, agrees with the argument that it is important for Acts to last 5,000 years. His lack of concern about rising global temperatures had led me to believe that he was not all that bothered about anything still being here in the year 7016.

Finally, there is the question of why on earth the Minister for the Cabinet Office is getting involved. This is a matter for the Lords, not the Commons or the Government. If the Government do wish to involve themselves, why is the Leader of the House not leading on this matter, rather than the Minister for the Cabinet Office? I am sure that there are much more useful things a Government Minister could be doing with his time, and there are certainly much more worthy causes on which £100,000 of taxpayers' money could be spent each year. He should let the Lords end this archaic process and get on with something more important. The world has moved on since 1497 and it is time that this place did too.

6.46 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): It falls to this House to debate issues both large and small. Today's debate has shown that this issue is both large and small: large because the question of how, as a Parliament and as a country, we record the sovereign laws of our land, and whether we should protect the traditions by which we have done this for many centuries, is of great importance; and small because the financial sums involved and the savings offered by the change that we are debating are but a minuscule fraction of the overall cost of government.

I want to be clear that this is, first and foremost, a House matter. Should the House carry the motion today, I hope that we can work with the other place to find a path forward that both Houses find satisfactory. In that spirit of pragmatism, the Government have offered financial support from other savings, without

further burdening taxpayers, to ensure that this tradition, which is of great symbolic and practical value, is not irrecoverably broken by a lack of funding on this small scale.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) on his tireless campaigning. I have been buoyed by the support that we have received from across the House and, indeed, the other place. The case was set out powerfully by him, by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), and by many Members across the House.

Sir Paul Beresford: It is absolutely inappropriate for the Government to dictate to the Houses of Parliament by a payment. The way in which it should work is that the Houses decide and pass on the bill, as traditionally happens every year. The Minister should know that. To tell us that he will pay for one specific thing is inappropriate.

Matthew Hancock: This is indeed a matter for the House, and this House is just about to make sure that its view is well known.

The speech by the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), the intervention by the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) and the speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) were incredibly powerful and persuasive. There are Members who sit on the Treasury Bench, not least my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Michael Fallon), and my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) and for Devizes (Claire Perry), who would have spoken had convention not prevented them from doing so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) made the case for abolition, but his speech ended up as a haggle about the costs. The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) railed against the rule of law, ultimately, arguing that it was not worth preserving laws. Well, I think that the rule of law in this country is important and should be preserved.

Paul Flynn: The Minister is distorting the point I made. This is a vanity issue. Does he not realise that the people outside this House who have been badly hurt by the austerity cuts of this Government will look at that £100,000, and the £47 million that his Department gave to Kids Company, and imagine what they could do with it? The Government have been so mean on the employment and support allowance and on the bedroom tax, but are saving the vellum.

Matthew Hancock: It is only because of the careful management of public finances that we can preserve and safeguard our best traditions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) brought his great and deep expertise to the debate, and told us why Dr Porck thinks we should print on goatskin. For that insight, I thank him. I also pay tribute to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton), which was powerful and rhetorical, and made the point succinctly. All I think I can safely say about the speech by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) is that she managed in her remarks to oppose the very material on

which her own town's charter is printed. I never expected to say this in the House, but her speech made me think, "Bring back Austin Mitchell."

Why does this matter? First, because in a world racked by instability, volatility and change, we must safeguard our great traditions. I am an optimist about the power of human ingenuity, innovation and technology, and their ability to transform our lives. I passionately believe that modern invention can radically improve the way we do almost everything in Government. I am responsible for digital transformation and for cyber-security. But this is not a debate that pits tradition against modernity, because a truly modern outlook does not put them up against each other. Novelty is no guarantee of improvement. Traditions matter precisely because they connect us with the collective wisdom of our predecessors. There are times when a tradition should and must be done away with, but traditions should not be broken lightly, especially those of the longest standing, for once discarded, they cannot be replaced easily, and sometimes cannot be replaced at all. Let us combine the best of the old with the best of the new.

Mrs Hodgson: I am grateful to the Minister for letting me intervene, especially as I wanted to make a similar point to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), who would not give way. I am pleased that the Minister is bringing the debate back to tradition. I come back again to my point about heritage craft. We are going to spend billions on saving this building, when it would be a lot cheaper to build a 21st-century building somewhere else. Heritage matters. The tiles that are being replaced out in Central Lobby are individually handmade; that money could have been spent on the poor. Why is no one making that argument? The same argument is not made about the fund for international development. Does he agree with me?

Matthew Hancock: I agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of our traditions. The Heritage Crafts Association, which she so ably spoke for, has for many years supported the skills needed to keep these crafts going. I knew its work when I was Minister of State for Skills and Enterprise, and am delighted to support the skills of those who make and print on vellum now.

Committing our laws to this robust material underlines the point that the law of the land is immutable and that the rule of law is steadfast. We should never take that for granted. To those who say that this is symbolism, I say yes, it is vital symbolism. What else are laws but symbols on a page? What are these symbols? They are symbols of great importance that make up and underpin the fabric of our society. The vellum record copies of Acts—signed in Norman French, no less, by the Clerk of the Parliaments—are part of the rich character of this House and of our evolving constitution, just like Black Rod's staff or the colour of the Benches of this Chamber. The symbolic power of vellum is undeniable. After the public outcry that followed the proposal to scrap it, it is time to reconsider. As Burke said, the British constitution is like an ancient house that

"stands well enough, though part Gothic, part Grecian, and part Chinese, until an attempt is made to square it into uniformity. Then it may come down upon our heads altogether in much uniformity of ruin".

Let us not make the mistake of trying to square this great tradition into uniformity.

[Matthew Hancock]

That is the symbolic case, but let me turn to the practical case for vellum. By any measure, vellum is far more durable and far stronger than archive paper, lasting thousands of years. It is hard to destroy, and without vellum, would we today have copies of the Domesday Book, the Magna Carta, the Lindisfarne gospels, Henry VIII's certificate of marriage or Charles I's warrant of death? I doubt that we would. Portugal is this nation's most long-standing ally, and since 1373, the Anglo-Portuguese treaty has held the force of law, and it can be read. Why? Because it was written on vellum. We used vellum even for the town charter of Grimsby.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I would like to take the opportunity to add to that list the charter for the Salford Hundred, a document showing that Salford was of greater cultural and commercial importance than its neighbour, Manchester. Even in times of austerity, documents like that, written on vellum, are so important to the people of Salford.

Matthew Hancock: And to places around the country: Grimsby, Salford, Chester—you name it. [Interruption.] Ebbsfleet—any more bids?

Let me deal with the costs. As has been noted, I bow to no one in my desire to save taxpayers' money. For the first half of this decade, the drive for savings has been the backdrop to debate in this House, and I expect that to continue for some years yet. The Administration Committee estimates that the cost to Parliament of using vellum has been a little over £100,000 a year. Of course, any alternative would have its own costs, so all this amount could not be saved in any case.

Last year, the total costs of the House of Lords were around £100 million. If both Houses decide to sit for one extra day, the cost runs into tens of thousands. By comparison with the resources put into researching, debating and passing each Bill, the printing of an Act on vellum is negligible. Even my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley called the costs "not significant". The savings proposed are just a tenth of 1% of the budget of the House of Lords, and one hundred thousandth of 1% of the total budget of the Government.

Vellum's durability means that it is excellent value for money. At today's prices, printing the Magna Carta on vellum would cost about £6 per century. I do not know of any other data storage system that can beat that, so I can give the House the commitment that, should there be any extra costs, taxpayers will be protected, and we will work with both Houses to find a solution that can work. I have heard the argument that there is only one printer and that it is being dismantled, but that is just not true. There are a multitude of printers; indeed, I printed the first page of my speech on vellum on a laser printer.

We have looked into the matter of suppliers, and one consequence of this debate and the scrutiny it has provided is that we can bring the costs of printing on vellum down. I have heard that we are running out of space for storage. That is not true. At the current rate, we could pass Acts for 500 years and there would be space enough in the Victoria tower for them. On the basis of symbolism, cost and practicality, therefore, we should continue this great and long tradition.

6.58 pm

Mr James Gray: What a fine debate this has been. It has been well informed and impassioned on all sides. I believe that 13 of the 15 speakers supported the motion, while the two or three who did not were very helpful to my case, so I was grateful to them. The fact of the matter is that children up and down the land are told that the laws of the land are important, and one symbol of that importance is that they are printed on vellum. The durability and traditional quality of vellum, the traditions of this House and the way in which vellum symbolises the importance of the laws of the land all make it crucial that, for a marginal cost, if any, we continue with this long tradition.

In 1999, we told the House of Lords that we in the House of Commons were the people who must decide these matters. I therefore call on Members once again to assert our House's right to say how we wish the laws of the land to be recorded.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 117, Noes 38.

Division No. 245]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Hoare, Simon
Ali, Rushanara	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Amess, Sir David	Hoey, Kate
Argar, Edward	Howarth, Sir Gerald
Atkins, Victoria	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Blackman, Bob	Jenrick, Robert
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Johnson, Gareth
Bone, Mr Peter	Jones, Andrew
Borwick, Victoria	Jones, Mr Kevan
Brady, Mr Graham	Keeley, Barbara
Brazier, Mr Julian	Kennedy, Seema
Bruce, Fiona	Kirby, Simon
Buckland, Robert	Lancaster, Mark
Burns, Conor	Lefroy, Jeremy
Burns, rh Sir Simon	Leigh, Sir Edward
Churchill, Jo	Leslie, Charlotte
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey	Leslie, Chris
Davies, Mims	Lewis, Brandon
Dinenage, Caroline	Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel	Loughton, Tim
Dowd, Jim	Mackinlay, Craig
Ellis, Michael	Mak, Mr Alan
Ellwood, Mr Tobias	Malthouse, Kit
Elphicke, Charlie	Matheson, Christian
Fallon, rh Michael	McCartney, Jason
Francois, rh Mr Mark	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Ghani, Nusrat	McGinn, Conor
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl	Menzies, Mark
Glindon, Mary	Milling, Amanda
Graham, Richard	Murrison, Dr Andrew
Gray, Mr James	Newton, Sarah
Grayling, rh Chris	Nuttall, Mr David
Green, Chris	Offord, Dr Matthew
Greening, rh Justine	Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Gummer, Ben	Perkins, Toby
Gwynne, Andrew	Perry, Claire
Hancock, rh Matthew	Philp, Chris
Hands, rh Greg	Pincher, Christopher
Harris, Rebecca	Pound, Stephen
Hayes, rh Mr John	Pow, Rebecca
Heappey, James	Pursglove, Tom
Heaton-Harris, Chris	Quin, Jeremy
Hinds, Damian	Quince, Will

Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Shannon, Jim
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Stewart, Iain
 Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vaz, rh Keith

Vaz, Valerie
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Warburton, David
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 White, Chris
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wragg, William
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Wendy Morton and
Kevin Foster

NOES

Ashworth, Jonathan
 Blackford, Iain
 Boswell, Philip
 Brown, Alan
 Bryant, Chris
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Cunningham, Alex
 Danczuk, Simon
 David, Wayne
 Durkan, Mark
 Flynn, Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Grady, Patrick
 Griffith, Nia
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendry, Drew
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Law, Chris
 Mann, John

McCarthy, Kerry
 Monaghan, Carol
 Mullin, Roger
 Onn, Melanie
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Streeting, Wes
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Watson, Mr Tom
 Weir, Mike
 Wilson, Corri
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:
Sir Paul Beresford and
Nigel Mills

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House disagrees with the conclusion of the House of Commons Administration Committee's First Report of Session 2015–16; welcomes the view expressed by the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General that government funds would be available to pay for the continued use of vellum for printing Acts of Parliament; is unwilling to amend or resile from the terms of the Resolutions agreed by both Houses on 12 February 1849; and accordingly instructs the Clerk of the House to convey to the Clerk of the Parliaments that the House of Commons has withheld its consent to the use of archival paper rather than vellum for the printing of record copies of public Acts of Parliament.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I just want to clarify one point. The Minister for the Cabinet Office stated that the first page of his speech was printed on vellum. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Never mind the hon. Gentleman having his hand in his pocket, I want to hear the point of order.

Ronnie Cowan: The first page of the Minister's speech was of course not printed on vellum. It may have been printed on a product called vellum paper, which is a completely different synthetic product. It is not vellum.

Mr Deputy Speaker: All I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that that is not a point for the Chair, and I am certainly not going to reopen the debate after what we have just been through.

Business without Debate

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)),

EUROPEAN AGENDA ON SECURITY

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 8293/15, a Commission Communication: The European Agenda on Security, and its relationship to the Renewed Internal Security Strategy 2015–2020; and supports the Government's approach of working with other Member States to support our international partners in the area of EU internal security, recognising that national security is a matter for individual nations through their sovereign Parliaments.—(*Charlie Elphicke.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Sports Pitches at Shugborough Hall, Staffordshire

7.11 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I rise to present a petition about sports pitches at Shugborough Hall in my constituency of Stafford. I pay tribute to Jeanette Daly who, accompanied by many others from the area of Great Haywood, Little Haywood and Colwich, has done a tremendous amount work on the matter. I declare an interest in that I am a member of the National Trust.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the sports pitches to the south of Shugborough Hall are well used and a valuable asset to local and area teams; further that the pitches have been part of a recreation site for decades; further that the proposals put forward by the National Trust to close the pitches in order to create parkland would have a negative impact on sports provision in Staffordshire and make it harder for local people to pursue a healthy and active lifestyle; further notes that these proposals have not been consulted upon; and further that a local petition on a similar matter has been signed by 1,000 individuals.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to call on the National Trust to work with the local community to arrive at a compromise where the sports pitches at Shugborough Hall can continue to be used by local sports teams.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P001685]

Butterfields Estate

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Charlie Elphicke.)

7.13 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Tonight, we are holding a debate about the future of the Butterfields estate in Walthamstow, but I want to tell the Minister about the properties and the residents who live in them. The story is not unique to Walthamstow; it is a story of what is happening in our housing market around the country due to a lack of properties, and speculative developers and letting and estate agents, who seek to maximise gains without any thought to the consequences of exploiting people in this uncompetitive market. I hope to persuade the Minister to help not only to change the future for the residents of the Butterfields estate, many of whom are in the Gallery this evening, but to tackle the underlying problems that enabled the situation to arise in the first place. I expect that he has not heard the story of Butterfields, so I intend to set that out and then ask a series of questions.

Last November, Butterfields E17 Ltd, a company formed just a few months before by Jasbir Singh Jhumat and Pardeep Singh Jhumat, bought the 63 flats on Shernhall Street and Butterfields in Walthamstow from a landlord who had owned the flats for almost 80 years. Hon. Members may have seen this part of my constituency on TV or in the newspapers—I am sure that for the Housing Minister “Location, Location, Location” is required zeitgeist viewing and that he pores over *Time Out* and the property hotspots in the *Evening Standard*—because it is at the edge of Walthamstow village.

The tenants were not told at the time that their homes had been sold by their previous long-term owner, the Glasspool Charity Trust, a charity whose charitable purpose is to prevent destitution—I will return to that irony later. No one told them their landlord had changed. They learned of this when some tenants started getting notices to quit in January 2016 from their new landlords, telling them they had just two more months to live in Walthamstow. Sixteen tenants have so far been served with notices to quit, and they are mainly people on fairly low incomes. Almost half of them have young children, and two have retired. Most of them have lived on the estate for a long time—up to 16 years, with an average stay of seven years.

This is a real community. It is not just those 16 households who are at risk; the owners have made it clear that they wish to sell on all the homes eventually. Like one in five households in this country, the only crime these people have committed is not being able to afford to get on the property ladder and so they are having to rent, meaning that they can be moved on at any time. Their good record on paying rent and taking care of these properties matters little to the new owners—businessmen with a slew of companies recorded at Companies House set up one after another and dissolved just as quickly, some with health and safety breaches recorded against them, too. The only concern of these companies has been to try to get the residents out as quickly as possible so that they can sell on these properties to make a profit in London’s overheated housing market: to capitalise on the gentrification buzz that puts Walthamstow at the top of so many housing lists.

To that end, these people have even sent the residents letters claiming they were no longer tenants because they had been served with an eviction notice, and suggesting they could face fines of thousands of pounds in the courts, as well as having their career prospects damaged if they fight the evictions. Despite the legislation on revenge evictions, these good tenants, mostly with assured shorthold tenancies, now have to fight for their very rights, including the right for their deposits to be protected—this company also failed to tell them about that when it bought the properties. No current legislation is stopping the juggernaut of these developers riding roughshod over these residents’ rights as they chase a quick profit. In March, the new landlord put six of the flats up for auction with Savills, without telling the occupying tenants or telling the people seeking to buy those properties that they had tenants in them. Three were sold, for £300,000 each, which we think is about £50,000 more than the price paid for them. I also want to come back to that point when talking about the charity that sold the estate.

This is not necessarily a bad news story for the Minister, because today I can reveal that Dolphin Living, part of the Dolphin Square Charitable Foundation, has formally stated that it is prepared to make an offer for the entire estate, helping to keep these hard-working residents in their homes and working for this city. Yet still the owners refuse to negotiate, hoping that by their tactics residents will go quietly and they can continue to flog off the flats to push up their profits. They have pound signs in their eyes, but good business sense has gone out the window. They are bullying, misleading and riding roughshod over the rights of these people. The question is: just how did they end up being able to buy all these properties? That is where NatWest comes into this story.

It was NatWest that financed the purchase of this estate. This is the same NatWest bank that we, as taxpayers, own 73% of. Yet it is financing the break-up of a community. Ironically, it is doing so during a Treasury consultation about the Bank of England’s role in regulating buy-to-let lending. This is at a time when UK productive corporate investment is low by historical and international comparison. NatWest bank owns a separate charge on each of the 63 flats, linked to its loan. No other funder has a charge on the flats. It is simply inconceivable that it did not know of the plans to evict the tenants, as how else would this loan be repaid? One would have hoped compliance would have flagged up the chequered history of the people who took out the loans.

NatWest policies explicitly state:

“Our firm commitment is to lend responsibly. It is not in our interest to enter into unsustainable commercial agreements, or to lend to organisations, or individuals, which could damage the bank’s reputation.”

I hope we can all agree on one thing across the House tonight: if making 63 families homeless is not bad for your reputation, what is? Yet NatWest tells me that its executive response team has not found any evidence that the bank did not act in accordance with its policy and procedures.

I am here not to discuss the pros and cons of the bail-out, but to say very plainly that we will pay the price twice for NatWest’s conduct. We will pay the cost of the bail-out and the cost of helping these families if

they are made homeless. I hope that the Minister will agree to act and to raise this matter with NatWest directly. The Government have taken an active interest in the future of NatWest. They sought to sort out its leadership; now it is time for us to use our muscle with this institution to make it live its values in its lending policies.

That multi-million pound loan given to Butterfields E17 Ltd diverts resources away from meeting the serious costs of funding the needs of small businesses. That bank is also fuelling the speculation in higher housing costs, which is so detrimental to my local community, without funding any building work despite the challenge of building houses in this country. It is not too late for NatWest to act. NatWest is entitled under the terms of the charge to withhold consent from any sale and to prevent any other charge being put on the property. It can ask its clients why they did not seem to understand tenancy rights, which puts them at risk of lengthy court proceedings. It could ask why, when a serious organisation such as Dolphin Living wants to work with them, they do not negotiate or even pick up the phone. I know all this because I have spent the past month trying to do that deal for them.

If we cannot save this estate with the help of Dolphin, the fate of these residents is unlikely to be happy. Local rents have rocketed to close to double the amount that these tenants were originally paying and far above what most of them can afford. Claiming housing benefit even if they were willing to reduce their net income is no longer feasible in a London where the limits on housing benefit are below local market rents. Indeed, many of my residents in Walthamstow pay nearly 60% of their monthly income on rent—little wonder that personal debt continues to rise in Walthamstow. Most would have to move away, losing out financially with higher travel costs or having to give up work. Their children would no longer be able to stay in our local schools. A well-established community would be broken up to the detriment not just of those residents but of Walthamstow itself.

Some have suggested that the council could buy the estate—as though, under this Government, it has a spare £16 million going—or put the residents at the top of its already stretched housing waiting list. Although Waltham Forest Council has been trying to help the residents with housing advice, the honest truth is that we already have 2,500 residents in our community in temporary accommodation. The lack of properties in the private rented sector as gentrification rips through both prices and local provision makes it even harder to keep people in our community.

I ask the Minister to raise this issue with his colleagues in the Cabinet Office, because I do not believe that the charity that sold this estate in the first place should be absent from its obligations to these residents. As I said at the start of my remarks, this charity's explicit remit is to prevent destitution and homelessness, yet that is precisely what its actions are likely to cause.

Charity rules require that a charity should consider the impact of the disposal of assets such as this. Given that the tenants of Butterfields would have been, and could still be, direct beneficiaries of this charity, the consequences of this deal should have been consulted on, yet that did not happen. It did not happen because the charity listened to Clarke Hillyer letting agents,

which acted for both itself and Butterfields E17 Ltd, no doubt making a healthy profit for both without any sense that there was a conflict of interest. It encouraged the charity to sell the estate without any consultation with the residents.

We can accept that the charity wanted to raise funds for its charitable purpose, but to have sold these properties as a block in 2015 and seen them resold on at a higher price not six months later raises serious questions about the value of this deal to the charity. Indeed, we estimate that it is possible that it has lost around £3 million in pursuit of a quick windfall, which made it so blind to the interests of either the tenants or its supposed beneficiaries.

I have been told today that the Charity Commission is now investigating the matter, but that the charity did not need to seek permission for the sale to go ahead. Yet it is clear that when such a hypocritical deal takes place, where the charity looks for a £16 million windfall thereby putting its charitable purpose in a secondary position, it can only damage the confidence that all of us have in the concept of charitable status.

I have a series of questions for the Minister and a request that he makes a commitment to raise these matters explicitly with his colleagues and also with NatWest. Can he tell us what the conditions are of the bail-out to which banks must adhere, especially as they are lending in property markets, given that 60% of their books is mostly property? The Chancellor claimed that under his watch the banking system had been “reset”, that banks should “work for customers” and that the changes would mean that when mistakes were made it would be the banks, not the taxpayers, who would pick up the bill. If the Chancellor was serious about that, in this instance—with 63 families who will be made homeless and will therefore require help and support from the state—I presume that the Minister will recognise that this is a mistake and that there is a cost to not acting. What does he believe the consequences should be as a direct result of this decision?

Indeed, how will Ministers ensure in future that lenders such as NatWest, which is still owned by the taxpayer, will instead increase credit for the real economy and for productive purposes, not for the kind of speculation we have seen, which is skewing our housing market in London? The developers can do this because there is no protection for tenants from such shady landlords. Will the Minister not only change his mind on landlord licensing, which is having such an impact in Waltham Forest in helping to address the quality of our housing and in dealing with landlords such as these, who seem to think that health and safety is optional for a rental property, but reconsider powers in the Housing and Planning Bill to protect tenants such as those from the Butterfields estate who are facing no-fault evictions caused by the threat of fees?

It is clear that the landlord is seeking to use the threat of fees in the same way as it could have used the threat of eviction to try to pressurise the residents to void their rights. I hope that the Minister will recognise that it is time to protect those tenants who, through no fault of their own and in the London housing market, face possible eviction. Finally, will the Minister speak to his colleagues in the Cabinet Office about the regulation of this charity, Glasspool, and how we can ensure that

[Stella Creasy]

charities do not act to undermine their purpose and that the Charity Commission is robust in its approach to such situations?

Gentrification has undoubtedly brought benefits to my community—new shops, new investment, even new people—but it also clearly has costs and consequences. Without action, those costs will be borne by those who can least afford it and we will all pay the price. Developers, charities and banks that are so blinded by pound signs that they cannot see the damage they are doing require strong Governments to speak for the public interest. I hope the Minister will not just watch the TV shows or read the property pages but act today and in future to help to ensure that communities such as Walthamstow can be a top location for all concerned.

7.27 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): I congratulate the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) on securing this debate about the future of the Butterfields estate. I also take the opportunity to extend my sympathies to the residents affected, as I recognise the difficult position in which they have been placed, which they must feel is quite precarious. I shall deal with some of the key issues the hon. Lady has outlined, as well as some of the wider general issues.

I appreciate the hon. Lady's comments about Walthamstow and know the area fairly well—as she might know, I went to school just down the road. It is a fabulous part of the country and a great part of London. She made some political comments, and I appreciate that we sit on opposite sides of the House. She talks about the opportunity to ensure that there are homes for people and that we have housing supply coming through, but I would make the point that we have a good track record, having doubled the number of first-time buyers since 2010 and having seen house building increase by 25% just last year. I gently remind her that next time she raises housing supply she might want to bear in mind that the previous Labour Government—in fact, the current shadow Housing Minister—left the country with the lowest level of house building since 1923. We have had quite a lot of work to do to get from that paltry 88,000 a year back to 181,000 over the past year. I am proud of that work.

To move on to this specific case, the decision by Glasspool to sell the estate is, as she will appreciate, a private matter relating to the charity's management of its assets. However, as she outlined, Dolphin Living, which I know and which is an excellent organisation, wants to negotiate with the new landlords to keep the residents of the Butterfields estate in their new homes at the correct rent. I am happy to do what I can to support driving forward that negotiation to get the parties to the table. I cannot imagine that the residents could be in better hands than if they had Dolphin Living as an organisation to work with. The fact that Dolphin Living wants to be involved is good news and I encourage all parties to get involved. If I can play a part in helping with that, I will happily do so.

The Government recognise that people want the security of a home that is stable and sustainable. The residents in this case will feel that poignantly. Most people strive

to have their own home and we are determined to do all we can to deliver for them, both in terms of supply and, as the hon. Lady outlined, by making sure that people are protected. I will come on to that in a moment.

It is right that the local authority should do all it can to support and encourage the parties to work together. Despite the hon. Lady's comments, she may want to go back and talk to her council about whether it will consider spending some of the £90 million that it has in reserves to be supportive and helpful. I am sure the council will want to help the residents in that situation.

We have embarked on the largest Government house building programme for 40 years. Over the past few years we delivered almost a million new homes, and we will deliver a million more by the end of this spending review, helping hundreds of thousands of people take the first step on the ladder to home ownership. We are also committed to building a bigger, better private rented sector, providing security and stability for both tenants and landlords. Increasing supply is the best way of improving quality, choice and, more importantly, affordability for tenants, but that will not be achieved without a significant boost to the investment coming into that sector. That is why we have put Government support behind it through our £1 billion Build to Rent fund, making sure that we are using our economic record to offer up to £10 billion of innovative housing guarantees. The affordable housing guarantee scheme has already provided more than £2 billion of investment.

On the existing legislation and how it is moving forward, the hon. Lady touched on the Housing and Planning Bill. Before shorthold tenancies were introduced by the Housing Act 1988, the private rental market was in decline. Regulated rents and lifetime tenancies meant that being a landlord was simply not commercially viable for many property owners. Since the changes in 1988, that sector has grown steadily, responded to the flexibility and created changes in the wider housing market. Private sector landlords play an important role in meeting the housing needs of many households. Of those who choose to live or have to live in the private rented sector, the vast majority will have an assured shorthold tenancy, which gives them certain rights under that Act. These include the right to live in the property as their home, and tenants can enforce their rights, for example, to get repairs done.

The legislation enables a landlord to regain possession of their property at any time after a fixed term comes to an end or at any time during a contractual or statutory periodic tenancy, provided it is at least six months since the start of the original tenancy. The landlord must give the tenant at least two months' notice that they require possession. Without the certainty that landlords can do that when required, landlords and lenders would be reluctant to allow those properties to be let. We believe that more restrictive and excessive legislation, such as forcing longer tenancies or notice periods, would mean that fewer homes were available in the market to rent. That would not help landlords or tenants.

I agree with the hon. Lady's comments about charities in the sector being very aware of their charitable purpose and their duty to their clients and beneficiaries.

Stella Creasy: I am pleased to hear the Minister say that he will help with the negotiation with Dolphin. That will take time. May I press him on no-fault evictions?

One of the things that residents present here tonight are afraid of are letters telling them that they could generate thousands of pounds in court fees. I am sure that many of them would love to be able to save for their new home, but sadly they will not be able to get on the housing ladder, given the prices in Walthamstow. The thought that they might incur several hundred or even several thousand pounds of fees is a stick that the landlord is using to beat them with. Just as we dealt with revenge evictions, I encourage the Minister to think about no-fault evictions. These tenants are paying their rent and they are not at fault, but their rights are being undermined. Is there a way of dealing with that?

Brandon Lewis: I will come to some of the provisions of the Housing and Planning Bill. I hope the hon. Lady will consider, possibly for the first time, supporting the Government's work to provide more homes at an affordable rate for people in Walthamstow by delivering starter homes—homes for first-time buyers at a discount on the market price, which make house buying affordable again. Our increase in shared ownership also aims to do that. I hope she will get behind the Bill when it returns to the House in the next few weeks, before it gets Royal Assent, as we hope it will.

I will come to the wider issue of legislation in a second, but increasing the supply of private rented homes is only part of the picture, as the hon. Lady rightly says. The private rented sector is currently dominated by small landlords, with larger landlords owning 10 or more properties accounting for only 1% of the market. Many landlords provide a very good service, and by far the majority of tenants are happy with it, but I share the hon. Lady's view that we want standards to rise across the board so that we drive out every last bad and rogue landlord, regardless of their position.

The Government therefore published the "How to rent" guide so that tenants know what they should expect from their landlords. The guide improves transparency, making more information available, and helping tenants to make informed decisions and to know their rights. That in itself can prevent more poor and substandard accommodation from being rented. Empowering tenants is key to our approach.

We have introduced legislation requiring all letting and management agents in England to belong to one of the three Government-approved redress schemes. We have also required them to publicise prominently in their offices and on their websites whether they are a member, for example, of a client money protection scheme and which redress scheme they are a member of, giving landlords and tenants a clear route to pursue complaints against agents and helping to drive up standards.

Just today, we have introduced an enabling power into the Housing and Planning Bill to make regulations to require letting agents and property management agents to belong to a client money protection scheme. That will protect the money of landlords and tenants if an agent goes into administration or from theft while the money is in the agent's control.

We are determined to do all we can to protect people who rent privately against a tiny minority of rogue and criminal landlords who exploit their tenants by renting out unsafe or substandard accommodation, or who act unfairly. We have also made millions of pounds available to local authorities to identify and successfully prosecute rogue landlords.

We have introduced legislation to protect tenants against retaliatory eviction where they have legitimate complaints about the standard of their accommodation. We have placed restrictions on repossessions where a landlord has failed to comply with legal responsibilities on, for example, gas safety and the provision of information to tenants.

We are going further by introducing measures in the Housing and Planning Bill to tackle rogue landlords and property agents. That includes establishing a database of landlords and property agents who have been convicted of serious offences; introducing banning orders for the most prolific and serious offenders; issuing civil penalty notices of up to £30,000 for some breaches of housing legislation, and ring-fencing those resources for housing-compliance activity; extending rent repayment orders to cover situations where a tenant has been illegally evicted, or where the landlord has failed to rectify a serious health and safety hazard in the property or breached a banning order; and applying a more stringent "fit and proper person" test for landlords letting out licensed properties, such as houses in multiple occupation, to help ensure that those landlords have the appropriate skills to manage such properties and that they do not pose a risk to the health and safety of their tenants.

As with the penalties introduced through the Immigration Bill, those measures are meant to make sure that we target criminal landlords who ignore their existing legal obligations. The penalties will not have an impact on the vast majority of good landlords who comply with the law and who rent out good-quality and well-managed accommodation.

However, we need to do all we can, and the Government are going further than any Government before us to crack down on rogue and bad landlords. I am happy to continue to make the case to the hon. Lady that landlords who behave in a manner that is not fair or appropriate, and who do not provide the right services and accommodation to their tenants, should be driven out of the market.

Stella Creasy: I do appreciate what the Minister says about wanting to tackle rogue landlords. May I press him, then, to use his good offices to engage with NatWest because of the concerns about this landlord, its previous business history and its behaviour towards residents of the Butterfields estate? In particular, its use of the idea that residents will somehow incur thousands of pounds in fines is evidence that those involved are not fit and proper people. If they will not engage with Dolphin, at least their bank might. May I therefore press the Minister to say whether he will engage with NatWest—yes or no?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady has great experience of dealing in this House with issues relating to the financial markets. She will appreciate that there is a difference in legal terms between the landlord and property owner on the one hand and the bank that has a financial agreement with the landlord and property owner on the other. The hon. Lady has outlined the situation, but the reality is that NatWest will not have any legal ability, as it is not the property owner.

I am very happy, through my office, to contact NatWest to see whether we can get it to involve itself in making a point of looking at the situation with the landlord. We have to be very clear, however, that there is a difference

[Brandon Lewis]

between a bank's financial agreement with the landlord, which is purely a financial agreement about lending money, and the landlord or property owner's duty to their tenants. I hope that, ultimately, the charity will talk to Dolphin Living, to get the right result for the tenants.

Question put and agreed to.

7.40 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 20 April 2016

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

Aircraft Noise

9.30 am

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of aircraft noise on local communities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. The revolution in air travel has been one of the great liberations of the British people. Since the birth of Her Majesty 90 years ago tomorrow, the Wright brothers' miracle has become the norm. Everyone, from families heading for a week in the sun to businesspeople trading across our globe, flies across our skies. That freedom to travel is one that I and many people whom I have the privilege to represent have used many times. It is a blessing to many but, as so often in the Kentish sky, behind the silver lining there is a cloud, because although airlines carry passengers away to other places, they condemn the citizens beneath these aerial motorways to lives of misery and the oppression of noise.

The balance between the needs of settled communities and travelling folk is as old as the Bible. The novelty here is that the two communities are often one and the same. The very people who are disturbed often use aircraft themselves, so the question for this debate is not whether we should ground all aircraft or close all airports, which would be absurd, but how we manage our airspace as a precious resource for the benefit of everyone.

Today, I will not address the questions of second or third runways at Gatwick or Heathrow because, although I can see the merits of increasing our connections with our region and the world, restating Britain's position at the heart of a series of networks and at the heart of a global community, I am waiting for the decision to come out in the best interests of our economy, so I will not argue for the merits of one or the other. I will also not be praising any particular carrier, airport or agency because, again, this is not the time to engage in what some would call the "politics of condemnation."

This debate is about getting change, getting understanding and, most importantly, getting to a stage where our nation can invest for the long term in our air infrastructure on the same basis as we would our ground connections, which means openly, after due consideration and taking into account the needs of our whole community. That is why I am particularly pleased to see many of my parliamentary neighbours here this morning. My right hon. Friends the Members for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), and my hon. Friends the Members for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) and for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), are all here, and we have been fighting together on many of these campaigns.

I will begin by setting out what I hope to achieve. I thank the Minister, who has been incredibly helpful on the question of aviation noise, but today I would like

him to do a few things. First, I would like him to clarify the position of Her Majesty's Government on the term "significantly affected." That vague term has caused difficulty for airports and agencies in designing flightpaths that cause the least disturbance. Secondly, I would like the outdated Environmental Protection Act 1990 to be refreshed so that aircraft noise is regulated in the same way as other disturbances, taking into account ambient noise so that the relative difference, as well as the absolute decibel level, is taken into consideration.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I offer my support on the issue of ambient noise, because in rural communities where noise levels are low the concentration of flights that often happens as a result of the new digital navigation technology means that the disruption now being caused from Gatwick can be great. Does that not need to be taken into account when considering flightpaths over areas that already have a high level of ambient noise and would therefore be disrupted less by such concentration?

Tom Tugendhat: My right hon. Friend makes a good point, to which I will return. Technology is now evolving that allows us to calculate the difference between background or ambient noise and the relative change.

Thirdly, I ask the Minister to demand that the Civil Aviation Authority takes noise disturbance into account and includes communities not just 10 nautical miles but 18 nautical miles from airports so that due consideration is given to local communities that are affected, not just those that neighbour the airport, when planning airspace.

Fourthly and, the Minister will be pleased to hear, lastly, I would like the angle of approach to be reviewed. Modern aircraft are able to approach runways more steeply than the current 3°. London City airport, which I have used many times, has an approach angle of 5.5° to protect the buildings of our great capital. Could the same not apply to protect heritage sites and communities in the glorious county of Kent? This is not about aircraft or runways but about using airspace in everyone's best interest. In my community, near Gatwick airport, the air corridor was changed in 2013. Since then, complaints have increased ninefold, and it is the failure to manage the airspace properly, not the raw numbers, that has caused the problem, but it is worth considering some of the numbers that do affect us.

More than 1 million people in the United Kingdom are exposed to aircraft noise above healthy levels. In the short term, that leads to loss of sleep and annoyance, and it makes it harder for children to learn, but the long-term effects can be worse still. High blood pressure, heart disease, heart attacks, strokes and dementia have all been associated with exposure to excessive noise. Indeed, the World Health Organisation recommends that such noise levels at school playgrounds should not exceed 55 dB. In my area, and in the area around Gatwick, 15 schools are already exposed to such levels, and nine are overflowed more than 20 times a day. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said, the ability to assess noise is one that we must take seriously if we are to move on from the 1990 Act. The National Physical Laboratory suggests that monitors costing only £100 could be fitted to tell regulators the exact pressure being put on residents,

[Tom Tugendhat]

which is a game-changing moment for all. For the first time, we can have accurate monitoring not just of the peak noise but of the relative change, because by monitoring the ambient noise we can see that not all are equally affected.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate, and I share his views. When I first became a Member of Parliament representing Crawley 33 years ago, British Caledonian flew the BAC 111, which was one of the noisiest aeroplanes—it was just appalling. One of aviation's arguments is that the quality of noise is now very different, but the point that he and my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) make about ambient noise is terribly important because, although the technologies are infinitely improved, the noise is still immensely disruptive. It is no good saying that that is just the way it is.

Tom Tugendhat: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The improvement in the quality of aircraft is noticeable, but that is not enough on its own. The change from a rural idyll to an aerial motorway in a few moments can be particularly stark, and never more so than at night. Perhaps the Minister would like to explain why night flights are banned from some airports but not from others, such as Gatwick.

This debate is not just about enjoying lazy summer afternoons in the garden of England, although that is a treasured blessing, and I intend to do as much of it as I can, parliamentary duties permitting; it is about the health of our nation. That does not tell the whole story. Noise, as measured today, does not take into account the full impact. The Civil Aviation Authority's aircraft noise contour model—a model with which you are no doubt incredibly familiar, Mr Howarth—measures only average noise for the 10 noisiest seconds. This is perhaps not always recognised, but it is a secret that I am willing to share with the House: aircraft move. That means that the average is significantly below the peak level, which is counted only 2.5 km from the rolling point of the aircraft. Many people in Kent, particularly in my communities and in the communities of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells, are badly affected and are simply not counted. That is not sensible. When a road is planned or a railway is considered, all those affected have a voice. It seems that communities are only ignored when it comes to overhead infrastructure.

The lack of guidance has allowed the Civil Aviation Authority and National Air Traffic Services to narrow the flightpaths, as they have done in the past few years over Gatwick, and increase the intensity of aircraft movements for those beneath. Some would say that they were using modern technology to demonstrate that they could increase capacity and perhaps even expand their operations; far be it from me to predict such things.

This is an area where we could and indeed should change things. That is why I ask for clarity from the Government on what reducing the numbers who are "significantly affected" means. Does it mean sharing the burden so that many are affected but not significantly, or does it mean placing the burden on the narrowest

shoulders so that the fewest people are affected, but those who are affected will be severely impacted and their lives transformed? That guidance should be given to our planners. It would be given if they were planners on the ground, and it should be given to planners in the air.

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising this important matter. All of us who have close interest in inland airports know the huge difficulties that exist; we are only in the mitigation game and it is very important that these matters are illuminated. However, is not the tragedy relating to the point he just made about planning that we forwent the opportunity in the mid-1970s to proceed with an estuarial airport, which would have brought great relief? It is where airports are put that creates the problems with which he is grappling.

Tom Tugendhat: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for his intervention. As a Member of this House, I have become used to taking responsibility for many things that are not directly my fault, but I hope he will forgive me for not taking responsibility for decisions taken in this House before I was born. I recognise that the need for long-term planning is one of the issues that, sadly, we have often got wrong in this country, and it is one reason why we now find ourselves causing damage to certain communities and asking certain small communities to bear the burden of economic expansion and its benefits for the whole nation. I thank my right hon. Friend very much for making that point.

Given that we are asking regulators to look around our communities, it would be good if the Civil Aviation Authority not only took account of areas that are 10 nautical miles away from airports but, as I have said, those that are 18 nautical miles away. Mr Chairman, you may ask, "Why double, or almost double, that distance?" It is because that is the point at which most airports begin to take control of aircraft, at the limit of the radar manoeuvring area, as it is known. That would mean the CAA and NATS would be regulated not only to make

"the most efficient use of airspace"

by maximising flights and fuel efficiency but to control noise and to recognise the impact on communities on the ground.

No agency is responsible for long-term reduction in noise, and I hope the Government now recognise the need to task the CAA and NATS to take on that role, because although aircraft have become quieter and airports are beginning to behave themselves a little, it seems to me that this is an opportunity for the Government to step in and take the lead.

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): I would very much like to second that point; in fact, I have made it myself in previous debates in the main Chamber. However, does my hon. Friend agree that at the heart of this problem, particularly in Bracknell, is the fact that there has been a breakdown in trust in the organisations responsible for the management of air traffic, including over my constituency? In my part of the world, the situation has totally changed in recent years and there

was no prior warning of it; indeed, it has taken a great deal of time and persistence to get NATS to admit that it has changed things.

My hon. Friend began his speech by talking about the need for change, and we all accept that there will be an increase in flight traffic over the south-east of England. However, is it not important that all the people involved—the Government and indeed the agencies that are responsible—begin telling the truth in advance, so that we can take the public with us?

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and indeed the reason I got involved in this fight was because of the sudden change that I saw in the skies over Kent because of what Gatwick had done.

I admit that this is a slight diversion, but the first thing that people did in relation to Gatwick was to deny that they had done anything; they denied that aircraft were changing their flight approaches in any way or that the airspace was being shaped any differently. I would argue that it was that deception that did the most damage. If they had been able to admit early on that there had indeed been a change, that NATS had indeed changed the approach and that Gatwick was indeed trying different things, we could at least have had a conversation. However, when they did it overnight in 2013 and then denied that they had done so, the breakdown in trust was such that even though Gatwick is now leading with the Redeborn and Lake review, which I will come on to, and, I would argue, leading best practice on how an airport should communicate with its neighbours, it will be a good number of years before many of us will have confidence that Gatwick can be a good neighbour. I am saddened to hear that there are other airports in this country that have behaved similarly.

That is why, as many people know, I have welcomed many times the review that was carried out by Bo Redeborn and Graham Lake, because they have introduced a change in policy; indeed, their 23 proposals have been put forward in a policy vacuum. It would be wrong to say that those proposals have all been implemented; they certainly have not been, although we hope that 20 of them will be implemented by the end of the year and that we will begin to see the change that we absolutely need in the skies above south-east England. However, it is only through that dialogue, which Redeborn and Lake both strongly recommend, that we will see that change not only embedded but recognised and appreciated. Sadly, if we keep getting the dishonesty—or at least the dissembling—that we have seen, we will not have the level of trust required to build a better community.

I again urge NATS to take forward the Gatwick review and take the opportunity to use it as an example for the rest of the country, because what Gatwick has done is truly ground-breaking. We are waiting for NATS to implement the review; at the moment, NATS is slightly struggling with it, but I urge it to stop that struggle and get on with it.

Airports are not alone and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex has mentioned, aircraft have changed. The infamous whine generated by the Airbus A320 demonstrates that airlines also have a responsibility. EasyJet has finally decided that the minor modifications that are required will all be in place very shortly, and Gatwick has decided that no aircraft without those modifications will be able to land after 2017. While it is

welcome that both the airline and the airport are making those changes, I am somewhat disappointed that the Government have not applied that to the whole of the United Kingdom. It seems wrong that only we should benefit, and those changes could be made today.

There are further changes that could be made and I have touched on one of them, which is the angle of approach. It is worth noting that Frankfurt airport has now increased the approach angle from 3° to 3.2°. That may sound like a minor change, but anything that keeps aircraft higher for longer makes a huge difference to communities beneath. If we can get to the 5.5° of London City airport, we will start to get somewhere.

None of this, I should emphasise, is anything like the hairy approaches that one used to take to get into Baghdad or Kabul, corkscrewing down through the skies to avoid incoming missiles; the approaches that I am proposing are rather more gentle. Modern aircraft can handle them and the communities beneath would benefit greatly.

I thank Members who have come to the Chamber to support the motion, because communities affected, including those significantly affected in my own area—in Cowden, Hever, Edenbridge, Chiddingstone, Penshurst, Leigh and Tonbridge—deserve clarity. Those communities, and a few others, have been left to shoulder this burden alone.

As I have said, this debate is not about whether another runway should go to Heathrow or Gatwick, or whether we need extra capacity. I make a simple request that Her Majesty's Government should recognise that when motorways are built, they are debated, and when railways are built, they are considered and assessed, so when motorways in the sky are placed over people's homes, the planning requirements should be no different.

9.49 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. First, I thank the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) for setting out the case. I want to bring a Northern Ireland perspective to the debate. We have three airports in Northern Ireland: Belfast City, Belfast International, or Aldergrove, and Londonderry City. I want to focus specifically on Belfast City airport and some of the things we have done in Northern Ireland. This matter is devolved to Northern Ireland, but Belfast City is an ongoing issue. Just yet, we have not concluded what the best way forward is.

Through the Assembly and elected representatives, we in Northern Ireland are very conscious of the issue of airport noise. It was useful that the hon. Gentleman set the scene for us, because we need to hear from other Members and compare the approach taken by central Government with the one taken in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, the most notable case of aircraft noise having an impact on local communities is that of George Best Belfast City airport. That is the one I use to go to Heathrow and then to London and the House of Commons every week. The airport has transformed from a secondary and relatively small regional airport into a hub of Greater Belfast offering flights once unthought of. With its renovation, it is competing with Belfast International for certain routes. As my party's transport spokesperson, I have always said that we are keen to see connectivity being achieved from Belfast

[*Jim Shannon*]

City to Heathrow and then to wherever else that can lead to in the world. That is so important for us, and I know the Minister is industrious and considers how important Belfast City is for us.

Although the expansion and success of the airport have brought clear benefits, not least to the local economy and regeneration of the area, there has been conflict. Despite tight restrictions on the times flights are permitted in and out of the airport, local residents are undoubtedly affected. With further expansion planned—it has been discussed; as I have said, nothing is agreed yet—and amendments to the current noise procedures, concerns have surfaced once again.

Hypertension and insomnia are the most established conditions associated with night-time flying. Although there are time restrictions, night-time flying has the potential to affect those who work shifts or have young children. These stats are ones that the airport agrees with. It says that up to 46,000 people and 21 schools could be affected by the changes proposed for the expansion of Belfast City, and that obviously needs to be taken into account. It is always a difficult one—we do not want to stand in the way of progress, but at the same time we do not want the lives of people who have lived in a certain area their whole lives turned upside down. Those are clear issues, and I am duty-bound to come here today and make those clear comments on behalf of those people.

In 2014, the number of people affected by Belfast City airport's operations at the level considered by the UK Government to cause serious community annoyance was 4,107. To give Members some idea of what that means, that was greater than Gatwick airport at 3,550 and Stansted airport at 1,400. If the proposals for Belfast City airport go ahead and noise levels rise to their permitted maximum, it will become the fourth noisiest airport in the UK in terms of population impact. Only Heathrow, Manchester and Birmingham would affect more people at or above the Government's "significant annoyance" threshold. We in Northern Ireland, where the matter is devolved, have the responsibility to look after that threshold. When we are moving forward, we have to remember that things do not have to have a health impact to have adverse effects on the community. People who live in a certain area and have put down roots and invested their income in their home may, through no choice of their own, be directly affected.

Having said that, I read with interest the Airports Commission's July 2013 aviation noise discussion paper, which found that 4.2 million people are exposed to road traffic noise of 65 dB or more. Let us get some perspective into the debate. The paper found that the corresponding figures for railways and aviation are 0.2 million people and 0.07 million people respectively. So in relative terms, aircraft noise itself has very little impact, but it is still important that those impacted and their viewpoints are respected. It is not just the health issues I have mentioned that are important.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): With all the figures and statistics that my hon. Friend has outlined in relation to health problems, difficulties, the built-up area and the number of people, is the bottom line that Belfast will not be able to expand because of its location?

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The serious question for us all—I am trying to get a balance in my contribution—is whether we have the airport expansion. Should it happen? Can it happen in such a way that is not detrimental to the 46,000 people and 21 schools around the airport that are potentially directly impacted? He is right. The issue he raises is the kernel of this debate.

George Best Belfast City airport could become one of the UK's five noisiest airports if the controversial expansion plans get the go-ahead. That is a key point. Residents want an independent aircraft noise regulator for Northern Ireland to be appointed and robust noise fines for airlines. If that is what residents want, who could argue with that? Such a proposal seems well-intended, but we have to be careful about unintended consequences. We do not want hard-won business to be put off from continuing to do business in our airports by feeling overregulated. It is about striking a balance. The Minister needs the wisdom of Solomon in relation to this one. If he had the wisdom of Solomon he would be a very wise man and he would have more than just a ministerial role in the Department he is looking after at the moment.

The Planning Appeals Commission report on the Belfast City expansion recommended that the removal of the seats for sale restriction should be accompanied by additional noise controls. That is one of the things that the commission is looking at. The process is ongoing, but it has shown that comprehensive consultation that includes all stakeholders can help to facilitate the right balance being struck between supporting enterprise and business and supporting local residents and ensuring that they are taken care of. In Northern Ireland, we are looking at an airports strategy for the Province to provide the right balance between the commercial interests of airports—that is important for jobs, money and the economy—and the health and quality of life of local residents, but we are still in the midst of consultation and the saga at Belfast City airport goes on.

In conclusion, I look forward to hearing from other Members who will bring their own contributions to this debate and their experiences in their regions.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Just before my hon. Friend finishes, does he agree that, on the issue of noise reduction, the Government generally could do much to assist the development of the C Series by Bombardier, which is an exceptionally quiet aircraft? If that were rolled out and developed more systematically, that would go some way to alleviating the noise concerns for residents, particularly those under the flight path.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and his wise words. His contributions are always worth listening to. Can the Minister say what discussions have taken place with aircraft companies on noise reduction? I know that Bombardier is working on that with the C Series, but other companies are probably doing so, too. We need to see the contributions of the aircraft companies and manufacturers.

I once more thank the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling for giving us a chance to participate in this debate and to offer a Belfast and Northern Ireland perspective. I hope the wise words of other Members will add to the debate, too.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): I intend to start calling the three Front Benchers at 10.30. The normal convention is to leave some time for the mover of the motion to say a few words at the end. I have five Back Benchers who have indicated that they want to speak. I am hoping not to need to impose a formal time limit, but informally, if people do the maths, it works out at about six minutes for each speaker, which should be ample.

9.59 am

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this debate. It is unfortunate that we are here again discussing an issue that is important to our constituents.

Aircraft noise is incredibly damaging, disturbing and stressful for various communities in the northern part of my constituency. Constituents regularly email me, and this week I had an email that is like many others:

“We have been woken on many nights in the early hours at 1.30 or 2.30 am, as well as suffering the usual stream of planes from before 6 am”.

It continues throughout.

“As a result, despite sleeping with ear plugs, neither of us is now a good sleeper and this has definitely affected our health.”

Constituents in Groombridge wrote in to describe how they

“absolutely dread being at home. We cannot sleep. We live constantly stressed and strained lives. It is so bad, we are seriously considering giving up jobs, schools and closeness to family to move away.”

This can no longer be dismissed as a minor issue. It is a very serious issue that needs to be taken seriously by airports and air traffic authorities.

Over the past few months, I have been grateful for the opportunity to contribute to Gatwick’s review of westerly arrivals. Last year, I held a packed community meeting where constituents were able to vent their frustration about noise pollution to the authors of the review. Earlier this month, I was pleased to join colleagues in welcoming Gatwick’s plan to act on the review’s recommendations and 23 proposals. Those must be implemented quickly, and I and neighbouring MPs will do all that we can to make sure that the process is sped up as fast as possible. I hope the Minister will offer support and assistance so that we can turn the recommendations into reality.

One thing to note is that the whole review and the changes that we expect to result from it will have been a massive waste of time if Gatwick is allowed to expand with a second runway. We will go from 270,000 flights a year to 560,000, with an increase from 325 to around 850 flights a day over Wealden, which means more noise. The areas of outstanding natural beauty that we are all proud of will be even more compromised. The value of our houses will plummet, and, more importantly, the quality of our lives will be further disrupted by noise pollution.

Despite such effects, Gatwick has not committed to any mitigation measures or compensation for Wealden residents in the event of expansion. The compensation package on offer extends only to areas immediately surrounding the airport. Wealden residents, as well as the 20 Wealden schools that would be overflowed, will suffer far greater disruption without receiving a single

penny in return. Will the Minister outline what operational mitigation measures have been proposed by Gatwick airport to reduce the effect of aviation noise in the event of expansion, and how does that compare with the measures proposed by Heathrow?

The proposed changes to arrival routes at Gatwick are very welcome and we will do all we can to make them a reality as quickly as possible. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the bigger picture and the appalling consequences that expansion at Gatwick would have for our constituents because of aircraft noise.

10.3 am

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing the debate. I agree with him that we should not turn this into a debate about where the additional runway in the south-east should go, and I agree that aircraft noise is a problem for every individual and every family affected by it. Those of us whose constituents are affected will understand that.

I will mention a statistic that bears repetition whenever we debate airport expansion, and particularly the issue of noise. It is a problem for every individual who suffers from it, but one has to also look at the quantum of the damage that is done. Some 725,000 people are affected by aircraft noise around Heathrow—it accounts for 28.5% of all those affected by aircraft noise in Europe. That one statistic should have settled the debate about airport expansion in the south-east many years ago. By comparison, 0.5% of people around Gatwick are affected by aircraft noise. I do not diminish that, and I understand that, although there are queries over the figures, the number of people affected around Gatwick would go up from roughly 12,000 to roughly 35,000 or 36,000 if there were expansion there. I have seen various figures for Heathrow, but Transport for London says that the number of people affected would go up to about 1 million if there were expansion there. Others say the number will go up by about 320,000. In other words, the increase would be 10 to 20 times that suffered by people around Gatwick. The reason for that is fairly obvious: Heathrow is in the wrong place and is directly adjacent to some of the most densely populated urban areas in this country.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I hope the hon. Gentleman accepts that the impact of ambient noise has a profound impact on one’s experience of aircraft noise.

Andy Slaughter: It does, but I took slight umbrage at the point that was made in an earlier contribution about those living in rural areas suffering more because they have a quieter environment. Urban areas that are not affected by aircraft noise at the moment, but will be affected for the first time, will also suffer greatly, particularly outside peak hours in the early morning and later at night. Some urban areas, including parts of my constituency, are extremely quiet and will be affected by noise for the first time.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that an ambient noise of, say, 30 dB will lead to an endocrine autonomic effect, which will only be compounded by a level of 55 dB or even

[Dr Tania Mathias]

83dB, as is the case with some flights? He probably has the same flights over Hammersmith that I have over Twickenham. Does he also agree that, medically, it is the children who suffer most?

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Her technical knowledge exceeds mine, but she is absolutely right. Friends of the Earth, for example, contends that it is misleading to talk about the noise energy emitted by planes being reduced, which is what Heathrow says will happen. According to Heathrow, fewer people will be affected by noise when the third runway is built, when 250,000 additional flights are going over west London and there will be an increase in activity of just under 50%. I do not know anybody who actually believes that apart from the people who spin for Heathrow, but, as Friends of the Earth says, even if there is a decrease in noise energy emitted by planes, that is only loosely linked to human perception of noise, and a 50% reduction in noise energy is only just detectable by the human ear.

Even if there are quieter aircraft and noise is reduced generally, it will still disproportionately affect those who live around Heathrow, because of the massive number of people affected. Any benefit will be gained by people around other airports.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman is making interesting points, but does he recognise that the problem affects the whole United Kingdom? We have heard comments from Belfast and will no doubt hear comments from Scotland. We should work together to create a level playing field of understanding, so that the planning for another runway in Perthshire or in Penzance is the same as it would be for Gatwick or Heathrow. At least we would then have some common understanding of the impact on the community beneath, and decisions could be taken in a fair and equitable manner and not just on the basis of who shouts loudest and longest.

Andy Slaughter: I agree with that. One still has to bear in mind that if a third runway is built—I declare an interest, because the Airports Commission's preferred option will run directly over central Hammersmith—whole new communities, and populous communities, will be affected for the first time. As a report published earlier this year shows, 460 schools around Heathrow are exposed to aircraft noise levels that may impair learning and memory. The health consequences include higher risk of strokes, heart disease and cardiovascular problems. Hundreds of thousands of people could be affected by those serious problems.

I particularly want to hear from the Minister about the review of night flights. The existing regulations end in 2017, so when are we going to have a consultation? Will the Minister condemn Heathrow for not even saying, as the Airports Commission recommended, that there should be a ban on night flights and that a fourth runway should be ruled out? Those are the concerns going forward.

Those of us who have battled Heathrow expansion for 30 years—the current expansion is always the last one—will never believe any promises the airport makes. We want to see the decision made in such a way that the Government are accountable to Members from all parties.

Above all, whatever the effects of airport expansion, we want to see them mitigated, not only by improved technology but by reducing the number of people affected.

10.11 am

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this incredibly important debate. I agree with him that there is an absolute need for change, but where I disagree is that I do think that a lot of condemnation is due. That is where I agree with the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). As he said, 725,000 people are affected by Heathrow, which means that, of all the people in Europe who are affected by noise pollution, 28% live under a Heathrow flight path.

I hope the Minister will take on board what my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) said, because there is no trust in the information that communities are being given and in the action the airports are taking to alleviate such a serious medical issue. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani). I, too, have to wear earplugs, which I did not have to do a few years ago. Things have changed and we are being woken up at 4 in the morning. There is noise late at night and at all kinds of hours. There is no mitigation for night flights—none is possible.

I mentioned condemnation because Heathrow affects more people than the airports of Paris, Frankfurt, Amsterdam and Madrid combined. That is why it is such an urgent problem, both environmentally and medically. I hope that the Minister will take that on board. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling said, we do have medical evidence. We know that there is a direct correlation between noise pollution and cardiovascular events. We also know from the World Health Organisation that seven categories of medical problems are associated with noise pollution, so it is a very serious problem. As I said in an intervention on the hon. Member for Hammersmith, ambient noise does not make people less sensitive to noise. Ambient noise is a problem in itself; it provides no mitigation.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling for mentioning the National Physical Laboratory, which is a world leader in noise measurement. I hope that the Minister will look into citizen scientists, because we need the community to be able to measure noise pollution. I believe that the NPL is close to giving us ways of measuring that are accessible for the community. The LAeq measurement is an average; it does not take night flights into account. The other decibel measurement, Lden, is an average over 24 hours. The medical problem relates to when the noise happens, its peak and its irregularity, so the existing measurements are not meaningful for the communities that are disrupted by aircraft noise. As the hon. Member for Hammersmith and I have said, 725,000 people are currently affected by Heathrow; goodness knows, that number will be more than 1 million if there is expansion at the airport.

I agree with my hon. Friends the Members for Bracknell and for Tonbridge and Malling that there is no trust and that there is dissemblance in the information provided. I notice that my local community group, Teddington Action Group, has reported that there is now a serious

problem with planes flying at lower angles over longer distances, earlier in the morning and later at night. It is a serious trend. I am grateful to the action group for working out, with the publicly available data, that Heathrow is only just meeting its legal requirements, which are not adequate anyway. I agree with the action group that, rather than aircraft having 6.5 km to reach 1,000 feet, they should be at 2,500 feet at that point. The minimum climb rate of 4% to an altitude of 4,000 feet should be increased to a rate of 4% up to 6,000 feet.

I humbly request that the Minister meets me to discuss the review that is needed of the noise notice around Heathrow airport. I would be very grateful if he did so, given the incredible work that my community has done and what our Twickenham expertise can do with the NPL. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling that noise should be considered a statutory nuisance. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 should be changed to reflect that.

I absolutely condemn what is going on right now, and I also condemn the dissembling. Change is needed, because no mitigation is possible for the levels of noise pollution that are affecting my idyll of Twickenham.

10.16 am

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) for securing this debate.

My constituency lies under the final approach path for Heathrow for the 70% of the time that the airport is on westerly operations. The area is fully built up beneath those flight paths, as passengers sitting by the aircraft windows will be well aware. My constituency is the second most overflowed constituency in London. Most of the 94,000 residents of Brentford and Isleworth are affected by aircraft noise, with a plane taking off or landing every 60 to 90 seconds. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said, according to figures from the European Commission, 725,000 people across London and the south-east are significantly affected by noise from aircraft using Heathrow.

I have some quotes from some of my constituents. Carol Petersen said:

“Although I live in Chiswick and therefore not in the immediate vicinity of the airport, I should like to record the effect of night noise in this area. This morning several came past at 5 am and we could not get back to sleep. The impact is significant. We can tolerate this during the day, but when sleep patterns are ruined it is very difficult.”

Basia Filzec lives a lot closer to the airport and said:

“Heathrow has always been a very poor neighbour. Apart from the noise and the smell, first flights are around 4.30 am and there are some night flights. When I was working it was very distressing to have to go to work not having had enough sleep. It made the job even more stressful.”

My constituent Diane wrote:

“We have endured weeks of flights past 11 pm and before 6 am (sometimes at 3.40 am). To be a reasonable neighbour Heathrow needs to ensure that we get 9 hours per night free of this noise so we stand a chance of getting 8 hours sleep. On two nights last week we only had 5 hours’ break—impossible to live or work effectively when sleep deprived. I am sure that those areas closer to the landing site suffer even more.”

More than 90% of children educated in the London Borough of Hounslow’s schools, nurseries and colleges are directly affected by aircraft noise. A school in Hounslow

will be overflowed at least every 90 seconds. Noise level is significantly related to children’s mathematical performance. As noise increases by contour band, performance drops by 0.73 of a mark. Schools exposed to high levels of aircraft noise near Heathrow have more than the average number of children with English as a second language. In addition, there is increasing evidence of the impact of noise on health—including on cardiovascular health, strokes and mental health—which will lead to a massive cost to the public purse and the economy.

I agree with the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling about the need for a public debate about flight routes and approach methods, but in my constituency the planes are on their final approach, so their routes cannot be varied. Steeper glide paths might actually increase the noise levels for those closest to the airport as the planes throttle back.

We have some mitigations, but they are frequently not met. There are not supposed to be night flights before 4 am, and the approach paths to Heathrow on the westerly approach should be alternated for half of the day, but those measures are often breached. The airport contributes to the cost of insulation and ventilation in some existing school buildings, but only those in the very noisiest areas. It covers nothing like all those affected, and no new school buildings have been insulated or improved by the Heathrow scheme.

My constituents look forward to the promised quieter planes, to full alternation, to decent insulation and to a ban on night flights so they can have some semblance of normal life and can sleep through the night more often and wake up fresher the next day. They do not want the 46% increase in flights that a third runway would mean.

10.21 am

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this debate. He, like me, has many constituents who live in rural communities, where the lower ambient noise makes the experience of aircraft hugely oppressive.

Gatwick is surrounded on three sides by areas of outstanding natural beauty. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said, the impact of Gatwick on the otherwise tranquil environment of large swathes of both of our constituencies is immense. In such conditions, noise can be experienced over a wide field—some 3.5 to 5 miles either side of the aircraft. The concentration of noise in quiet environments is not properly recognised by the existing standard industry metrics, which measure noise over 24 hours. In some parts of my constituency, the rate of take-offs has resulted in a relentless wall of noise, which is a pressing problem for my constituents.

I wish to focus on the issues that are being experienced right now, but, with great respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, no debate on aircraft noise would be complete without a reference to runway expansion. If the Government were to go against the clear recommendation of the Davies commission and make what to my mind is the wrong decision on runway expansion, the number of flights over my constituency would double to up to 560,000 per year. Aircraft movements would become more concentrated

[Jeremy Quin]

on existing flightpaths, and two new flightpaths would be created over Copthorne and Crawley Down. The villages of Rusper and Copthorne would be taken within the standard noise contours for Gatwick. Rusper would be overflown by more than 300 easterly arrivals a day to the southern runway and more than 300 westerly departures using two routes from the same runway. Warnham and Slinfold would experience 150-plus concentrated departures per day, and Billingshurst would be affected by the massive increase in aircraft approaching both runways. The list goes on. I will not mention every single village in my constituency that would be adversely affected, because they all would be.

As the Davies commission pointed out,

“Knowing that aviation noise will be limited to certain times of the day is very important to many people.”

That is something on which I have common cause with the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias). With that in mind, I am horrified that Gatwick’s post-expansion proposal is to operate both runways for take-offs and landings throughout the day, offering no period for respite—not even during the night. Night flights are incentivised by Gatwick’s charging structure. That is a nightmarish vision of the future.

However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) so eloquently set out, the present has its own severe problems. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, I welcome the independent arrivals review that was established by Gatwick. That shows its awareness of the very real concerns of many residents. I hope that the proposed noise management board will maintain that focus and be given real teeth so that it not only brings together stakeholders but makes a genuine impact.

As Gatwick considers its response, I ask that it addresses certain key issues. I have sought and received assurances from the airport that the impact of departures on communities will be taken into account when it determines its position on arrivals. Although the review focused on the latter, rather than the former, it would be wholly unfair and incongruous if attempts to mitigate the impact of aircraft noise were made without a proper appreciation of both arrivals and departures on residents.

The proposed wider swathe for arrivals from the west should result in a fairer distribution of aircraft impact. However, that will not be the case if air traffic control simply allows pilots to come in consistently by the shortest possible route. That will result in a heavy concentration of flights over a small area of my constituency, which is already severely adversely affected by departures. I understand that negotiations on that point are ongoing between Gatwick and NATS. It is an issue on which my constituents want cast-iron guarantees.

I am disappointed that night flights, which hon. Members have already spoken about, were excluded from the Gatwick review. Like the hon. Member for Hammersmith, I look to the Minister for reassurance that the consultation on night flights will be forthcoming this year. On technical innovations, I again look to the Minister to support the principle that noise modifications should be made on time and be effective. As mentioned earlier, Gatwick has a sunset date of the end of 2017 for

A320s to be fitted with noise modification. The success of that depends on defaulters being subjected to severe penalties for non-compliance.

Finally—I again look to the Minister on this point—I am saddened that a more innovative approach has not been taken to stacking. As the Minister also has responsibility for shipping, he is more aware than most that we are an island. Could not a way be found to stack aircraft out to sea, rather than, as at present, over residential areas, national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty?

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): I call Caroline Spelman. I ask you to bear in mind that I intend to call the Front Benchers at 10.30 am.

10.26 am

Mrs Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I am extremely grateful to you for allowing me to scrape in under the wire, Mr Howarth, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) for securing this debate.

Birmingham airport is in my constituency. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, it has one of the highest numbers of people affected by aircraft noise, as it is close to the conurbation. Its recent expansion and the lengthening of its runway brought aircraft lower and closer to the populations underneath it. Unfortunately, that coincided with the proposed national flightpath changes. The trials caused a significant increase in noise pollution for the community underneath. The fact that the aircraft could not fly the new routes accurately also caused confusion and dismay. The airport apologised for that, but the community suffered a breach of trust, and good will has been damaged.

The Civil Aviation Authority has now approved the airport’s preferred option, but three further mitigations are to be trialled: the angle of descent and ascent will be increased, and different types of aircraft will fly slightly different routes. I suspect that we have some more challenges ahead. The concentration of sound has increased the impact on certain households. The removal of manoeuvres to deflect sound away from communities was disappointing.

Looking ahead, I hope the Minister will recognise the blight that is caused by uncertainty about the proposals to expand airports. Birmingham once proposed a second runway, but has now extended its single runway. It now has the same capacity as Gatwick, but only one third of its passengers. I hope that will put paid to the threat of another runway being proposed in that densely populated location, and I hope the Minister will strongly oppose any suggestion of reopening a second runway proposal at Birmingham.

10.29 am

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I commend and congratulate the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this important and timely debate on a very important issue for his constituency. He has voiced concern about aircraft noise around Gatwick for some time. Although he was pleased that the Airports

Commission recommended Heathrow, he vowed to continue to campaign on the matter. I understand that it is close to his heart.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the issue of airspace, which has been a problem in the UK for many decades. We have had a glaring lack of an airspace strategy, so it is about time to deal with the issue in the round, along with noise and air quality. As a side issue, he reflected on the dodging of incoming elements when landing at Helmand and Basra, and of course we have the current issue of drones near aircraft, which needs to be addressed in an air strategy. I hope that the Minister will do something about that before there is a critical problem.

Returning to the main point, I am the MP for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, and the House will understand that we do not have the same issues as Heathrow or Gatwick. Indeed, we are keen to get more routes, because we have been left behind for many years, and we are delighted that British Airways is introducing a new route between Inverness and Heathrow. However, that does not mean that we have no understanding of the Gatwick and Heathrow situation. Personally, I lived under the Heathrow flight path for many years, enduring night flights and Concorde, which was exceptionally noisy when it flew over my house. We understand the issue, but it is also important to understand that 90% of international visitors to Scotland—a big driver for the tourism economy—travel by air, with more than a third coming through Heathrow, which is therefore clearly of interest to us.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned the need for the end of uncertainty about airport expansion. We heard the same from the right hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman) and a number of hon. Members, all of whom said that they did not particularly want to talk about airport expansion, although they all mentioned it. I will come back to that subject in a moment.

The hon. Member for Strangford also talked about the need to look at the strategy of other Governments and Administrations. The Scottish Government are committed to understanding and managing the environmental impacts of air travel. They have acknowledged that noise can be distressing, affects quality of life and can have an impact on our health and environment. The existing legislation and controls are for vehicle noise and provide limited solutions to the problems of transportation noise. The Scottish Government are therefore making use of the European Union environmental noise directive, commonly known as END, to manage noise pollution, particularly from transportation sources.

The directive was transposed into Scots law in 2006. As per END, noise maps and noise action plans have been published for all major airport areas in Scotland. Delivery of the END objectives in Scotland has been achieved through extensive partnership working. The Scottish Government assumed responsibility for the co-ordination of noise mapping and action planning exercises, but they were heavily supported by individual working groups dealing with each of the major airports and other transportation systems.

Two rounds of noise mapping have been carried out by consultants AECOM. The consultants also host an interactive website on behalf of the Scottish Government, which displays all the Scottish noise mapping, action plans and statistics, allowing anyone to provide feedback

or to raise an issue. The Scottish Government have received many positive comments and much feedback on their approach from others in the UK and throughout Europe. All that work has been informed by research at EU, UK and Scottish levels.

I want to discuss airport expansion, which is the issue that Members have been dancing around. The Scottish Government remain impartial on the Airports Commission's report. The Prime Minister, however, has put political convenience before UK connectivity by delaying his decision. The concern of local communities is understandable, given the stress and problems that can be caused by noise pollution, not to mention the potential disruption to everyday life, so the longer the Government delay their decision, the further the lives of people living around airports in the south-east will be plunged into uncertainty. That is all the more important given that the Airports Commission stated that aircraft were responsible for some negative effects on health, concentration and wellbeing, as we have heard from hon. Members today. That makes the conclusion of a decision even more important for those negatively affected.

The Prime Minister seems to have wriggled out of his commitment because he wants to help his party to win the mayoral election in London. He is not making a decision, at any scale, based on commercial activity or the direct impact on the economies of the nations of the UK, nor is he considering the uncertainty for local communities. Yet the UK Government constantly promote a new runway as a national infrastructure project with huge ramifications for air connectivity to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the regions of England.

Any decision on the runway will have a massive impact on travel, exports, growth and jobs throughout the nations of our islands—not only London and the south-east of England but the rest of us. A further delay in taking a firm decision will mean that the UK continues to be an international laughing stock, as other nations yet again steal a march on investment and business and as people are stuck in the Government's departure lounge to nowhere. As I said, I believe the delay in the decision is because the Prime Minister wants to allow his party to win the mayoral election in London. The decision, however, should be made not for party political reasons but based on the right outcomes. Freezing a decision is wrong—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the debate is about aircraft noise. Although he is not out of order, he is straying into a slightly wider argument.

Drew Hendry: Thank you for your advice, Mr Howarth. I had hoped to have made it clear why I was discussing those things—the effect on noise and air pollution, as well as the economics. They have been mentioned by all Members who have spoken today. However, I will conclude my remarks now.

Freezing the decision is wrong. The delay is not about noise or air quality. That is just a cold myth; this is about a Goldsmith.

10.37 am

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

[Richard Burden]

I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing the debate and, indeed, on how he introduced it. The matter is clearly of concern to many right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House. If I got my calculations right, 15 right hon. and hon. Members from the Back Benches have spoken today in interventions or speeches, which underlines that point.

Noise from aircraft operations is a real source of tension between airports, authorities, airlines and local communities. It is not only the annoyance or disruption, important though such things are, but the genuine public health concerns about ongoing exposure to aircraft noise. A report published in January this year by the Aviation Environment Federation drew on evidence accumulated over the past 20 years to highlight noise exposure and the way in which it can impact on someone's quality of life. Some studies go further and draw links to the possibility of many serious long-term health problems, to which many hon. Members referred: my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and the hon. Members for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) and for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani). All that shows that we need more research to understand in more detail the many variables at play.

Addressing the question of noise is part of a much wider aviation puzzle, the pieces of which we need to join together. Challenges are coming to a head: noise challenges; modernising outdated airspace regulation; improving service access; promoting cleaner and greener aviation; and meeting various environmental challenges. The elephant in the room, relevant to all those things, is the question of airport capacity—the point made by the spokesperson of the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry).

Last year, the Prime Minister promised a response on the airport capacity question before Christmas. The hon. Gentleman speaking for the SNP made the point that the reasons for the delay might have been political—heaven forbid that any of us have that thought! The point is that when the delay was announced the Government at the time said they wanted time to consider the recommendations and the report of the Environmental Audit Committee. They are valid questions, and I wonder why the Government were not already asking them, between the publication of the commission report last summer and the announcement, or non-announcement, just before Christmas. I want to ask the Minister what work has been done since the Government delayed their decision to ensure that we get a decision this summer? Will he confirm that the Government will make a decision this summer, or could things take even longer?

We have been clear about the four criteria against which we will assess a decision, whenever the Government announce it: how it addresses airport capacity; how that works in relation to carbon obligations; local noise and other environmental impacts; and how the rest of the UK, not simply the south-east, will be affected. The third test relates directly to what we are talking about today—noise. The hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling was right to say that the debate today is not about the decision between Gatwick and Heathrow, but whichever is chosen the noise and air quality impact on

communities must be addressed. My worry about noise is that all written questions that other Members and I have tabled on the issue seem to receive a stock response from the Government—that they are conducting an ongoing review of their airspace and noise policies. That is fine, but we need to know what it involves. Are the Government in touch with the World Health Organisation to take account of health guidance, and what is their current thinking about the Davies commission's recommendation on a ban on night flights? The messages coming from Heathrow and some airlines have been that they do not feel night flights can be ruled out, for all sorts of reasons, including connectivity.

Andy Slaughter: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend's point. He may have seen that the question was raised in the other place earlier in the week about when the independent aviation noise authority recommended by the Airports Commission would be set up. The reply from the Government was, "We are not going to do anything until the decision has been made." That is a lacklustre approach.

Richard Burden: My hon. Friend is right, and I will say a couple of words about the noise ombudsman, as it is sometimes referred to, in a little while.

The Government have commissioned Ipsos MORI research on public attitudes to aviation noise. If that is to inform the public debate, it needs to be published. My question to the Minister, again, is when it will be published.

I also want to ask the Minister about airspace redesign, a theme that has come up several times in the debate. Future approaches to the best use of airspace, bearing in mind changes and advances in technology, should inform issues of where to put new runways, and how they should be used. However, even without any airport expansion, the UK needs to modernise its outdated airspace management, in line with the EU single European sky programme. The benefits of doing that are obviously big, but the question is how we are to find a balance between dispersing routes between a number of corridors or concentrating on a number of routes. Either option has pros and cons for communities, and those that are negatively affected must be fairly compensated. However, whatever is done, a decision must be made. We have seen that trust can drain away when trials come out and people do not know what is going on. NATS, the Civil Aviation Authority, airports and communities need clear signals as to what will happen about airspace operations.

Mrs Spelman: The hon. Gentleman is a fellow Birmingham-based MP. Does he acknowledge that there was no compensation for people following the airspace changes—nor, indeed, following the runway extension?

Richard Burden: The right hon. Lady makes a valid point. The point I am making is that going forward we need a more comprehensive approach to such things. In appearances before the Transport Committee in February the Secretary of State and Department for Transport officials promised to publish a consultation on future airspace "soon". What they would not say was whether the delay—and possibly further delays—in looking at expansion would lead to further delay in looking at airspace management. How soon is soon? What timetable is the Minister working on?

Whatever the Minister's answers to the other questions that I have put to him both today and in writing, I must put it to him and the Government that delays, and the fact that there are difficult questions ahead, should not mean there is nothing we can do now. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith made the point correctly that an independent aviation noise authority could be established now, to act as an impartial mediator between airports and communities and help to restore trust and deliver the future of airspace operation. Nothing more is needed before that can be done. Sir Howard Davies and the Environmental Audit Committee endorsed the idea, and if the Minister endorsed it today it would certainly have the Opposition's full backing, so let us get on with it. Will he do that?

Making use of existing capacity would also alleviate pressure on airspace. A key to utilising capacity is improving road and rail access to different international gateways in the UK. It is the Airport Operators Association's top priority for 2016 and would bring about environmental and noise improvements around airports. Will the Minister back our calls for the National Infrastructure Commission to look at surface access to the UK's international gateways?

Finally, I want to put it to the Minister that it is important to work with industry on the issue of noise. The Sustainable Aviation group has produced an aviation noise road map showing how aviation can manage noise from aircraft operations between now and 2050. It emphasises the importance of improving airspace structures and operational procedures, but also points out, importantly, that a key is future aircraft and engine technology. The noise road map shows that, unless that new technology comes on stream and is used, noise output could double, even without expansion, in the coming years. What are the Government doing to encourage innovation, as well as the take-up of lighter, smaller aircraft such as the Boeing 787 and A350? Retrofitting noise-reducing devices to older fleets is also critical, and I think that the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling mentioned that. How are the Government promoting that? Does the Minister know what proportion of aircraft at each UK airport have not yet had such devices installed? If he does not know, when will he find out, and what will he do to put such measures in place?

I look forward to the Minister addressing those points. Vital questions have been raised today. At some point down the line the decision on expansion will come. It would be very useful to know when, but, irrespective of that, when will decisions be made on the various questions that I and other hon. Members have raised today?

10.47 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing the debate. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) suggested that we might need the wisdom of Solomon. I cannot claim to have that, but I am wise enough not to stray into the area that the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), encouraged us to stray into. I shall focus on the issue of noise, if I may.

I want to assure the House that the Government are acutely aware that noise is a major environmental concern around airports. We know that communities feel strongly about the issue. I remind the House that, as set out in the aviation policy framework published in 2013, our overall policy is

“to limit and, where possible, reduce the number of people in the UK significantly affected by aircraft noise”.

How we define the word “significantly” is important, and I well understand the points that have been made about background ambient noise in more rural areas. In accordance with the aviation policy framework, we will continue to treat 57 dB as the average level of daytime aircraft noise that marks the approximate onset of significant community annoyance. That does not, however, mean that all people within that contour will experience significant adverse affects. Nor does it mean that no one outside the contour will consider themselves annoyed by aircraft noise. We are looking at the matter, and our consultation later in the year will consider policy in that area and particularly what it means for airspace change. Our overarching policy on the issue of noise remains as I have set out, and I think that the House will agree that it is the right approach to take.

We have a strong aviation sector here in the United Kingdom, and we should be proud of it, but we want to ensure that it does all it can to reduce the effect of noise on communities. I know that airports and other stakeholders, such as airlines, the CAA and NATS, all realise the importance of tackling noise if the industry is to continue to grow. The Government, too, have a role to play, which is why we set noise controls at Gatwick, Heathrow and Stansted to balance the benefits of aviation with the burdens they place on communities.

Aircraft noise is a difficult issue, as we have heard, and when changes take place, they can lead to less noise for some but a worsening for others. It can be particularly difficult for people who experience a noticeable change in noise, and it presents formidable challenges for those responsible for decisions. I am aware that in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, and in others, people will have experienced changes in noise in recent years because of changes to where aircraft fly.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, a recent change to the joining point for aircraft approaching Gatwick from the east has created concerns for some residents. That change affected the point at which aircraft join the instrument landing system that leads down to the runway. Although that will have meant that some people have experienced fewer aircraft, for others it will have led to an increase in noise as a result of a narrower and more concentrated swathe on the final approach. As he will be aware, the Government believe that it is usually better to concentrate aircraft over as few routes as possible in order to minimise the number of people affected. That has been Government policy for many years and works well for many airports across the country.

Our current policy makes it clear, however, that there may be instances in which multiple routes, such as those that can offer respite for communities, can be better. The Government believe that those decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis, with local communities informing the process where possible. I understand that in this instance, as the change was not to published airspace routes, communities were neither informed nor

[Mr Robert Goodwill]

consulted before it occurred. For aircraft arriving in the UK, there are no set routes leading to the final approach. That is because arriving aircraft approach UK airspace in a random pattern and then have to be sequenced for safe operation by air traffic controllers. The change that took place in 2013 was to the procedures that air traffic controllers followed. It was therefore not subject to the Civil Aviation Authority's airspace change process, which needs to be followed when changes to airspace routes are proposed and requires consultation. Although there is no suggestion that NATS, Gatwick or the CAA acted improperly when making the change, as I have said, I believe that communities should be engaged when such changes are made.

I turn to one or two points that were made in the debate. My hon. Friend talked about changing the angle of approach. At the end of March, Heathrow airport trialled a 3.2° descent, but of course that requires significant pilot training and safety tests. As some airports trial that, more can follow. We need to look at pilot training and plane technology, and the report following that trial is expected over the summer. Having flown the 747 simulator into Heathrow at various descent angles, I can well understand some of the issues involved—in particular, the kinetic energy in a plane when it arrives on a steeper descent. That requires training, and there are noise issues when planes get nearer to the airport as greater braking power is needed. However, the descents are certainly not the same as I experienced when being taken into Kandahar airport some time ago.

My hon. Friends the Members for Tonbridge and Malling and for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) both referred to the lack of a night flight ban at Gatwick. The Government recognise the impact of noise disturbance at night and, for that reason, set night flight restrictions at Heathrow, Stansted and Gatwick. The current restrictions end in October 2017, and we will consult on future arrangements later this year to ensure that the cost and benefits of night flights continue to be balanced.

My hon. Friend the Member for Horsham asked why stacking could not be done out at sea. The Gatwick arrivals review has recommended that holding areas should be enabled over the sea. Gatwick has accepted that, but it will take some years, as it will require widespread airspace and procedural change. Gatwick will be conferring with the CAA and NATS on that particular issue.

A number of Members raised the issue of the health effects on people on the ground. I have visited schools in the constituency of the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and experienced the noise at first hand. I had a briefing earlier this week from the Aviation Environment Federation, which presented some very important research—not least from Imperial College, a well respected institution—on the effects on cardiovascular disease and other diseases.

The basic structure of UK airspace was developed more than 40 years ago and since then there has been a dramatic increase in the demand for flights. The future airspace strategy, which is being led by the CAA, is crucial to ensuring that the industry is efficient and can minimise its overall environmental impacts. The plan is to modernise UK airspace and deliver our contribution

to the European Commission's single European sky by 2030—the date by which we feel we should be able to do that. It is an ambitious plan designed around the use of modern technology, including more precise navigation.

Performance-based navigation can vastly improve the accuracy with which aircraft can fly a designated route, and airspace systemisation will mean that they follow a more predictable route, reducing the need for interference from air traffic controllers. That will not only make air travel safer but reduce emissions and journey times. It will also offer the chance to reduce noise for communities around airports by allowing routes that can accurately avoid built-up areas and maximising the rate at which aircraft can climb or descend. For those benefits to be realised, however, we need to ensure that when those essential changes take place, they work for communities as much as possible.

My officials are constantly reviewing Government policies on airspace and aviation noise. One thing I have asked them to consider is whether we can ensure that communities are informed and, when appropriate, consulted when such changes are to be made. They have also been working to deliver the right policies by engaging with all stakeholders, including representatives of local communities. I know that they have found that engagement valuable in ensuring that communities' interests are represented, and we will continue that dialogue when refining our policies.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank the Minister for his promise to consult communities. Should the Government be inclined to go ahead with runway 3 at Heathrow, will they consult the 300,000 residents of west London and beyond who would be affected? Those people are not currently affected by aircraft noise to the same extent as they would be in that situation.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): May I ask the Minister to bear in mind that he needs to leave some time for the mover of the motion to sum up?

Mr Goodwill: Thank you, Mr Howarth.

Of course we will consult in that case.

The Government want to maximise the benefits from a strong aviation sector; it is good for the economy, bringing investment and employment to the UK and wider benefits to society and individuals. However, the Government recognise that that needs to be balanced against the costs to the local environment that more flights bring, with noise being a prime example. I thank the Members who have taken part in this debate; it has been useful to inform the Government of people's views, and I look forward to hearing the summing-up by my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling.

10.57 am

Tom Tugendhat: I thank the Minister for his words. I am grateful for the support that I have received from throughout the House today, and particularly for the many comments from Scottish National party and Labour Members. They have shown that this issue covers every party in every part of our great kingdom.

If I am honest, I am little disappointed that we have not yet had a better answer on what the words "significantly affected" mean, and that we have not had what I hoped

we would have—a promise that the Civil Aviation Authority and NATS will take into account the communities on the ground when they are looking at the future airspace strategy. I think that is absolutely essential for all communities across our country.

In the closing few moments, I would like to pay a small tribute to Gatwick Obviously Not, a campaign group in my constituency that has worked tirelessly and fought very hard not only for communities in our area, but—as I hope this debate has recognised—for communities across our country that are suffering. Aviation noise recognises no boundaries of constituency, or indeed of town, borough or county.

Sadly, this issue will come back again and again, because although some have felt the need to argue against one project or another—it will come as no surprise that I would always argue against Gatwick's expansion—this is not about Gatwick or Heathrow. It is about the rights of citizens in our great country to be treated fairly and with justice when some of the planning decisions that are most important to them are taken. Were a motorway to be bulldozed through their back garden or a railway to be bulldozed under their land, they would have a right to be consulted. When the same is done in the air—when a motorway is put over their homes, their lives are disrupted, their sleep is interrupted and their children fail to get to school on time because they are tired—they get no say. That is surely wrong. I welcome the Minister beginning to answer that, and I know that this is a fight we will take forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of aircraft noise on local communities.

Cardiff Coal Exchange

11 am

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the Cardiff Coal Exchange.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I welcome the new Wales Office Minister to his post. We have both served on the Welsh Affairs Committee and I was pleased to hear that he would respond to this debate.

The subject of the recent ownership and the future of the Cardiff Coal Exchange is extremely complex. It cuts across devolved and reserved matters and the responsibilities of several UK Departments, including the Wales Office, and the Welsh Government. Let me make it clear at the outset that I do not expect the Minister to have all the answers today, but I hope he will listen carefully to my concerns. I am interested in his views on them and ask him to make representations to the Departments involved and the incoming Welsh Government, and to take a personal interest in the future of what is arguably one of the most important buildings of the Welsh national heritage and indeed our industrial heritage from the 19th and 20th centuries.

I do not want to detain the House too long on the remarkable history, architectural merits and the importance of the coal exchange to Cardiff and the Butetown community, as I want to focus on current matters, but I would be remiss not to remind the Chamber of some crucial issues.

Cardiff became the largest coal port in the world at the end of the 19th century and the coal exchange was constructed in the 1880s by Edwin Seward as a base from which to conduct trade negotiations regarding the coal mines of the south Wales valleys, with Cardiff being the key coal port in the world at the time. Following its opening, ship owners, their agents and many others interested in the coal trade met daily on the floor of the remarkable trading hall, where agreements were made by word of mouth and telephone. It has been estimated that 10,000 people would pass in and out of the building each day. At one time, the price of the world's coal was determined in the Cardiff Coal Exchange in Butetown. It is famously claimed that the first £1 million business deal took place and the first £1 million cheque was signed at the coal exchange during a transaction in 1901.

With the decline of the coal industry and of the export of coal from Cardiff and the Bute docks during the 20th century, the coal exchange eventually closed in 1958 and coal exports from Cardiff dock came to an end in the 1960s.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and on his extensive work on the issue. He mentioned the proud history of the building, which is iconic for Wales. Does he agree that the Labour council that currently runs Cardiff should consider all those matters?

Stephen Doughty: I have some concerns about Cardiff Council's involvement, which are focused on the officers of the council, and I will make that clear.

The building became grade II* listed in 1975 and there were discussions about the use of the building, which is so important that it was considered as the future home of the proposed Welsh Assembly during the devolution referendum in the 1970s. It was also considered as the headquarters for S4C, the Welsh language television channel. Eventually, it was refurbished and reopened as a major venue hosting acts such as the Manic Street Preachers, Ocean Colour Scene and the Stereophonics. There has been support from across the music and entertainment spectrum and people who have enjoyed gigs and events there. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) here and I know he has been there for many gigs, as has my hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), as have I. There was even support recently from Sir Tom Jones, no less.

However, the coal exchange closed indefinitely in August 2013 as a result of claimed building safety issues and the imposition of prohibition orders by Cardiff Council, which were themselves a matter of controversy. There has been an issue about the council's regulatory functions potentially being used unsympathetically to frustrate access to the building over a number of years. We then saw the liquidation of Macob, the company that owned the exchange, and in 2014, ownership of the coal exchange was disclaimed by the liquidators and passed to the Crown Estate. That was an unusual legal situation and led to a great deal of uncertainty.

At that point, I became aware of a lot of local concern about the future of the building. My office is nearby in Mount Stuart Square in one of the other historic buildings of Cardiff Bay. The coal exchange is a building I have long felt a great attachment and passion for. Many people in the community came forward and, with the opportunity presented by its being disclaimed to the Crown Estate, I decided to make a public call for all the parties interested in its future to come together for the benefit of the community and to save the building.

I was contacted by many hundreds of people: existing tenants, experts, former workers in the building and people from the diverse Butetown community and those associated with the building in the past, as well as an extensive number of interested developers. We held a first major public meeting in Butetown in October 2014, which was followed by a smaller working group coming together to form what was to become the Save The Coal Exchange campaign at the end of the same month. It was clear there was a significant appetite for a collaborative effort involving all those who cared about the building to find a solution.

A number of formal claims persisted against the building from Cardiff Council, Julian Hodge bank, Barclays bank and Coal Exchange Ltd, the company that had previously hosted events at the venue and had effectively been forced out of it by the council-imposed prohibitions, but there was great optimism that a solution involving the local community, the council, the Welsh Government, Cadw, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Victorian Society and others who had expressed an interest, as well as a private developer or investment of private funds, might result in a solution that would not only save this remarkable piece of heritage, but find a

use or uses that could meet multiple needs, retain community access to it and generate revenue to secure its future. In the months following, there was much progress.

Over the past 18 months, the Save The Coal Exchange campaign has secured parts of the habitable building, ensuring bills were paid for utilities, attracting a significant number of new tenants, ranging from lawyers to creatives and community organisations and, crucially, challenging the false perception that has repeatedly arisen that the entire building is derelict and at immediate risk of falling down. Parts of it are in a difficult state, but other parts are entirely functional and the public debate has at times been extremely misleading.

Surveys were undertaken and approaches made to prospective partners. The Save The Coal Exchange campaign secured a grant of £10,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund Wales with a view to a larger application. I commend the campaign for doing a remarkable job in keeping the building going and keeping open the options for its future. At the same time, the Welsh Government commissioned their own survey and studies, and a series of developers expressed interest in being involved.

On no fewer than seven occasions, I met Cardiff Council officials—

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): The hon. Gentleman alluded to the Welsh Government study, which was done by Capita, and the Cardiff Council study, which was done by RVW. The costs were estimated to be in the region of £35 million to £45 million. Does he accept that that is an enormous amount of money, that the issue is not new, that the Welsh Government have sat on their hands when it comes to helping Cardiff Council out with this problem, and that a large amount of money could fall on taxpayers?

Stephen Doughty: I have concerns about the liability for taxpayers, but the Welsh Government have engaged proactively and positively. I hope that the new Government will look carefully at these issues.

As I said, on no fewer than seven occasions, I met council officials and was provided with repeated assurances of partnership. I spoke to Julian Hodge bank and Barclays bank, which assured me they would act in the interests of all those with a stake and the local community, and not sign off any deal that they did not think met those concerns. I also spoke to the Crown Estate, the Heritage Lottery Fund and many others. However, sadly, our hopes and optimism for a collaborative and transparent process seem to have been misplaced and I am sorry to say that over the last six months we have seen some deeply untransparent manoeuvres by a small group of council officers to cut a backroom deal, first with a Liverpool company, Harcourt Developments, and then with another Liverpool company, Signature Living, and its owner Lawrence Kenwright.

Despite my misgivings, I have tried at all times to maintain an open mind to various developers and proposals that have come forward. Indeed, I was happy to put them in touch with relevant parties and the Save The Coal Exchange campaign. That includes Signature Living. I met its representatives on a number of occasions, including Lawrence Kenwright on three occasions, to listen to their plans and to ask detailed questions, not least because one of the positive aspects of its proposal was, on the face of it, to maintain the core heritage

fabric. However, as time went on and more matters came to my attention, I became increasingly concerned about its suitability as a developer and the nature of its assurances, which seemed to vary at every meeting. I raised those directly with Cardiff Council and many of the other parties but I was assured that they would be fully examined again and again.

So we come to the present day. The Minister will be aware that in the last two weeks there has been a sudden announcement that a deal has been facilitated by Cardiff Council to transfer ownership of the coal exchange to Signature Living, followed by a barrage of heavy corporate PR from Mr Kenwright and subsequent controversy in the media and local community, with nearly 800 local individuals now having signed a petition criticising the deal.

Let me be clear. I am not opposed to a private developer being involved in a solution to save the coal exchange. Indeed, since day one, I have been clear about the level of finance needed. I am also perfectly happy to put my personal concerns about Mr Kenwright to one side in the interests of any deal about the building and the local community. It is easy to provide a fait accompli in these situations—to present oneself as the only alternative, threaten dire consequences, respond to any criticism or reasonable questions as a “slur” and warn of the jobs that might be lost. But we owe it to the building and the local community in Butetown, Cardiff and, indeed, the rest of Wales to secure the right solution for the coal exchange.

I want to detail a few specific concerns that I hope the Minister will listen to carefully. First, on the process, previous dealings with Macob and other potential developers reveal a concerning record. Freedom of information requests have revealed a complex web of negotiations over a number of years, including that the council was contemplating a development that would have seen a significant proportion of the building demolished and the building of a multi-storey block of flats. That is hardly reassuring.

There has been no tender or public process in this instance. The council was fully aware of the concerns during the process, and I do not understand why it did not go forward in a fully transparent and open way to secure the right bid. In fact, one developer came to see me to tell me of his concerns—that bid was supported by officials at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, at UK level—and told me that in effect he had been scared away by the council: it was not interested and he should go away.

In recent days the council appears to have exercised its right of sale to seize and transfer the building to Signature Living. How it did that is unclear and has been questioned by independent legal practitioners. That largely centres on a claim that the council has made, but never fully substantiated, of “costs” that it incurred and then attempted to formalise by pinning a notice to the building some months ago. It appears to have done a deal with other claimants to relinquish their charges.

Lawrence Kenwright has claimed in the press this week that he beat dozens of competitors. On 8 April I had an email from the council’s director of economic development, Neil Hanratty, that made the point that the

“condition of the building has been widely publicised”.

He went on to confirm that rather than dozens, only “four parties were interviewed by a panel of officers including the Listed Building...Officer and a representative of Julian Hodge Bank.”

I find it very odd, given the UK and international interest in the building, let alone that in Wales, that the council appears to have engaged in negotiations in the past 18 months with only two companies, both of which happen to be from Liverpool. It is a shame that the council did not get together with other key stakeholders to put together a public bid process, working with all those other people who could have played a part in finding the best solution.

I also have concerns that this matter has not received the proper democratic scrutiny. It does not appear to have gone to the cabinet or the leader of the council, or, to my knowledge, to the council’s economic development committee.

I want to turn now to Mr Kenwright’s financial background. I am afraid that Mr Kenwright has been less than transparent about his financial history, and I think it is in the public interest to raise these matters so that others can draw their own conclusions. Mr Kenwright did not proactively disclose these to Cardiff Council or to anybody else who met him. Indeed, the council claimed that it was unaware of them when I raised them with it. He has blamed his past difficulties on the credit crunch and said that they have made him “a better businessman”. He has attempted to downplay them in the Welsh press this week. He told WalesOnline:

“I had an apartment block in Liverpool which went over budget. I was one of the first ones to go bust. The only difference between liquidation and bankruptcy is giving the personal guarantee.”

However, Mr Kenwright confirmed to me personally in a meeting in the House on 9 March that he was made bankrupt as recently as 2010, in Liverpool Crown court on 22 June in that year. The credit crunch of course started in 2008. And, crucially, he was a director, as reported in the north Wales *Daily Post* on 28 April 2004, of a clothing company called Yes & Co. Distribution Ltd, which in 2002 went into liquidation, with an estimated £1.9 million owing to creditors. The newspaper reported at the time that a Patricia Kenwright—believed to be his former wife—was disqualified from being a director for four years and that her husband Lawrence Kenwright accepted a similar undertaking for eight years, and a Frederick Greenwood for five years. That of course suggests that Mr Kenwright could have been disqualified until as recently as 2012, although admittedly that is not clear.

It is not clear why the directors were disqualified, but the newspaper reported that Mrs Kenwright

“allowed the company to fail to deal properly with its taxation affairs.”

For the record, the Insolvency Service lists a range of reasons for being disqualified. Of course, there could have been another Lawrence Kenwright, so I wanted to ask him directly, and he confirmed that he was a former director of Yes & Co. and that he had indeed been disqualified. It is interesting to note that until recently he was not even listed as a director of the company that he set up to facilitate the purchase of the coal exchange. As of yesterday, Signature Living Coal Exchange Ltd listed only one director, his current wife Katie Kenwright, although Mr Kenwright is listed as a director of Signature Living Coal Exchange Ops Ltd.

I want to turn briefly to the financial model—

Craig Williams: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Doughty: If I may, I will not. We have limited time and I have already taken one intervention, but I might take another later if we have enough time.

The financial model that Mr Kenwright proposes to use for the building is the BPRA—business premises renovation allowance—scheme. That was introduced in the Finance Act 2005 and was intended to bring derelict or unused properties back into use. The scheme gives an initial allowance of 100% for expenditure on converting or renovating unused business premises in a disadvantaged area. However, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced the end of the scheme from the end of this financial year, after a raft of concerns, and investigations by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

The council has claimed to me that Signature Living has told it that it has secured an “approved £12 million” and up to a further £30 million. However, Lawrence Kenwright told me that only one of his previous schemes had received full approval from HMRC. I am deeply concerned. Given the investigations into these schemes in the past and the risk of their not being approved, where does the liability lie? We also ought to ask, given the current climate and concerns about tax avoidance and transparency: is this the right scheme to be funding this sort of building? Should we be assisting wealthy individuals and shadowy funds to avoid tax in this way? The Treasury has decided that it will end the scheme, which I think shows what it thinks of it.

The *Financial Times* reported on 14 July 2015:

“HM Revenue & Customs indicated it saw problems with arrangements involving BPRA, drawing parallels with abusive avoidance schemes, and a year later added them to its public ‘Spotlights’ list of arrangements it said taxpayers should avoid.”

A range of concerns were raised. The *FT* continues:

“Where tax relief was not granted to taxpayers before 2013, the Revenue has in most cases withheld it, said Mr Avient”—

he comes from UHY Hacker Young—

“The Revenue clearly saw a situation where certain structures were stretching the rules too far...it has issued a raft of accelerated payment demands to repay disputed tax to BPRA scheme investors. These tax bills cannot be appealed.”

Interestingly, on 21 April 2014 the *Liverpool Echo* revealed the problems with the Stanley Dock regeneration scheme, funded in the same way. Builders were left unpaid; the council was left having to provide a significant amount of grant—multi-million pounds—and there was a complete lack of transparency. That involved another Liverpool company called Harcourt, which incidentally, as I said, was the previous preferred partner of Cardiff Council. The *Liverpool Echo* reported that it was

“surprisingly difficult to pin down the developers and owners”,

which I think exposes the difficulties and concerns about the transparency of these schemes and their solidity.

I also have concerns about what the building will be—what is the proposal on the table? We have heard about it being proposed as a hotel. It is clear that Signature Living is a hotel developer. I am not opposed to a hotel development and I am sure that many other people in the community are not, but it is still, as of this date, unclear what parts of the building will be used for what. At various times, in various meetings, we have been told of residential, part-hotel and normal hotel

usage. In fact, Mr Kenwright suggested to me that it might be a third, a third, a third—or, as he put it, “as much as the council let me get away with”.

We need to be very clear—we need to know—before accepting or agreeing that this scheme is a good thing what the building will be used for. Tenants and businesses in the area and residents in the square—it is already a significant residential area—need to understand what will be there. Will there be lots of big parties coming there? Mr Kenwright has a hen and stag business in his hotels in Liverpool. Will lots of people be living there and will there be parking issues and all the other things associated with that? None of those schemes is necessarily wrong, but the public have a right to know what the building will be.

I come now to community benefits and issues. First, the Save The Coal Exchange campaign has listed a whole series of issues that it would want to be included in a section 106 agreement. It would want to see those outlined and agreed to. We have had promises of jobs and apprenticeships, although Lawrence Kenwright told me that the company would “bring their own people in”. Where are the clear assurances on jobs and apprenticeships?

Secondly, there are existing tenants—nearly 40 tenants—in the building. What assurances have they been given? They are deeply fearful that the council may step in, given its history, issue prohibition notices and see them evicted once building work starts. Where are the assurances for them?

We also have concerns about engagement with the local community in the square. There has not been serious consultation with local residents or businesses. Signature Living has been advertising major changes to Baltic House, home of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action. Is it aware of those; has it been consulted?

I have had an exchange of letters with the council about this matter and have had some assurances, but the letter from Neil Hanratty on 8 April confirms only that

“commitment to the above will be secured formally through the planning process”

and merely that Signature Living has “agreed in principle”. We should be having cast-iron guarantees for a building of this nature, with this kind of expenditure and the potential impact. These are really serious issues and we want to ensure that there is that community benefit, quite apart from all the other issues about access to the building.

Finally, heritage was one of the most positive aspects of the Signature Living proposal but, even so, there are concerns. In March 2016, the Victorian Society wrote to City of Cardiff Council officer Pat Thompson, copying in Neil Hanratty, saying that it had heard nothing from the council for 20 months and that

“the lack of communication from Cardiff Council is both disappointing and concerning... we are concerned that without close scrutiny, and clear direction from the local authority, aided and informed by a proper assessment...an acceptably sympathetic scheme, might...prove difficult to achieve. In 2013 and 2014 the Society was involved in consultations with Signature Living over its proposed hotel conversion, of Albion House, Liverpool, a Grade 2* Listed Building by Richard Norman Shaw.”

That building will, of course, be of interest to those of us in this Parliament. The letter continued:

“From our point of view the process was far from ideal. Plans were drawn up hurriedly and without any evidence of the sort of high quality, detailed heritage assessment a Grade 2* Listed Building demands. Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, the conversion involved some alterations and additions that we as well as Historic England advised were unsympathetic and harmful. These were undertaken regardless, some seemingly prior to receiving the necessary consents... None of this is to suggest that Signature Living is incapable or indisposed to deliver a high quality sensitive scheme, rather it is to demonstrate that without proper guidance...in the form of a Conservation Management Plan and a structural survey, a less sympathetic and unnecessarily damaging conversion scheme is the likely outcome.”

I conclude by identifying a few key areas. First, the questions about the financial background are deeply concerning. What does the Minister think? I want Cardiff Council to be clear about its due diligence process in that regard, particularly on the sureties around the BPRA scheme, given the concerns that have been raised. What happens if that goes wrong? Who will bail this out? Who will deal with the financial consequences?

Secondly, on heritage and planning, there is a clear need for strict oversight from Cadw, the Victorian Society and others, for conservation management plans and for surveys, whatever developer comes in. Thirdly, we need guarantees in writing, not assurances that mean nothing, on the community issues and on access to the building. We need guarantees for the tenants of the building as it is, and we need an inquiry into the overall process over a number of years. The process has been deeply unsatisfactory and has involved the use of health and safety powers and the spending of public money in a deeply non-transparent way. We should put a halt to the proposal, re-engage with the community and other stakeholders and act in the national interest to save the coal exchange.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): I put it on the record that I had no foreknowledge of what the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth was going to raise. I raised some issues about one of the developments he mentioned on behalf of some constituents many years ago, and I would not want it to be thought that I had any prior knowledge that he would mention it, otherwise it might not have been appropriate for me to take the Chair today.

11.22 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on his speech and on securing this debate. It is important that Westminster is still relevant to the communities that we represent in Wales, and highlighting such issues in Westminster Hall debates is appropriate and correct. He said that he does not expect me to have all the answers, and indeed it would be inappropriate for me to respond to some of the points that have been raised because many of them are issues for the Welsh Government and for City of Cardiff Council, which as part of local government in Wales is answerable to the Welsh Government. I will have to restrain myself from commenting on devolved areas. It is important to place this debate in context and to respond to the undeveloped issues, and I will particularly respond to the questions on the tax allowance system. Additionally, it is important to touch on the Crown Estate's position in the sales process to try to allay some of the fears he raised.

On the background to the debate, I fully subscribe to the hon. Gentleman's comments on the coal exchange, which is an iconic Welsh building. We should be proud that Wales was able to dictate the price of coal throughout the world, and we should trumpet that the first £1 million business transaction—the sale of coal to France—happened at the coal exchange. We should talk about that when we discuss the history of Cardiff but, in the context of Cardiff bay, this debate is also an opportunity to highlight the way in which Wales has developed. We should proudly boast of the revitalisation of Cardiff bay and highlight the economic impact of the changes in Cardiff that have been secured through the work of successive Governments here in Westminster, in co-operation with Governments in Cardiff bay—it is an example of the two Governments working together and of the local authority being proactive in redeveloping an area that was ripe for redevelopment. This is a success story, and there is no doubt that the coal exchange is an iconic building at the centre of the proposed redevelopment of Cardiff bay.

When we talk about redevelopment and business opportunities in Cardiff, it is no bad thing to trumpet, for example, the Cardiff city deal. I represent a north Wales constituency, and I often hear the accusation that all the investment in Wales goes to Cardiff, but it is important to point out that the scale of the Cardiff city deal is not confined to the city of Cardiff; it will have a huge impact on all the areas surrounding Cardiff. Indeed, a significant proportion of the Welsh population will be affected by the Cardiff city deal, which has secured a £1.2 billion investment on a cross-governmental level. I am sure that every hon. Member in this Chamber would welcome that.

Cardiff is a city that is going places and performing extremely well in attracting inward investment. There is no doubt that the Cardiff bay area has been crucial to the refocusing of Cardiff in the mind of inward investors as a city with a “can do” attitude, which has made a difference to job creation throughout the area and south Wales.

Craig Williams: There is a direct comparison between the scale of regeneration in Cardiff under the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation, which was formed under the previous Conservative Government, and the city deal in partnership with the Wales Government. It is a national disgrace that we are debating the future of the coal exchange and that it has been left to fall down through the inaction of the Labour Welsh Government. The impression has been given that the officers run City of Cardiff Council, which has a Labour cabinet.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Speech!

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. That is very lengthy for an intervention.

Guto Bebb: Concerns have been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) and by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) on the inactivity, or otherwise, of the Welsh Government. It is not for me to comment on that, but I am sure that the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth will be making his views known in due course.

[Guto Bebb]

Two specific issues have been raised to which I can respond. First, I cannot respond to the sales process adopted by City of Cardiff Council, but it is only right and proper that I address the involvement of the Crown Estate, about which the hon. Gentleman expressed concern. It is clear that the whole process was subject to the escheat process, which means that the building was never owned by the Crown Estate. As such, the Crown Estate was neither consulted nor involved in the process by which the property's ownership is being transferred. That is not unique; it is a pattern that can be seen in many circumstances involving the Crown Estate. The actual decision-making process will be for City of Cardiff Council and the Welsh Government. Although the Crown Estate is technically involved, it is not odd that it was not consulted and did not provide any input in the process.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the tax allowance scheme, and it is fair to say that the business premises renovation allowance is central to the redevelopment plan. He is right to highlight the fact that the scheme will be coming to an end at the end of this financial year at the end of March 2017. He is also correct that concerns have been raised about the way in which the scheme has been utilised in the past. Those concerns, which were raised, I think, back in 2011-12, have been addressed by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and it was stated in summer Budget 2015 that the scheme would be coming to an end. That is still the case. It is important to highlight the fact that the BPRA is a capital allowance scheme, and my understanding is that under such schemes any claim for the allowance would have to be made retrospectively, after the expenditure is made. It is also important to highlight the fact that any claim for a capital allowance under such a scheme would have to refer to expenditure incurred during the 2016-17 financial year. Any expenditure incurred after that point would obviously be outside the scope of the allowance scheme, which is a fairly important point.

Stephen Doughty *rose*—

Guto Bebb: I apologise, but I am afraid that I have only one minute.

The hon. Gentleman's concerns have been heard, if nothing else. By raising this issue in Westminster, he has ensured that the concerns of tenants, the local community and elected representatives have been heard. The concerns raised in relation to the tenants of the coal exchange are valid and should be addressed, and everyone would agree that the redevelopment of such an iconic business should be open and transparent and should have the support of the local community. However, on the issues relating to the involvement of the Westminster Government, I restate that the Crown Estate process has been par for the course. In the same way, the concerns raised about the tax allowance scheme are valid if this redevelopment does not happen before the end of March 2017 but, as it currently stands, the scheme is still in existence.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

UK Dairy Sector

[*Relevant document: Third Report from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Farmgate Prices, HC 474.*]

[*JOAN RYAN in the Chair*]

2.33 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I beg to move, That this House has considered the UK dairy sector.

I am grateful for the opportunity to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan, and to address the state of the UK dairy sector. This is an important debate, and I am glad that there are so many people here, not only from Wales and the devolved nations but from across the United Kingdom. I suspect there may be some interventions but, given the number of Members who wish to contribute, perhaps we will keep them to a minimum.

Everyone here will recognise and agree on the importance of the agricultural sector, especially the dairy sector, which is a vital part of our economy, our landscape and, in many parts of the country, our communities. In the rural areas that we represent—I represent Ceredigion—local family farms are the lifeblood that run through our community. Without them, many parts of my constituency could not survive and, in many cases, would not exist at all. Many farmers who work the land and tend the flocks and herds have done so from generation to generation for hundreds of years, and they want to continue, yet the future looks bleak for many of them. I get that ongoing and constant message from farmers and their representatives in the farming unions. This is a time of grave uncertainty for many farmers in my constituency, in Wales and throughout the United Kingdom. It is a time of difficulty and, day by day, many farmers are struggling to get by, which has led to the harrowing fact that almost half of all dairy farmers in Britain have stated their intention to quit the sector.

There has been an incredibly difficult market for dairy produce in the past several years. That difficulty has not been caused by one specific issue that can be easily addressed. A number of factors are involved: local ones, national ones and, of course, global ones. Farmers understand that—they have told me about it—and it has been endorsed by reports from the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I am glad that the Select Committee Chairman, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), is here to share with us his wisdom and expertise on the back of an excellent report that has many positive recommendations, which I will pursue later.

Whether the factors are local, national or global, the impact is the same. In the summer of 2014 alone we saw farm-gate milk price returns to UK farmers fall between 25% and 50%, which meant a fall from about 34p a litre to 23.3p a litre as of late last year. That is the lowest price farmers have seen since 2009, yet many receive even less than that low figure. Yesterday, at the excellent Anglesey day pioneered by the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), farming unions told me that some farmers in north Wales may soon receive payment of just 16p a litre. Although 23p is difficult for many dairy farmers, and perhaps 26p or 27p would be sustainable,

there is simply no farmer in this country who could survive for long by selling milk as cheaply as 16p a litre. Many farmers are already struggling and living on the edge financially. Yes, Government action on averaging out tax payments over three years for farmers is incredibly helpful, but it does not address many of the challenges they face.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): One issue that farmers in my constituency of Eddisbury raise with me is the fact that the processors are not subject to the Groceries Code Adjudicator and that there is a huge gap between those on aligned contracts and those on non-aligned contracts, and it is those on non-aligned contracts who are really suffering at the moment.

Mr Williams: I completely concur with the hon. Lady, who has experience of the farming industry both in England and in Wales. I will address the Groceries Code Adjudicator later, but I agree with her sentiments.

In Wales, the dairy sector continues to suffer from months of continuing low prices and poor profitability, and many of the farming unions are not convinced that there is likely to be a recovery any time soon. According to AHDB Dairy, for the 12 months to December 2015 total full costs of production ranged from 25.7p to 34.4p a litre. In short, there is huge disparity between the costs of production and the price that producers receive, which is a huge concern. The figures over the past decade show the loss of 5,500 dairy producers in England and Wales, and that downward trajectory will continue if nothing is done to help support dairy farmers. That means a change in the ethos of some of our farmers, but it also means positive action from the different Governments, whether it is the Government here in Westminster or the devolved Administrations. If we do not do that, it will have a terrible impact on the rural communities that many of us represent.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Williams: I give way to a neighbour of Wales.

Daniel Kawczynski: One thing that the hon. Gentleman has not mentioned is the fact that this debate is almost as repetitive as the changing seasons. I must have been to more than 12 such debates over the past decade, and we always get platitudes from Ministers, who say that everything is being done. I hope he agrees that, when the Minister stands up on this occasion, we will hearing about concrete steps that the Government are taking to support our dairy farmers.

Mr Williams: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I refer him and the Minister to the report by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. The hon. Gentleman has a fine pedigree in championing such issues. He set up the all-party dairy group in the last Parliament, and he initiated many of the 12 debates that I mentioned. I thank him for his contribution.

I mentioned rural communities. I reflect on the words of the farmer whom I spoke to on the streets of Aberystwyth last weekend, who told me that price fluctuations over the past five years have cost his business

something like £100,000. That is a huge loss to the local economy, local businesses and the wider agricultural economy.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I commend the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I must register a slight interest, as my husband runs an agricultural auctioneering business; he runs the Sedgemoor market, which many Welsh farmers come to. He has reported to me that there is a knock-on effect. It is not only the farmers selling milk who are affected; it is the whole industry. The cost of a cow now is less than £1,000. People who rear cows to sell them to dairy farmers can hardly cover the costs of their business. The whole chain is affected, not just the end of it, and we absolutely must do something to address this situation.

Mr Williams: The hon. Lady is quite right, and she represents a rural area, as I do. For people who do not live in a rural area, it can sometimes be very hard to understand the extent to which the agricultural community and the agricultural economy are engrained in rural areas and every aspect of life in those areas. We have had a big debate in our area about the closure of village schools. If families working on dairy farms move away, that has a direct impact on the capacity of small schools to function. If young families leave a community, public services dwindle as a consequence, as well as the auctioneers and others involved in the supply chain for the agricultural industry, as she said.

The nature of my remarks so far has been negative, but I do not want this to be a wholly negative debate, because we have some immensely innovative farmers who want to stay in the industry and want the industry to thrive and prosper. However, my farmers tell me that they want us to speak out about the reality on the ground as they experience it.

Of course, not all the problems are home-made. There are serious global challenges for British agriculture that are not under our control. The farmers I have spoken to recognise the significant impact of global supply and demand on their businesses, and the difficulties for Government in changing that. There has been a fall in the global commodity price which, along with other factors such as the Russian ban and the reduced demand for milk from China and the middle east, has played a part in the current difficulties we face in Wales and in the UK as a whole.

For those farmers who have stayed in business and continued producing dairy, production has increased, but so has production around the world and it seems unlikely to slow down in the near future. There have been warnings. I will not dwell on them too much, but the Welsh Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, warned about the impact of the end of quota and the impact of the increase in Irish production, which the Farmers Union of Wales has been talking about since 2009; but we are where we are.

While there are positive signs that the global market for milk will continue to grow, the growth in production is higher than the growth in demand, which has a huge impact on the commodity price of milk. We live in a globalised world and at times that unfortunately means that small changes somewhere else in the world have a huge impact at home. There is action that can and must be taken to improve British dairy producers' opportunities

[Mr Mark Williams]

on the global market, such as having a strong and long-term dairy exports strategy; I emphasise that it should be strong and long-term. However, these global factors cannot always be predicted.

The domestic market remains important. Over half the milk produced in the UK is sold directly as fresh liquid milk through retailers and consumed here in the UK. This milk is mostly sold as skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, with much of the remaining milk being processed into products such as cheese, yoghurt, milk powders and butter. There are some very good companies using that milk. I think of Rachel's in Aberystwyth in my constituency; its products can be bought in Portcullis House. They are excellent products that are made using local milk.

While many dairy products are in a very competitive global market, there has been huge criticism about the relationship between supermarkets and their suppliers, especially when it comes to the price that supermarkets pay for the milk that goes on their shelves. Milk, as a staple in many people's shopping baskets, has for too long been at the forefront of the UK retail price war. However, rather than affecting the profits of the supermarkets, it seems that much of this cost-cutting has instead affected the price paid to dairy suppliers. Much of the milk that is produced was bought at a price lower than it cost to produce. That situation is simply not sustainable for my constituents who are farmers—or for any constituents in the farming communities represented in Westminster Hall today. The FUW said in 2015:

“It is not, and never has been, the job of the producer to fund supermarket price cuts or to enhance a retailer's market share. Sacrificing producers to a retailer price war can only function to further break an already fractured supply chain”.

That is why I return to the point about the Groceries Code Adjudicator made by the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), and it is why many of us in this House supported the creation of the adjudicator.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Williams: I know that the hon. Gentleman has done a lot of work on this issue, so I give way to him.

Julian Sturdy: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate and on making a powerful argument. Regarding the Groceries Code Adjudicator, he will be aware that there is an upcoming review of the adjudicator, two years after the office was created. Is that not the perfect opportunity to strengthen the adjudicator and its remit, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) touched on? This is an area where Government can act.

Mr Williams: Again, I completely concur with that comment. I think the hon. Gentleman secured a debate on the Groceries Code Adjudicator in this Chamber a few weeks or months ago, and he made that point very strongly then. He is quite right; we need the opportunity that this review presents.

I supported the creation of the adjudicator, as did my party, and I commend the cross-party efforts to create the adjudicator. Andrew George, the former Member for St Ives, and others, including the hon. Member for

Ynys Môn—in fact, all parties in the House pioneered and put forward the case for the adjudicator, the creation of which was long in coming.

Like the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), farmers tell me that, yes, the adjudicator has the power to name and shame, and, yes, the adjudicator has the power to levy fines, but those powers are insufficient. The adjudicator needs to have the power to examine the whole of the supply chain from gate to plate, even if that requires legislative change. That would instil great confidence in many farmers who do not have a direct relationship with supermarkets through one of the admirable dedicated supply contracts.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC) *rose*—

Mr Williams: I give way to my neighbour from Carmarthen East and Dinefwr.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, for securing this debate and for the passionate remarks he has made. Based on what he has just said, and based on the previous intervention, unless the Government act during that review and give the adjudicator some teeth, there will be a huge Government failure on the dairy industry.

Mr Williams: I totally concur with that. I think there is an emerging consensus. It took some time to give the adjudicator the capacity to levy fines. I think this is the next step, but it cannot come quickly enough for many of the farmers in Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and elsewhere.

We are told that more dairy farmers are supplying supermarkets on a dedicated contract, which is true, and that many of those farmers receive more favourable milk prices, which is good, but only 4% of Welsh dairy farmers have a direct link with the supermarkets. I celebrate that 4%—I congratulate those farmers and those supermarkets on having better arrangements—but it is only 4% of Welsh farmers who can potentially be assisted by the Groceries Code Adjudicator if there are contractual breaches. The rest of them are on their own and there is a huge sense of vulnerability.

I will proceed as quickly as I can now; if the House will excuse me, I will not take any more interventions. I will talk about efficiency in the dairy sector. Of course, efficiency can help to reduce the cost of milk production, but to do so farmers need to have the money to invest, and that needs to be recognised in the price paid to farmers for their milk. The FUW says,

“Whilst... some retailers have made small in-roads in this area, it remains imperative that the prices paid to producers not only cover the cost of production, but also provide room for investment in order to allow the sector to innovate and remain competitive.”

I am yet to find a farmer who does not have an eye on the future and who is not prepared to plan or innovate. The issue for almost all those producers, and many of the larger ones, is that the financial constraints on them—some of those constraints are sometimes imposed by the banks, which are not always helpful; many of them are, but many of them are not—make it impossible for them to invest in the way that we want them to. If we expect farmers to invest, say, £100,000 to extend a milking parlour at a time of gravely low prices, that is a huge challenge and for many farmers it is not feasible.

Despite that, the industry has achieved many of the efficiencies expected of it. It is predicted that between 2015 and 2016 the industry will reduce the cost of production by 4.56 pence per litre. However, to go back to the international dimension to this situation, at the same time prices fell by 20%.

We need to look at processing capacity. In Wales, the fact is that we have had no substantive investment in processing facilities for 10 years, although the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) may tell us a little good news if she catches your eye, Ms Ryan. There has been a loss of milk and cheese processing at a time of increasing supply. That needs to be addressed.

Briefly, I will endorse what the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee said in the recommendations of its excellent report, "Farmgate prices". One of the recommendations stated:

"Claims from national retailers that there are 'sustainable economic reasons'—

sustainable for whom, we ask—

"justifying price differentials have not been fully accepted by many farmers, and retailers must"—

I emphasise, "must"—

"do more to explain their reasoning and to ensure their prices adequately reflect the costs of production."

The report talks about producer power in the marketplace. What is being done at the UK level—I would ask the same question to Ministers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales—to encourage producer organisations? In Wales, there has been concern that the Assembly Government have not been forthcoming with the resources promised to the farming community to develop producer organisations.

The report highlighted that opportunities exist for imports to be displaced and for new products to appeal to UK and global consumers. The whole supply chain needs to invest in continued improvement and productivity. If that is an aspiration, it is a laudable one, and I know many farmers are attempting to respond to it.

The report also questioned the

"assurance from the retail sector that there is no link between the price at which supermarkets sell to their customers and the price supermarkets pay to farmers."

The report said that "Progress is uneven". I would say that the Committee is being rather generous in saying that it is "uneven".

DEFRA and Agriculture Ministers in the devolved Governments need to encourage the use of more long-term contracts. That will help to provide predictable levels of income and ensure secure financial planning and investment decisions, regardless of the price in the supermarket. There needs to be clearer guidance from DEFRA so that customers know that they are buying British goods or—I would say this, wouldn't I?—Welsh produce.

Through the European school milk scheme, children over the age of five receive a subsidised portion of milk. Revisions to the scheme—I believe the UK Government abstained—were passed this month, which means that the UK will receive just under €10 million in aid per school year, which is the fourth highest allocation of any country in the EU. DEFRA is responsible for implementing that allocation. Will the Minister clarify whether the Government will continue to participate in

the revised European school milk scheme? What plans do they have for consultation? Critically for this debate, what discussions has the Minister had with the dairy industry about how it can benefit from the scheme?

My final substantive point is on the voluntary dairy code of practice, which often gets ignored. There is concern over its brevity and the number of people it covers. My farmers tell me that the code has had little impact on the farm-gate price received by producers and is largely ineffectual in the midst of a market surplus. When the former Minister, Sir James Paice—Jim Paice—came to the Royal Welsh show in Builth Wells and announced the code, there was great excitement among the farming community. We were told at the time that, if there were concerns that the dairy code was not working effectively, the Government would leave open the potential for a statutory code of practice. How is the voluntary code being monitored? What consideration is being given to putting it on a statutory basis? For a long time, the FUW has called for the inclusion of market-related pricing formulas within dairy contracts, and I fully support that.

I could go on; it is a hugely wide subject. The remit of the debate was deliberately made as wide as possible to encourage contributions from Members from all parts of the UK and with different experiences, but there will be a commonality to many of the messages that we present to the Minister. There are two great industries left in Wales—steel and agriculture—and a growing small business sector, which we nurture. The steel industry is concentrated. We hope that the proposals for a management buy-out in Port Talbot yield results, because the impact of many thousands of people losing their jobs overnight would be catastrophic for Wales and the United Kingdom. However, a more sublime, devious decline of an industry is happening in Wales, and that is agriculture. The Committee report gives us some of the answers that need to be pursued. It is very important that the thousands of jobs in rural communities are sustained and protected. I do not dwell on the negatives, because I am reminded by the young farmers who come to my surgeries—I go to their meetings, and they want to stay in the industry—that they are the people we need to support and on whom our rural communities depend.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I say to right hon. and hon. Members that we have 10 people seeking to contribute, so I am placing a four-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches. If everyone is helpful, everyone should get in on that basis. I will be seeking to start calling the three Front Benchers at 3.30. With the Minister's co-operation, I ask that we allow the mover of the motion two minutes at the end, bearing in mind that we have a few minutes past the hour as we started late.

2.55 pm

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak early in this debate. To some extent, I had been hoping to hear all the other speeches and use them to contribute to mine. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) not only on raising such an important debate, but on doing so in an excellent way. There was hardly a single comment

[Glyn Davies]

that I disagreed with. He has raised most of the issues that I would have raised, so I will concentrate on two points only; I realise that many Members want to speak.

My first point relates to the public announcements in the past couple of weeks about an increase in the price that Arla pays farmers. It seems to have been accepted as an increase by DEFRA in publicity saying, "Well done, Arla", but it was not an increase. Arla's press release worked a treat, but the increase did not reach the farmers. We need to be pretty clear about that simply as a point of information.

The second issue I want to raise is hugely important. Cross-border single farm payments are a massive problem, particularly in Wales. The agriculture industry is structured such that the single farm payment from Brussels is crucial to the economy of farms. The cross-border farms in Wales have been deeply let down. They are not getting any money at all, but I am raising this issue with the Minister because the problem in Wales—this is what the Welsh Minister is saying to all those farmers—is that the information is not available to the Welsh Government. The Welsh Government therefore cannot calculate the payments for the cross-border farms, and they are getting nothing.

The farmers are in a desperate position. We read today about a supplier who has gone bankrupt. Some 300 cross-border farms in Wales are suffering. We have to have a proper working relationship between the Rural Payments Agency and Rural Payments Wales. We are told that they are not talking to each other, and people are losing out because of a bureaucratic failure. I do not know where the failure lies, but it needs to be gripped by DEFRA so that the problem can be sorted out for the sake of those cross-border farmers who are heading towards bankruptcy, purely because of inefficiency and bureaucratic failings.

2.58 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) on securing this incredibly important and hugely topical debate on our dairy sector. The dairy sector has a long and proud history in Britain and in Ireland, both north and south. In Northern Ireland, the dairy industry stretches back many generations. Members will agree that dairy products are so much a part of our everyday diet that it is easy to forget the huge skill and effort it takes for farmers to produce such world-class produce. In fact, the all-party group on dairy—I am one of its vice-chairs—recently produced a helpful document on the need for Government, schools and the wider industry to promote dairy as an essential part of our diet.

We have already heard about the challenges faced by the dairy sector in Britain. Unfortunately, the issues are even greater in Northern Ireland, where they are amplified by our reliance on the export market. Northern Ireland's small population and proportionally larger dairy sector mean that our farmers must seek export markets for their produce, either in the south of Ireland, in Britain or further afield. That means that our farmers are the first to feel the impact of falls in the global dairy price

or currency shocks. The situation is made worse by the lower prices Northern Irish farmers tend to get for their produce.

Despite producing dairy products that are as good as or better than products produced here in Britain—forgive me for being slightly parochial—Northern Irish farmers consistently suffer from lower average prices paid by national processors and retailers. In 2014, the average price for milk in Northern Ireland was 4.42p per litre less than the average price in Britain. In 2015, the price difference was even greater, reaching 5.34p per litre. Farmers are having to sell their milk for less than what it costs to produce. Anyone can see that that is unsustainable.

This is not just a matter for us Northern Ireland MPs or the Northern Ireland Executive in Belfast; regional dairy price inequality should concern every MP and Minister in Northern Ireland and Britain. Although we would say that Northern Ireland is the worst affected, there are many areas of England, Scotland and Wales where farmers are paid less than the cost of production. There is no doubt that that has dire implications for the long-term future of the industry. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee produced a very good report on farm-gate prices and made recommendations that I hope the Government will be able to implement.

Rebecca Pow: Perhaps a leaf might be taken out of the Northern Irish book, because I believe that the dairy companies of Northern Ireland successfully bid for an EU grant to help to promote the export of dairy products. Northern Ireland is obviously very successful at that, which is perhaps a good reason for remaining in Europe.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Lady for making that helpful point. She is on the same page as me in terms of retaining membership of the European Union.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Hear, hear!

Daniel Kawczynski: Shame! Shame!

Ms Ritchie: Perhaps it would help if I moved on.

We must look at solutions. The Government must seek to bring to Britain and Northern Ireland a scheme that the European Investment Bank has already trialled in the south of Ireland. Under the scheme, the bank would allow DEFRA and the devolved Administrations to act as guarantors for loans made to dairy farmers. That added level of security would allow banks to make loans on much more favourable terms. For instance, in Northern Ireland, a bank loan made to a dairy farm typically has a pay-back period of 15 years, which is well below the average in Britain because of the difficulties to which I have referred. The Ulster Farmers Union believes that with the Government acting as a creditor, banks could offer loans with pay-back periods of 30 years, doubling the time farmers typically now have. Will the Minister and his colleagues in the Department give some consideration to that scheme? Will he give us his opinion, or at least go away and have a think about it before coming back to us MPs with a particular interest in the matter?

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady should draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Ritchie: Like the all-party group on dairy, I believe that dairy should be put back on the daily menu. That means encouraging parents, schools and others. I urge the Minister to take heed of this debate.

3.4 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I must correct the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie): the best dairy products are from Shropshire. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) on securing this debate.

When I was first elected as a Member of Parliament in 2005—11 years ago—we set up the all-party group on dairy farmers because at that time Shropshire farmers were on their knees. We heard a lot of anecdotal evidence about the terrible financial difficulties they were suffering. Eleven years on and we are in almost the same place as then—indeed, we are probably even worse off. It is rather frustrating to have repeated debates in Westminster Hall while the situation continues to worsen, so I am really looking forward to the Minister giving us some heart-warming news of specific Government action on this issue.

I am delighted that tomorrow I will be attending the Shropshire business awards 2016 at RAF Cosford to support my friend, Daniel Morris, a cattle farmer, in the farming section. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will wish my constituent every success.

When we set up the all-party group on dairy farmers, more than 200 MPs joined—it was one of the largest all-party groups in the House of Commons. We produced a report, and during the process interviewed a lot of people, even going to Brussels to take evidence. We came up with two recommendations: first, a grocery adjudicator, and secondly, a limited cull of badgers. We took those recommendations to the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, David Miliband, who basically laughed us out of his office saying that both were completely impossible and would never happen. I am extremely pleased that the Government have introduced the Groceries Code Adjudicator but, as has been said already, we want to hear what teeth the adjudicator is going to be given and about the roll-out of limited badger culls.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I represent an area that has had a cull, and the data I have seen are certainly encouraging. Nevertheless, we should not simply lay the blame with the Labour Secretary of State at that time, because later the then Lib Dem Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg), put the brakes on the rolling out of the cull in Dorset. A Conservative Secretary of State took those brakes off.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention.

I want the Minister to remember what I am about to say and to have these figures indelibly imprinted on his mind, in perpetuity. In Shropshire in 1997, we slaughtered 47 cows because of bovine tuberculosis; last year, the figure was more than 2,000. It has gone from 47 a year to 2,000 a year. We have a bovine tuberculosis crisis in Shropshire. I have said this in previous debates and I do

not mind saying it again. I have sat round a kitchen table with one of my dairy farmers, Chris Bulmer from Snailbeach, after his entire herd had been taken away. We sat together crying, such is the emotional drain on farmers and their families.

The biggest organisation in my constituency is the Shropshire Wildlife Trust. What is its symbol? A badger. I know that many people from the trust would like to hang me from the nearest lamp post because I advocate a cull. They would have difficulty because I am so tall.

Neil Parish: Unless they got a higher lamp post.

Daniel Kawczynski: They would need an extra-high lamp post. There has been fury and blood on the carpet at the meetings I have had with the Shropshire Wildlife Trust. It has to understand that nobody wants the needless slaughter of animals, but when our fellow human beings—our fellow citizens—are going through such appalling financial misery, the time has come for the Government to act boldly and roll out the cull to other parts of the country.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor recently announced in his Budget an extremely controversial measure on fizzy drinks. It is not universally popular, but he took a really bold move that is shaking the industry. Something of a similar nature must now take place to protect our dairy farmers. We cannot allow this vital industry to be decimated.

3.9 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I also want to thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for securing this debate, which is important. I want to say a few words about the situation in Cumbria, where local farmers tell me it is the worst they have ever known it to be. We have heard about the price paid for milk not covering the cost of production, but in Cumbria we have the added costs of transportation to the processors. One farmer told me that in the past financial year he made £26,000 from selling his milk. This year he estimates £12,000. That reduction in income is simply unsustainable. I have a friend who has decided to sell his herd because he cannot even make enough money to pay for the renting of the milking machines.

I have been told that at Carlisle market 11,000 dairy cows have been sold since January this year. That has a knock-on effect on the wider rural economy. Feed merchants, fertiliser merchants, machinery sellers and vets all feel the impact of the pressures on our dairy industry. A major issue for the farmers who have contacted me—I am sure nobody here will be surprised—is the fact that they have not yet received their basic payment scheme money, which should have been paid in December. In my area, where many of the farms have been flooded, the situation is desperate. The Rural Payments Agency said it would prioritise farms that had suffered from flooding, but that has simply not happened. One farmer, Susan Tyson, has contacted me. She farms at Underskiddaw near Keswick and she has had nothing, although her application went in last May. She said that every time she asks about it, she is told that

“there is nothing wrong with your claim but we don’t know when you will be paid”.

[Sue Hayman]

How on earth are farmers supposed to manage? They have taken out loans and have paid their tax bills. The situation is simply not acceptable.

Farmers need to know what is happening with their money. How else can they budget, invest and plan for the future of their farms? This is made particularly difficult in an industry where the cost of what is being sold is dictated by the consumer. We have talked about the Groceries Code Adjudicator, and I am really pleased that we have that. I agree with hon. Members who have said that now that that is up for review, we need to make sure that it is strengthened and extended and that the adjudicator has real teeth to be able to help particularly the small farmers who fall out of the system.

Farmers are asking me what else they are supposed to do. Farmers whose families have farmed the land for generations now face the prospect not just of selling their herds, but of selling their land, which is absolutely heart-breaking. I also want to draw Members' attention to the fact that members of the farming industry are three times more likely to take their own lives than people in any other industry. A farmer in my constituency recently collapsed and died at a sale. How much of that was down to stress? He was only in his 40s. The stress that people are under is unacceptable.

I am sure the Minister, who represents Penrith and The Border, is aware of the situations I am talking about in Cumbria, so I urge him to get the Government to work with farmers, processors and supermarkets to find a solution, but we also need advice and support to help farmers cope in these difficult times. Finally, just get the RPA to make the payments.

3.13 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate, Ms Ryan. I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for securing this debate and keeping a spotlight on dairy prices. May I offer him a little solace? I think a previous Minister, David Heath, from his party, was a very good agriculture Minister. I want to put that on the record. We may not have agreed on politics, especially in our younger days on Somerset County Council, but I will not go into that.

Food and farming is a £100 billion industry. One in eight jobs are in food and farming, so it really needs to be taken seriously. Dairy farming is the backbone of most livestock agriculture. It has a knock-on effect on the beef industry because most of the beef industry comes from dairy. When a lot of cull cows come on to the market because of the poor price of milk, the price of beef is depressed as well, so the whole thing has a knock-on effect.

The situation is not simple. We have had a large over-supply of milk throughout the world, but New Zealand has now dropped production by 5%, which must be good news. We can see a knock-on effect across the world of an approximately 2% increase in dairy trade year on year, so if we can start to reduce production and increase the volume, we will get better prices internationally. In the meantime, we must concentrate

on two fronts in particular. One is making sure that this country can get the best market possible for milk. We need to work with the retailers and say to them, "Not only offer a good price on liquid milk, but a good price on processed milk."

Tesco and others are stepping up to the plate. As I have said before, I used to want to be able indiscriminately to shoot a retailer a day and feel much better, but I cannot actually do that because there are some good retailers out there. When supermarkets put in milk as a loss leader for perhaps 89p, we must make sure that they fund that themselves and are not funded by the processor and the farmer. I do not like milk as a loss leader because it downgrades the value of milk. All of us in this room would stand up and say that our produce from our county is the very best in the country—there is no doubt Devon's is the best—but I say to the Minister that we have to get country of origin labelling. We have to make sure that it is not only country of origin but regional labelling so that we can compete with one another on cheese, on yoghurt and on dairy products in total. That is absolutely key to the argument, so let us make sure that Government procures everything that is British as well, and let us make sure that the health service and the schools that provide school milk serve up things that are British. I know the Government have done a lot of work on that, but we need to do even more.

On the single farm payment, let us ensure we do not have the debacle that we have had this past year where we still have 10% of farmers waiting to receive their payments. I welcome the fact that the Rural Payments Agency has, perhaps slightly belatedly, said that the last 10% will get at least 50% of their payment by the end of the month. This is very important. This is money the Government can actually produce and they can make sure that it gets through.

We have to make sure that we get export markets right. China wants more milk powder. China has decided to allow the country to produce more children and that is why there is a big market for baby milk powder. That is key. We have to make sure we have the processors and everything in place to take that up so that we have either Chinese money or European investment money. Let us get this industry moving so that we are able to get the best price for our farmers.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): To accommodate all those who wish to speak, I am now going to reduce the time limit to three minutes per speaker.

3.18 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Gadeirydd. I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for securing this debate. Both he and I know that whether it is llaeth or llefrith, Welsh milk is best.

The efficient method of food production—namely, the conversion of grass into dairy produce—is particularly well suited to the Welsh climate. It would be irresponsible to stand back and do nothing when the industry is in crisis. As has been mentioned already, there are many reasons for the latest drop in milk prices, and we have

mentioned Russia. As an aside, it is worth noting that Russia is subsidising its home dairy producers to the tune of \$400 million as we speak.

We have heard about the role of supermarkets. Today is an opportunity to say that supermarkets should be encouraged—I use the word with emphasis—to ensure that discount retail price strategies are funded from their own profits, rather than dumped on farmers. The fact that the profit motive of retailers is allowed to trump the sustainability of UK farming is in the long-term interests of neither the UK consumer nor the UK economy. The primary ask from farmers is that the Government acknowledge that something is fundamentally wrong in the supply chain, which cannot be remedied without intervention. We cannot go on ignoring that fact and relying on the market to correct itself.

There are codes of practice in the food chain, both statutory and voluntary, that must be either proved effective or reviewed, strengthened and enforced. The statutory grocery supply code of practice applies, at present, only to the biggest retailers. It is overseen, as we know, by the adjudicator. The Government made a commitment in their election manifesto last year to increasing the powers of the adjudicator. I suggest that that might be done by reducing the minimum turnover requirement, making the arrangement applicable to a wider range of retailers. Perhaps that could happen in the two-year review that was mentioned.

Agriculture suffers from the public perception of being hand-out dependent. None the less, many farming families have shown great enterprise in the face of volatile markets by venturing into value-added or branded products. I must in the brief time available to me mention Dylan and Annwen Jones of Bryn Rhydd, Edern—my next-door neighbours, effectively—who, with their Puerto Madryn herd of Holstein-Friesians, have been producing the excellent Glasu ice cream. I am also proud to represent the constituency that is home to South Caernarfonshire Creameries at Rhydygwystl, which has been owned since 1938 by its dairy farmer members. I am proud to say that they are about to launch a new cheese factory unit, although this is a most difficult time to be operating.

I call on the Government to make full use of the potential of public sector and third party procurement opportunities, and to work with devolved Governments to enable and to invest in added-value processing opportunities. Finally, will the Minister make a commitment to press the EU Agriculture Commissioner to move ahead with proposals presently under consideration to allow emergency state aid of up to €15,000 per farmer annually?

3.21 pm

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): Big thanks are due to my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams), for striking the right balance between optimism, pessimism and realism about the industry.

I have only a few points to make. We have heard a lot about the negative effect on the industry and the supply chain, but not much about the negative effect that that causes for the environment, which is equally significant. There was some reference to the state of the steel industry in Wales, and the impact of potential closure on the community around Port Talbot, and further

afield. When I look at the great efforts being made by No. 10, and the huge efforts of the Treasury, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and the Wales Office, to rescue the steel industry, just as much for social and cultural reasons as for economic ones, part of me wants to ask the Minister whether his Department is looking into assessing the potential downside of the dairy industry's problems in the same way as those other Departments are looking at the potential downsides of the closure of the steel industry. Numerically, spread across the UK, the numbers of people in each case may not be as dissimilar as we might think. The impact is no less important just because dairy farmers are dotted around individual communities and farms. I hope that that assessment is being undertaken and, if not, I hope it will be, because there are some significant numbers that we need to address.

There has been some reference to the role of Government in procurement, labelling and education. Just on the matter of education I want to say that it is quite frustrating for dairy farmers when advice comes out of the Department of Health about reducing dairy intake by 50%, without, really, any supporting evidence or context to it. Some cross-departmental co-operation on the messages coming out of Government, with regard to the positive side of eating home-produced dairy products, would be useful and would send a positive message to farmers, who are looking to Government, desperately at times, for a positive lead and an indication that the Government are on their side. Such things, small as they may seem, are significant for the message they send. Also, let us, via the Department for Education, talk about the value that home-grown food provides in the many ways that have been discussed, rather than simply talking about the cost of food. Of course cost is a driving factor, but are the Government doing enough with respect to the value of that high-quality product?

As to labelling, the issue is not about labelling milk. Sometimes it is about labelling other agricultural products that farmers produce. The supermarkets will say that they label things very clearly, and up to a point they do, but the frozen lines are not well labelled at all. On any supermarket website it is almost impossible to discover where frozen lines come from, whether that is in this country or not. A little more work by retailers on frozen lines would be helpful.

Finally, on the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) made, the DEFRA interpretation of farm-gate average prices and the Arla press release give the impression that the Department does not really understand the severity of the situation. Perhaps now is a good time, with a sort of stand-in Minister—if he does not mind my saying so—to put the record straight and remind farmers that DEFRA completely understands the problems they face.

3.25 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Ryan. I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for bringing this extremely important debate to the Chamber.

The dairy sector is vital to the farming and food sectors and the wider rural economy across the UK, including Scotland. It is also an integral part of local

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

communities. My constituency is made up of many rural areas, and farming and dairy industries have been key contributors to our local economy and job markets for many decades. One of the key issues for my constituency at present is the recent announcement by Müller Dairies that it is proposing to close its site in East Kilbride. That is part of a larger plan to consolidate elsewhere. The plans may also affect two of its dairies in the Aberdeen area.

The East Kilbride dairy has been owned by Müller only since 2012, but it has been a local institution for many years. It was previously owned by Robert Wiseman Dairies, which was founded in 1947, and it traces its roots back to Robert Wiseman senior, who started out in East Kilbride with a milk round, delivered from a horse and cart. Wiseman Dairies grew to be one of the major suppliers of milk and dairy products across the UK, until it was bought by Müller a few years ago. The dairy currently employs 131 staff, and the loss of those jobs would be a huge blow to the staff and the wider community. It is considered to be a vital local industry, and is ingrained in the identity of East Kilbride.

At present, a statutory consultation process about the proposals is going on. I am due to meet with representatives of Müller to discuss the proposals, and I will be following developments closely with the parent company, the Scottish Government, and the local East Kilbride taskforce. Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Development International will also be meeting with Müller to explore potential options for supporting all the company's sites in Scotland, and their employees. At a personal level, however, this is an extremely unsettling time for those affected—people in my constituency have been left experiencing a period of uncertainty as they wait to find out the future of their jobs. We must do all we can to offer support and protection for jobs in that vital local industry.

The Scottish Government believe it is important to encourage local production, sourcing and consumption, as that helps to support local businesses and ensure that quality products are available. I reiterate what has been said about the importance of the dairy sector, particularly for my constituency and at this vital time. I ask the Government to do all they can to protect the industry, our economy and our local dairy farmers.

3.28 pm

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for obtaining the debate.

I recently spoke with an 80-year-old dairy farmer, in my North Yorkshire constituency, who told me that in a lifetime of dairy farming he had never seen times as bad. I believe that there are five key steps that need to be taken by Government, industry and consumer to bring some relief to him and others and safeguard the future of dairy farming in the UK. First, we need buyers to give farmers a fair deal. I commend retailer initiatives from Tesco, Sainsbury's and others, which ensure that farmers receive a fair cost-of-production price for their milk, but if the dairy sector is to be sustainable, retailers need to expand that good work on liquid milk to other dairy products, and, indeed, more milk buyers need to

follow the lead of the large retailers. That process should, of course, be overseen by a robust Groceries Code Adjudicator with additional powers to investigate downstream supply chains and indirect suppliers.

Secondly, we must make and buy more British. It might seem that there are few things more British than an honest slice of Cheddar, yet almost half the cheddar consumed in the UK today is imported from overseas. We must invest more in processing technology to ensure we add value to British milk by turning more of it into British butter, yoghurt and cheese, rather than importing. Alongside that, we must have better food labelling so that large retailers and caterers clearly show consumers how much of their dairy products is British.

Thirdly, the industry needs to create more dairy producer organisations. Groups of farmers banding together to negotiate a better sale price for their milk and a lower purchase price for their feed, and to share machinery, are commonplace across Europe. In the UK we currently have only one such producer organisation. In Germany, there are 143. If farmers are to balance out the power of big processors and retailers, that must change.

Fourthly, we need to develop a working futures market. As New Zealand and America show, futures can be a vital tool for providing price stability in a volatile world. It is crucial, therefore, that the Government continue their efforts to ensure that the relevant benchmarking data are available, which will help British dairy futures to become a reality.

Finally, Government at all levels must buy British. I know that the national Government are working hard to purchase British dairy products, but at a regional level we can do more. We must push local government, the military, hospitals and schools to do their part as well.

In conclusion, without its dairy farmers, the lush fields of the Yorkshire dales in my constituency would soon turn to scrub and its dry stone walls would go unrepaired. Only if the Government, farmers and consumers work together will we preserve our dairy industry and, with it, our rural communities and beautiful countryside for generations to come.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): With the co-operation of the Front Benchers, I have time for a couple more speakers. If everyone is to get in, they will have to speak for no more than two minutes. I leave it to their co-operation.

3.31 pm

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The agri-food sector employs about 100,000 people across the whole of the industry, and the dairy sector makes up a lot of that figure. When I speak to farmers, they tell me that there are a number of things that they have no control over. They had no say on the Russian ban, and they had no control over the quotas being done away with or the fluctuations of the euro.

Everyone knew that when the quota system went there would be a free-for-all and production would go up. The production of milk in Northern Ireland has increased by 4% this year, even though prices are falling. On Monday, I spoke to farmers who have been told that they will be paid 16p a litre for milk in May and that it will go down to 15p in June. That is crazy.

We have heard today of the pressure on farmers. Hon. Members have talked about meetings they have had with farmers who have shed tears. I have experienced the same thing. Farmers do not know how they are going to pay their next bill or how they are going to fend for their families. We have also heard about the issues of mental health and stress, about which I have written to DEFRA. Something for the farming community needs to be put into the UK mental health strategy.

The dairy sector is a vital industry, and it needs help. We can talk about retailers and new cheese factories, but that takes time. Something needs to be done now to alleviate the difficulties and problems that the dairy sector faces. In Northern Ireland, there is talk of a voluntary reduction of milk production. Whether that happens is a matter for the farmers and the processors. France and a number of other countries are in favour of a reduction, but the problem is that the tap cannot just be turned on and off in milk production. More help is needed, and we look to the Government to ease the difficulties and problems.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I call Mel Stride—*[Interruption.]* Sorry, I call Simon Hoare.

3.33 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Thank you very much, Ms Ryan—I think. I want to make two brief points in the time available to me. Like my colleague the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), I am a vice-chair of the all-party group on dairy.

I want to pick up on the point that other hon. Members have made, about the Rural Payments Agency. Last week alone, I spoke to five farmers who had collectively spent six and a half hours waiting on the RPA hotline. I was slightly surprised when I tried to talk to somebody—as did my caseworker—only to find that we were left on hold for an average of 37 minutes. There is no direct email or telephone hotline for Members of Parliament to contact the RPA on behalf of their constituents. Most other Government Departments have such facilities. I urge the Minister to use his good offices to press for that.

In March, the all-party dairy group, after a lot of research, launched its report “Putting Dairy Back on the Daily Menu”. It was based on best practice and used a lot of scientific research. It sought to emulate the French example of having three a day for dairy, just as we have five a day for fruit and veg. Many dairy farmers saw it as a lifeline. One can imagine the shock—my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) spoke of this—when Public Health England reduced the intake of dairy from 15% to 8%. That was a kick in the bullocks as far as the dairy industry was concerned.

I invite DEFRA Ministers to stand with the all-party group on dairy and talk to the Prime Minister, the Department of Health and the Department for Education to work out what methodology the recommendations of that rather dodgy Public Health England report were based on. They need to understand the huge damage it will do to the dairy sector and the huge damage and uncertainty it will cause for those in the public sector who buy food, whether in schools, hospitals or elsewhere. We look to DEFRA to stand with us to try to get that crazy recommendation overturned.

3.36 pm

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): My constituency is predominantly rural. Dairy farming is at the heart of Ayrshire, so I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. Ayrshire is home to the famous Ayrshire cattle and has been described as the dairy of Scotland. That claim is now in jeopardy, as the current milk prices are threatening the livelihoods of many farmers across the region.

Earlier this year, I was contacted by a group of local dairy farmers in dire straits, many of whom would never have previously come to an MP with a problem. That group was just a small proportion of the 70% of dairy farmers in Scotland who are non-aligned—in other words, they do not have direct contracts with supermarkets via milk processors, so they have to accept the price that is given to them on the open market.

Milk prices have gone into freefall in the past 12 months. My local farmers report that they now receive a pitiful 14p per litre, while their aligned neighbours typically get about 22p to 25p. A broker collects the milk from both the aligned and non-aligned farmers, which means that the 22p milk sloshes around in the back of the tanker with the milk that has been bought at 14p. That situation sets neighbours against each other, as the milk ends up in the same cartons regardless of the price paid to the farmer.

I welcome the Scottish Parliament’s inquiry into the milk pricing crisis and the work the Scottish Government have undertaken to support the dairy sector. One of the key issues that we in Westminster can address is the Groceries Code Adjudicator, which has been mentioned a number of times. Unless the adjudicator is given a remit to look beyond the relationship between retailers and processors, there is little point in having one.

One of my dairy farmers recently said to me that people need farmers at least three times a day, yet the industry is being decimated. We cannot sit back and allow that to happen.

3.38 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Thank you for the chance to speak, albeit briefly, Ms Ryan. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for securing the debate. The dairy industry is extremely important in my constituency, which contains many dairy farmers and associated businesses, such as Graham’s the Family Dairy and Asher’s Ice Cream. In the limited time I have, I will concentrate on just a couple of the things that I was going to say.

As hon. Members have said, dairy is a healthy product. We should encourage further consumption of it to help to address some of the underlying problems in the industry. I share the concerns about some of the messages coming from the Government, and I hope the Minister will comment on those concerns and put them at rest.

After the election last year, I visited Graham’s the Family Dairy in Bridge of Allan in my constituency and had a tour of the factory with the managing director, Robert Graham. Graham’s has operated for more than 70 years in my constituency, and it produces a wide range of excellent products. It employs 500 staff and is supplied by 90 dairy farmers across Scotland, many of which are in Stirling. Its products are excellent sellers.

[Steven Paterson]

Last month, Graham's signed a partnership deal with the food supplier Brakes, which represents a significant boost to the industry locally. That is good news, but there is a lot still to do, because the industry is in a perilous state.

Last year, the Scottish Government launched a dairy action plan to offer immediate support because of the problems facing the sector. One of the recommendations was to develop a strong Scottish dairy brand at home and abroad, and to get more Scottish dairy products on retail shelves, in food service and in export markets. Additional funding was given to the Dairy Growth Board to develop a Scottish dairy brand, which was released at the royal highland show last year. Ongoing efforts involve engaging with retailers to encourage the stocking of local Scottish dairy produce, in order to develop a viable Scottish supply base for the future, which will create a more resilient and sustainable dairy industry. Other initiatives have seen the Scottish Government promote the use of Scottish dairy produce in the public sector, for example through work with local authorities to get Scottish cheese, butter, yogurt and other dairy products into schools.

3.40 pm

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): This has been an excellent debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) on securing it.

We may have had many debates on this subject, but this one has highlighted the fact that we need time in which to discuss it. What came across to me right from the offset was the desire to resolve the situation. Our farmers get a bit of a bad name sometimes—they have a tough job, with many factors ranged against them, which means that they are sometimes seen as being somewhat negative and complaining. Actually, as one farmer said to me, "To still be in farming, you're an optimist, because you're still keeping at it."

The hon. Gentleman made an excellent starting contribution, which set out the challenges and, critically, put forward proactive and constructive suggestions. As he said, the issue is a complex local and global one, with many factors in play. Fundamentally, the drop in the price received has outweighed the savings from efficiencies in production. He made an excellent point about that.

We are lucky to have my neighbouring MP from across the border, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), responding to the debate, because I am sure that he will talk about concrete steps and not platitudes. He is known for getting his wellies on and getting engaged, and I am sure that he will demonstrate that again today. We need to consider many issues—the Groceries Code Adjudicator was mentioned regularly in the debate, as was the voluntary code of practice, which I will return to—but let us keep it positive and proactive. The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) nearly started off a different kind of milk war with her boastful contribution, but such is the nature of politics—it was understandable.

The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) made some excellent points. I congratulate his all-party group on its work, in particular on the GCA, and it presented a strong case on the badger cull. For reasons of time I cannot go through everyone's contributions, so I apologise to the many other Members who added to the debate. It has been of great benefit to have present the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish). He summarised the key points about the market for milk, the important distinctions between fresh and processed milk, how critical labelling is and the role that Government procurement has to play.

It is fair to say that the dairy industry throughout the UK is in crisis, and that is particularly true in Scotland, as we have heard. The downturn in milk prices has led to a fall in returns of some 50% for many Scottish dairy businesses. My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) wanted to be present today, but is in the main Chamber. His concerns for his constituency, and the figures involved, are worth reviewing. Only three years ago, the farmers whom he represents were receiving 32.5p per litre; now, they obtain a farm-gate price of just 15.8p per litre, even though the milk is costing them 26p per litre to produce.

We cannot leave the milk pricing issue simply to market forces. There is a pressing need for action and more imaginative solutions. Collaboration involving Government and the entire supply chain is needed, with urgent action across a range of areas. In the short term, it is critical that banks are involved in the planning process and are prepared to extend credit to dairy farmers. That makes business sense, because global experts believe that the long-term outlook for the sector is promising. We need to maintain a viable UK industry through the lean times, and to do that we need collaboration and innovation now.

Above all, we need to deal urgently with the fact that we have a broken supply chain, with fundamental imbalances exacerbated by short-term opportunism. The chain needs to be fair, workable and responsible. Unless we have that, milk producers and others will continue to get a raw deal and will not have the confidence to invest.

For a start, we need the dairy voluntary code of practice to be refreshed. NFU Scotland says that that is potentially the key to the viability of the sector, and I agree. The code is designed to set out minimum good practice, and as long as it is respected and there is a commitment to it, it could be effective. So far, however, it has not developed enough momentum. The NFUS has warned that to date, and despite Government support, vested interests have undermined the uptake of the code of practice, and that the code is not being allowed to deliver the benefits that it could provide. I know that the Farming Minister is committed to strengthening the code in relation to the milk sector, and I welcome that, but it must include the whole supply chain. If for any reason we cannot make progress with a voluntary code, we need to look again at the option of compulsory contracts.

Another way to assist the dairy industry—this ties in closely with the voluntary code—would be to strengthen the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. Some Members have already made specific recommendations, but I will

summarise the three main possibilities: allowing her to initiate her investigations rather than waiting until a complaint has been received; taking in smaller retailers and indirect suppliers; and reporting on the balance of pricing across the whole supply chain. Another useful step forward, as we have heard, would be to encourage retailers to use labelling to identify the origin of the product, giving consumers the power to buy local and from the home nations.

We cannot allow the retail giants and others to keep on milking our dairy sector. Firm action is needed and firm action must come—we owe that to our farmers, our consumers and our national self-sufficiency. Without wasting another moment, let us give our dairy sector the help and support that it deserves.

3.47 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for introducing the debate and the many colleagues who have intervened and made contributions this afternoon. Time is short, so I cannot mention everyone, but the hon. Gentleman certainly gave a great *cri de coeur* for dairy farmers throughout the country, as well as for the steel industry in Wales—I thank him for that.

With the global market in flux and farm-gate prices on the floor, the UK dairy industry is in danger. Some farmers are being paid less than the cost of producing the milk, which is unsustainable. Only last month, thousands of proud farmers felt that they had no other choice but to march on Whitehall and ask for change and for support. The Government must listen to that call. Bodies such as Dairy UK are saying there are no quick fixes, although the Government recognise that a package of support is needed to help save the industry from collapse. However, despite promising much in the face of pressure from the industry, there is still no sign of respite.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee report listed many recommendations that I hope the Government will make good on. It talked about a futures market for dairy. Will the Minister make it clear when such a market will be established properly?

The British public have consistently proven that they back a “buy British” principle, but dairy in the UK still lacks country of origin labelling. The Farming Minister has been unable to get the EU to bring that forward, despite the EU approving similar branding on a vast swathe of other products. Meanwhile, he has written to supermarkets to encourage them to display the British flag on British dairy products. That code, however, is voluntary.

On exports, sector leaders such as Dairy UK have called for the development of new markets where we can showcase the quality of British products. It looks as if there may be good news on red meat and the USA this week, but will the Minister detail the results of talks with other countries about their importing our dairy products? All such suggestions are long-term goals, and that is understood, but where is the progress on those key issues?

The NFU and farmers have joined Labour in calling for the Groceries Code Adjudicator’s powers to be toughened up. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has published a report calling on the Government to consider extending the GCA’s remit.

The Committee wants it to incorporate both direct and indirect suppliers. Will the Minister confirm that those concerns will be taken into account when the GCA is reviewed later this year?

Jonathan Edwards: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, in Wales many of the powers relating to Government intervention are devolved and, to date, the Welsh Government have decided to pursue a voluntary code of practice in this sector. Does he agree that it is about time that the Welsh Government began to look at statutory intervention, and not just leave it on a voluntary basis?

Nick Smith: That may be helpful and I certainly think it is worth looking at.

The problem of delayed payments has come up too, with the high-profile failure of the Rural Payments Agency system this year. That money is a vital lifeline, given the struggles in the dairy marketplace, yet a Public Accounts Committee report revealed a payments fiasco. The Government must accept their part in a failing IT project that may have landed us with a £180 million annual fine from the EU. Money that could have gone to British agriculture will now be thrown away. The NFU says that that the RPA should be making 90% of payments by the end of December each year. Will the Minister give assurances that that target will be met in future years?

Finally, I welcome the deep analysis done by the NFU on the implications of a UK exit from the EU. The analysis showed that every Brexit scenario resulted in a large drop in income for farmers. Will the Minister join me in recognising that for dairy farmers, staying in the EU is vital for the trade and support that it provides to the industry?

Simon Hoare: The situation is worse than the hon. Gentleman seems to suggest. Right hon. colleagues on my side of the House—although not on my side of the European debate—told us last week that all the money we spend on the EU would be spent on the national health service. My reading of that was that that equals no subsidy and no support to agriculture anywhere in the United Kingdom.

Nick Smith: I need to move on to allow the Minister to come back on the problems and issues that colleagues around the Chamber have raised.

The UK Government have recently failed to support an important EU funding stream for our dairy industries, so I would like the Minister’s response on that issue.

In conclusion, the Government must make good their promises on a futures market for dairy and country-of-origin labelling, give a proper boost for British dairy exports and put the RPA on track. They must speak with one voice about the value of the single market and the value of EU funding for British dairy farmers.

3.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): Unfortunately, I have been asked for answers to 31 separate requests—I have written them down—and I have been allowed only seven minutes to respond, but I will do my very best.

[Rory Stewart]

Fundamentally, dairy matters deeply to the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams), to whom I pay tribute for securing this debate, made a very powerful case for the importance of the dairy industry to communities. The hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) made a powerful case for the nutritional importance of dairy. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) made a deep and complex argument about the importance of dairy for our history and heritage. My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) pointed to the economic importance of dairy and, of course, the chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), made a strong argument for the importance of dairy for the farming industry in general.

The situation is genuinely terrible. Over the last decade, we have gone from having 13,500 dairy farms to having 9,500. We have seen that very directly in Cumbria, as the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) expressed so eloquently. In my constituency, from very large herds—thousand-cow herds in places such as Longtown, producing 10,000 litres per cow per year—right the way down to the herds of 50 or 60 cows in the Bailey valley, we now see them being sold in the marts and we see real pressure and psychological strain. As the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) pointed out, the regional factors are really important in places such as Cumbria and Northern Ireland, where access to the liquid milk markets in places such as London is much more difficult. Our prices are considerably lower.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) made a powerful argument about the global context in which the dairy industry operates, and the Labour shadow spokesman, the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), also made a very good statement about the context. Of course, global demand has dropped—Chinese demand alone has dropped by 23%. China matters: 30% of the global export market is China and Russia. At the same time, our production is going up. There is a real problem. Production was up last year globally by 6% and UK production was up by 2.7%. This is not just a UK problem. In New Zealand, the prices per litre for their milk are now down to 12p per litre. New Zealand production is falling, as we heard from the chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton.

We believe that things can be done. Despite the serious issues raised by both the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) about capital structures and the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) about price, we think there is a great future. In China, the average person consumes about 30 kg of milk products a year. In Britain, the average per person is about 250 kg a year. There is huge upward potential in terms of such markets, which Britain can exploit, provided the United Kingdom can get from the short-term problems to the long term. That will be a real challenge.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) made points about the health of our herds. It is why we are taking the steps that we are, not just in bovine TB but in Johne's disease,

and there is all the investment we are putting into animal health. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton made points about supermarkets. Indeed, I join him in paying tribute to the steps that supermarkets such as Tesco have taken, particularly in moving towards British yoghurt.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) pointed to the serious problems on processing. We are looking at that seriously with European Union partners to see whether strategic investments could be made in processing in order to ensure that liquid milk, particularly from more remote parts of the United Kingdom, can be processed in the right place. The hon. Member for South Down raised some of the problems with the banking system. We are addressing that issue directly through conversations with the banks.

There are other steps—about 14 of them—that the Department is taking that were not addressed so much in this debate. It is important to bear in mind that underlying the dairy industry is considerable Government investment. On average, about £20,000 per farm comes from the Government. We have provided emergency support of £26.3 million for the current dairy crisis.

Cutting red tape is something that has not been discussed today. We estimate that by the end of this Parliament, we will have saved farmers in general £450 million by moving to single-farm inspections. We have invested £160 million in agri-science. That is absolutely essential for everybody talking about innovation. We are looking at inward investment and had the Chinese company, Yili, here.

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent raised the issue of exports. The Secretary of State is currently in the United States, driving British food exports, and we are also driving them into Chinese markets. We are focusing a great deal on specialist producers. I would like to pay tribute, for example, to the movement in Swaledale towards yoghurt production.

That brings me to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) on the advances that we ought to be able to make in markets, hedging and futures markets. We have a specialist working on that in DEFRA with very considerable experience in the financial industry. It is a very complex industry, but we believe that it is something we ought to be able to make progress on.

On producer organisations, which were raised by the hon. Member for Ceredigion and by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks), we have created the seed funding to launch producer organisations. We have created the legislative framework for those producer organisations.

On procurement, which the hon. the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) raised, £60,000 of British Government money is being put into our schools to provide milk for our children. That is Department of Health money, proving that that Department recognises that milk is nutritionally beneficial to our children. The Justice Secretary has committed to milk coming into our prisons.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and the hon. Member for Workington rightly raised issues about the Rural Payments Agency. I am therefore delighted to be able to announce that we will

make part-payments to every farmer by the end of April: that means at least 50% of their payments by the end of this month to address this issue.

Finally, my hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) raised the question of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. Again, I am delighted to announce on behalf of the Department that we are doing a full review of the powers and behaviour of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. That is being done by civil servants at the moment, and we will report back on progress and looking specifically at issues such as whether the adjudicator can address the processing industry.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ceredigion for securing this debate and for the extraordinary quality of the argument, interest and commitment in this Chamber. The issue is unbelievably difficult and heart-breaking for farmers. Dairy farmers are at the core of our culture, history, identity, nutrition and heritage. The 17 measures that I have set out are contributions towards that, but ultimately we must get from a short-term crisis to a long-term future in which global demand for milk is rising and Britain is ideally placed to meet it.

4 pm

Mr Mark Williams: I am grateful for the opportunity to thank all hon. Members, including those on the Front Benches, for their contributions. I am not sorry we asked the Minister 31 questions. I know that if he was unable to answer any as fully as he wanted, he will write to us. I thank him for his contribution and those of the Front-Bench spokesmen. Many points of note were made, some following from my speech, and many new ones.

The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) spoke about Northern Ireland and the proactive way in which moneys are being released to support investment. That is important. Mention was made of TB eradication. The hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) may find that history regards various aspects of coalition life and policy rather differently from him. We will see what happens in the fullness of time. Certainly in Wales, there has been consistency in three of the four parties about what we need to do to eradicate TB. I am particularly pleased that Ceredigion, with Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire, recently voted for a selective badger cull. That was the first issue raised at a meeting I had on a farm last week. It needs to be addressed.

Finally, I did not raise this, but I am pleased that my constituency has been labelled the most Europhile part of the United Kingdom. I am proud of that—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members knocked me off my perch. A strong reason is the importance of the farming industry, which is a major employer in my constituency. Farmers are fully aware of the necessity of continued EU membership. On that controversial note, I thank all hon. Members for taking part in this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the UK dairy sector.

4.2 pm

Sitting suspended.

Small Weapons Trade

[ANDREW ROSINDELL *in the Chair*]

4.3 pm

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policy on the trade in small weapons.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I want to say at the outset that I have an interest in this topic. I am a Quaker attender, a member of Amnesty International and I have observed and documented peaceful protestors at the London arms fair at the ExCel centre.

I have called for this debate because some constituents who came to my surgery were concerned about the UK's role in the small weapons trade. The weapons may be small, but I am sure the Minister will agree that the problem is not small. According to a Government briefing, there is one small weapon for every 10 human beings on the planet. We know from other work by non-governmental and Government organisations that between 60% and 90% of conflict deaths are caused by so-called small weapons. That means about 300,000 fatalities and about 900,000 injuries every year. As we know, in conflict situations, most deaths and injuries in this century have involved civilians. The problem is not small.

I have come across injuries from small weapons in my work as a doctor abroad. I have come across near-fatal injuries from rubber bullets and I have come across fatalities from live ammunition and dum-dum bullets. But I was most concerned about trade in small weapons when I was working in a peaceful setting in an African village with no electricity outside the hospital and no running water. There was an emergency one night—a young man had a gunshot wound—but we had no idea where the gun or ammunition came from.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that our country is at the forefront in the control of trade in all weapons and was one of the first to sign the UN arms trade treaty in 2013?

Dr Mathias: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. I believe we are leading when it comes to trade in larger weapons, but we are doing very poorly when it comes to small weapons. I will give examples.

The young man in Africa nearly died from his gunshot wound. We need to be responsible because, when there are small weapons in the community, it is very rare for them to be dismantled or to disappear. You may live in a mud hut with no furniture or belongings of note but, if anyone has a small weapon, it remains in that community for generations. We must be more responsible about this and, as a major trader in small weapons, we must take the lead.

Strong defence means transparency and regulation. Historically, we have not done well. I am sure the Minister is aware of some UK traders in small weapons. One transferred about 40,000 AK47s, 30,000 other assault rifles and 32 million rounds of ammunition to Nigeria—

[Dr Mathias]

what one commentator said was enough for a small army. That UK trader was under investigation for three years before that licence was removed.

Another UK trader had a conviction in the 1990s for trading in pump-action weapons. They were found guilty in 2009 of selling arms to Iraq. Another UK trader, who we believe supplied the man who was responsible for the Hungerford massacre in the 1980s, was found guilty of trading with North Korea in 2012.

Jack Lopresti: On a point of clarification, are the people my hon. Friend cited as UK or British traders British nationals or do they just trade from the UK? There is a huge difference.

Dr Mathias: I regret to say that they are UK citizens. One was extradited to the US. I believe the others are from the UK. The first one I mentioned was selling arms to our police and our Ministry of Defence. My hon. Friend may know that, when Sir John Stanley was Chair of the Committees on Arms Exports Controls, he went to Ukraine and was given a list of UK traders. Many of those were known to our Export Control Organisation, but it did not know that several of them were transferring arms from Ukraine to Libya, Rwanda and Sri Lanka. Therefore, historically—these are recent enough cases—our policy on the trade in small weapons has not been good enough. I hope that the Minister can reassure me that things have changed dramatically, but I am not aware of evidence of that.

I am asking for a pre-licence register whereby there are criminal record checks so that we do not have a case like that of the person who had a record in the 1990s and was found guilty in the next century of illegal trade, and whereby we check for financial illegalities. My suspicion—again, I would like the Minister to reassure me—is that there is more vetting of a man who would like to volunteer as a scout leader than there is of a man who is going to trade in weapons that end up in the hands of a child soldier in Nigeria.

I am asking that the UK lead on the marking of small weapons—by that, I mean conform to the 2005 UN instrument. I had it from a Department for Business, Innovation and Skills Minister that we were or are aiming to go along with those measures, but the instrument is more than 10 years old now. I want these weapons to have the marking of the dealer, the importer, the exporter and the carrier.

I would like there to be better sharing of information. I would like the Minister to assure me that there is intra-governmental sharing of information so that we do not have a repeat of those cases in which people were under investigation but still dealing with other Departments. I would also like reassurance that there is a transfer of information between Governments.

I commend the UK for doing well when it comes to large weapons. I believe that if, for instance, there is trade in a combat aircraft such as a Typhoon, a Minister will be a co-signatory on the contract. That shows a high level of responsibility. I am asking for that level of responsibility for small weapons, which as we know are contributing to most of the injuries and fatalities in conflict situations.

The Government did issue a call for evidence last July on a pre-licensing register of arms brokers. What is disappointing is that only 78 people were consulted and most of those were arms traders; I do not believe any of the consultees were victims. One of the problems cited in the consultation was cost, but I would say that, if most UK traders are dealing with tens of thousands of AK-47s or millions of rounds of ammunition, cost should not be a bar to a good register, vetting and good marking of these weapons. We should be responsible and we should be leading on this.

In summary, I would like the Minister to tell me about a register, a vetting for the register, a regular vetting and transparent marking that leads the way internationally. We need to know how many and what type of weapons are being traded, not just give someone a licence and *carte blanche* to trade. With this strong defence, we can lead. We can take a lead from the scouts on leadership and responsibility. I believe that the Minister can do what is done for the larger weapons and transfer that level of responsibility to small weapons.

4.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) on securing the debate and particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) for making insightful interventions, given his history and expertise in this matter.

With your permission, Mr Rosindell, I will interpret the subject of the debate widely and will refer to small arms and light weaponry—rather than small weapons—a term that is more established in the trade and in Government policy, as a way of encompassing the totality of what is happening. I will also try to draw a distinction between traders and brokers, because I think there is a bit of a misunderstanding. A broker is someone who arranges a deal, perhaps through a third country, and the goods more traditionally come through the individual trader.

The effective control of small arms and light weaponry is a goal that clearly unites us all, because, as we have heard, the potential consequences of their misuse are so grave. I see that across my portfolio and particularly on the African continent. When states fail to control the supply and sale of these weapons, they not only jeopardise the safety and security of innocent people worldwide—including a disproportionate number of women and children—but fuel instability more generally and threaten international peace and security.

The debate has focused on national arms trade and controls, so I would like to deal with that up front. The UK Government operate one of the most rigorous and transparent arms export control systems in the world. My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke indicated that. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham talked of Sir John Stanley, whom I served with in two Parliaments. For the last five years, he was the Chair of the Committees on Arms Exports Controls, on which I briefly served as a member of the Select Committee on International Development, which contributes to that work. Sir John Stanley has previously acknowledged that the UK operates

“one of the most transparent export licensing systems in the world”.

So we really are at the cutting edge of what is being done. That is not to say that we should not do more, but I do not want the House to be left in any doubt as to whether we are a laggard on these issues; we are right at the forefront. However, I will deal with the points that my hon. Friend raises. Just because we are right at the forefront and doing the right thing globally does not mean that we cannot and should not do, and aspire to do, more.

It is right that the Government facilitate responsible exports by British companies, and support them in winning such contracts. In many cases, the export of arms is of benefit. It brings security and stability. It is in the interest of the importing country and it is in the British national interest.

Jack Lopresti: Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that it is vital that we protect our sovereign defence capability, not only for jobs and exports but for our very protection, our expertise and our ability as a sovereign country to conduct our own operations with our own kit?

James Duddridge: Absolutely, and I defer to my hon. Friend, with his military expertise. It is important to maintain that capability overall, in terms of critical mass. Also—I travel from country to country with conflict areas—there are issues of interoperability between weapons, particularly large weapons as opposed to small arms. Having a production facility with similar arms and munitions is very helpful in theatre, as well as in building critical mass to maintain the British Army.

All export and trade licence applications are fully assessed, very carefully, on a case-by-case basis, in line with international legislation but also domestic—national—arms licensing criteria. That takes into account all the factors at the time of application, including the prevailing circumstances in the recipient countries, the nature of the goods that are being sent, the nature of the end-user and, in addition, the stated end-use. The Government follow a clear procedure for each application. That is informed by expert advice from a number of Departments. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham asked about the degree of co-ordination. I think that some of her interactions have been with BIS. The Foreign Office takes the lead on a lot of these matters, but the Home Office and a number of other Departments are also involved. A licence will not be issued in any way, shape or form if it would be inconsistent with the provisions of our export regime in its totality.

If there is a clear risk that the goods may be used for internal repression or external aggression, a licence is always denied. The UK has one of the world's most effective enforcement regimes for arms exports. Enforcement of the UK's arms export controls is led by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which works jointly with Border Force to detect and prevent unlicensed arms exports. HMRC and Border Force work closely with other Government Departments and with other intelligence agencies across the world to ensure that arms are not exported through the UK in breach of the UK's licensing controls.

Additionally, HMRC works with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to engage with legitimate arms exporters and to help them to comply with the law, but we are vigorous in actively pursuing those who

either deliberately or carelessly circumvent legislation. We remain committed to transparent exchange control systems, as demonstrated by the publication of export licensing decisions and details of export controls policy in the UK annual report on strategic export controls, as well as in the European Union annual report on arms exports.

The Government recognise and respect the public interest in export licensing decisions, and therefore we took the decision to publish quarterly statistics on all export and trade licences issued, refused or revoked. I understand that my hon. Friend would like us to publish more information. That has a cost. If we were to do that in looking at the overall picture of reducing the number of atrocities, we would focus too much on already law-abiding providers supplying more detail. There is a much bigger picture in respect of the supply of small arms and light weaponry. If someone is looking to source weaponry for nefarious purposes, there are many places across the world where they would look before looking to the United Kingdom, both in terms of laxer export controls and in terms of price and quality—such countries offer lower quality but, all importantly, lower price.

In parallel to our work on our own system, it is important that we ask others to step up and meet the same exacting standards to which Sir John Stanley referred when he said that we operate

“one of the most transparent export licensing systems in the world”.

If I were able to do one thing on this issue, it would be to get others to do as well as we are, not to improve an already excellent, but not perfect, system in the UK.

Among other things, in terms of data, we are committed to a reporting timescale and the provision of data analysis. The Government are a world leader on transparency, and we are fully compliant with European Union and other international requirements.

The brokering of arms sales continues to be controlled on a rigorous case-by-case basis through the licensing assessment process. The idea of creating a pre-licensing register of arms brokers was explored by BIS, and my hon. Friend's predecessor as the MP for Twickenham, in a call to evidence in 2014. I have reviewed BIS's correspondence. I am sure that my hon. Friend has tales of campaigning against Liberal Democrats in Twickenham. In my 10 years in the House, and during the coalition, there were occasions when—I say this gently—the Liberal Democrats over-promised and under-delivered. If that had been a priority, and if it had been the right thing to do, it could have been pushed forward at the time, but in letters to constituents her predecessor promised a lot but did not deliver. The consultation showed that, actually, delivering that was the wrong thing to do. In a sense, it would have layered in extra bureaucracy without addressing the fundamental problem.

In the last 10 years, the UK has successfully prosecuted eight UK nationals for arms trafficking and brokering outside the UK. Customs investigators work jointly with law enforcement officials across the world to gather the necessary evidence to enable such prosecutions. Additionally, we continue to work with international partners to prevent and disrupt arms transfers before they occur, including through the sharing of intelligence. The global control of arms requires an overall global

[James Duddridge]

commitment to marking, record keeping and tracing weapons. Without the proper management of stockpiles, weapons may end up in the wrong hands, fuelling crime, terrorism and conflict, so we need everyone to up their game.

The UK has signed and supports various politically binding agreements, including the international tracing instruments, which promote effective national controls over the full life-cycle of small arms and light weapons. We encourage and support states to improve their stockpile security, including by funding projects through, for example, the counter-proliferation programme fund, which is FCO-led but delivered across Departments, in priority countries such as Libya. We look at how we can prevent arms from disappearing out of that country, as has happened previously.

In conclusion, the Government support the responsible trade in defence equipment but always apply rigorous and accountable national export control systems. The Government have one of the most rigorous and transparent export control systems in the world. I welcome the continued high level of scrutiny—including debates such as this one—which remains central to our goal of achieving global security through responsible exports.

4.26 pm

Dr Mathias: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for his response and concur with him that the situation is not perfect. I am glad that work is being done with other Departments. I am not satisfied that the cost and bureaucracy are problems for a register or for vetting. I maintain that the charity sector bears the cost of bureaucracy and more checks and controls. I am not convinced that Sir John Stanley's concerns have yet been addressed, but I am glad that the Minister considers things on a case-by-case basis. I hope that if I bring individual cases to him he will be open to reviewing the ongoing situation, because I know that he shares my concerns.

Question put and agreed to.

4.27 pm

Sitting suspended.

Western Sahara: Self-determination

4.30 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Western Sahara and self-determination.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. The principle of self-determination is close to my heart, but this debate is about an international situation that has been the subject of interest for all parties of the House. That is reflected by the creation of an all-party group of which I am a member. The debate could equally have been titled “Western Sahara: Self-determination and human rights abuse”, as the two issues are intertwined. The debate is timely given that even today, al-Jazeera quoted from a report by Ban Ki-moon warning of potential

“significant implications for the stability of the region as well as the credibility of the Security Council and United Nations peacekeeping worldwide.”

I will return to those themes as my speech develops.

The region of Western Sahara was ruled by Spain for approximately 100 years. Following its own independence in 1957, Morocco disputed the legitimacy of that colonial rule. Towards the end of Franco's reign it took advantage of the accepted need for decolonisation by European states in Africa. Consequently, an occupation by some 350,000 Moroccans in 1975 led to Spain transferring administrative control to Morocco and Mauritania. Mauritania dropped its claim of sovereignty in 1979, but to this day Morocco continues to forcibly exert its perceived sovereignty across the nation of Western Sahara.

Morocco has ignored the fact that an indigenous Sahrawi independence movement was formed in 1973. That organisation, the Polisario Front, then fought a guerrilla war from 1975 to 1991, when there was a United Nations-brokered ceasefire. A Polisario Government-in-exile in Algeria was set up in 1976. It is important to note that part of the ceasefire deal included the holding of a referendum on self-determination within six months. Here we are a quarter of a century later, and there has still been no referendum, even though a UN voter list was created in 1999. That obviously led nowhere. The situation has led to Western Sahara being dubbed Africa's last colony, given that it is the only territory recognised by the UN as never having been decolonised. It is an unenviable title with serious ramifications.

There are still 165,000 refugees from the period of conflict living in the Algerian desert and dependent on international aid. Given that those refugees never make the headlines, it should be no surprise that the aid can be classed as inadequate. There is conflict around the world just now, and we know the scale of the Syrian refugee crisis, so it is easy to become immune to a figure of 165,000, but that is still a huge number of people who are suffering. Given that Western Sahara has a reported population of about 550,000, including Moroccan settlers, we can see the scale of the indigenous population who are classed as refugees.

As often happens before debates, I received briefing notes relevant to the subject of this debate. I have also received official communication from the ambassador at the Moroccan embassy in London. I was pleased to receive it, as counter-arguments are always welcome.

I have a mantra when dealing with cases and issues that the truth is usually somewhere in the middle of the two parties' viewpoints. However, I do not think that is the case with the self-determination of Western Sahara.

Morocco claims to have been colonised in different eras by Spain and France. I therefore find it incomprehensible that Morocco cannot learn from its history that the people's will should not be subverted. It seems that Morocco cannot see the irony of imposing a ruling force to maintain order, as it sees it, and using settlers to complete a colonisation process. Using an army to maintain control and objecting to Ban Ki-moon using the term "occupation" smacks of an inability to look inward.

Morocco also ignores the fact that, before it took control in November 1975, the International Court of Justice ruled that there were no ties of territorial sovereignty between Morocco and Western Sahara and, further, that the Sahrawi people have a legal right to a process of self-determination. The fact that a referendum has still not been held since the ceasefire deal in 1991 suggests both an unwillingness to move forward and Moroccan concern about the likely outcome of such a poll.

Morocco seems to believe that the African Union's recognition of Western Sahara belies another agenda, which does not seem credible to me. Since 1991 there has been a UN peacekeeping force in place under the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, or MINURSO. Unlike any other modern UN peacekeeping force, it does not have a human rights mandate. That is completely unacceptable. Given that there is another vote on 28 April on renewing the peacekeeping force, will the Minister advise us of what representations the Government are making at the UN to incorporate a human rights mandate for the force?

Furthermore, as one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—a status deemed so critical to the UK's role in the world that it featured in the Scottish referendum campaign—what is the UK doing to bring about a fair referendum some 25 years down the road? What discussions have the Government had with Morocco on this issue, and what is the UK view on the sovereignty of Western Sahara?

From a security perspective, the situation is becoming critical. On 26 March, Oxfam stated that there is now a "threat to regional stability". Does the Minister share concerns about possible threats in the Maghreb region from extremist, terrorist and criminal factions? The Western Sahara Action Forum reports the presence of Daesh sleeper cells and attacks. Does that accord with UK intelligence on the region?

We all know the spiral of descent caused by the unrest manipulated by terrorists, which leads to further human rights abuses and so, of course, to further unrest. It is imperative that the UN gets to grips with that. As recently as March, 84 civilian and three military MINURSO personnel were expelled. Their presence in Western Sahara is critical, and given the suggested mandate for human rights, it seems to me that Morocco is giving the proverbial two fingers to the UN and directly challenging the Security Council's authority. What is the UK view on that?

I keep referring to human rights. On top of the denial of the fundamental right of self-determination, the situation in Western Sahara goes much deeper. In 2012, the UN special rapporteur found that

"torture and ill-treatment were used to extract confessions and that protesters were subjected to excessive use of force".

We know that the monthly peaceful protests are regularly broken up, and on one occasion in 2014 that was witnessed by a parliamentary delegation from the UK. One year on, in 2015, Human Rights Watch noted Morocco's

"growing intolerance for independent human rights organizations and other critical voices".

In June 2015, two Amnesty International workers were banned, which tells a story.

The US State Department states that there have been an estimated 50 to 70 deaths in detention, and no Moroccan investigations into alleged abuses. I suggest to Morocco that if it is serious about a solution, it needs to recognise allegations of abuse, violence and torture and start some investigations. Other testimonies confirm sexual violence and rape, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights are non-existent. Morocco's autonomy proposal for Western Sahara proposes self-determination "whilst remaining respectful" of Morocco's "sovereignty and territorial integrity". I think that we can see that for what it is.

A cynical assessment of the Moroccan offer is justified when we consider the offer within the context of Morocco's celebrations to mark 40 years of its presence in Western Sahara and King Mohammed VI's comment:

"Those who are waiting for any other concessions on Morocco's part are deceiving themselves. Indeed, Morocco has given all there was to give."

I would like the Minister to confirm the UK view of the Moroccan proposals that have been put forward.

Western Sahara could be a successful independent nation. It has natural resources, including vegetables, fish and minerals. However, Morocco again subverts the will of the indigenous people by using the classic colonial trick of negotiating trade deals itself and ensuring that jobs, particularly in the mines, go to settlers. Again, I remind Morocco to learn from history, because further resentment is the only outcome of such a policy.

It could be that Morocco feels vindicated in adopting such an approach given the attitude of the international community. The EU has negotiated a fishing deal for Spanish fishermen and the UK has made its own trade deals, although the Western Sahara Action Forum reports that those deals are subject to a case at the European Court of Justice. I would like the Minister to give more information on that issue, because, as I say, the international community's actions give validity to Morocco's attitude towards Western Sahara.

The way that Morocco is acting is contrary to international law, given that the UN General Assembly recognises the Polisario as "the representative of the people of Western Sahara". Does the Minister agree with that view and, if so, what are the UK Government doing to engage with the Polisario? Does he agree that no international agreements should be made with Morocco about minerals and oil or gas extraction until these issues are resolved? Does he agree that it is time the

[Alan Brown]

Sahrawi were given their referendum, and will he pledge that the UK will do more diplomatically within the UN to allow the self-determination of Western Sahara?

It really is time that we remove the stain of the last colony in Africa, and there should be a recognised, independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.

4.42 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell.

In recent years, the UK has spent a great deal of its time and effort, and one could say a great deal of its blood and treasure, focusing on the MENA—the middle east and north Africa. However, I have to agree with the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who secured the debate, that we have failed in relation to Western Sahara. We have failed to recognise the human rights abuses there, and we have failed to lend our voice to those calling for the legitimate rights of the indigenous people of the region to be recognised and endorsed.

As the hon. Gentleman said, Western Sahara is in essence Africa's last colony. The Kingdom of Morocco has maintained the territory in subjugation since Spanish rule collapsed in 1976. The Sahrawi people are caught between the competing claims of a repressive Moroccan occupying force and the Polisario Front, which is supported by the Algerian Government and emerged in the 1970s in opposition to Moroccan rule. Their right to self-determination has been recognised by the EU, the United Nations, the African Union and the International Court of Justice, but it is still denied to them.

Morocco's annexation of Western Sahara precipitated a fierce civil war, during which, the Red Cross alleges, Moroccan armed forces deployed napalm and cluster bombs against civilians. Throughout the 1980s, the Moroccan Government sought to cement their position and secure their claim to the territory, and to the vast natural resources that it contains. They encircled Western Sahara with a wall, or a berm, extending nearly 3,000 km, and peppered its perimeter with landmines. The wall also violated Mauritanian security and extended into its territory. Under those conditions, thousands of Sahrawi refugees poured into neighbouring Algeria, where they continue to live in sprawling camps near Tindouf. With an absence of independent food sources or opportunities for employment, residents live dependent on aid to feed their families. A survey conducted in 2012 found that 8% of residents in the camps were malnourished. There is huge opposition to the refugees, who are being denied their human rights. We all too often hear of people in Western Sahara, particularly women, facing sexual subjugation and torture.

A ceasefire was agreed in the 1990s, and a settlement plan was brokered by the then Organisation of African Unity and the United Nations. A referendum on Sahrawi independence was an integral component of that plan, and the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara was established to oversee the Sahrawi people's transition to autonomy, but that referendum has not taken place. The composition of the electorate has been complicated by the influx of Moroccan nationals

into Western Sahara. There have been allegations that the Moroccan Government have introduced thousands of their citizens as part of an insidious policy of colonisation and forced integration. Sporadic violence perpetrated by both Moroccan and Polisario forces has continued to interrupt and delay the peace process. That stagnation has undermined the credibility of MINURSO and the settlement plan it was established to uphold. In 2013, the Moroccan Government persuaded the US to abandon its plans to extend MINURSO's mandate to include human rights abuses in Western Sahara and in the refugee camps.

In October 2010, a camp called Gdeim Izik was established by the Sahrawi people near El Aaiún in protest against human rights abuses, the repression of dissidents and the continued reluctance of the outside world to act. That reluctance is shocking once we start looking at the issue. The city is the administrative capital of the southern provinces—of Western Sahara—and the erection of the camp was interpreted by Moroccan officials as an act of aggression. The forceful dismantlement of the camp sparked riots, in which a number of Moroccan security personnel were killed, as were an unknown number of Sahrawi people.

With the camp destroyed, the Moroccan Government set out to convict what they called the instigators and leaders of the riots, and 25 people were convicted of murder following confessions that were said to have been extracted through torture. According to Amnesty International, such practices are depressingly common in Western Sahara. We cannot overestimate the shockwaves that those acts of repression are causing across the region. Eyes are on countries such as the United Kingdom that have a track record of upholding human rights. People in Algeria, Western Sahara and Mauritania are rightly asking, "What is the UK doing? Where are its values? Why are its values not being endorsed here, where there is clear repression of an indigenous people?"

It is time that we looked at Western Sahara. There is a huge danger of it becoming an incubator for terrorism and organised crime. There is a sense of injustice, and of the failure of western Governments to acknowledge that injustice, among the indigenous people, who have been given no opportunity to go anywhere to seek redress, except through organisations such as al-Qaeda and Daesh. The grievances generated by the Moroccan occupation are powerful recruiting tools, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has flourished in the absence of legitimate political authority. The UK can no longer afford to confine the conflict and the plight of the Sahrawi people to the peripheries of its foreign policy. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, and I hope that we will at last use our position in the United Nations to move forward on the UN mandate and seek justice and legitimacy for these people.

4.50 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Rosindell. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) for her speech, and particularly to the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who initiated the debate. He is a much valued member of the all-party group on Western Sahara, which I chair, and he has done the people of Western Sahara a great service in raising the issue today.

I want to express a few of the concerns that I have had for some time, since I visited the country with the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who used to chair the all-party group. It was my privilege to visit Laayoune, the capital of Western Sahara, in February 2014, along with the right hon. Gentleman, the director of War on Want and a constituent of mine who runs the Western Sahara Campaign Cymru. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun mentioned that visit, as a result of which we produced a report titled "Life Under Occupation". I believe the Minister will have seen it and his predecessors in the Foreign Office certainly saw it.

I want to ask the Minister, as the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun did, for his response to Morocco ordering the expulsion of the 84 civilian and three military MINURSO personnel following the visit of the United Nations Secretary-General to Western Sahara in March. The mission complied with that request, despite the fact that it was a United Nations mission in a country designated a non-self-governing territory. In short, the Moroccan authorities had no authority to make that request. Surely Morocco cannot be allowed to dictate to a UN mission in a territory it does not have sovereignty over. I believe that that represents an unprecedented challenge to the authority of the United Nations Security Council, and I worry that it shows the Security Council is failing to live up to its responsibilities. I hope that it will strongly condemn the action of the Moroccan authorities in expelling the citizens and military personnel after the March visit by Ban Ki-moon.

I visited the mission in 2014, and we sat and talked to the officials there. Without mentioning names, I have to say that some of those UN officials expressed great frustration that they had no human rights monitoring mandate for Western Sahara. They were fully aware of the human rights violations and the street demonstrations in Laayoune, some of which were witnessed by colleagues on our visit. They were also fully aware of the great brutality with which the Moroccan authorities broke up peaceable demonstrations by men, women and children. However, they were unable to take any action because of the lack of any human rights monitoring role. They had no capacity or power to act. That was one of the most distressing things—to witness, with colleagues, those violations taking place in the streets, and to know that there was a UN capacity there with the potential to act, which could do nothing.

There was great brutality. The constituent who came with me attempted bravely to take photographs of the demonstrations. It was perhaps no surprise, given the way things are controlled in Laayoune, that his camera was stolen. It was later returned, with the offending pictures of course removed and wiped completely. While we were spending those three or four days in an unfamiliar city some way from home, it was quite clear that the powers of surveillance, under the pretext of protecting our interests, were following our every move—that is an unnerving experience. However, I had the luxury of being able to hop on a plane to return to this country. The Sahrawi people, of course, continue to be less fortunate.

The hon. member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun talked at length about human rights issues. I can only concur with what he and the hon. Member for Bridgend said. The UN special rapporteur on torture, Juan Méndez,

visited Morocco and Western Sahara in 2012. He found that torture and ill treatment were used to extract confessions, and that Moroccan law enforcement officials used excessive force. In 2015, Human Rights Watch noted the growing intolerance for independent human rights organisations and other critical voices. All the meetings that we had in Laayoune, whether with organisations campaigning for women's rights, trade unions or other human rights activists, had to be conducted under the cloak of secrecy. All too often, we had to sit in dark rooms—literally—in the back streets of the city, because any public acknowledgment that the meetings were taking place would seriously implicate the Sahrawis we were meeting.

The huge natural resources in Western Sahara are clear from any visit, and their exploitation by Morocco is used as a justification for its occupation. Phosphate mining, fishing and market gardening provide jobs for Moroccan settlers—very few of those jobs go to the indigenous population, among whom unemployment rates are disproportionately high. We visited the ports and saw for ourselves how all offshore fishing is carried out by Moroccan-owned trawlers. In the phosphate mining industry, only 21% of the workforce are Sahrawis, the majority of whom are employed in the most menial jobs. Moroccan influence and money dominates the market gardening industry, its capital and its rewards.

For the indigenous population, there is very little evidence of a return on investment and improvements in their lives. We are talking about the absence of democracy and basic human rights, but in narrow economic terms, the people of Western Sahara are not being delivered a fair share—*chwarae teg*, as we say in Wales—of resources.

Our overwhelming impression from our visit was of deep and utter sadness—of an indigenous people being repressed, their identities being suppressed and their history and culture not being recognised in school. We saw several private Sahrawi schools, which basically meant that parents educated their children in their own history, traditions and culture in their own homes. Again, that took place in secrecy, because it is illegal and the Moroccan authorities would clamp down on it.

All Members who have spoken today have agreed that such violations occur as a direct consequence of the UN's failure to fulfil its duty to provide self-determination through a referendum for the people there. I know that, as the years go by, that becomes more of a challenge. Concocting an electoral list when the population is so split is, of course, a huge challenge. It is not helped by the concessionary tax and housing rights that encourage people to migrate from Morocco into Western Sahara, which the hon. Member for Bridgend mentioned. I strongly encourage the Minister to do whatever he can, because there is an expectation that countries such as ours should take more of a lead, to ensure progress towards the referendum and a continuing UN presence with a human rights monitoring role. Nothing less will do.

Finally, I want to talk about the case of a Sahrawi campaigner, Mr Brahim Saika, who fell into a coma and died last Friday after being arbitrarily detained by the police and accused of organising protests for self-determination. He was a co-ordinator of a group of unemployed Sahrawis and was arrested on 1 April. According to reports, he was detained and tortured in

[*Mr Mark Williams*]

Gulemin police station. He was then transferred to a hospital in Agadir in Morocco from Bozakarn prison, where he had been held. His sister stated that he had been hit on the head, which is why he fell into a coma and subsequently died. After he was arrested, he went on hunger strike in protest against his detention and maltreatment. A few days later, his condition deteriorated significantly, which was when he was transferred to hospital. The reports we have heard suggest that no serious attempts were made to save his life. The hospital authorities are now refusing to conduct an autopsy to determine the cause of his death, despite his family's demand for one. The family have been told that the cause of death was poisoning due to a rat bite.

I would appreciate the Minister raising the case with Morocco, and the all-party group would very much like to hear back about that in due course. The sad reality is that brave people such as Brahim Saika are by no means the only victims of the continued occupation of Western Sahara.

5 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing the debate and the members of the APPG from whom we have heard. The debate is timely, coming as it does shortly after the 40th anniversary of the Moroccan invasion—40 years during which 165,000 refugees from Western Sahara have lived in the Algerian desert. It is one of the global situations, or African situations in particular, that does not receive the attention that it is due.

Mrs Moon: One of the things that we must put on the record is, honestly, our gratitude to the Algerians. They have provided a safe haven for those people and, let's face it, we have created additional problems for the Algerians with people fleeing from Libya and Tunisia into Algeria. The Algerians are carrying a huge burden, so we have a responsibility to them, too, to resolve the problem.

Patrick Grady: That is a fair point.

Sadly, we can look across Africa and see a number of forgotten nations that maybe do not get the attention that they deserve. For example, the APPG on Eritrea, of which I am a member, was recently founded. There is the situation in Somalia. Western Sahara's particular situation, however, with its description as "the last colony", is especially tragic. I was trying to find some statistics, but that is difficult to do, because of its stateless position. I could not find, for example, a ranking in the UN human development index, although I found a GDP figure of about US \$2,500 per head, which is not in any way significant. I pay tribute to the work of the various campaign groups that are seeking to make the issue live. They have helped to provide background briefings for Members for today. I note that the comedian and activist Mark Thomas is doing a fundraiser for the cause on 2 May. I wish him all the very best for that.

Three key issues have arisen in the debate: first, the principle of self-determination; secondly, a reflection on recent developments and the human rights situation in the country; and, thirdly, questions for the Government that I hope the Minister will be able to answer. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun said, the SNP feels passionately about the principle of self-determination, and we in Scotland were able to exercise it in 2014, in a wonderful exercise in democratic participation. Here in the UK, after elections in Scotland in a few weeks' time, on 23 June we will have a referendum on our membership of the European Union. That is the kind of thing that we take for granted, but it is sadly denied in so many different parts of the world—only today, in Question Time, the Prime Minister was asked about the Chagos islands. In any event, surely a referendum has to be the endgame and the way in which matters are resolved.

Mrs Moon: Not a great ask.

Patrick Grady: No, it is not a great ask at all. A peaceful solution has to involve the right of individuals and nations to self-determination. Also, we cannot and should not prejudge what the decision might be. It might be a form of autonomy, or of independence. We will not know until it is put to the test. The UN groundwork has been done, but it is rapidly dating. Generations continue to grow up, still waiting for an opportunity to have their say.

Meanwhile, the situation continues to deteriorate, perhaps not least because of a lack of a human rights mandate for the UN mission. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun referred to the Oxfam analysis, which described the recent crisis and the expulsion of UN diplomats as a threat to regional stability. Other examples can be found of human rights abuses; some were referred to by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams). A 2015 Amnesty International report lists a whole range of different torture techniques used by Moroccan security forces to extract confessions to crimes or to silence activists and crush dissent.

We expect a report in the next few days from the Secretary-General of the UN. Press reports, from those who have perhaps seen advance copies, say that the language used by the Secretary-General seems to indicate that the UN is backing away from its insistence on the concept of self-determination as necessarily leading to independence. I do not know if that is accurate; it is from an article that I have read and it would be interesting to hear from the Minister, because that is the big-picture question. The situation of the people of Western Sahara is important in its own right, but there is a bigger question about the mandate and role of the UN and the respect attributed to decisions by the UN Security Council, of which the United Kingdom is a member. How will the Government use its role as a permanent member to push for further action? The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) rightly pointed out the risks of inaction. Now is a very appropriate time for action.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun said, it would be useful to know the Government's view on Morocco's claim to the territory and its progress in entering into commercial contracts for the exploitation of natural resources in Western Sahara. What consideration are the Government giving to support refugees from

Western Sahara in neighbouring countries, as well as to those trying to enter the UK and the EU? Finally, as was touched on in exchanges at the start of my speech, what role do the Government see for neighbouring and regional countries in the area and the broader African Union? The hon. Member for Bridgend noted that a wide range of international institutions recognise the right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination. Surely, after 40 years, it is time to stop talking and start doing.

5.7 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, and to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). I always seem to be following him, so let me hope that I can enhance what he said.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing such an important and timely debate. The Western Sahara is not a region regularly raised in the House, but it is an important area and the situation deserves our attention. We also heard an important contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who pointed out that women in Western Sahara often face sexual subjugation and torture, something we really need to press our Government and the Moroccan Government on.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun pointed out something that the hon. Member for Glasgow North reiterated: Morocco has made a direct challenge to the UN Security Council's resolution by trying to put obstacles in the way of the referendum that the Security Council wishes to take place. Today's debate is timely because this month the UN Security Council will also be debating the Western Sahara, 25 years after the establishment of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara. MINURSO was first given six months to hold a referendum on and in the Western Sahara. That was in 1991. If the mandate is renewed this week, the mission will be in its 26th year. In preparation for today's debate, I read through the minutes of previous Security Council debates on the Western Sahara, as you do. They make for rather depressing reading. There is generally unanimous agreement that the status quo is unsustainable and there is a desire to see a resolution, yet we never seem to get any nearer to a final agreement.

As we have heard, the failure to find a resolution comes at a serious human cost. Around 100,000 Sahrawis remain in refugee camps in the Algerian desert and there are now multiple generations who have grown up there. I also have serious concerns about the position of Sahrawis in Western Sahara. As has been said, numerous accounts of human rights abuses have been recognised by Her Majesty's Government, the UN and independent bodies such as Amnesty International. Of course we need to see progress on the ground, but there are real fears that the position of Sahrawis, both economically and politically, is worsening.

Those concerns were set out in the report of the APPG on Western Sahara written by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams), who made an excellent contribution this afternoon and now chairs the all-party group. He is clearly one of our most

knowledgeable MPs. That report followed the APPG's delegation to the area in 2014, the year that I visited the region and Laayoune with the Minister, before he was the Minister. The report is informative and clearly highlights the issues facing the Sahrawi population, especially when it comes to political protest. I join the hon. Member for Ceredigion in thanking John Gurr for the report and the work that he continues to do through the Western Sahara Campaign, which I found helpful in preparing for the debate.

In the long term, we need an agreement among all parties to enable a referendum to take place in Western Sahara. However, getting to that point will require more political will on all sides. I echo the text of resolution 2218 in calling

“upon the parties and the neighbouring states to cooperate more fully with the United Nations and with each other and to strengthen their involvement to end the current impasse and to achieve progress towards a political solution”.

The international community must never seek to impose a solution on Western Sahara.

5.12 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.23 pm

On resuming—

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Just before I bring Fabian Hamilton back in to conclude his remarks, given the change in timing necessitated by the Division, we will be looking at completing the debate by 5.41 pm.

Fabian Hamilton: I will continue with my speech, if I may. There is not too much left. I had just quoted from the text of resolution 2218.

The international community must never seek to impose a solution on the dispute over Western Sahara. Whether it remains part of Morocco or becomes a self-governing territory or an independent state, Western Sahara will always have to rely on a very close relationship with Morocco. Whatever the outcome, Western Sahara will need to trade with Morocco, particularly if it is to benefit from the significant investment currently going into it from the Moroccan state and Moroccan companies.

We must also recognise Morocco's role in providing security in an increasingly unstable area with rising levels of extremism and sectarian conflict. However, the difficulties of achieving a long-term solution should not mean we forget the human rights of the Sahrawi population and their political and economic situation.

I was pleased to see from written answers that the Government have repeatedly raised the Western Sahara issue with the Moroccan Government, including with His Majesty King Mohammed VI. I am particularly pleased that the Government made successful representations to ensure that the UN Secretary-General's personal envoy to Western Sahara was able to gain access to the region. I hope the Minister will be able to tell the House whether his discussions with the Government of Morocco have included the human rights situation in Western Sahara and the human rights issues facing the Sahrawi people in Morocco. I also hope the Minister will tell us

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

what steps the UK is taking unilaterally and through the Friends of Western Sahara group of nations, of which the UK is a member, to improve the economic and civic participation of the Sahrawi population.

I want to press the Minister on the mandate for MINURSO. I understand that, as has been said this afternoon, it is the only mission in the world without a human rights remit. As the mission is about to have its mandate renewed, or at least reviewed, is it not time to include human rights within its remit and to ask it to report back to the UN Security Council on its findings? Is it also not time to set a date for a free and fair referendum in Western Sahara, with an option for independence on the ballot paper, consistent with the established international legal norm of self-determination?

Is the Minister prepared to demand an end to the extraction of natural resources from Western Sahara through deals that disregard the interests and wishes of the indigenous Sahrawi people? In particular, I hope he will set out the UK's position on the sale of products from Western Sahara within the EU. I understand that the European Court of Justice ruled to exclude waters off the Western Sahara from the EU-Moroccan fisheries agreement, but that is subject to an appeal from the EU.

Mr Mark Williams: Would the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that there is a problem with labelling? We have just had a debate on agriculture. Many of the products produced in the occupied territories, which is how some of us refer to the area, are labelled as products of Morocco when clearly they should be labelled as products of Western Sahara.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will finish what I was saying because it may cover the point he has raised. Will the Minister explain the UK's position on the current appeal? Will he also explain what the judgment will mean for the sale of other Western Sahrawi produce within the EU if the appeal fails? In particular, will he explain whether Western Sahrawi goods, such as phosphorus and tomatoes, will be excluded from EU-Morocco trade agreements or require special labelling? I hope that covers the point raised by the hon. Gentleman.

These steps could be important in addressing many of the issues in Western Sahara that we have heard about today and could facilitate further progress. It is precisely because Morocco is such a close ally of the United Kingdom and a significant diplomatic player in its own right that we should work with the Moroccans to welcome a bigger role for the United Nations in finding a long-term and sustainable solution for all the parties involved in Western Sahara.

5.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing this debate, on his strong interest in Western Sahara and more generally the work of the all-party group on Western Sahara. I thank other hon. Members from all three main parties for their contributions. In my briefing, I was not prepared for questions about

the Scottish referendum, but I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on getting that in.

I am sorry to disappoint hon. Members who were expecting the illustrious Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who would have been delighted to respond to the debate, which is within his portfolio. He was, until very recently, engaged in another debate on the Floor of the House. It is therefore my pleasure to respond to the debate, particularly because, as the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) alluded to with great foresight, both of us went to Western Sahara while on the Back Benches in order to be better briefed for this very occasion. We specifically visited the UN headquarters in Laayoune to see its work for ourselves first hand.

The Government's position on Western Sahara is consistent and long-standing. The Government consider the final status of Western Sahara as undetermined, and we support the UN-led efforts to reach a lasting and mutually acceptable political solution that provides for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara. In line with the debate, I will first speak about the underlying principles of self-determination and our support for those, then move on to the situation in Western Sahara and how it applies to the broader issue of self-determination.

In his statement of principles for world peace nearly a hundred years ago, President Woodrow Wilson said:

"Self-determination is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of actions which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril."

I am not sure he had the hon. Member for Leeds North West and me in mind when he said that, but nevertheless, I think I can speak for both of us in saying that we hear that principle. Wilson was unsuccessful in his attempts to include the principle in the covenant of the League of Nations.

More than two decades later, in the midst of world war two, Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt came up with a set of principles that defined the Allies' goals for the post-war world, which included

"the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live".

Their Atlantic charter is widely recognised as a precursor to the 1942 declaration of United Nations, which was the foundation of the charter of the United Nations. This charter, and many other treaties and agreements to which the United Kingdom is signatory, set out clearly the right to self-determination.

The principle of self-determination is about freedom to make one's own choices. This country demonstrated its commitment to that principle in 2013, when the Government gave residents of the Falkland Islands the freedom to choose whether they wanted to remain a British overseas territory. Self-determination has allowed, and continues to allow, countries and territories around the world to determine their own fate and chart their own course.

Turning to Western Sahara, the UK supports UN-led efforts to reach a lasting and mutually acceptable political solution to this long-standing dispute that provides,

crucially, for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara. Morocco and the pro-independence Polisario Front both claim sovereignty over Western Sahara. An International Court of Justice ruling on the issue in 1975 means that the territory is “non-self-governing” under chapter XI of the UN charter, and that its people therefore have the right to self-determination. Following Spanish withdrawal in 1975, most of the territory has been under Moroccan administration.

In 1991, after more than 15 years of hostilities between Morocco and the Polisario Front, a ceasefire was brokered by the Organisation of African Unity and the United Nations. It was agreed that both sides would stop fighting and the UN would monitor the ceasefire. The UN would also prepare for a referendum in which the Sahrawi people would exercise their right to self-determination, choosing either to be an autonomous region within Morocco or an independent state. That was the mandate for the UN MINURSO, which we have discussed, and which I visited with the hon. Member for Leeds North West in 2014. That body has succeeded in monitoring a ceasefire. The UN has persisted, through rounds of discussion, negotiations and renegotiations, in trying to find a political solution to the conflict. However, despite engagement and credible efforts over the years from both sides, little real progress has been made on the political track.

On 11 April 2007, Morocco put forward a proposal for advanced autonomy for the region. I think that is what the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun was referring to when he asked about the Government’s views on the proposal. UN Security Council resolution 1754 of 30 April 2007 took note of the proposal and welcomed the serious and credible Moroccan efforts to move the process forward towards resolution. It also took note of the Polisario Front’s proposal presented on 10 April 2007. However, neither proposal was accepted by the other party and no further proposals have been put on the table. The solution has to be UN-led. The UN has to move things forward.

In March this year, the UN Secretary-General made comments, which a number of Members have referred to, during a visit to the region. That led to disagreement around the UN troops and to withdrawal of the 84 civilian members of the UN deployment. While the Secretary-General has since clarified his statement and expressed regret for the misunderstanding caused, the civilian staff still have not returned. The UK Government are concerned about the lack of a civilian component in the force. Without that vital support, the UN mission is unable to fulfil its existing mandate, let alone an extended one. It is unable to assist the UN and thus the UK’s interest in finding a political solution, but it is still maintaining peace and security in the region.

We have urged the UN secretariat and Morocco to engage in dialogue that will allow the individuals to return as quickly as possible to enable the full functionality of the mission, allowing it to carry forward the full scope of its existing mission. We are hopeful that a way forward can be found. The situation is not totally gridlocked, but more effort is needed.

Turning to some of the additional points made during the debate, the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and a number of other Members talked about Daesh. We are concerned about the presence of Daesh throughout the broader region, although the Moroccan authorities have disputed the assertion that cells have been encountered. On the other hand, the Secretary-General’s personal envoy, Christopher Ross, has told the permanent under-secretary for the middle east and north Africa that about 15 individuals have travelled to fight with extremist groups in north Africa. I do not think 15 can be described as endemic, but we are aware of some people travelling from the region.

A lot of points were made about human rights. Although it is primarily a UN process, the UK, through its position on the Security Council, stresses the importance of humanitarian rights on an ongoing basis in Western Sahara and the camps. That was clear in the UN Security Council resolution of April 2015. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights visited Western Sahara in 2015 and the findings of that report will be reflected in the Secretary-General’s report, which we believe will be published later today. As I stand before the Chamber, I have not seen that it has been published. That is only one way that the UN looks at human rights in the area.

There was a specific case that the all-party group would like me to look into. If it writes to me with details, I am more than happy to look into that and circulate a letter that can be sent around to the rest of the group.

There has been progress on human rights. The Moroccan authorities recently took steps to improve human rights, including ratifying the protocol to the convention against torture and ending the practice of trying civilians in military courts. That is good progress, but I still hear calls to do a lot more. We are considering our position on the mandate renewal but, as I have said, actually getting the existing mandate delivered is troublesome without extending it further. I was asked by the hon. Member for Leeds North East about commercial activity. We do not consider commercial activity in Western Sahara to be illegal, as long as it respects the interests and wishes of the people of Western Sahara and benefits them. The UK does not prohibit companies from engaging in commercial activity, but they should take legal advice before doing so.

The Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs supports refugees in the camps in Algeria through all the UN agencies, most notably UNICEF, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Programme. This is a situation that we are very much aware of and very keen to engage in, and I look forward to progress being made through the UN and through working with the all-party parliamentary group.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Western Sahara and self-determination.

5.41 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 20 April 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Police and Crime Commissioner Elections

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): The Cabinet Office wishes to report the entry into force of the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections (Local Returning Officers' and Police Area Returning Officers' Charges) Order 2016. The order sets the maximum recoverable amounts for the services and expenses of police area returning officers and local returning officers. The order is the final piece of legislation which, taken together, confirm the arrangements for the police and crime commissioner elections on 5 May 2016.

[HCWS683]

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Energy Bill: English Votes for English Laws

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I am pleased to announce the publication of updated analysis of the Energy Bill for the purposes of English votes for English laws.

The English votes for English laws process applies to public Bills in the House of Commons. To support the process, the Government have agreed that they will provide information to assist the Speaker in considering whether to certify that Bill or any of its provisions for the purposes of English votes for English laws.

The memorandum provides an assessment of amendments made at Lords consideration of Commons amendments (LCCA) and tabled for Commons consideration of Lords amendments (CCLA), ahead of CCLA. The Department's assessment is that none of the amendments change the territorial application of the Bill.

The memorandum can be found on the Bill documents page of the Parliament website at: <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2015-16/energy/documents.html> and I have deposited a copy in the House of Commons Library.

[HCWS680]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EU Readmission Agreement: Jordan

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): The Government have decided not to opt in to a Council decision (12137/15) authorising the opening of negotiations on an agreement between the European Union and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (hereafter referred to as Jordan) on readmission.

EURAs ensure reciprocal procedures for the identification, documentation and return of persons illegally entering or remaining in EU member states. We decide whether to participate in EURAs on a case-by-case basis, depending on the priority we attach to the country concerned in terms of numbers of immigration returns and the degree to which we enjoy a good bilateral relationship with that country.

Jordan is not an immigration returns priority for the UK (there were only four enforced returns from January to September 2015), and our returns process is excellent; Jordan is a country to which we return on EU letters (this is easier because we do not need to obtain a travel document if we have strong supporting evidence of nationality). We would not enjoy an operational advantage if we were to change our bilateral arrangements for conducting returns to Jordan.

[HCWS681]

Police Advisory Board for England and Wales: Triennial Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): On 5 February 2015, I announced in Parliament, through a written statement, the commencement of a triennial review of the Police Advisory Board for England and Wales. I am pleased to announce the completion of the review.

The Police Advisory Board provides independent advice to the Secretary of State on general questions affecting the police.

The review concludes that the functions performed by the Police Advisory Board are still required and that it should be retained as a stakeholder group. This is an administrative change in its classification that better reflects the way the body is constituted and provides advice. The Police Advisory Board is, therefore, no longer classified as a non-departmental public body. The report makes a further five recommendations that will be implemented shortly.

The full report of the review of the Police Advisory Board can be found on www.gov.uk and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS682]

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Answer to urgent question—(Mrs May)

Property Ownership in London (Registration) [Col. 933]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Forensic Linguistics (Standards) [Col. 934]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Roger Mullin)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Energy Bill [Lords] [Col. 937]

Programme motion (No. 3)—(Stephen Barclay)—agreed to
Lords message considered

Backbench Business

Daesh: Genocide of Minorities [Col. 957]

Motion—(Fiona Bruce)—on a Division, agreed to

Record Copies of Acts [Col. 1001]

Motion—(Mr James Gray)—on a Division, agreed to

Petition [Col. 1030]

Butterfields Estate [Col. 1031]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Aircraft Noise [Col. 341WH]

Cardiff Coal Exchange [Col. 366WH]

UK Dairy Sector [Col. 376WH]

Small Weapons Trade [Col. 402WH]

Western Sahara: Self-determination [Col. 408WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 13WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
