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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 14 July 2016

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Geothermal Energy

1. **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential contribution of deep geothermal as a source of renewable energy. [905848]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): If you will allow me, Mr Speaker, may I take this opportunity to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), the new Home Secretary, on her appointment, and also of course our new Prime Minister, the former Home Secretary? I wish them both great success. I also welcome the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) to his place; I think this is the first time we have had an exchange over the Dispatch Box. I wish the hon. Members for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) very good luck in their futures, too; I have enjoyed our exchanges.

Owing to our geology, deep geothermal power is likely to make a small contribution to electricity supply. However, Cornwall is one area where the technology can work and I am pleased that this is part of the devolution deal for Cornwall. Deep geothermal heat has greater potential and we are supporting its development through the renewable heat incentive and through feasibility studies funded by the heat network delivery unit.

Steve Double: I thank the Minister for that response. Deep geothermal has the great benefit of being a baseload energy source that is not reliant on variable weather conditions, and, as the Minister points out, Cornwall is one place where great potential for geothermal lies. As she is aware, a scheme is being developed at the Eden project in my constituency. May I invite her to visit Cornwall to see for herself the huge potential that there is for geothermal development there?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; nothing would please me more than a nice holiday in Cornwall right now. I am very pleased to hear that the EGS Energy and Eden project development is progressing well and, as he knows, it has the potential to produce power for about 4,000 homes and to make a very important contribution to the local community.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The truth is that the Ernst & Young renewable energy attractiveness index shows that the UK has fallen from the seventh most attractive country to invest in to the 13th. Following Brexit, that is only going to get worse, so what is the Minister doing to reverse that trend?

Andrea Leadsom: According to Bloomberg New Energy Finance the UK has been the fourth highest investor in clean energy globally for the past five years. Over half the total investment in the EU in 2015 occurred in the UK. We have a very proud record and we are set to exceed our own targets for generating renewable energy by 2020. That is a very proud achievement for this country.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Iceland has a fantastic football team, a free trade agreement of its own with China and is outside the EU. It is also the world's leader in geothermal energy. Are we drawing on Iceland's expertise to develop this industry in our own country?

Andrea Leadsom: If my hon. Friend is referring to the taskforce for the interconnector with Iceland, let me say that I am a huge fan of that, and there will be a statement shortly about the progress that he will be aware has been made between the leaders of the UK and Iceland. I seriously hope we will be able to make progress with all sorts of bilateral energy deals in the future.

Energy Infrastructure: Use of British Steel

2. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to increase the use of British steel in energy infrastructure projects. [905849]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): Officials in my Department regularly meet developers to make clear the importance we place on sourcing UK content, including steel, in infrastructure projects. For example, EDF says it expects that a large proportion of the steel for Hinkley Point C sourced by its supply chain will come from UK companies.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. As she will know, the Corby steelworks plays a vital role in manufacturing steel tubes which can be used for fracking purposes. Does she agree it is very important that, wherever possible, we use British steel, not just because it supports the industry and the jobs it provides, but because the quality and safety of the product is far superior to that of foreign competitors?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I have had a number of meetings with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to discuss exactly this point. In its 2014 report "Getting ready for UK shale gas" Ernst & Young said there would be significant benefits for jobs and growth from a successful UK shale industry, including a projected need for over £2 billion-worth of steel.

15. [905864] **Christina Rees** (Neath) (Lab): The Sustainable Product Engineering Centre for Innovative Functional Industrial Coatings—SPECIFIC—national innovation centre in Neath Port Talbot relies on EU

funding to use Tata British steel to develop buildings that are completely decarbonised. Such buildings lower household and business energy bills and help the UK to achieve its carbon reduction targets. Will the Minister support SPECIFIC in developing its use of British steel in its innovative projects, and replace any EU funds that might be lost as a result of Brexit?

Andrea Leadsom: My Department has been working closely with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to look at how we can help Port Talbot with its energy costs. We have already made announcements about how we are going to reduce the impact of carbon policies on the steelworks in Port Talbot, and we will continue to look at further ways of helping, including considering how energy-intensive industries across the board can reduce their electricity costs by changing the way in which they generate power.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that British steel can be used in energy infrastructure projects not just in the UK but around the world? Last week on a visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo with the International Development Committee, we saw the way in which Britain is leading in helping to provide energy infrastructure in that country.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. A good example of my own efforts to improve the use of UK steel has been to urge the Offshore Wind Industry Council to do more to promote UK content. The UK is one of the biggest deployers of offshore wind to date and we can certainly hope that, once we start building our export markets, British steel will form a part of those exports.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The Minister will be aware that the two Liberty steel plants, including Clydebridge in my constituency, will be heavily involved in the supply of turbine casings for tidal lagoon projects and tubular steel structures for offshore wind turbines. The renewables industry can provide a huge market for steel produced in Britain, which represents a huge opportunity for British businesses. Will the Minister commit to revisiting the Government's approach to the subsidy of such renewables?

Andrea Leadsom: On the subsidies for renewables, we have made it clear that we must balance the need to keep costs down for consumers with the need of new technologies to be subsidised in order to deploy and keep their costs down. On offshore wind, we have made it clear that we see huge potential for the cost trajectory to go down. The offshore wind industry already has a target of 50% UK content, and I am certainly encouraging it to be more ambitious. That would absolutely include the use of British steel.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Hinkley Point is expected to be one of the largest construction projects this country has ever seen, and it will require more than 200,000 tonnes of steel. Does my hon. Friend agree that this will provide a huge opportunity for the British steel industry?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, and I would expand that to include opportunities for the supply chain right across the UK. The Government are working with the industry

to develop a demand model that will provide a capability and capacity picture for the UK against the demand. Part of the aim is to identify the forward requirement for the components, which will include steel. We are working closely with new nuclear developers to create that supply chain right across UK businesses.

Energy Market Competition

3. **Oliver Colvile** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): What her policy is on the proposals of the Competition and Markets Authority on increasing competition in the energy market. [905850]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): The Government welcome the Competition and Markets Authority's final recommendations, which represent another step towards a competitive and effective energy market that works for all consumers, but it is key to understand that it is also the responsibility of energy suppliers to take action in response to the CMA's recommendations, and we are meeting representatives of all the big six suppliers to urge them to do that.

Oliver Colvile: I congratulate my hon. Friend on answering all the questions this morning and wish her the very best of luck with anything that might happen later. Does she agree that it is only by having greater competition in the market that we can drive down prices, especially for those living in fuel poverty?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I invite any of my hon. Friends on the Front Bench to jump up and answer any of these questions, should they wish to do so, but I am quite used to being the last person on the battlefield; I know my place.

The Government have taken a great deal of action to boost competition and to make switching easier for all consumers, and we have absolutely recognised that vulnerable consumers need additional help to engage with the energy market. To help to address that, we have provided about £3 million over the last three years to fund face-to-face support through the Big Energy Saving Network as well as £1 million of funding for this winter and £1.5 million of funding for a programme administered by National Energy Action over the next two years. This is a top priority for my Department.

Mr Speaker: The Deputy Leader of the House has other important responsibilities and she knows that. As far as the men sitting on the Front Bench are concerned, they all look absolutely fine and are doing the right thing—simply nodding in the appropriate places.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her kind comments this morning. I, too, enjoyed our exchanges—and the chocolate peanuts.

The CMA's final report has been characterised as blaming sticky customers for not switching and condoning penalties on them if they continue not to switch. Does the Minister agree with that analysis?

Andrea Leadsom: I also enjoyed the chocolate raisins.

The evidence is clear that customers on expensive standard tariffs could save £325 by switching to the cheapest fixed deal. I do not think that the CMA is blaming consumers; it is recognising a slight inertia or unwillingness to switch. We are trying to urge people to

switch. Between January and March this year, almost 2 million energy accounts were switched, over half of which moved to new suppliers, so the push to switch is actually getting through and we are seeing some progress.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on all that she has done to encourage competition, which helps consumers to get a price that is better for them. That is in stark contrast to Opposition Members who often scaremonger about capacity markets driving prices up and scare my constituents into worrying about whether they can pay their bills.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. People all too often fail to recognise that the energy trilemma consists of keeping the lights on, keeping bills down, and decarbonising. He is right that the capacity market is there to ensure the security of supply and that is the payment we make to keep the lights on.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I echo the remarks made about the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd) and wish her well in her new role as Home Secretary. I am glad that the Minister is here, because if she had not been, these questions may have been a little more rhetorical than usual.

The previous Prime Minister said in 2012 that he would legislate to ensure that all consumers were on the lowest tariff. We have had four years since then, and an extensive CMA report has come up with recommendations that are a little underwhelming in their scope. Does the Minister think that that will be enough to ensure that energy customers get the best possible deal?

Andrea Leadsom: That was a fair question. The CMA has carried out a detailed piece of research and we are committed to implementing all its recommendations as soon as possible. We have also made it clear that if we do not see change, we will take further steps. The hon. Gentleman is right. We will implement the CMA's recommendations. We will see costs come down, competition go up, and better remedies for people on prepayment meters, but we will also be alert to other opportunities to get costs down for consumers.

Callum McCaig: I am glad that the Minister says that the Government will remain vigilant on this matter. The CMA found that 70% of customers of the big six domestic suppliers were on the more expensive standard variable tariff. Will she set a target for reducing that so that we know what success looks like and to determine whether the further action that she mentions is required?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have just explained, we do not want to set a specific target. However, we are successfully providing support to organisations that then go on to help people to switch. I love the idea that if anybody listening to this really wants to help their grandparents, neighbour or whomever, who may not have the confidence to switch themselves, they could go and help them switch, possibly saving them several hundred pounds. Instead of setting targets and blaming people when they are not met, we need to persuade people of the advantages of switching.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd) and congratulate her on her appointment as Home Secretary. Under her charge, the Department of

Energy and Climate Change played an important role in securing the Paris climate agreement, and she was a strong and enthusiastic champion for it. Only two weeks ago, some might have suspected that today she would be more likely to be standing at the Dispatch Box saying goodbye to me, but in this place we are beginning to learn to expect the unexpected. She was always courteous and often actually helpful in our exchanges, and we wish her well in her new role.

The CMA report states for the past five years the big energy companies have been overcharging customers by more than £4,657,000 every single day. Can the Minister name any other swindle of such enormous magnitude where the Government would simply say, "It is the customer's fault. People should have shopped around and switched to another provider"?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question, but I completely refute the suggestion that the Government are saying it is the customer's fault. We have been clear that we support the CMA's recommendations; some huge changes are being undertaken. We are rolling out smart meters; simpler tariff rules are coming in; we will enable newer suppliers to pitch cheaper deals to inactive consumers; and there will be improved accuracy of quotes on price comparison websites. A range of remedies are being undertaken, and in no sense is there inaction on the part of this Government.

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Lady said that she was going to be meeting the industry and the big six. The Government's own figures state that in England 2.38 million households are living in fuel poverty. Her Department could today take action to force—not to talk to, but to force—energy companies to pass on changes in wholesale prices immediately to customers through their tariff structures. In that way, customers would benefit directly from the drop in wholesale prices. Why is she failing to do this?

Andrea Leadsom: I am afraid that just shows that the hon. Gentleman does not really understand how the energy market works. His party's proposal to cap energy bills to consumers was a grave mistake, because we have seen wholesale prices come down and all consumers have benefited from that. I say again that this Government are absolutely committed to getting bills down for consumers at every opportunity, to implementing the CMA's significant reforms and to looking at what else is available to be done.

EU Referendum: Climate Change Commitments

4. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the outcome of the EU referendum on the ability of the UK to meet its climate change commitments. [905851]

6. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the ability of the UK to meet its climate change obligations. [905854]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): The UK's climate change commitments are grounded in the UK's Climate

Change Act 2008, which commits us to a reduction in emissions of 80% by 2050, from 1990 levels. Our membership of the EU has no impact on our commitment to this Act, as hon. Members will have seen in our decision to accept the Committee on Climate Change's advice on the level of the fifth carbon budget just two weeks ago.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for her answer, but she will know that the Committee on Climate Change has said that tackling climate change is going to be more difficult outside the EU. The vote to leave does not give the Government a mandate to undermine the global transition to clean energy, so will she confirm that the UK will maintain its commitment to meeting our 2020 clean energy target, which was agreed as part of the EU's climate and energy package?

Andrea Leadsom: The UK is a world leader in tackling climate change. The 2008 Act is a UK Act that we are absolutely committed to. We are outperforming on our target on energy renewables by 2020, and we remain committed to that.

Mr Cunningham: What estimates has the Minister made of the impact there will be on energy costs in this country if we leave the EU?

Andrea Leadsom: In my view, leaving the EU will not make a difference to the innate cost of energy or the challenges for the energy sector. Most of our transactions for electricity generation are home-grown. There is a global market for gas. We have very good connections with European and non-European countries on interconnection, and we will continue to make commercial arrangements that are to the advantage of both the UK and those partners in energy.

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her ability to do the work of four Ministers with such panache. She will know that normally economists disagree about everything, but one of the few things they are agreed about is that the best way to achieve an objective such as that set by the Climate Change Act 2008 is through a price mechanism. However, if subordinate targets are set, that inevitably means a less efficient and more costly route. When we leave the EU, will we therefore be able to scrap unnecessary targets while maintaining that final target, and thereby reduce the cost to consumers of reducing emissions by 80% by 2050?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is right to point out the importance of keeping costs down while we decarbonise. The Department has always made it clear that every opportunity to decarbonise at the lowest cost to consumers will be taken. It is my view that leaving the EU will enable us to do that to an even greater extent than we have in the past.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): Since 1990 the UK has decreased emissions by a third more than the EU average. We have now set a target for 2030 that implies a decrease of about double that which the EU put into the Paris INDCs—intended nationally determined contributions. Does the Minister agree that the real

concern about Brexit might be that we will no longer be able to influence the EU to make more progress in decarbonisation?

Andrea Leadsom: I am entirely clear: European countries remain our friends and great allies, and we will continue to work with them. Leaving the European Union does not mean that we are suddenly leaving Europe in any sense, so it is my expectation and anticipation that we will remain closely aligned on global issues such as climate change, and that we will continue to play a leading role in the world's attempts to tackle that great threat.

EU Referendum: Policy Implications

5. **Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP):** What assessment she has made of the potential policy implications for her Department of the UK leaving the EU. [905853]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): At the heart of our energy strategy is the need to encourage new investment in the UK's energy system, so my Department will continue to take action to deliver secure, affordable and clean energy for hard-working families and businesses. This work is already under way. Since the referendum we have accepted the recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change for the level of carbon budget 5. We have published details of our upcoming capacity market auction and confirmed that our contracts for difference allocation round will go ahead later this year.

Kirsten Oswald: In fact, the UK Government's failure to attract investment to the energy sector has already undermined energy security and sustainability for generations to come, and the Brexit vote has plunged the sector into further insecurity. What are the Minister's plans to ensure the future of green energy following the leave vote?

Andrea Leadsom: I do not recognise at all what the hon. Lady says about our failure to attract international investment—that is clearly not the case. We are attracting a huge amount of investment in offshore wind. We have the successful turbine blade plant that is being created up in Humber by Siemens, we have DONG Energy, and we have various international developers that are putting in bids and building new offshore wind facilities in the UK. Onshore wind in the UK has been a huge success story. Some 99% of all our solar installations have taken place since 2010 and I have already cited statistics about our share of the investment going into renewables, so, I am sorry, but I do not recognise what the hon. Lady says.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on confounding the doom-mongers. Does she agree that COP 22 in Marrakesh in November will be a wonderful opportunity for the UK to showcase its world-beating edge in renewables technology and our industrial base?

Andrea Leadsom: I could not agree more; my hon. Friend is exactly right. The UK is leading on the deployment of renewables—we are getting down the cost of those technologies through our policies—and through our

commitment to decarbonisation and tackling climate change, and to showing the rest of the world how much we want to lead in this area, which we will continue to do.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Policy favouring small modular reactor technology offers affordable innovation in low-carbon energy, which is important in these days, as well as equally important manufacturing opportunities. Trawsfynydd in my constituency offers the ideal site for SMRs and, indeed, advanced reactor technology. Does not the Minister agree that the DECC process to select an SMR technology for generic design safety assessment should move forward with greater energy and a focus on a realistic shortlist of organisations?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, I agree that we need to move forward with this. The Government have recognised the potential of small modular reactors, and we have announced that we will invest at least £250 million over the next five years in an ambitious nuclear research and development programme that includes the competition the hon. Lady mentions. We have committed to publishing an SMR delivery road map in the autumn to clarify the UK's plans for addressing the siting issues that she mentions, as well as regulatory approvals and, vitally, skills issues.

Energy Bills

7. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce energy bills for (a) businesses and (b) households. [905855]

8. **Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce energy bills for (a) businesses and (b) households. [905856]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): The best way to deliver lower energy bills for businesses and households is to have a robust and competitive energy market. There are now over 40 energy suppliers in the domestic retail energy market, which is up from 13 in 2010, and independent suppliers have over 17% of the dual fuel market. Competition is improving, but we are not complacent, and we look forward to implementing the recommendations from the Competition and Markets Authority's final report on the issue.

Mark Pawsey: As a method of controlling its energy costs, CEMEX, which operates a large cement plant in my constituency, has adopted an alternative fuel, called Climafuel, which is derived from household waste and has the benefit of making use of material that would otherwise go to landfill. That is a great example of the circular economy. What steps can my hon. Friend take to encourage other energy-intensive industries to consider the use of alternative fuels?

Andrea Leadsom: I really welcome the initiative by CEMEX in my hon. Friend's constituency. My Department is working closely with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, as well as with the energy-intensive industrial sectors, including the cement sector, on ways in which companies can reduce their emissions while maintaining their competitiveness, and the use of alternative fuels is an important part of that.

Michelle Donelan: What steps does the Minister plan to take to improve the effectiveness of the energy supply market to help small and large businesses to expand in Wiltshire and across the country?

Andrea Leadsom: The CMA has said that the energy sector for larger businesses is competitive, but it has put forward some strong and sound remedies for microbusinesses to prevent automatic roll-overs without a business's consent and to improve online quotations, competition and the service available to microbusinesses.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): The Government have guaranteed an electricity price of about three times the wholesale price to EDF so that it will build a nuclear white elephant at Hinkley Point C. How on earth will that help consumers—businesses or households—to reduce their energy bills?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows that we get about 16% of our electricity every day from nuclear. He will also know that our nuclear plants are all due to be retired by at least the end of the 2020s. Therefore, new nuclear forms a core part of how we replace our electricity supplies. Hinkley is a good deal for consumers. Of course, the mark-to-market costs change according to the wholesale prices, but the price of the electricity coming out of Hinkley by the mid-2020s is guaranteed, and that is very important so that we provide certainty. The Government do not take the view that we will just see what happens; we have to plan for the future. Why? Because electricity security is not negotiable.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Northern Ireland households and businesses face the highest electricity bills in the whole United Kingdom. Businesses still face some of the highest energy costs in Europe. What discussions has the hon. Lady had with the Minister responsible for enterprise, trade and industry to ensure that everything is done to drive these costs down for Northern Ireland customers?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue. My Department and others frequently consult Northern Ireland Ministers to ensure that all the benefits that can be passed on to Northern Ireland consumers are being passed on. I welcome his contribution to the debate.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Barry Gardiner.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman looks surprised. This could be a first—is this a question on which he does not wish to give the House the benefit of his views?

Barry Gardiner: I am always happy to abide by your ruling, Mr Speaker.

One year ago, DECC's estimate for the total lifetime cost of the nuclear power station at Hinkley Point C was £14 billion. Recently, that estimate was revised to £37 billion. Following the referendum vote, the Government's expert adviser has said that Hinkley C is extremely unlikely to go ahead. Does this mean that the Minister now does not have to worry about justifying

the extra £23 billion cost to the Treasury, or does she just feel that she does not need to explain about the additional burden on taxpayers?

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Andrea Leadsom: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood. The cost of the project has not changed. The difference is because of wholesale prices. As there is a fixed price agreed for consumers, when forecasts and current wholesale prices change, so will the difference between the fixed price and the wholesale price. To be clear, the cost of the project has not changed. It remains a good deal for consumers—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman is chuntering at me from a sedentary position, but let us be clear: we cannot just wait and see. We have to make investment decisions and stick by them. We cannot simply magic electricity out of thin air; we need to invest, make decisions, and be committed to them.

Smart Meters

9. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What progress her Department has made on working with the major energy suppliers on the smart meter roll-out to ensure maximum benefit to consumers. [905857]

21. **Craig Williams** (Cardiff North) (Con): What progress her Department has made on working with the major energy suppliers on the smart meter roll-out to ensure maximum benefit to consumers. [905871]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): Good progress has been made to date on the roll-out of smart meters, with more than 3.6 million meters installed across the country. There is evidence that these consumers are already saving energy. Research by British Gas shows that smart meter customers have reduced their energy consumption by an average of about 3% for both gas and electricity.

Stephen Metcalfe: Having recently installed a smart meter, I can confirm that it is a very useful tool in managing energy consumption. Will my hon. Friend join me in encouraging my constituents to contact their energy supplier to explore how these very useful little gadgets can save them some money?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes. I can also tell my hon. Friend that they are very useful when going away for the weekend, as a parent, because if your electricity use suddenly goes up dramatically, you know the kids are up to something.

My hon. Friend is exactly right. We need to encourage consumers to have smart meters installed in their homes to make sure that they can enjoy the benefits that he sets out. I encourage his constituents, and all our constituents, to find out more about the benefits of smart meters, and to request an installation or visit the Smart Energy GB website.

Craig Williams: Many of my vulnerable constituents are on pre-payment meters, so smart energy meters present them with a terrific opportunity to get better

value for money. Does my hon. Friend agree that smart meters have a terrific role to play for pre-payment customers?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Smart metering will transform the experience of pre-payment customers. Topping up pre-payment meters should become as easy as topping up a mobile phone. I welcome the fact that a number of energy suppliers are already offering or trialling pay-as-you-go services for their customers.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I welcome the Secretary of State to her new post? She has done some very good work despite, as she knows, my disappointment with her views on Brexit. May I urge her to think again about smart metering being rolled out to every home in the country? May I also remind her that the research and innovation behind smart metering happened partly because of university co-operation across Europe? Contracts are already being withdrawn from British universities because of Brexit.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, but I am not actually in a new post; I am in my old post. Secondly, I do not recognise any damage to our smart metering roll-out as a result of contracts not being awarded to universities. I have not seen any evidence of that. Thirdly, it is our continued plan that all households and businesses should be offered a smart meter by 2020.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm whether her Department is to be abolished? If so, who will take forward the work in progress on smart meters in Cabinet?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman will have to wait and see, but I can tell him that the commitment to our energy trilemma, smart meters and all our policies will remain as strong as ever.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Smart meters can reduce our energy usage, but there were 43,900 excess winter deaths last year and a “Panorama” investigation revealed that more than 9,000 of them were directly related to living in cold and poorly insulated homes. Will the Minister explain why there has been an 80% drop in the installation of major energy efficiency measures in British homes over the past four years, and will she agree to have urgent talks with Lord Adonis to ensure that energy efficiency is a top priority for the National Infrastructure Commission?

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that fuel poverty in this country has to be tackled, and that is an absolute priority for my Department. He may be aware that we have launched our consultation on the energy company obligation to ensure that we refocus it on the fuel-poor and do everything we can to ensure warmer homes.

Retail Energy Market: Switching

10. **Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): What assessment she has made of recent trends in the rate of switching in the retail energy market. [905858]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that switching was at a four-year high in 2015, with 6.1 million electricity and gas switches across the UK. That is an increase of about 15% since 2014. Some 2 million further gas and electricity switches have already taken place between January and March of this year, with 52% of those customers moving to newer suppliers.

Mims Davies: Will the Minister confirm that the Government are specifically ensuring that those who are in most need or who are financially challenged, including those in my constituency and across the UK who are in need of lower energy bills, are benefiting from an efficient and easier switching regime?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, I can assure my hon. Friend that the Government are acting to do just that. In fact, customers on expensive standard tariffs could save £325 by switching to the cheapest fixed deal, which is why we continue to encourage customers to switch through our big energy saving network initiative.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): When trying to compare tariffs, most of them remain incomprehensible, which particularly affects my most vulnerable constituents, including the elderly, the disabled and those with mental health issues. What measures will the Minister take specifically to support the most vulnerable?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is exactly right that this is a very important area. I reiterate that over the past three years the big energy saving network has reached about 350,000 vulnerable consumers, helping them to reduce their bills by switching. Last year we ran a successful national TV and press advertising campaign, Power to Switch, and more than £38 million was saved by 130,000 households switching energy supplier. We continue to support good organisations such as Citizens Advice, which often hosts such initiatives and works face to face with vulnerable consumers to help them with the process of switching. I urge people who are struggling with fuel bills to give it a try; it really is not too difficult.

Low-carbon Economy

11. **Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the Government's decision on the level of the fifth carbon budget on investment in the low-carbon economy. [905859]

13. **Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the Government's decision on the level of the fifth carbon budget on investment in the low-carbon economy. [905862]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): The UK's system of carbon budgets provides the long-term certainty that businesses need to invest in our low-carbon economy. The Government announced last month that we would accept the advice of the Committee on Climate Change on the level of the fifth carbon budget. That announcement has been widely welcomed by the business community.

Luke Hall: I thank the Minister for that answer. Will she update the House on what steps the Government will take to involve investors and businesses in the preparation of their emissions reduction plan?

Andrea Leadsom: As my hon. Friend would expect, we are already busy working on that plan with other Departments, businesses, consumers and civil society. For example, we are already in discussion with the CBI, the Aldersgate Group and Energy UK among others to arrange specific stakeholder events, ensuring that our emissions reduction plan is built from the ground up, with input from a range of stakeholders.

Mark Menzies: Westinghouse nuclear fuels is the second largest employer in Fylde and produces nuclear fuel for 15% of the UK's electricity production. What assurances can the Minister give that this Government will continue to support the UK's domestic nuclear fuel industry and take us to a low-carbon future?

Andrea Leadsom: Nuclear power is a vital part of our work to build a secure, affordable and clean energy system to keep the lights on in the decades ahead. The Westinghouse facility in my hon. Friend's constituency has a crucial role to play, providing the fuel that powers our nuclear fleet, as well as employment to many in his constituency.

EU Referendum: Investment in Power Sector

12. **Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab):** What assessment she has made of the effect of the outcome of the EU referendum on investor confidence in the UK power sector. [905861]

16. **Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP):** What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the outcome of the EU referendum on levels of overseas investment in the UK energy sector. [905865]

20. **Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP):** What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the outcome of the EU referendum on levels of overseas investment in the UK energy sector. [905870]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): The Government have engaged extensively with investors since the EU referendum, sending a clear message that the UK remains open for investment and business. I am very clear that the UK is an attractive environment for investment in energy. My Department will continue to take the steps needed to deliver secure, affordable and clean energy for families and businesses across the UK.

Mary Creagh: As one former leadership contender to another, I commiserate with the Minister over the events of the past week and wish her well in the reshuffle today.

The manufacturers organisation the EEF told the Environmental Audit Committee, which I chair, that the decision to cancel the carbon capture and storage competition in the autumn statement came as a huge shock and damaged investor confidence in the industry. We also heard from Siemens, which has invested £160 million

in the wind industry in Yorkshire, that the referendum result means it is facing a whole new set of unanswered questions. What steps is the Minister taking to bring confidence to investors in low-carbon industries?

Andrea Leadsom: In fact Siemens has recommitted to its investment in Hull, which is great news for that area. I had a meeting a few days ago—it seems like a year ago—with the Offshore Wind Industry Council to talk about confidence in investment. Its members all remain committed to the UK, and EDF has reaffirmed its commitment to the UK.

Specifically on CCS, as I have said many times in this Chamber, we remain committed to looking at what our future strategy for CCS will be. The fact that the competition did not make the cut in terms of taxpayer value for money at the last spending round does not mean that we are ruling out CCS. We believe that it continues to play an important role in the future of our decarbonisation strategy.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: The recent EU referendum result has of course created widespread insecurity in this market and, indeed, the wider economy. There is now an increasing number of possible options from the Brexit negotiations, each leading to a number of regulatory and market options for the UK's relationship with the EU, with each of these having differing implications for the investment in and trade of energy. What steps has the Department already taken to guarantee that overseas investment in our energy sector is protected, whichever of the outcomes is taken?

Andrea Leadsom: I believe that we will see huge opportunities in leaving the European Union. As is always the case in the United Kingdom, we will take great steps to ensure business confidence and ensure that those who have invested in this country will be able to use our very sound contract law and investor base to be able to continue to fruition with their projects.

Deidre Brock: I am sure the Minister will agree that the EU exit vote has caused uncertainty. I am sure that this new and slightly unexpected Government, with the paint still drying on the signs, will want to boost investment and development in the energy sector. Will the Minister tell us how the Government will create incentives for investment and boost consumer confidence?

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Lady will accept that my concern about investor confidence led to a very significant move on my own part to make sure that we had certainty in the UK. The new Government will absolutely be keen to reassure investors and to make sure that this remains a very strong place to invest.

Energy Tariffs

14. **Ben Howlett** (Bath) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that energy consumers are on the best value energy tariffs. [905863]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): The most effective way for energy consumers to make sure that they are on the best value tariff is to shop around. I encourage all consumers to engage in the market and to make use of

the Ofgem-approved price comparison websites that are readily available. We have taken action to make it simpler and quicker to switch supplier, and we are working with Ofgem to move to reliable next-day switching.

Ben Howlett: I thank the Minister for that response. Many people remain unaware of how easy it is to switch energy providers and save money. What actions is her Department taking to encourage people to look into switching providers?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to say that we need to make sure that people are aware not just of the benefits of switching, but of how easy it is to do. We are taking steps to raise awareness through the big energy saving network, Big Energy Saving Week and the Power to Switch campaign. We are also working to improve the switching process for customers. We launched the energy switch guarantee last month to give consumers confidence to switch, and we are working with Ofgem to deliver next-day switching.

Security of Electricity Supply

17. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure security of electricity supply in winter 2016-17 and in future years. [905867]

19. **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure security of electricity supply in winter 2016-17 and in future years. [905869]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): Our top priority is to make sure that families and businesses have secure energy supplies, and therefore to ensure that National Grid has the right tools in place to manage the system. Our energy security has been strengthened by reforms of the capacity market, including holding an auction this coming winter for delivery in 2017-18.

Sir David Amess: As the promoter of the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act 2000, I am very interested in energy supplies in winter. Will my hon. Friend do all she can to encourage investment in new gas generation?

Andrea Leadsom: The capacity market is the most cost-effective way to make sure we have the infrastructure to cope with unexpected demand peaks. In May, we committed to buying more capacity and buying it sooner. New build capacity is eligible for 15-year agreements, providing a secure revenue stream and thereby encouraging new gas infrastructure.

Richard Graham: Yesterday I launched a new all-party parliamentary group for marine energy, to promote the fantastic potential from our tumultuous seas of energy, whether tidal, stream or wave. Does my hon. Friend agree that when the Hendry review comes out in November this year, the Government should respond as fast and as positively as possible to make us a world leader in what could be one of the great sources of energy in the world?

Andrea Leadsom: We certainly recognise the potential that tidal lagoons could bring to the UK, which is why we have commissioned this independent review. We are

absolutely committed to providing clean, affordable and secure energy that we can rely on now and in the future. This review will report in the autumn and will help us to determine what role tidal lagoons could play in that.

Mr Speaker: Finally, Antoinette Sandbach.

Shale Gas

22. **Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that protected areas remain protected from the development of shale gas. [905872]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): Strong protections for sensitive areas are already provided by the existing regimes. Those regulations ban fracking in national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty and other sensitive areas to a depth of 1,200 metres. In response to our consultation on 28 June, we have confirmed that fracking will not be permitted from wells drilled at the surface of our most valued areas, including sites of special scientific interest.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am grateful for the Minister's response. Petroleum exploration and development licences have been granted in areas with green-belt and nature conservation status in my constituency. Can she reassure me that her recent announcement about protection from surface drilling will extend to the green belt and sites of special scientific interest?

Andrea Leadsom: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the planning process will take into account all issues related to sensitive areas. I can also tell her that fracking will not be permitted from wells drilled at the surface of areas such as national parks, the broads, areas of outstanding natural beauty, world heritage sites, sites of special scientific interest, Ramsar sites and Natura 2000 sites.

Topical Questions

T1. [905873] **Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): As things stand, I am delighted that the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) and I are able to take forward the enormous job of the Department of Energy and Climate Change. I am quite sure that there will be further announcements later that we all look forward to hearing.

Mims Davies: Worryingly, my constituency is very polluted in parts of Botley and central Eastleigh. What progress is being made to ensure that all cars imported to this country meet our rigorous emissions standards?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely assure my hon. Friend that the Department for Transport is looking closely at transport and vehicle emissions. Further measures will be brought forward this autumn on meeting the increasingly stringent emissions requirements.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Some 23,000 businesses in the UK have solar panels on their roofs. If proposals in the current review of business rates go ahead, instead of paying £8 per kW, those companies could end up paying between £43 and £61 from next April. Up until last week, the Minister's Department did not even know about that. Will she find out why her officials have been sleeping on the job, and speak to Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government to get this mess sorted out?

Andrea Leadsom: I am not aware of any sleeping on the job. If the hon. Gentleman wishes me to liaise with DCLG I will look into that, but we are certainly not asleep on the job.

T2. [905874] **Graham Evans** (Weaver Vale) (Con): I have never known my hon. Friend to sleep on the job and I wish her well in the reshuffle.

On the north side of the River Mersey, Fiddlers Ferry power station has closed down, while on the south side we have the blight of the new wind farm being built. Will my hon. Friend reassure my constituents in Frodsham and Helsby that the scientifically significant Frodsham marshes will not be blighted if fracking goes ahead?

Andrea Leadsom: We have more than 50 years of drilling experience in the UK, as well as one of the best records in the world for economic development alongside protection of the environment. All onshore oil and gas projects, including shale gas, are subject to the planning system, which addresses impacts such as traffic movements, noise, working hours and so on. National planning guidance states that any new development must be appropriate for its location and must take into account effects on health, the natural environment and general amenity, as well as any adverse effects from pollution. I hope that I can reassure my hon. Friend that his constituency will be protected.

T4. [905876] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): The Swansea Bay tidal lagoon project is hugely important not just to Swansea and south Wales but for potentially similar projects in Newport. When will the Minister have news of the independent report, and what is the timetable for making the decision?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that Charles Hendry was appointed to look into the whole case for tidal lagoons and the contribution they could make to our future energy security, but also, importantly, the cost trajectory. His report will come out later this year. I cannot put a specific time on that, but we are acting just as fast as we possibly can.

T3. [905875] **Ben Howlett** (Bath) (Con): What assessment has my hon. Friend made of progress on Hinkley Point following the result of the EU referendum?

Andrea Leadsom: Good progress continues to be made on Hinkley Point C. When I visited the site a few months ago, it was very apparent that a huge amount of work is already going on. As my hon. Friend will have seen, EDF has reaffirmed its full commitment to the project following the result of the referendum on 23 June.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that scrapping the Department of Energy and Climate Change could only be taken as a signal that the new Government attach less significance to these important issues?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. The assumption that we have to have a Department for something in order to meet objectives on it is not one I agree with at all.

T5. [905877] **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): I have just been sent a report from Southend-on-Sea citizens advice bureau calling for a fair deal for prepayment meter users, who seem to be getting a second-class service. Given that they are the most vulnerable people, will my hon. Friend see to it that her Department looks again at the system?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree that prepayment meter customers get a rough deal, with a far smaller choice of tariffs and suppliers than customers who pay by other methods. That is why we are supporting recommendations by the Competition and Markets Authority to make it easier for prepayment meter customers to switch supplier, and to introduce a safeguard tariff cap for those customers until competition in that segment of the market significantly improves.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): May I too wish the hon. Lady well in the reshuffle? We worked closely together on early intervention policy, and I know how committed she is to that.

My constituent Margaret Graham recently attended my surgery. She was at her wits' end over protracted dealings with her energy supplier, npower, which has continually failed her since it made a huge error resulting in a very large overpayment. Since my intervention it has apologised and offered £150 in compensation, but this has been going on since 2013. Can the Minister assure me and the House that energy companies will treat their customers fairly and with respect, and does she agree that they should be held fully to account for their failings?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the hon. Lady—she is exactly right. Energy suppliers must behave properly towards their customers. There are too many complaints and not a good enough service, and that has to change.

T6. [905882] **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on fielding all the questions over the last hour, and on the manner in which she has conducted herself over the past week. I believe that she has done herself a great deal of credit, and I add my voice to those wishing her well later today.

Following the historic vote by the British people to leave the EU, the UK once again has full control over our VAT. One way we could help households across the UK with high energy bills would be to cut VAT on energy. Will the Minister support calls for such a move?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and to prove that collective responsibility has once again taken effect, I reassure him that VAT is a matter for the Treasury. I agree about the need to reduce the

number of households in fuel poverty, which is why we are consulting on proposals to focus more of the energy company obligation on those most in need. We have laid regulations that will ensure continued support for more than 2 million households through the warm home discount.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The Minister suggested that there has been no loss of confidence in investment in clean energy as a result of the vote to leave the EU. Will she explain why the Swedish firm Vattenfall is reviewing its investment in the UK, which will put £5.5 billion of investment in offshore wind at risk?

Andrea Leadsom: I made it clear that continued, enormous investment is coming to the UK from offshore and onshore investors. I am not aware of the hon. Lady's particular point, but the UK remains an attractive place to invest. The Government are doing everything they can to ensure that we get even more overseas investment in our energy infrastructure.

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure the effectiveness of the capacity mechanism in bringing forward new gas-fired power stations such as that at the Carrington site?

Andrea Leadsom: The capacity market is incredibly important for ensuring secure energy supplies. We recently announced that we will bring forward an earlier auction for 2017-18, to secure more capacity. We hope that that will enable us to get over this short-term issue where wholesale prices are so low that the viability of power stations is at risk. By having that capacity mechanism firmly embedded in our energy supply, we believe that we will bring forward new, attractive gas investment through longer-term contracts that will benefit the UK energy consumer.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The Government have estimated that the capacity auction this winter could put £36 on customer bills. Given that today the Minister has talked about keeping down customer bills, how does she think that that auction will affect those bills?

Andrea Leadsom: Our central assessment is that the impact on bills could be up to £28, but our impact assessment also shows that if we did nothing, further power station closures could add a further £46 to consumer bills. We believe that this auction is good value for consumers, and it provides the energy security on which we all rely.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What opportunities does my hon. Friend see for both inward investment and selling our services abroad as a result of breaking free of the shackles of the EU?

Andrea Leadsom: I personally believe there will be huge opportunities. We now have the chance to negotiate free trade deals with the rest of the world. We have the opportunity to determine policies for energy without the need to constantly look for EU state aid. The opportunities for the future are enormous, and I look forward to being able to promote UK plc in the world.

Business of the House

10.35 am

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

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

MONDAY 18 JULY—Debate on a motion relating to the UK's nuclear deterrent.

TUESDAY 19 JULY—Second Reading of the Higher Education and Research Bill.

WEDNESDAY 20 JULY—Opposition day (6th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 21 JULY—Debate on a motion relating to a ban on manufacture, sale, possession and use of snares, followed by general debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. Both subjects were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 22 JULY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 5 September will include:

MONDAY 5 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the Finance Bill (day 1).

Paul Flynn: When can we have a debate on recidivism? This problem has not been reduced by any Government in the past 43 years. The cycle of repeated offending goes on and on, and it is now afflicting politics.

Yesterday's Prime Minister committed political suicide by giving into his party and ordering a referendum that guaranteed the destruction of his premiership. Are we seeing the same thing repeated today? The hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) might have made a perfectly adequate Minister for the import of second-hand water cannon, but he is now the Foreign Secretary—especially for his services to Europhobia. He has been sacked twice from previous jobs for not telling the truth; he has insulted the President of the United States; and he has attacked people from all parts of the world from Liverpool to Papua New Guinea. Do these qualities mean he will be supreme in an area where the qualities of diplomacy and truthfulness are in demand?

The right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) is returning to the Government without any explanation of why he was disgraced and sacked from his previous appointment. At the time, Sir Philip Mawer was the independent adviser on ministerial conduct. He said that the right hon. Gentleman should have been investigated for what happened at the Ministry of Defence. The Prime Minister refused to refer the case to the adviser and Sir Philip resigned. The right hon. Member for North Somerset received absolution by resignation. What this means—this is a matter of concern for the Leader of the House, because it is his responsibility—is that the return of the right hon. Member for North Somerset to the Cabinet is a degradation of the probity of this House and the advances made by the previous Government. A Government are being created not in the best interests of the country but to deal with the perpetual internal war in the Conservative party between Europhiliacs and Europhobes.

Chilcot has given its verdict. It is a thunderous verdict of guilty not just for one man but for this House, the previous Government, the Opposition and three Select Committees. We are guilty, and are judged guilty, of commanding our valiant troops to fight a vain, avoidable war, and the Leader of the House is uniquely qualified and responsible for answering the charge.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has apologised on behalf of the Labour party: 179 of our gallant British soldiers died; their loved ones have a wound of grief that will never heal; 3,000 have been maimed in body and mind; uncounted Iraqis were killed, made homeless or exiled; the cycle of terrorism continues to this day—and all because of an act of folly, incompetence and vanity by this House. Will the Leader of the House take responsibility—it is his job—and arrange a formal apology, preferably face to face with the bereaved and surviving injured? This is the least a grateful nation can do for those we have grievously wronged.

Chris Grayling: I will come back to the last point in a moment, but I should start with congratulations: we are both still here; the hon. Gentleman is on his third week in the job. He has not yet acquired a new job, but with changes in the structure of Departments, perhaps he will have the opportunity of a third one—shadow International Trade Secretary—to go with his existing portfolio. If Labour party Front Benchers were a football team, they would have him in goal, him in defence, him in attack, lots of people on the left wing, nobody willing to play on the right and endless own goals.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the Foreign Secretary. I will take no lessons from a party that has the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) as its shadow Foreign Secretary. We have on those Benches a party that is not fit to be an Opposition, let alone an alternative Government. Over the past few months, we have heard from people now holding senior positions on the Opposition Benches views that undermine our armed forces and defences and are wholly unaligned with the national interest.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned matters of propriety. I simply remind him—he has raised this at business questions before from the Back Benches—that if he has complaints about any Member, there are channels available by which he can pursue them. But he has not done so. He also talked about internal war. This week of all weeks, a Labour politician talks of internal war in another political party. Labour Members have been trying again and again to get rid of their leader, but they just cannot do it. He is on the ballot paper and will probably win again, and they will be resigning all year. It is a complete shambles and Labour is a complete disgrace to this country politically. I will take no lessons from the Opposition about internal wars within a political party.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Chilcot and says it is my responsibility to answer the charges. I simply remind him that it was a Labour Prime Minister who stood in the House and explained why we should support his decision to go to war in Iraq. It was a Labour Prime Minister, and it is for the Labour party to explain itself, not those of us who were in opposition at the time.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last weekend, I and Members from across the House attended a rally for the National Council of Resistance of Iran.

[Bob Blackman]

Unfortunately, we had to go to Paris to meet those good people and their brave leader, Maryam Rajavi. Why can we not invite the leader of the resistance to this country, so that we might help free Iran from the shackles of the mullahs?

Chris Grayling: I know that my hon. Friend believes passionately in this cause, and I am sure that the Foreign Secretary will have heard his comments and will want to give them careful thought.

May I take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friend, in his capacity as deputy Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, and the Chairman, who is also here, for returning to the tradition of a pre-recess Adjournment debate? It is something that the House values, and I am glad that they have done it.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week's business. In the night and morning of the long silver spoons, the nation was glued to the television. "What would Grayling get?" was the question that perplexed the nation—the man who designed and fashioned the new Prime Minister's leadership coronation would surely get a top job, but he is back here with us this morning, and the nation can only breathe a collective sigh of relief.

We had thought that the new Prime Minister did not have a sense of humour, but she has proved us totally wrong on that one by appointing the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) as the Foreign Secretary. We could almost have heard the guffaws of laughter from Parliaments and ambassadors last night as news got around that "Boris" was in charge of the UK's foreign policy—and he is in charge of MI6, too. Perhaps the Leader of the House will tell us a little about how this new restructured Government are going to work. When will we see the new diet of departmental questions and how this is all going to come together?

Is it not ironic that the first motion that the new Prime Minister will put before this House on Monday is for a new generation of weapons of mass destruction? That will be resolutely opposed by my hon. Friends and me, and we hope that the Labour party will join us in opposing it. When this country is facing the disaster of Brexit and further austerity, in what world is it right to spend billions and billions of pounds on new nuclear weapons and nuclear re-armament?

Lastly, we are not even sure whether the Labour party has enough personnel resources to fill the places in all the new Departments that will be created. I have asked you this question already, Mr Speaker, but at what point do they fail to meet their obligations as the official Opposition as clearly set out in "Erskine May"? Can we have a debate about what is expected from Oppositions? Perhaps the Leader of the House will support a rearrangement of the furniture, so that this Government and he can experience some real opposition in this House.

Chris Grayling: I was slightly surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman talk about the role of the Leader of the House as not being a top job; of course, he has the

Scottish National party equivalent of that job, so I take it that he is, in fact, a junior member of his Front-Bench team.

On departmental questions, the hon. Gentleman knows that the Government are in the middle of a process of restructuring. We will make further information available shortly, and the House authorities will set out plans for a revised schedule for parliamentary questions. That is inevitable, and it will be in place for the start of the September sittings. As it stands, next week has a fairly routine collection of oral questions and I do not think there is any need for change there.

On Trident, the hon. Gentleman and his party have been very clear about their views. I am delighted to say that a large number of Labour Members will support us on Monday, and I am grateful to them for their support. What puzzles me is this: the SNP is vigorously opposed to Trident, but are SNP Members actually arguing that the Rosyth facility should be transferred south of the border? Are they suggesting that? Are they suggesting that the facilities in Scotland that provide jobs for people in Scotland should be transferred south of the border? [Interruption.] Are they or are they not suggesting that? I suspect that a lot of people who work in the nuclear sector in Scotland and who support those submarines would be deeply distressed if their jobs disappeared.

The Labour Front Bench is an issue on which the hon. Gentleman and I can clearly agree. It is an extraordinary situation to see multi-tasking and to see people who resigned from the Labour Front Bench 26 years ago making a comeback, as the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) has done. It will be fascinating to see over the next few weeks whether they will be able to get their act back together again or whether this shambles is going to continue for month after month.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): One of the reasons why many people voted for Brexit was that they believed it would provide this country and our communities with more opportunity to shape their own futures. May we have a debate, in turn, on a regional strategy for transport infrastructure to sit alongside other provisions such as health and education, so that any additional housing can be sustainable?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend has made a similar point before, and I know she feels strongly about the devolution of powers to the regions. I am absolutely certain that, as we leave the European Union, there will be more opportunity for that to take place. Ironically, I suspect there will be more powers heading for Scotland, as well as for Wales and Northern Ireland. The point that she makes is a good one. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will be in his place to answer questions on Monday, and my hon. Friend might like to bring the subject to the Floor of the House through an Adjournment debate.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for filling in for me over the last two weeks. Two weeks ago, I visited the Somme, which ironically seemed like a place of real tranquillity in comparison with this place recently. Last week, we saw the opening of the A1 road-widening

scheme in Gateshead, which has brought immense calm to the town centre as a result of displacing traffic. We are very grateful for that.

Will the Leader of the House please confirm that Thursday 8 September will be available for Back-Bench business? If business is to be tabled for that day, we shall need to consider it and table it next Tuesday, but without confirmation of the date, we shall not be able to do so.

Chris Grayling: Let me begin by welcoming the hon. Gentleman back to the Chamber. We have missed him over the last couple of weeks.

I am delighted to hear about the opening of the widened A1. There is something that I find very encouraging nowadays. Ten years ago, when I was shadow Transport Secretary, I travelled the country visiting marginal seats and other areas where industrial development was taking place but essential transport projects were not. Now, I am delighted to discover that such projects are being developed wherever I go, and the widened A1 is one of them. It will bring real bonuses to the north-east, and it is a sign that we care about areas—including the north-east—that are really important to the country.

As for that date in September, I will have a look at it. We have planned business only up to the day on which the House returns after the recess, but I will give careful thought to whether we can accommodate the hon. Gentleman in this regard.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will the Leader of the House arrange for whoever happens to be the Minister responsible—I think it unlikely to be me—to make a statement about the status and protection of the green belt? My constituents in Burley in Wharfedale are facing a planning application for the building of 500 houses on the green belt in that village, and my constituents in Baildon are facing similar proposals. Surely, the whole point of the green belt is that it should be immune from house building. My constituents do not trust Bradford Council to look after their interests, and look to the Government to ensure that they are properly protected.

Chris Grayling: I am sorry that my hon. Friend is so pessimistic about his prospects in the reshuffle. I think we would all value his contributions were he to appear at this Dispatch Box.

Questions to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will take place on Monday, and my hon. Friend will then have an opportunity to raise an issue that I know is important to him and his constituents. As ever, he is a powerful advocate for Yorkshire and will continue to be so, even if it is still from the Back Benches.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Has the Leader of the House received a request from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills for him to provide Government time for a debate on the fantastic contribution that the leisure industries make to the UK economy? Such a debate would allow Ministers to tell us how UK manufacturers will fulfil demand for major new infrastructure: a transcontinental network of zip wires to enable our new Foreign Secretary to travel around the world cheaply, with low environmental impact, and in the style to which he is accustomed.

Chris Grayling: It is an interesting idea, but I think we will probably be investing in infrastructure that is more used to cars, trains and buses.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The outgoing Chancellor was a great proponent of the northern powerhouse, and policies connected with that initiative are vital to constituencies such as mine. May we have an early debate on how new Ministers will develop the northern powerhouse concept?

Chris Grayling: The new Chancellor will take questions in the House on Tuesday, but I can also say that there is no question of a change in our focus on supporting the development of the northern part of the country, and encouraging economic growth and new investment. That will remain a priority for the new Government, and we are committed to a continuation of the progress that we have already made.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): One of my constituents is currently detained at Yarl's Wood. She is suffering ill health, and does not feel that her health concerns are being addressed. There is evidence to corroborate that. According to a recent report from the National Audit Office, 35% of recommendations from the chief inspector of prisons have yet to be implemented. Will the current Leader of the House offer an urgent debate on the issue?

Chris Grayling: I do not know about the individual constituency case, but I am sure that the hon. Lady will raise it with the new Home Secretary. Of course there are lessons to be learnt from the inspections that are carried out in institutions such as Yarl's Wood. It continues to be a priority for the Government to ensure that we detain people decently, but also to ensure that we detain people when there is a serious question mark over their right to be in the country, and I think that that is right and proper.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Last night, GHA Coaches—which is in the constituency of Wrexham but has two depots in my constituency, in Tarvin and Winsford—went into administration, with the potential loss of 300 to 400 jobs. I should be grateful if the Leader of the House encouraged the new Secretary of State for Wales to liaise with the Department for Transport, and indeed with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, to establish what support can be given to those who may be facing redundancy.

Chris Grayling: I am very sorry to hear of what must be very difficult and distressing news for my hon. Friend's constituents and those in the next-door constituency of Wrexham, and all our good wishes in this House go out to those affected. When a business is put into administration, one always hopes that it is possible to save it. I know that the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Wales Office will do everything they can to provide appropriate support, where they are able to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Life in Iraq: imagine your phone rings and the question is, "Are you a Christian?", and the answer is, "Yes, I believe in Jesus." The second question is, "Are you in the police?", and the answer is,

[*Jim Shannon*]

“Yes, I am,” and then you are told that you must leave or die. This is what happened to Franco Said, a policeman in Baghdad, and his family. They fled to Irbil in northern Iraq the very next day. No one is safe from Daesh in Iraq. Murdering the Christian faith in Iraq is truly a reality for many. Will the Leader of the House agree to there being a statement on this matter as soon as possible?

Chris Grayling: I have every sympathy with the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises. The tragedy is that parts of the middle east used to be beacons of stability, with religions standing side by side, having done so for hundreds of years. The persecution that has taken place of Christian populations, typically by extremists, is absolutely unacceptable and a tragedy. I know the hon. Gentleman’s comments will have been listened to by the new Foreign Secretary. We as a Government continue to do everything we can to encourage an end to this kind of persecution, but of course we face extraordinarily difficult security situations there. We will carry on doing our best.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The Government are preparing to negotiate Brexit, which will rightly secure the future of EU nationals in the UK and UK citizens living abroad. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is a fine opportunity to settle the issue of the *lettori*, foreign nationals working in Italian universities who have been discriminated against in their pay and working conditions for decades, despite several EU judgments against the Italian Government? May we have a statement from the Government to say that the issue of the *lettori* will be dealt with during the Brexit renegotiations? It would be very satisfying, on leaving the EU, to resolve an issue that we are completely unable to deal with while we are in the EU.

Chris Grayling: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has campaigned on this issue for a long time; he has raised it with me before at business questions. The Foreign Office continues to put pressure on the Italian Government over this. Our ambassador in Rome has made representations recently about it, and will continue to do so. It is, and should remain, unacceptable for discrimination of this kind to take place in any civilised country.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Last week, this House debated claims by the Vote Leave campaign that an extra £350 million a week would be available for the NHS if we voted to leave the EU. The problem with that debate was that none of the Members who made those claims attended the House to answer for their claims, so may we have that debate again, please, only this time will the Members associated with that claim attend and answer for their actions?

Chris Grayling: It is the job of the Government to respond in this House. Those who stand at this Dispatch Box speak for the Government, not for campaigns for either side in the referendum debate.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): In the light of growing concerns about the increase in childhood obesity, may we have a ministerial statement on what the

Government are doing to tackle the problem, and will the Leader of the House confirm whether that will include bringing forward a childhood obesity strategy?

Chris Grayling: I can confirm that work has been taking place in the Department of Health on such a strategy. Of course, I hope that the decision we took to introduce a sugar tax in the Budget will help improve the situation with childhood obesity.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I am delighted that the Leader of the House is still here, but we all know that soon one of the great offices of state will undoubtedly be his. In the meantime, may we, through him, congratulate the Prime Minister on her choices and the quality of her sackings and dismissals from Government over the last 24 hours? I think that we can agree on that, on a cross-party basis. The new Secretaries of State—the right hon. Members for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), and for North Somerset (Dr Fox)—are serious politicians, but it seems that their boss is the court jester: the new Foreign Secretary. Will these serious politicians have their own Departments of State, or will they be answering to the new Foreign Secretary?

Chris Grayling: All the new Secretaries of State will be accountable to this House in the normal way when they head a Department. The Department that will take us out of the European Union has been expressly designed by the new Prime Minister to be a separate Department, and its Secretary of State will be accountable to the House in the normal way.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Will the Government make a statement on the implications for the House’s Select Committees of any changes in the organisational structure of the Government?

Chris Grayling: That is also something that we will have to address, probably during the September fortnight. Clearly there is a relationship between a Government Department and a Select Committee, so as new Departments are established, or existing ones are reshaped or renamed, the Select Committee structure will have to change as well. That is something that we will address over the next few days in preparation for either renaming Select Committees or appointing members to new ones when we return after the summer recess.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I for one am extremely pleased to see the Leader of the House still in his position, because in April I advised him that Porthcawl primary school, with its Porthcawl power team, had won second place in the Jaguar Formula 1 primary schools challenge, demonstrating the great capabilities of science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM—teaching in Wales, and I can now bring him the good news that the school won the national championship. Will he give the House a statement of his support and congratulate Porthcawl primary school’s power team on its great success in demonstrating the importance of STEM teaching across the UK? Before I sit down, may I say—on behalf of myself, of the First Minister of Wales, my Assembly Member Carwyn Jones, and of the leader of my local authority, who is our armed forces champion—that in our view, the Labour party strongly supports the armed forces?

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making that last point. There are those in the Labour party who do not take that view, or who have misgivings about aspects of the way in which our armed forces work, and many of them sit on the Front Bench, but I know that a large number of people across the ranks on the Labour Benches are as committed to our armed forces as anyone on our side of the House. I am also glad to be able to respond to this latest success. I remember the hon. Lady asking her earlier question and my telling her what a great achievement that was, but to win the national prize is excellent. The school must be enormously proud, and I am sure that everyone across the House would wish to send it their congratulations. She has every reason to be proud of her young constituents.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): The death toll from recent protests in Indian-held Kashmir continues to grow, and hundreds have now been injured in the violence, most of them young people. Many face losing their sight after being blinded by shotgun pellets. Given the widespread concern in the UK about the situation in Kashmir, may we have an urgent debate on the violence there?

Chris Grayling: The reports of the disturbances, injuries and deaths in Kashmir are very worrying, and they will be a matter of very great concern indeed to members of the Kashmiri community in this country. Of course this Government will continue, as we always do, to provide support and encouragement to—and put pressure on—other Governments where this kind of ongoing trouble is taking place. We will continue to do everything we can to facilitate peace in that troubled part of the Asian subcontinent.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): When the Leader of the House was talking about Chilcot earlier, he said that, on the issue of why we went to war in Iraq, it was “for the Labour party to explain itself, not those of us who were in opposition at the time”. That is not entirely true, however, because the Government of which he is a member are refusing to release the confidential advice that Whitehall officials gave to Gordon Brown about the remit of the inquiry. That advice made it impossible for Sir John Chilcot to rule on whether the 2003 war was illegal. The Government’s refusal flies in the face of an Information Tribunal ruling ordering the material’s release. This means that the public cannot see what options were considered when the nature and scope of the inquiry were decided on in 2009. May we have a statement on the reasons for the refusal to release that advice?

Chris Grayling: I can see the report here in front of me, and the one thing that cannot be said about the Chilcot inquiry is that it was not exhaustive. Over the past couple of weeks, what has emerged is a really detailed piece of work about what happened, the mistakes that were made and the lessons learned, and I think we should all be grateful to Sir John for the work he has done. I do not think that there is any shortage of evidence about what took place.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Following the excellent report a few weeks ago by the Select Committee on Transport, may we have a debate on the full-lane running of motorways without the hard shoulder? Such motorways

have recently come to my constituency, and I welcome the investment, but I agree with the Committee’s safety concerns, particularly as at least 20 miles more of this type of motorway is coming to Staffordshire over the next few years.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely understand my hon. Friend’s point. Full-lane running can make a real difference on our motorways, particularly because cars are so much more reliable today than they were a generation ago, but I am aware of the Transport Committee’s concerns. The Government will respond to the report in due course and will always put safety right at the forefront of their considerations.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May we have a debate on Islamic extremism in UK prisons? The Acheson report is worrying and states that the National Offender Management Service does not have coherent strategy to deal with the threat.

Chris Grayling: I will certainly ensure that the new Justice Secretary is aware of the hon. Gentleman’s concerns. I tracked the issue closely when I was Justice Secretary. I looked very hard, talked to people on the frontline and made significant changes to how we handle Islamic extremism in our prisons, but we clearly need to watch the issue continually, and ensure that all the lessons are learned and that the report’s recommendations are studied carefully. I am sure that the Ministry of Justice will do that.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Both Corby and Kings Cliffe are suffering as a result of post office branch closures, so may we have a debate next week on the importance of putting alternative arrangements in place before branches are closed? Will the Leader of the House join me in calling on the Post Office to sort out this mess as a priority?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I join him in hoping that the Post Office will be careful and proactive in how it approaches closures, including looking for places where alternative provision can be made, particularly for the older generation, who often depend on their local post office. I am sure that the leadership of the Post Office will have heard his comments today and will take note.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The Government recently closed the consultation on reform of the civil service compensation scheme, which has seen significant reforms that the Government claim are fair and affordable in the long term, though we know what the Government’s track record on pensions is like. May we have a debate on that issue? My constituent Libby King transferred within the civil service from Northern Ireland to Scotland with 11 years’ service, and was told that she could not transfer, losing £25,000. May I also ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office—whoever that might be—to carry out an impact assessment and publish its findings, and to respond to the letter that I sent to the Minister some weeks ago?

Chris Grayling: I clearly do not know the details of the case concerned. If the hon. Lady has written to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, I will ask my office to

[Chris Grayling]

chase that up on her behalf. She mentioned our record on pensions; I remind her that it was us who relinked the state pension to earnings and created the triple-lock guarantee. We are doing more for our pensioners than previous Governments did for a long time.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Speaking from the Dispatch Box on Monday, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said:

“there is a very real systemic issue with DB”—
defined benefit—

“pension schemes that we need to look at”.—[*Official Report*, 11 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 12.]

He is right. Of the 6,000 defined benefit schemes in the UK, 5,000 are in deficit. The Pensions Regulator has raised concerns about additional risks to such schemes following the vote to leave the EU. We are talking about a real risk to pension fund members. May we have a debate in Government time on this crucial issue?

Chris Grayling: There is no doubt that defined benefit schemes face enormous pressures because, most fundamentally, of the change in lifespan over the past few decades. It is a good thing that we are living longer, but it makes it much more difficult to fund a pension fund through a vastly longer period of retirement. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about this issue, which the Department for Work and Pensions is monitoring carefully, and he will no doubt take advantage of the opportunities in the House, either in oral questions or in an Adjournment debate on the Floor of the House, to raise the matter directly with Ministers.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Public Health England recently reported a dramatic rise in the incidence of sexually transmitted disease in the UK since 2012. The figures should set alarm bells ringing about the availability of sexual health services, and the strong link between poor sexual health and higher levels of deprivation. May we have an urgent debate in Government time on the provision of sexual health services and investment in prevention to begin to address this growing health crisis?

Chris Grayling: One reason why we devolved responsibility for public health to local authorities is that it provides the opportunity for them to put in place tailored approaches to suit the needs of their local communities. Smart councils can now address very well precisely the kind of problem that the hon. Lady is talking about.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): In yesterday's Adjournment debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) made an excellent case for a city deal for the Tay cities area and, to be fair, the Minister was very positive in response to that. Stirling has also applied for a city deal, so will the Government make a statement on the status of current bids, including Stirling's, and in particular on the timescales, given the change of Government and the recent Brexit decision?

Chris Grayling: The city deals are proving to be a very positive thing. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will be here on Monday for Community and Local Government questions. He has

been heavily involved in city deals. It is worth remembering that if Scotland were independent from the United Kingdom, there would be no city deals.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): With the news that the new Prime Minister has sacked not only the Culture Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Justice Secretary, but the Education Secretary, would this be a good opportunity to debate improving the teaching of geography and of classics? Improving the former would allow the Leader of the House to learn the difference between Faslane and Rosyth, while improving the latter would enable the children of this country to learn that the appointment of the new Foreign Secretary must be the most remarkable appointment since the Emperor Caligula appointed his horse a senator.

Chris Grayling: Even the Leader of the House can get momentarily confused between two places, but I am still certain that the Scottish National party would struggle to convince the communities adjoining the base at Faslane that it is a jolly good idea to lose that facility to somewhere else; it makes no sense at all. On learning classics, I remind the hon. Gentleman that more than 1 million more children than in 2010 are being educated in good or excellent schools, and I am very proud of that.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): We now have a Prime Minister who, as Home Secretary, led the charge on scrapping the Human Rights Act. People will be concerned, given her promotion, that this assault on human rights will continue, possibly at a faster rate. May we have a debate on the matter, as that would give the new Cabinet a chance to spell out their intentions clearly?

Chris Grayling: Clearly, the hon. Lady did not listen to the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) a couple of weeks ago when she launched her campaign to be leader of our party and Prime Minister of this country, in which she said that she was not currently planning to pursue the option mentioned.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): May we have a debate on the powers of trading standards officers, particularly to deal with unscrupulous builders, as I have encountered a number of cases where people have been ripped off?

Chris Grayling: I know that this is a matter of concern, and these things have happened on one or two occasions in my constituency. I believe that trading standards officers have the powers to intervene, but if the hon. Gentleman has specific ideas about where those powers could and should be strengthened and wants to write to me with them, I will pass them to the appropriate Minister.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Was the hon. Lady present at the start?

Michelle Donelan: No.

Mr Speaker: In that case, I am afraid that the hon. Lady's words of wisdom—I do not doubt they will be just that—will have to be put into storage and used on another occasion, to which we all look forward with bated breath and beads of sweat upon our foreheads in eager anticipation.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Westbourne House is a hostel run by Humbercare in my constituency, and it deals with people who have a variety of issues. When it was set up, the chief executive of Humbercare decided not to consult the local community, and he also did not tell me about what was happening. Since then, despite the good efforts of the police and the front-line staff in the hostel, there have been ongoing problems with antisocial behaviour. Would it be possible to have a debate about the responsibilities of people who hold office—chief executives of charities and organisations—when they take decisions that cause real problems in local communities? It seems very difficult to get any action taken in cases such as this.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady makes her point in her customary forthright way. I know that this will be a matter of great concern to her constituents. It is essential that when such facilities are established, they are established in the right place. All of us over the years have discovered cases where that has not happened. The matter will have to be dealt with by the local authorities, but I understand the point that she makes, and she has made it very well.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In recent weeks, Clydebank Asbestos Group has brought to my attention the fact that requests to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs for workplace histories for those suffering from mesothelioma conditions, such as my constituents George Cairney, Dennis Dunn and Alistair McDermond, are still unresolved after almost a year. Will the Leader of the House urge the new Chancellor of the Exchequer to review HMRC's procedures and seek early compliance with workplace history requests for those suffering from life-threatening conditions, and to bring that review to the Floor of the House?

Chris Grayling: I understand how desperately difficult it is for people suffering from mesothelioma, which is a horrible, horrible condition. The new Chancellor will be here on Tuesday, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to come to the House and make that point. It is a very important one.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On a point similar to that raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 310 on the civil service compensation scheme and the Government's proposals to cut exit payments drastically by between 25% and 60%.

[That this House is concerned by the Government's proposed reforms of the Civil Service Compensation Scheme (CSCS); notes the proposal to drastically cut civil service compensation payments by between 25 and 60 per cent, affecting thousands of civil servants across the UK; is alarmed that these reforms are being brought forward at the same time as hundreds of government offices are closing and departments are facing immense pressure to downsize, putting thousands of civil service jobs at risk; is

aware that the then Minister for the Cabinet Office introduced changes to the CSCS in 2010 which he described as fair and sustainable in the long term; further notes that an equality impact assessment on these proposed new reforms has not been carried out; is concerned that cuts to the CSCS may affect older workers, women, those with disabilities and BME civil servants; notes that civil servants across the UK are facing an uncertain future and that additional uncertainty regarding exit payments has had a negative impact on staff morale and health; and therefore calls on the Government to halt its plans to further cut the CSCS and instead invest in the civil service through staff training, decent pay rises and honouring the terms and conditions of all civil servants.]

May we have a debate in Government time on this issue, as it is severely affecting civil servants' morale?

Chris Grayling: This is one of the difficult challenges that we have faced as a Government over the past six years. Ever since we took office in 2010, the compensation schemes have been very much out of kilter with what would happen in the private sector. There comes a point when we have to say that we have a duty to the taxpayer to have a system that is balanced, appropriate and consistent with what people would face in other employment.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am sure the whole House agrees that the UK Government should support the families of service personnel who have died while serving, but a group of UK military widows are prevented from receiving pensions if they remarried before April last year. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on how we can close this illogical and deeply unjust loophole?

Chris Grayling: This is an issue that the hon. Lady and other Members have raised before. I understand the point that she makes. I will make sure that the Defence Secretary is aware of the concerns that she has raised, and will ask him to write to her.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): May we have a debate on Cabinet appointments? It strikes me that aside from insulting foreigners, the new Foreign Secretary is not actually interested in foreign affairs. Since the beginning of this Parliament, he has tabled no written or oral questions to the Foreign Office and has bothered to turn up for only four Foreign and Commonwealth Office statements. Should we move to a position in which Parliament approves Cabinet appointments, as we do in Holyrood, rather than those being made at the Prime Minister's discretion?

Chris Grayling: Judging by the extent to which Members are going on about the new Foreign Secretary this morning, they must be quite afraid of his appointment.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Last week, I asked the Leader of the House a question about the House of Lords, and I got the worst answer that I have received in this place to date. That is quite an achievement, I can tell the right hon. Gentleman. When asked about the Government's position, his answer was that the SNP should have brought forward private Members' Bills. He knows full well that his Back Benchers would talk out private Members' Bills, and his Government

[Alan Brown]

have refused to implement the recommendations of the Procedure Committee to improve the private Members' Bills system. I will therefore try again. Why does the Leader of the House think it is acceptable to have 26 Bishops of the Church of England sitting in the House of Lords making legislation? Why should they be allowed to vote on legislation that affects Scotland?

Chris Grayling: I am going to give the hon. Gentleman the same answer again. I do not believe it is a priority for this country to start reforming the House of Lords. If SNP Members feel so strongly about it, why have we had no Opposition day debate about it and no private Members' Bills about it? They talk about the issues that they are concerned about, but when they have the chance to act, they simply do not.

Points of Order

11.19 am

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is a matter of record that, in recent weeks, there has been a significant escalation in misogynistic abuse and threats of violence, and those have been aimed disproportionately towards female MPs on both sides of the House. It is apparent that this abuse is completely out of hand now, with many Members fearful for their and their staff's safety, to the point where a number of Members have told me they are worried about their personal health. As we all know, this comes just four weeks to the day after our dear colleague was murdered. This cannot be allowed to continue. Could you advise the House what action it can take to make it clear that this behaviour will not be tolerated from any party and that all perpetrators will be punished appropriately?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling)
rose—

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, to whose point of order I will, in a moment, respond in very truncated terms, but the Leader of the House is signalling a desire to contribute, and it is important that we should hear from the right hon. Gentleman.

Chris Grayling: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. May I say first that I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady? A lot of work is taking place on measures to improve the security of right hon. and hon. Members. There is a project group looking in detail at what lessons can be learned from the tragic events of a few weeks ago. Next week, the Commission will consider improvements to the approach we take. Included in that approach will, I hope, be a greater opportunity for individual Members to raise concerns about their safety and to have those concerns acted on. Would everyone in the House please be reassured that you, myself, the Chairman of Ways and Means, and House officials are very mindful of the need for us to step up the security that is available to Members of Parliament and the service we provide to watch over their safety?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the Leader of the House for saying what he has said. Traditionally, we do not discuss security on the Floor of the House, for very good reasons. That said, the Leader of the House has just pointed out the extent of the work that is taking place behind the scenes, and it is only right that Members should know that what the right hon. Gentleman has said about co-operation between senior colleagues is, of course, absolutely pertinent and on the money.

The Leader of the House, I and the Chairman of Ways and Means are in regular discussion about these matters and, indeed, co-operated only a matter of a few days ago in putting together a letter to register our concerns and constructive proposals—that letter being to another senior colleague. It is also true, as the right hon. Gentleman has said, that these matters will be broached at the meeting of the House of Commons Commission on Monday. By definition, I cannot elaborate, because the discussion is to be had, but it is important that Members know that we are not in any way hermetically

sealed from the rest of our colleagues; we share and take very seriously these concerns. Moreover, those of us who are quite fortunate in our living accommodation are very conscious of those who are not, to whom we have a very particular sense of responsibility.

So far as the hon. Lady is concerned today, I just make the point that if any individual Member has particular personal concerns as of now, the best course of action is to approach the parliamentary security director for his best advice. He is immensely experienced and better placed at a practical level to give guidance than any of us laypersons could be. I hope that that is helpful, but doubtless there will be further updates in due course.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If I may, Sir, I would just like to thank you, the Leader of the House and my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) for their contributions, which were very reassuring.

May I seek your guidance about the rules of this place as they refer to the language we use when referring to each other? We call each other honourable Members, and the underlying assumption is that we act honourably and honestly. However, in business questions, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) raised the question of claims being made during the referendum campaign that we now believe to be palpably untrue. If I were to accuse a specific hon. Member of making those statements knowingly, you would instruct me to withdraw those comments, and if I refused, you would instruct me to leave this place. Nevertheless, I and other hon. Members believe that claims were made that were false, and I am looking for a mechanism by which to call out those Members we believe knowingly made them. Is there a mechanism within the rules of the House whereby I can make suggestions without falling foul of the rules, which, of course, we all hold dear?

Mr Speaker: There are procedures available for that purpose—procedures with which some very experienced Members of the House are well familiar. I think that for now my best advice to the hon. Gentleman is that he should go to the Table Office, where the staff will be very well able to point him to the approach or mechanism that might enable him to pursue his objective. It would be a profitable visit for the hon. Gentleman, and it would consume—he will know the whereabouts of the office in question—very little energy.

Report of the Iraq Inquiry

[2ND DAY]

[Relevant documents: First Report from the Defence Committee, Session 2015–16, on Flexible response? An SDSR checklist of potential threats and vulnerabilities, HC 493, and the Government's response, Fourth Special Report of Session 2015–16, HC 794. Eleventh Report from the Defence Committee, Session 2014–15, on Decision-making in Defence Policy, HC 682, and the Government's response, Third Special Report of Session 2015–16, HC 367. Seventh Report from the Defence Committee, Session 2014–15, on The situation in Iraq and Syria and the response to al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham (DAESH), HC 690, and the Government's response, Twelfth Special Report of Session 2014–15, HC 1126. Fourteenth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 2013–14, on Intervention: Why, When and How?, HC 952, and the Government's response, Fourth Special Report of Session 2014–15, HC 581.]

Debate resumed (Order, 13 July).

Question again proposed,

That this House has considered the Report of the Iraq Inquiry.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the first speaker—from the Back Benches, as this is a continuation of the debate that began yesterday—I should say to the House that at this stage I have not imposed a time limit on speeches. The House will be aware that there will have to be wind-up speeches from the Opposition Front Bench and the Government Front Bench tonight, for which I have to allow, but beyond that, I will wait to see how things go. My best advice to colleagues is that if each feels able to contribute for 10 minutes, but not much more than that, it may not be necessary to have any formal limit. There is therefore a burden on the shoulders of distinguished colleagues as they commence their contributions. That burden, I am sure, will be keenly felt by the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis).

11.27 am

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you very much for calling me, Mr Speaker. I shall endeavour to follow your injunction to be brief. There is a very good reason to be brief at this stage of consideration of the Chilcot report, and that is that we have had very little time to consider a very large mass of detailed information.

I generally find, when trying to unravel what has happened historically, that it is sensible to look back at some of the original sources. In the very short time available, I have picked out a few original documents that have been included in the mass of published material. One of them is the Joint Intelligence Committee assessment dated 29 January 2003 and entitled, “Iraq: the emerging view from Baghdad”. I shall refer to two quotations. At paragraph 10, the JIC says:

“We are unlikely to receive any advance warning of a pre-emptive attack on the Kurds. We judge that a pre-emptive limited artillery strike on Kuwait using CBW could be launched in as little as two hours.”

[Dr Julian Lewis]

At another point in the report, a list of things that might be the result of an attack on Saddam Hussein is given. One of these possibilities is described in the following terms:

“to inflict high enough casualties on any coalition ground forces, perhaps in Kuwait, including through the use of CBW, to halt a coalition attack and to swing public opinion in the West against hostilities.”

Another note, entitled, “Saddam: The Beginning of the End”, which was prepared by the assessment staff following a discussion at the JIC on 19 March 2003, states:

“We judge Iraq has a useable CBW capability, deliverable using artillery, missiles and possibly unmanned aerial vehicles. We judge Iraq possesses up to 20 al-Hussein missiles with a range of up to 650km and 100s of shorter range missiles, mostly with a range of 150km or less. These missiles may be able to deliver CBW, although intelligence suggests that Iraq may lack warheads capable of effective dispersal of such agents.”

The reason I quote those two documents is that they were top secret documents that were never intended for publication until the archives eventually came to be released many years later. They show, beyond any reasonable doubt, that the advice received by the Labour Government at that time was that Saddam Hussein did possess, in the assessment of our intelligence agencies, chemical and biological weapons. We now know that that was wrong, but we also know, as a result of the release of those documents, that the Labour Government of the day did not lie to Parliament over the question of their belief that chemical and biological weapons were kept.

More contentious is the question of whether or not Tony Blair exaggerated. That is a matter of harder judgment, but I sometimes wonder what the reaction of Parliament would have been if he had come to us and said, “We really don’t know for certain whether Saddam Hussein still has chemical and biological weapons. We know he has had them in the past and used them. Because we can’t be certain that he hasn’t got them now, because of the events that happened only a matter of months earlier, which put al-Qaeda and its suicide brand of terrorism on the world stage, and because we cannot be sure that, for reasons of his own, he might not seek to supply such weapons to suicidal terrorist groups, we judge that we can’t take the chance.”

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s useful approach in going back to the primary sources. Does not the information to which he refers, though, highlight just how dangerous it is to go to war on the basis of intelligence alone, which is essentially what marked the Iraq war out from every other one? Does he agree that the process of making intelligence available for assessment by this House has to be improved, or we could risk doing it again?

Dr Lewis: That is very tricky, because there are two scenarios where we can go to war. One is quite straightforward: somebody attacks us and we get on with it, because we are given no choice. The other is a situation such as that under discussion, where we have reason to believe that something horrible could happen and the question arises of whether we should intervene.

One of the most problematic aspects of the Chilcot report is its statement that military action was “not a last resort” and that the peace process could have been

given longer. The reality is that, unless an attack is launched on us, we can always go on talking for longer. I cannot think of any point at which it would be possible to say, “We have to launch an attack now because there is no prospect of continuing to try to find out without taking military action.”

The right hon. Gentleman talks about this House having to assess the intelligence, but I am not sure that that helps us too much. We can never be certain that what we are assessing is the whole picture, because sometimes, as those of us who have served on bodies such as the Intelligence and Security Committee will know, there are sources of intelligence that cannot be revealed. Therefore, to present raw intelligence to the House, without being able to say that there is other intelligence not being presented to the House, leaves the House in an anomalous position.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, in 2003, the House voted not just, or even mainly, on the intelligence? If you look at the debate, Mr Speaker, you will see that the House voted on Saddam Hussein’s repeated and unprecedented non-compliance with mandatory United Nations resolutions and on his record. Does the right hon. Gentleman think from his reading of the report that Saddam Hussein executed a massive bluff on the international community and his own people by pretending that he still had the weapons we know he had, or does he agree with the current Iraqi Government that Saddam sent them across the border to Syria?

Dr Lewis: I agree with a great deal of what the right hon. Gentleman has just said. Although it is not a matter of primary concern to us now, the fact is that Saddam Hussein was the author of his own misfortune. We must remember that, apart from being a brutal dictator, Saddam Hussein had invaded and occupied Kuwait in 1990. He chose to try to convince his own people that he had not given up these weapons, when either he had given them up or, as the right hon. Gentleman said and as rumours persist to this day, he had spirited them away, possibly to Syria. However, although I see a degree of agreement with me from those on the Labour Benches over this issue, they may find it a little harder to accept the next point that I wish to make.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I have great respect for my right hon. Friend, as he will know. However, I suggest that, on this issue, it was not just about intelligence sourcing from here. The United Nations inspectors at the time were pleading for more time because they could not find the WMDs upon which premise we were going to war. We should have listened to them as well. Ultimately, the reason they could not find the WMDs is that they did not exist.

Dr Lewis: Yes, but the problem that the inspectors and we would always have faced was summed up by something that was said at the Hutton inquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly. I was going to quote this later, but I shall do so now. On 21 August 2003, I attended the Hutton inquiry. In the course of giving evidence, Nicolas Rufford, a journalist, made a statement about a telephone conversation that he had had with Dr David Kelly in June 2003. Dr Kelly was, of course, a weapons expert,

and knew all about the difficulties of detecting weapons stockpiles if they were hidden. In the course of that telephone conversation, Dr Kelly said to Mr Rufford that

“it was very easy to hide weapons of mass destruction because you simply had to dig a hole in the desert, put them inside, cover them with a tarpaulin, cover them with sand and then they would be almost impossible to discover”.

So the question that we come back to once again is: if Tony Blair had come to this House and more honestly highlighted the question marks against the reliability of the intelligence, would he be as excoriated today as he has been? Let me be counterfactual for a moment. Let us suppose that some stocks of anthrax had been discovered and there had been a secret cache. Would we still be saying that the people who took the decision in 2003, on the basis of what clearly was an honest belief that Saddam Hussein might have deadly stocks of anthrax, were wrong? I have no hesitation in saying that although the Government may have exaggerated—and probably did exaggerate—the strength of the evidence they had, I believe that they genuinely expected to find stocks of these weapons.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Lewis: Yes, but I am taking a lot of interventions, and I am keen not to abuse the fact that I do not have a time limit.

George Kerevan: Given the right hon. Gentleman’s wisdom and expertise, he is a focal point in this discussion. Does he accept that there are some on these Benches who think—and who feel that this is justified by the Chilcot findings—that the whole issue of weapons of mass destruction was an artificial *casus belli* that was used to effect regime change? If weapons of mass destruction were an issue, why wait 13 years to invade? Why not go in at the time of the first Iraq war?

Dr Lewis: The answer to the second question is easy. What happened during those 13 years was the appearance on the international stage, in September 2001, of a group that had been around for a long time but had not previously succeeded in killing 3,000 people in the heart of New York and Washington DC. [*Interruption.*] Therefore, the issue at question, as we often hear quite rightly said in debates about international terrorism, was that the traditional policy—the technique of containment, which is usually the best technique to deal with rogue regimes that have weapons stocks—could no longer apply under the circumstances. It was feared that if an international terrorist organisation was, for any reason, supplied with a substance such as anthrax, rational deterrence would be ineffective in preventing the organisation from using it, no matter how suicidally.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Given the role that my right hon. Friend plays as Chairman of the Defence Committee, I wonder whether he could qualify the statement that he has just made, which caused a reaction in the House. He suggested that somehow the events of 9/11 created a different scenario in Iraq. Does he not agree with me that in 2003,

al-Qaeda was not present in Iraq, and therefore the relationship between 9/11 and Iraq, unlike Afghanistan, cannot be made?

Dr Lewis: I do agree that al-Qaeda was not present in Iraq at the time, but that is not the point that I was making. The point that I was making was that the west was in a major stand-off with Saddam Hussein, and people use other groups and organisations for their own ends. The danger was—the then Prime Minister said this at the time, and it is what convinced me to support him—that Saddam Hussein might, for reasons of his own, decide to make some of these weapons available to certain groups, not because he was allied to such groups but because he and al-Qaeda shared a common enemy in the west.

I want to move on. Some Members will agree with what I have said, and others will not. Let me continue with the second branch of my remarks, and then it will be for other Members to put their own perspective on the matter. I hasten to add that although my chairmanship of the Defence Committee has been referred to a number of times, I am, of course, speaking entirely on my own behalf as someone who was here at the time and took part in the debate and the vote.

When I look back at those circumstances, I say to myself that the primary reason why I supported and spoke in favour of military action was that I believed what I was told by the then Labour Government about the possession of anthrax and other weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein. But here is where I have to make a major admission. At the back of my mind, and at the back, I believe, of many other hon. Members’ minds, was a second belief. It was the belief that if Saddam Hussein were removed, we might see the emergence of some form of democracy in Iraq. I was profoundly mistaken in that belief. From looking at the scenario as it developed, it is quite clear that what emerged was not any form of democracy; instead, there re-emerged the mutual hatreds between different branches of fundamentalist Islam that has led to bitter conflict for more than 1,000 years.

That was the lesson I drew from the Iraq war. It is also why, when it subsequently became clear that the same scenario would be played out in other theatres for the same sort of reasons—in particular, in relation to Syria in August 2013—I was determined not to make the same mistake again. Along with 29 other right hon. and hon. Members of the Conservative party and nine Liberal Democrats, I therefore voted not to take the same sort of action against President Assad as we had taken against Saddam Hussein. I remember hearing exactly the same sort of arguments in favour of removing Assad as everyone now accepts had been inadequate arguments for removing Saddam Hussein.

Members who feel strongly that it was the wrong thing to do in 2003 ought to check what the consequences have been of not taking the same sort of step in 2013. Since 2013 huge bloodletting has continued in Syria, but many of us still argue that if the choice is between an authoritarian dictatorship and totalitarian civil conflict engaged in by people who believe that suicide terrorism is the answer to the world’s problems and the fastest route to paradise, we should appreciate that very often there are no simple or easy answers in such dilemmas.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I have great respect for the Chairman of the Defence Committee—in fact, I believe I voted for him. Is he saying that if he had his time again he would vote against the Iraq war in 2003 and for the Syrian conflict in 2013?

Dr Lewis: I am saying that I was absolutely right not to vote to remove Assad in 2013 and absolutely wrong to vote as I did in 2003, but that I did so because I believed what I was told about weapons of mass destruction and also believed—wrongly—that there was a chance for Iraqi society to advance along more democratic lines. That was my terrible error.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr Lewis: I shall make a little more progress first.

My last point leads me to a second question. I hope that I have, in effect, shown that when the Labour Government of the day said to the House that they believed there were weapons of mass destruction they were not lying, and that there was a reasonable case to be made on those grounds for taking the action that was taken. However, the papers also show that the Prime Minister of the day, Tony Blair, was not unaware of the possible consequences of removing Saddam Hussein. In his public statement, Sir John Chilcot said:

“We do not agree that hindsight is required. The risks of internal strife in Iraq, active Iranian pursuit of its interests, regional instability, and Al Qaida activity in Iraq, were each explicitly identified before the invasion.”

He added:

“Despite explicit warnings, the consequences of the invasion were underestimated. The planning and preparations for Iraq after Saddam Hussein were wholly inadequate.”

In a briefing note in January 2003 from Mr Blair to President Bush, the then Prime Minister wrote:

“The biggest risk we face is internecine fighting between all the rival groups, religions, tribes, etc, in Iraq, when the military strike destabilises the regime. They are perfectly capable, on previous form, of killing each other in large numbers.”

Let us remind ourselves that the vast total of deaths that have taken place in Iraq are not people who have been killed by westerners; they are Muslims who have been killed by other Muslims once the lid of authoritarian repression was removed.

Philip Davies: I am nervous about opening up a new front for my right hon. Friend, but some of the deaths in Iraq were clearly of our soldiers, and Chilcot said that there were some

“serious equipment shortfalls when conflict began”.

Two of my constituents died in action in Iraq—Sergeant Roberts died because he did not have the right body armour, and Flight Lieutenant Stead died because his Hercules did not have the proper suppressant foam fitted. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should never, ever, again send our armed forces into combat without properly equipping them for the task in hand?

Dr Lewis: Never, ever, again is a strong statement, and when a conflict arises, especially when it is the result of unforeseen events, it is seldom the case that the armed forces are fully equipped in every respect. The history of our engagement in many conflicts is of a disastrous start that is usually gradually rectified as the conflict goes on. The report clearly brings out that, for

far too long while the conflict was going on, equipment deficiencies were not identified and remedied—I will leave it at that for the moment.

I have two points on which to conclude. First, we must now accept that societies are unready for western-style democracy while their politics remain indissolubly linked to totalitarian, religious supremacism. I am not saying anything racist in making those remarks, because only a few hundred years ago, religious wars devastated Europe, and here in England heretics were treated just as barbarously as they are in the middle east today. If the democratic model is to work, it usually has to evolve. If it does not evolve, a country must be totally occupied for many years in order for such a model to be implanted and to take root.

Secondly, the then Foreign Secretary said yesterday that he believed that some of those decisions, which were mistaken at the time, would less likely be taken in future because of the creation and existence of the National Security Council, and that that council is a forum where such matters could be thrashed out more realistically. I am not sure that that forum is quite strong enough. In bygone years, the heads of each of the three services had a direct input into the policy debate. The Chiefs of Staff Committee was a body that had to be reckoned with, even by Prime Ministers as forceful as Winston Churchill. Our current arrangements, in which the Chiefs of Staff are supposed to funnel their views to politicians through the medium of just one person—the Chief of the Defence Staff—are entirely inadequate.

I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary is continuing in his post and I am pleased he is here to hear me say something that I hope he will be hearing more about from the Defence Committee, which is that there is too much of a disconnect between our top military advisers and the politicians. It is easier for a Prime Minister with a bee in his bonnet about overthrowing one regime or another to brush aside the words of one man, no matter how authoritative any given Chief of the Defence Staff may be, than it is to brush aside the contribution of the heads of the armed forces as a body.

The Defence Committee suggested, in one of its final reports under my predecessor as Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), that the Chiefs of Staff Committee needed to be constituted as the military sub-committee of the National Security Council. The recommendation was ignored in the reply to that report, but I reiterate it today. We must have authoritative and expert people who are in a position to stand up to a Prime Minister on a mission, whether to remove Saddam Hussein or to remove Gaddafi while telling this House that we are just going to implement a no-fly zone to protect the citizens of Benghazi. It is very important that the strategic calculus should be properly presented to politicians, so we do not ever again have a situation, as we are told happened over Libya, where a Chief of the Defence Staff is told to do the fighting while the politicians do the planning.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who very helpfully gave the House the product of his lucubrations and interpreted my guidance loosely. He had to take

lots of interventions—that is certainly true. There is no time limit. I am leaving the House to regulate itself, but Members will want to take account of the fact that people might try to intervene on them. I say in all sincerity that we want everybody to get in. I thank the right hon. Gentleman. The next contributor will be Ben Bradshaw. *[Interruption.]* No, the right hon. Gentleman does not now wish to contribute. I rather hope that Mr Pat McFadden does.

11.57 am

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I am happy to be a substitute for my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), Mr Speaker.

The decision to go to war in Iraq was, certainly in foreign policy terms, the most controversial decision of the Blair premiership and, indeed, of the entire Labour period in government. One hundred and seventy nine British troops died, as did more than 4,000 American troops, and many thousands of Iraqi civilians in the chaos and destruction afterwards. Sir John's inquiry was asked to look at how the decision was taken and what lessons can be learned.

First, there is the crucial question of whether the war was based on a lie. On this, the report concludes:

“there is no evidence that intelligence was improperly included in the dossier or that No 10 improperly influenced the text.”

Prior to the report's publication, there had been years of accusations about fabricating intelligence. In the wake of its publication a different question has been raised, which is why the intelligence was not challenged more.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) quoted from some Joint Intelligence Committee reports. I do not need to repeat those particular quotes, but in 2002 the reports say that the intelligence was “sporadic and patchy”. They also say:

“it is clear that Iraq continues to pursue a policy of acquiring WMD and their delivery means”,

that

“Iraq has an offensive chemical warfare programme”

and that

“Iraq has a chemical and biological weapons capability and Saddam is prepared to use it”.

This view turned out to be wrong, but it was genuinely felt and reported to the Government time after time. It was shared by many intelligence services around the world, including in countries fiercely opposed to the war. Sir John makes important recommendations about how intelligence is to be assessed and challenged in the future, but they are not the same as accusations of fabrication, lying or using intelligence deliberately to mislead.

Sir John concludes that the war was “not a last resort”, that the inspection process should have been given more time, and that the decision to use military action “undermined the authority” of the UN Security Council. This finding raises a huge and fundamental question, particularly in view of the fact that Saddam Hussein had been in breach of a whole series of UN Security Council resolutions over a period of 12 years, and that he had in the past used chemical weapons against his own people. One therefore has to ask who was really undermining the UN. Was it the country in breach, or the countries trying to enforce the UN's will?

What does this finding mean for the responsibility to protect? My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) raised that issue yesterday. Is one of the lessons that we should never engage in military action, no matter how multiple the breaches of previous UN Security Council resolutions, unless there is full support from the Security Council itself? If that is our conclusion, what does that mean for the authority of the UN? This was not the view that we took in Kosovo. That action, although it was opposed by some, is generally felt to have produced a positive outcome for the people and to have prevented a disaster in the Balkans.

Thirdly, I turn to the aftermath, and the chaos and destruction that ensued.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: The question for the House is whether there is the weight of evidence to justify action, not if we should never act without express authority from the UN Security Council, which would be just one piece of evidence that the House should take into consideration. In the case of Kosovo, which is a good example, there were other reasons for acting as we did. I supported that action then and continue to support it now.

Mr McFadden: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's intervention. My point is that the finding about undermining the authority of the UN raises huge questions. It is one of the most controversial findings in the report.

Colin Powell famously remarked:

“If you break it, you own it”.

It is undoubtedly the responsibility of countries that remove a brutal dictator to put in place security measures afterwards. On this point, Sir John's report is understandably critical of the UK and the US. With intervention comes responsibility. Security is a key part of that responsibility, but we should be clear about two other points: first, the killing of innocent civilians in Iraq was carried out not by UK or US armed forces, but by terrorists and militias that blew up the UN headquarters, attacked mosques, destroyed already fragile infrastructure and bombed marketplaces; and, secondly, that sectarian violence and killings in Iraq did not begin in 2003. Prior to that, it was carried out by the Saddam regime itself: the Anfal campaign; the use of chemical weapons against the Kurds in the north; and the brutal suppression of the Shi'a uprising after the first Gulf war in 1991. It was a reign of terror. Decades on, mass graves are still being discovered. I pay tribute to the courage and determination of my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who was campaigning for the victims of Saddam's brutal regime long before the Iraq war in 2003.

Fourthly, what is the lesson for our own security? I believe that people supported the Iraq war for different reasons, and many opposed it for different reasons. They should not all be put in the one bracket. Not everyone has drawn a direct line between this intervention and all the security problems we face, but some have. Foreign interventions will anger jihadists, and may also be used as a recruiting sergeant for jihadists, but it would be a fundamental mistake to believe that the mass murder of innocent people is only a response to what we do, and that if we stopped doing it, they would leave us alone. We should remember that Islamist terrorism existed long before the Iraq war. The USS Cole was

[Mr McFadden]

bombed in 2000. The World Trade Centre was first bombed in 1993 and then destroyed in 2001, with the loss of 3,000 innocent lives. In Bali in 2002, we saw the murder of hundreds of innocent tourists, and there have been many more attacks around the world since, including last year in Paris. That attack took place in the country in Europe that was the most opposed to the Iraq war.

Let me repeat something I have said here before. Understanding Islamist terrorism simply as a reaction to what we do infantilises terrorists, fails to confer responsibility on them for what they do, and fails to stand up for the pluralism, equality, diversity and religious freedom that we hold dear. Whatever lesson we learn from past interventions, it should not be to franchise out our foreign policy decisions for the approval or veto of the terrorists who oppose our way of life.

Finally, there is the lesson on intervention itself. Sir John makes a number of recommendations on this point—about how intelligence should be treated, ministerial oversight, the challenge of arguments and so forth. The recommendations look eminently sensible, and I am sure that any future Government will take them on board. The truth is, however, that this is not just a matter of process.

Mr Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend made a strong critique of one of Sir John's findings about the undermining of the United Nations. Another finding that I consider problematic is the "last resort" suggestion, which was also criticised by the Chair of the Defence Committee. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, at that time, it was clear that time was running out? Saddam had been given 90 days when the resolution specified 30 days, so saying that other avenues could somehow be explored was not realistic at the time.

Mr McFadden: I agree with my right hon. Friend. At some point, there is always the issue of deciding. Every debate about intervention since 2003 has taken place in the shadow of this decision. Iraq has already increased the threshold for military action and the Chilcot report will raise it further. There is an inescapable question, however. To put it bluntly, we can have all the committees and processes that we want, but we still have to decide. The decision can go wrong, and everything that will happen in the aftermath cannot be predicted.

Much has been said about the size of the report, with its 2.5 million words. If we stack the volumes on top of one another, the paper would stand about 2 feet high. The very sight of the report will be a warning to future Prime Ministers. Since 2003, Prime Ministers and Presidents have been very conscious about learning from Iraq, and this report will make them even more conscious in the future. The biggest question of all is this: in reflecting on what went wrong after the invasion and the findings of the report, and adding in the reduced size of our armed forces in recent years, what if the conclusion was, "Never intervene again"? What message would that send out to the oppressed of the world, to dictators or to terrorist groups?

I was not an MP in 2003, so I never had to face the responsibility of voting for the war in Iraq. The most significant vote on foreign policy since I was elected was

over Syria in 2013, and that vote was heavily coloured by our experience in Iraq. I have a slightly different interpretation from that of the right hon. Member for New Forest East. I voted against military action in 2013, even after Assad had used chemical weapons against his own people. Yet Syria, where we did not intervene beyond the limited airstrikes we voted for last year, has been a humanitarian disaster even worse than Iraq. Hundreds of thousands are dead, millions have been displaced, and we have seen the greatest movement of refugees since the end of the second world war. It is not a vote to intervene that has troubled me most in my 11 years here; it is that vote not to intervene, as the international community, with the exception of Russia—where have the demonstrations outside its embassy been?—stood back and decided that it was all too difficult. There is no Chilcot report on Syria. We can tell ourselves that because we did not break it, we did not buy it, but that makes absolutely no difference to the human cost.

So let us learn, but let us not sign a blank cheque for despots and terrorist groups around the world, or delude ourselves that the security issues that we face stem only from our foreign policy decisions, rather than from an ideology that encourages the killing of innocent people in countries around the world. Yes, intervening has consequences—2.5 million words detailing those consequences are before us—but so does standing back, and leadership is about deciding the difference.

12.10 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I suggest that Iraq 2003 ranks with Suez in a catalogue of British foreign policy disasters. It cost the lives of more than 200 British nationals and many tens of thousands of Iraqi nationals and citizens, and set in train a terrible sequence of events, including a vicious civil war and a fundamental alteration in the balance of power in the region. Thirteen years later, we are still living with many of those consequences.

Given that I resigned from the shadow Front Bench in 2003 to vote against the war, I suppose it could be said that it marked a pivotal point in defining my political career, such as it has been, so for me it has been of rather more than passing interest to observe the progress of the Chilcot report. I defended the time that Sir John Chilcot took, and I want to take this opportunity to thank him and his team for the thoroughness of the report.

As a former soldier, I believe that, whatever has been said previously, war should always be the measure of last resort, to be taken when all other possibilities have been exhausted. We should never lose sight of that simple fact. Of course there is such a thing as a just war, but at the same time we owe it to our citizens, to our Parliament and, above all, to the soldiers whom we are committing to battle to recognise that it must be the measure of last resort. In my view, the overriding, the most important and the most damning conclusion of Sir John's report was that Iraq was not, in fact, that last resort and that other possibilities had not been exhausted.

The report made other points. It said that the premise on which we went to war—the existence of weapons of mass destruction—was oversold and that there was a discarding of caveats attached to the intelligence. It

referred to a lack of preparedness in respect of our armed forces, to deficiencies in equipment and to an absence of post-war planning, all which have been touched on before. That litany of errors was compounded by an overestimation of our influence over the United States. We could not, at the time, believe that it could be in our interests not to be on the frontline. I think that one of the proudest and best moments for Prime Minister Wilson was when he said no to the Americans over Vietnam. That did not fracture the so-called special relationship, which, within 15 or 20 years, was on a very firm footing indeed.

I do not intend to look back at all the errors in that litany, but I suggest that there are two key lessons from this episode on which we would do well to reflect. First, Parliament should have done more to question the evidence put before it. That was a failure at almost every level. If the legislature does not examine the evidence and question the Executive at times like that, when is it going to do so? There was also the failure of those in the know—at all levels, in my view, but particularly in the Cabinet—to challenge what was being presented to the public. I think that the one figure who stands proud among that select group of people in the Cabinet is Robin Cook. Everything that he said during that eventful debate in 2003 has been proved right. I contributed to that debate as well, but his was one of the best speeches that I had heard for a very long time.

We should have questioned more. We should have examined the detail. I was told to stop asking awkward questions, but we, the official Opposition, were asking so few awkward questions that it was suggested to me from the other side that we were trying to play political games with the issue, perhaps hoping that, if it blew up in the Government's face, we could take advantage of the fact. That is how bad it got during that debate in 2003. We were simply not asking enough questions, and we should have done so.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I was here in 2003, and I was one of those who rebelled against the leader of my party and voted against action in the Iraq war. I think that the hon. Gentleman is being disingenuous, because it was one of the biggest rebellions that there had been against a Government from that Government's side.

I remember how difficult it was to make that judgment against the leader. When someone is being led by a party leader whose judgment they respect, it is a tough call to say, "I am going to disagree, and vote against action of that kind." I had a difference of opinion, and I have had no cause to change my mind about the decision that I made, but can the hon. Gentleman not accept, as I do, that the people who made those decisions did so believing that they were doing the right thing?

Mr Baron: I do not think that we are saying different things. I am not suggesting that there was intentional deceit. What I am suggesting is that many of us in this place did not question sufficiently the evidence that was before us. The report from the Joint Intelligence Committee was full of caveats and holes, yet we relied on the Prime Minister's interpretation, which was given in his foreword to the report.

I fully respect Members' views as expressed on that fateful evening itself. If one cannot trust the Prime Minister, standing at the Dispatch Box making the case

for war and, perhaps, privy to intelligence that we have not seen, it is a sad turn of events. However, I must return to the fundamental point that we should have questioned more, because there was a firm lack of evidence of weapons of mass destruction, and such evidence was the premise for war. We must not forget that central consideration.

The reason the United Nations inspectors were pleading for more time, by the way, was that they could not find any weapons of mass destruction, and they could not find them because they did not exist. We should remember that it was the UN that was asking us to give it more time. The problem was that, at that point, we were marching to a military timetable.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I hope that the hon. Gentleman and you, Mr Speaker, will indulge me for a second. My speaking time was reduced to four minutes yesterday, so I did not have an opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Robin Cook. Had it not been for his untimely death, I would not be in this place, and he was my Member of Parliament when I was growing up. I wanted to say that we might have disagreed on many things, but on Iraq we did agree. I know that he is missed very much by his family, his friends and his party.

Mr Baron: I thank the hon. Lady for what she has said. I am sure that it will be taken on board by all concerned.

I am conscious that time is pressing on, Mr Speaker, so I shall try to wrap up my speech in the next few minutes; I know that many other Members want to speak.

The second important lesson that I think we should learn from Iraq is that we need a properly functioning, properly funded and well-sited foreign policy apparatus. There is no doubt that Iraq revealed clear deficiencies in that apparatus, and subsequent interventions suggest that, in large part, we have still not put them right. Helmand is one example. While most of us supported the initial invasion, or rather intervention, in Afghanistan to get rid of al-Qaeda, we made a massive mistake in allowing that mission—a mission that was wholly under-resourced—to morph into one of nation building. In Libya, we did not understand events on the ground: we could not believe that once we had knocked the door down, which was the easy part, we would lay open all the tribal rivalries.

As for Syria in 2013, there was a suggestion we would be arming the rebels, not realising that lurking in the shadows was ISIL-Daesh and how that would eventually play out. There was a clear deficit of strategic analysis, with a loss of expertise at all levels of the machinery of foreign policy. That is a problem particularly felt within the FCO. In this country, we have quite a narrow pyramid in foreign policy making. In the States, it is much more open and diverse; there are lobbyists and political analysts, and the politicians and experts can buy into and influence the system. In this country, it is much more narrowly defined; it is the preserve of the select few, and the FCO is part of the few, which is why it must be firing on all cylinders, but it has not been doing so.

That is why we need proper funding of the FCO. Its budget has been continually eroded, with a hollowing out of expertise and staff. Traditional skills like languages

[Mr Baron]

and knowledge of events on the ground and of peoples and places have all been downgraded, as illustrated by the closure of the in-house language school and the gutting of the venerable library.

How did we get to the point that when Russia intervened in Ukraine we did not have one Crimean expert in the FCO? How is it that when the Arab uprising took place we had so few Arabists that we were calling them out of retirement? How is it that we have a DFID budget 10 times the budget of the FCO? This does not serve us well. We need to increase the budget and have long-term investment to make sure we are as well-sighted as we can be, which is not the case at the moment. There is a continual pressure on the FCO budget, and we need to put that right.

It is no surprise that Parliament—the legislature—has raised the bar with regard to interventions. It expects to be consulted. That is one of the positive developments from the Iraq intervention. The rationale is straightforward: if we believe there is a loss of expertise at the heart of our foreign policy apparatus and if there is a lack of trust not just because of Iraq, but because of Helmand, Libya and Syria, the bar needs to be raised, but this is not a healthy position in the longer term. In this increasingly challenging international environment, we need a knowledgeable Executive to be firing on all cylinders. A well-informed and resourced FCO is essential to that, both to act as a better counterweight to the impulses of No. 10 and possibly to help us avoid costly errors and conflicts in the future. There must be within the system a readiness to speak truth to power, and I am not sure we are quite there yet, but that is one of the key lessons from Iraq.

The UK and the west face enormous geopolitical challenges. The world's population will rise to 9 billion by 2050, with changing distribution—which is particularly of relevance to Africa—and urbanisation and the consequent strain on natural resources. Today, 1 billion people lack access to sufficient potable water, and by 2050 three-quarters of the world's population could face water scarcity. A whole array of security and environmental challenges is caused by economic and political uncertainty. In today's global information world, success will depend not only on who prevails by force but on who wins the story.

One of the lessons from the Iraq failure is that it is symptomatic of a wider malaise: the deficiency of strategic analysis at the core of our foreign policy apparatus. The greatest challenge for policy makers is to ensure we embrace flexibility and foresight. This is perhaps diplomacy's greatest challenge. We must restore our foreign policy and defence capabilities, otherwise the country risks being left behind. This is happening at a time when the international community is failing to produce co-ordinated responses to many of the challenges facing mankind, including poverty, organised crime, conflict, disease, hunger and inequalities.

We must have a properly resourced and respected foreign policy apparatus and investment in soft power and old friendships and strong defence, because diplomacy and soft power cannot succeed by themselves. We must have this proper funding in place for our FCO, because if we are not well-sighted, the next intervention challenge—

there will be more—might not be as local in its ramifications as these past errors have been. The costs of getting it wrong might be much greater next time.

12.25 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and to follow the previous speakers, who have a great wealth and depth of information and knowledge to bring to it. If I wanted to sum up my comments I would say, "Mistakes made and lessons learned."

British forces peaked at 46,000 during the invasion phase, but of course due to the way the tours system worked at the time, more actually served. I pay tribute to the 179 very brave and courageous servicemen and women who gave their lives during the campaign, and also to those gallant Members of this House and the other place who served.

The Chilcot inquiry and report have raised many questions, and the general public need answers. The lack of answers on key issues is the cause of much of the public's rage. We followed the American lead without properly analysing intelligence. That is absolutely clear from the now public comment of Mr Blair to the then President of the United States:

"I will be with you, whatever"—

unconditional support.

We need to be much more discerning about the way we interrogate intelligence material and information. It is imperative to note that the plan for success was absent. In 2003, there was outrageous and unexpected success, for which we had no plan. No one was able to foresee Hussein capitulating so early, and thus Iraq fell apart with no one to deliver the stable, successful programmes that existed, such as the oil for aid programme. We did not have a plan, a vision or an understanding of what would happen if we were successful in battle at that time. The vacuum that plunged the entire region into instability is felt strongly to this day, not only in the region but across the world.

We also did not understand the complex society of Iraq. There was no understanding of cultural sensitivities or local divisions, sectarianism or politics, which meant that our presence was further resented as time went on and things did not get better. There was also the unprecedented Shi'a majority uprising in Basra, where the Iran-Iraq war was most pronounced. All these things were unforeseen.

We cannot keep sending forces to places that they are unprepared to go to, in terms of equipment and understanding the reason. Estimates of the length of time a mission may take need to be more conservative and honest in future, not only to prepare our armed forces fully, but to regain the much-damaged public trust. I was not a Member of this House at the time of the Iraq war, but constituents have come to me who were sending socks, boots, food, body-warmers and, on one occasion I am aware of, body armour, to their people in Iraq. There is something wrong when our people serve overseas and we, their families, have to send them stuff the Army should give them when they first go out. There needs to be an honest conversation about that.

A lot of the things that went wrong can be explained by a lack of resources. We simply have not got the capacity to fight on so many fronts anymore. It is now

clear that we greatly underestimated the capability of the enemy. What worked against rocket-propelled grenades in Ulster was not fit to take on 250-lb improvised explosive devices in Iraq. That is another important learning point that must be taken forward.

I want to talk about veterans, and the family support package when the soldiers were away. At that time, just two soldiers were left at headquarters to look after family affairs, and given the number of deaths and injuries, the situation became almost overpowering for them. I know things have changed, and I welcome those changes, but we have to build on this and make sure that the veterans are not forgotten, as some in the past have been. We need foresight, and we need to build on lessons learned and to continue learning, so that we only move forward in how we treat our armed forces.

I want to talk about the pension of a gentleman who served in uniform. His story will be well known to those who read *The Sunday Times*. His name is Chris Braithwaite, 41, a former major in the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment who served in Afghanistan, the Balkans and Iraq. He said:

"When we were in Basra, we were subjected to rocket and mortar attacks daily for seven months. This was a great worry for my wife, Laura, but we believed that the financial support which is provided by the army in recognition of long service would reflect that family sacrifice—until the rug was pulled from under us.

On the same day that I received the Queen's diamond jubilee medal in recognition of my service, I was given the news that I would be made redundant just 87 days short of the 16 years' service I needed to receive an immediate pension."

We are talking about people who fought for Queen and country. They did their bit, but when they needed support back home, it fell short with a vengeance. We must take care of our veterans. We must make sure that they receive absolutely first-class service from the state. It is vital that they are offered, and get, the best.

I have asked this question before and I ask it again today: will we see the statistic some day that more Iraq veterans have committed suicide than were killed in the conflict? We must confront the issue of how we treat our veterans. The Chilcot report gives us the opportunity to do just that, and it must be fully assessed. More British soldiers and veterans took their life in 2012 than died fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan over the same period. These are statistical facts. I do not like having to put them before the House, but we need to recognise them.

I want briefly to mention the reserves. This is another imperative issue, and there could be awful consequences if it is not addressed. We were using the highest number of reservists on record, and we have no method of tracking what happened to them when they came home, or of finding out whether they have fallen victim to any of the problems associated with veterans. Despite all this, the number of reservists was cut from 45,000 to 30,000 after the Iraq war. Clearly there needs to be a rethink.

Referring to the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, the Belfast-born commander Tim Collins, who led the Royal Irish Regiment into Iraq in March 2003, has said:

"It may well be he was actually drunk on his self-importance having had successes in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, and having brokered the Good Friday Agreement, he genuinely believed he could do no wrong".

This is in keeping with the

"I will be with you, whatever"

memo that was sent to President Bush. It is increasingly clear that our soldiers were being sent to war by Tony Blair, no matter what. Tim Collins said at the time that people believed there had been a plan in place for the aftermath. Sadly, we all know now that this was not the case, and the results of the lack of planning were disastrous for too many. It is easy to point the finger at Tony Blair, but there were others involved. Alastair Campbell, Geoff Hoon and others in that circle of friends, or of decision makers, should take this on board as well.

Right hon. and hon. Members will be aware of the poem by Rudyard Kipling entitled "Tommy", and I should like to read out two verses from it—the second and the fifth. Its theme is just as applicable today as it was in its time.

"I went into a theatre as sober as could be,

They gave a drunk civilian room, but 'adn't none for me;

They sent me to the gallery or round the music-'alls,

But when it comes to fightin', Lord! they'll shove me in the stalls!

For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' 'Tommy, wait outside';

But it's 'Special train for Atkins' when the trooper's on the tide

The troopship's on the tide, my boys, the troopship's on the tide,

O it's 'Special train for Atkins' when the trooper's on the tide."

And:

"You talk o' better food for us, an' schools, an' fires, an' all:

We'll wait for extra rations if you treat us rational.

Don't mess about the cook-room slops, but prove it to our face

The Widow's Uniform is not the soldier-man's disgrace.

For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' 'Chuck him out, the brute!'

But it's 'Saviour of 'is country' when the guns begin to shoot;

An' it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' anything you please;

An' Tommy ain't a bloomin' fool—you bet that Tommy sees!'

We have a duty to look after our veterans, and to ensure that those who have served this country well are looked after.

The Iraqi vulnerable persons resettlement scheme was set up after the war, but it has not delivered the capacity that it should have. The current reflections on Iraq are important, but they will have no impact on the ongoing dire situation in that country. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) made the point yesterday—I shall make it again today—that many Yazidis, Shi'as, Syriac Catholics, Protestants, Sabean-Mandaean and Sunnis, as well as many others, continue to be targeted by Daesh on the basis of their identity. Around 3.3 million have been displaced due to the instability in Iraq, and many minority groups are on the verge of disappearance.

In June, the United Nations independent international commission of inquiry on Syria determined that Daesh had committed genocide against the Yazidis. Around 90% of Yazidis are Iraqi. Despite this evidence, the Gateway, Children at Risk and Mandate resettlement schemes, which are not nationality-specific, have taken in only a very low number of Iraqis—up to 300 in 2015. While some Iraqis might fit all the criteria under the

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current Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, they are not eligible for asylum in the UK because they are not Syrian nationals.

I want to call for a modest expansion of the SVPRS and the Iraqi vulnerable persons resettlement scheme to permit Iraqis who fit the SVPRS vulnerability criteria to qualify for asylum in the UK. A modest expansion is particularly pertinent, because Iraqis have suffered as much as their Syrian counterparts at the hands of Daesh, and the death toll in Iraq continues to rise. The UK cannot absolve itself from assisting Iraqis, and making them eligible for resettlement in the UK, with the UNHCR's recommendation, is the least we can do.

We have heard about the mistakes, and we can learn from them and move forward. We can make the world a better place for our soldiers to serve in, with the uniform and equipment that they should have and with the support for veterans and their families that they need when they come home. Let us learn from the Chilcot report, and from those mistakes, and move forward.

12.35 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for this opportunity to speak in the debate. The Chilcot report, published last week, made sobering reading. Many things have been said already on the issue—I shall not repeat them—and the chief protagonists at the time have received, in my view, fair criticism. I am in the fortunate position of both having been in the Army at the time of the Iraq war and now being a Member of this place. I did not serve in combat in Iraq; my theatre was another unpopular war, in Afghanistan.

At the time of the Iraq invasion, the Army was a strange place to be, particularly if you were just beginning your career. It is difficult to be positive about a mission when over 1 million people march against your deployment just before you go. But it is testament to the character and professionalism of the UK armed forces that the initial operation was the success that it was, despite cruel losses—including from my own regiment on 23 March 2003, when Ian Seymour, Les Hehir and Welly Evans of 29 Commando were killed during the insertion into southern Iraq.

However, what happened following the initial operation in that country and for the following seven years—indeed, perhaps right up to today—has been a tragedy for Iraq. I visited the country last autumn and met the President. It remains a place of extreme violence, heavy corruption and deep division. It was a challenge to return from a visit to Baghdad with much of a sense of optimism, although recent changes in the Iraqi security forces, and the international coalition's mammoth efforts in the fight against Daesh, give real cause for hope, and I want to pay tribute to all UK forces engaged in that fight today.

How did we get to this point? I absolutely understand the public rage. The actions of some of those at the top of Government at the time—and yes, at the top of the military—were negligent. I am concerned, however, that the public's fixation on Tony Blair could make us miss some of the learning points that must be taken from Sir John's comprehensive work. Those learning points are

the whole point of this process. It was encouraging to hear the Prime Minister who left office yesterday say that it would be impossible for these events to happen again today because of the structures he and his team had put in place, and I commend him and the Secretary of State for Defence for that.

However, there is a deeper issue here—one of basic moral courage—that I have found most distressing. In the military, that moral courage can be a rarer and therefore more treasured commodity in an organisation configured to imbue and nurture physical courage in the face of the enemy. That ability to stand up for your men in the face of a seemingly unstoppable sequence of events, and to speak truth to power, is an integral part of the military's duty to this nation. We drill it into our subordinates and we preach it to anyone who will listen. So where was that courage in the build-up to this disastrous war?

It is inconceivable to me to allow a political Administration in this country to hamper preparations for war because they did not politically want to be seen to be making those preparations. It is inconceivable to me to allow soldiers out of patrol bases and into contact with the enemy without body armour, not as a tactical decision or a result of enemy action against a supply route, but simply because of bad planning. It is inconceivable to me continually to allow patrolling in Snatch Land Rovers when they were known to provide no protection whatever to our men and women against a well known and obvious threat from improvised explosive devices. But those things happened, and they directly cost UK military lives. These lessons must not be missed amid the almost visceral fixation of hatred on Tony Blair, lest we do a further disservice to our men and women who serve.

The Prime Minister does not make tactical decisions. She does not plan logistics; she is advised by those who do. I cannot in all honesty conceive of a time when I, as a very junior and insignificant commander in another unpopular war in Afghanistan, would ever have sanctioned an operation knowing that it lacked the equipment required to protect my men from a threat that I clearly knew about, because I was not prepared to say no. I find it hard, as do many of my cohort, to understand why that was sanctioned, yet it was.

We as a military betrayed the individuals who lost their life in this conflict as a direct result of equipment shortages. That is the point that really sticks in the craw. The political arguments and the strategic comings and goings will be debated ad infinitum, as they must be, to ensure that we do not make the same mistakes again, but the military and tactical lessons must also be learned. What happened in Iraq had a profound effect on my whole generation of junior commanders in the military. We grew up with a deep sense of distrust in our superiors as a result of their actions, or lack thereof, during the Iraq war. That affected many of us at a formative stage in our career.

Finally, I want to speak strongly against the idea that the lives of British servicemen and women were somehow wasted in this war, or that they died for nothing. I simply cannot reconcile it with my not insignificant personal experience of commanding men in combat that lives lost in the pursuit of protecting the freedoms and privileges that we enjoy in this country were lost in vain. For the families, many of whom I know intimately,

nothing—no mission, no cause—can be worth losing a loved one. As a soldier, however, I feel that I must represent the intimate conversations we shared, and the deep motivations that we fell back on to get through yet another day in the sweat, heat, blood and dust of these recent wars. We soldiers are drawn from all backgrounds, races, religions, colours and creeds. We all have different views—usually much more informed than anyone gives us credit for, and no doubt crafted by our own personal experiences—but we wear one uniform, with one Union Jack on our sleeve. We sign up to the same core value of protecting this nation, in exactly the same tradition of immense sacrifices as our forefathers, who wore the same cap badges and were under the same flag.

The truth is that, when a soldier leaves his patrol base in the morning, he is not thinking about how his particular contribution that day will help to advance the cause of Iraq's future prosperity or Afghanistan's place in the world. He is not thinking about whether we should have believed the dossier about weapons of mass destruction or whether he is going to stumble upon Osama's house in downtown Sangin. He is thinking of calling his wife later, of covering his arcs and of trying not to blink in case he misses something. He is making sure he has some spare batteries for his radio. He is more frightened of letting his mates down than he is of the enemy. He is more focused on doing his section, his platoon, or his battalion proud than whether he should be there in the first place. In those endeavours he is showing that courage, that fortitude, that resilience, that commitment, that discipline and that humanity that we all aspire to on the most revealing stage of all: warfare, where norms do not exist and brutality and raw human emotion are everywhere.

We aspire to those things because they are good, because they are noble, because they are to be desired, and young men and women made sacrifices demonstrating such qualities, which those of us who witnessed it and were lucky enough to return refuse to remember as futile. They did make a difference. They saved comrades' lives through their bravery. They shielded civilians from a brutal enemy intent on showing the very worst of humanity. They improved individual communities and made them safer and better—perhaps not on an overall strategic level, but it was not all a waste. That courage, that resilience, that discipline, that commitment, they are what we must remember from these conflicts. They cannot and must never be forgotten, for that would be an even greater betrayal than the ones laid out in the report. The lives were not wasted; they were engaged in noble pursuits in the generational struggle of our lifetime.

In conclusion, let us learn these painful lessons. Let us not fixate on Tony Blair—he is yesterday's man. Let us not commit to things that we cannot fulfil and pass the buck to the lower end of the command chains.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for his powerful speech. One thing that has always worried me about the Iraq war debate is the idea of the military as victims who were forced to go to fight when they in fact were trained and wanted to do so. What they did not want, however, was bad equipment, and they do not want bad equipment today. Does it not behove this House and its Members to be much more interested on a daily basis in what we are providing service personnel with, rather than just focusing on past decisions?

Johnny Mercer: Absolutely. I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. We have come an extraordinarily long way. The processes at the time were simply unacceptable. Under this Government and this and previous Defence Secretaries, we have made real progress, but she is right that we do not want sympathy. We want a little more empathy and understanding of what we are doing. There is sometimes too much sympathy. We sign up and are proud to do so, but we do not expect to be ill-equipped or to be part of a mission that is ultimately badly planned and resourced.

Let us never lose the courage to speak truth to power—no matter our rank or position in life. Let us remember with humility the courage and sacrifice of our servicemen and women in Iraq. Let us make sure that we learn the lessons for the hundreds of thousands who lost their lives on either side, civilian or military. The human race can only evolve if we learn, and I sincerely hope we do.

12.45 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. and gallant Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). He made such a powerful contribution—it is always right to make those points. The entire House should congratulate him on his speech and remember the people who went to war on our behalf.

I was here on the day the House voted to go to war, and the Chilcot report offers a bit of closure for some of us. There is a real sense of vindication for people such as me who resolutely opposed the conflict all the way through. I remember that day. It was a horrible, brutal, ugly day. It was a day that should be indelibly imprinted on this House's collective consciousness. I had a look at the proceedings of that day to refresh my memory of the atmosphere and culture. It sounds a bit masochistic to watch YouTube recordings of Tony Blair and others making their speeches, but it was important to get a sense of what that day was like because it was such a long time ago. We had to listen to Tony Blair lay out that exaggerated, fabricated case and listen to those flights of fancy. Of course, we now know, because of the Chilcot report, that it was mainly nonsense and invention.

I was the Chief Whip of what was a small group of SNP MPs in 2003, and I remember observing the Government Whips rounding up the recalcitrant, the doubters and those who were trying to make up their minds. Let us never forget that that Labour Government imposed a harsh three-line Whip on their Members that day. Really good women and men were dragooned into the Aye Lobby to support that fabricated case and their flawed Prime Minister. The House passed the motion by 412 to 149. I was among the 149 and it is the proudest vote of my 15 years in this House.

It was a vote that more or less defined and characterised the previous Labour Government—just as the vote to leave Europe will characterise this Conservative Government. There are parallels if we look underneath what happened. Both were a reckless gamble. There was no planning for what transpired when it comes to Brexit and there was no planning, as we have learned from Chilcot, by the Labour Government and the rest of our allies for what transpired once they embarked upon that

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campaign. It is curious when big events characterise particular Governments and the previous Labour Government will forever be characterised by Iraq.

However, the war was all about one man. My apologies to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View, but it is about Tony Blair. There is no escaping the personal association of the former Prime Minister with what transpired in Iraq. It will follow him to the grave and will be on his headstone. Such is his association with the Iraq conflict that he might as well have it tattooed on his forehead. It was about that man and about how he approached the war.

I have listened carefully to many of the speeches from honourable colleagues who were Members of this House on that day in 2003. I think we can group them into three categories, and I will try to help the House by defining what those are. I am in the first category, which is those who voted against the war, took a consistent line and did not accept for a minute the nonsensical case presented to us. Today, we feel in a pretty good place. I am looking around at some of my honourable colleagues who were in the House that day, particularly the Liberal Democrats. I pay tribute to the Liberal Democrats, who had our place back in 2003, for the way they led the case against the war. [Interruption.] I also pay tribute to the Labour Members—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) can take it easy, as I acknowledge the Labour Members who opposed their Whip. As he said, it was the biggest rebellion during that Government. I pay tribute to those Members, too, because they saw through this and were prepared to reject the fabricated, nonsensical case from the Prime Minister. They did the right thing, and I congratulate them, too.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): On a brief point of information, I should say that historically this was British political history's biggest rebellion within a governing party. Some 122 Back-Bench colleagues in the Labour party voted on the motion that the case was not proven; only 119 voted with the Government—under immense pressure from the Whips and others, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding us of that, and he is right. This is why it is important to set out the context of what that day was like. It was a horrible, ugly, dreadful day, and we can never get around some of the things that went on.

Let me get on to the Conservatives, as the second category is mainly comprised of them. I have listened to several Conservative Members. I cannot recall which one made this case earlier, but there is a sense among Conservative Members that they were misled. They range from those who are angry and upset about the way they were duped by the former Prime Minister, to those like the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr Cameron), who resigned as Prime Minister yesterday, who are a bit more morose and philosophical about it. They say, "A Prime Minister was giving us information. We had to go along with it because it was a Prime Minister and of course he will know all this." What the Conservative party failed to do—it absolutely failed to do this on that day—was hold that Labour Government to account; it did not question and it was not inquisitive. It did not

look at the case presented to it and say, "Hold on a minute, this is a lot of nonsense." It should have known—the rest of the country knew this was wrong.

Some 100,000 people marched through Glasgow—I was at the front of that procession with my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond)—and 1 million people in London marched against that war. More than that, there was an atmosphere in the nation among the public, who just knew profoundly that something was wrong with this case. They knew instinctively that what they were hearing night after night from Tony Blair and all his cronies was uncomfortable—there was something wrong. The Conservatives should have picked that up. Had they done their job, we would not have been presented with this utter failure and disaster.

Let me now deal with those in the third and last category, and I have listened to some of them today. They seem almost still to be making the case for war, as if that was somehow justified and right. They point to all sorts of things, saying, "The world's a better place without Saddam." Well, of course it is, but what a price we have paid. What world do these people live on? We have seen half a million people dead; a region destabilised; a generation radicalised; foreign policy discredited like never before—and it is unlikely that we will ever restore that faith in foreign policy again; and distrust in politics. That was a key point when the public fell out of trust with what we did in this House. And what about the place where Saddam was removed? Of course, we all welcome that, but no one, least of all the Iraqis who have to live with the consequences, would start to suggest that Iraq is a better place now than in 2002.

Clive Efford: The hon. Gentleman just said that this decision led to the public losing faith in this House, but many of the accusations that were made against the Government are not found in the Chilcot report. Those led to people coming to that conclusion about this House. Does he not accept that that day was difficult for all of us? Even those who voted against were not certain that we were making the right decision. We cannot be so exact about our judgment call on that day. Surely he can accept that those who voted in favour did so believing that they were doing the right thing. At least he could be graceful about that.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that, as it brings me on to my next point, which is that we should look at the case for the war. I believe he was in the House in 2003—

Clive Efford *indicated assent.*

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman, like me, will therefore have been recalled to Parliament in September 2002. We would march to the Members' Lobby and take out what has become known as "the dodgy dossier". Did he, for a minute, believe the fabricated nonsense it contained? The case for war was appalling. As we find out from Chilcot now, most of it came from the post-doctoral thesis of a student called Ibrahim al-Marashi. I have just read a report from him, and he is now saying that his evidence and his post-doctoral work were doctored by the Government at the time. That was the case for war—the hon. Gentleman had to make a judgement on it, as did I—and it was nonsensical. It was fabricated

and it was a flight of fancy, but it was what we were asked to go to war on. It was a disgrace. This was like a comedy sketch for a case to go to war on; it was more sexed up than some teenage starlet embarking on their first video. That is what I would say about the dodgy dossier. It was an appalling document and this House should never have been taken in for a minute with the rubbish included in it.

I listened to Tony Blair last week and I was appalled at what I heard in his response: the lack of contrition; the half-hearted apology, which will probably do nothing other than incense the victims; the flights of fancy still there, almost with an attempt to rewrite several sections of the Chilcot report; and the failure to acknowledge the enormity of what was unleashed. What happened was appalling, and so several things now have to happen.

My view is that we are not at the end of the process, despite having had 1 million-odd words; there is still a journey to go in this sorry saga in which this House has been involved. We are not at the conclusion in terms of what happened in Iraq. That is mainly because of a point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) have raised: Chilcot was not able to judge on the legality of this conflict. We still have that extra mile to go to see whether this was an illegal war. Until we get that verdict, big issues will remain outstanding on the assessment of the conflict. There are further journeys to go on, which may disappoint hon. Members who have waited years and years for the Chilcot report.

The second thing that must happen is that those who are responsible for the biggest foreign policy disaster ever—this is bigger than Suez—must be held to account for the decisions they made, for the things they did in the course of the conflict and for how it was pursued. I overwhelmingly support the case that the chief architect—the designer—of the Iraq war, Mr Tony Blair, should be brought in front of this House to face the charges that have been suggested. I hope that the House gets that opportunity to discuss this, because the public expect us to do it. They do not want us, after all this time, to let it go. The only people who have lost their jobs in the course of the conflict are two BBC journalists. Is that not an appalling way to leave things? That has to be addressed and I believe that there is a real public desire to move to the next stage now, which is holding people to account. I hope we do that.

I hated every minute of the debate about the Iraq war—the build-up to it and the post-conflict resolution. It was dreadful; it was this House at its worst. We must never get there again. If there is one thing we can take from this, it is to learn lessons and never to do this again. We must hold the people responsible to account. We must apologise for that conflict and start to try to move on from all of this. Let us vow that we will never do something like the Iraq war ever again in this Parliament.

12.59 pm

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): Many important lessons will emerge over the coming months and years, and of course deep sympathy must persist for the people of Iraq and the families of the members of our outstanding armed forces who fell in the line of duty. I shall focus on

the Iraq inquiry's immediate lessons for the leadership of our country, in which this House has such a vital role.

First, may I offer some historical perspective? It is worth noting some similarities between the times that we are living through now and the last period of our recent history that was similarly defined by what I would describe as political sclerosis. During the first half of the 20th century, we witnessed the collapse of empires—the Ottoman empire and our own; we saw the failure of an intergovernmental institution—the League of Nations; and we endured economic turbulence and depression. Such dramatic geopolitical change was fuelled by remarkable technological change, with the mass transit of people and advanced weapons of war, along with large armies, which resulted in appalling human cost in two world wars.

Today we are experiencing similar geopolitical change with an expansionist China, a resurgent Russia, and a socially unstable and perhaps more parochial United States of America. We have the mass transit of data rather than of people, and globalisation, which brings with it opportunities and costs. Drones have replaced tanks and the potential for space-based weaponry looms. Within the context of this dramatic change, the new Government must set their path. A crucial lesson from the Iraq inquiry's report is that we have to be better prepared to provide great leadership at historic tipping points for our nation and for our world.

It was not wrong to wish to depose Saddam Hussein, but the way in which the US-led coalition went about it has had effects that were predicted by many experts. Those effects were perfectly foreseeable, and they were catastrophic for the Iraqi people and also for our own regional interests. Our own country's leadership at every level, from the Prime Minister down, was far too weak to deliver a good outcome.

I note that we are again at a critical moment—this time in the history of our own nation and continent. Delivering a good long-term outcome once again depends on this House supplying the best possible leadership now. The ties that have bound our nation, our communities and our people at home and abroad are severely strained, and some are breaking. Our people mistrust those whom they have elected to represent their interests and lead our nation. As in 2003, decisions taken quickly today will have enormous ramifications over the coming decades, like the proverbial flap of the butterfly's wings in one part of the world that creates a hurricane in another.

It is at such critical moments that we require great leadership: leadership with the experience and perspective to see our nation's role clearly; leadership with the wisdom and understanding to realise what must be done; and leadership with the vision to set clear direction, the tenacity to deliver a plan, and the good sense to adapt when the context changes, as it always does. In other words, we must not be sclerotic. We need leadership with the selflessness and self-awareness to put the public interest and public service at its heart. We need leadership that will forge our future, not allow us to be carried off on the currents of history to an unknown and unwanted destination.

Our new Prime Minister has taken an important step in setting out her vision for a country that works for everyone. This Government and the previous one have

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made welcome changes. Notably, the National Security Council structures enable more strategic decision making in our national interests.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): One of the lessons that I took from the Chilcot report was about a habit that we who have been to Sandhurst had beaten out of us: starting with our aim and retrofitting justifications to suit that. At this time of change in our national leadership, would my hon. Friend welcome any calls that might be made to the new Prime Minister to have a robust team of people to provide counter-narratives at times of key decision making, to test hypotheses and to make sure that when difficult decisions have to be made, that is done in the best possible way?

Dr Lee: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Yes, over the past 10 to 15 years, we have seen too much evidence of the absence of people speaking truth to power in the room that matters. I am hopeful that the elevation of our new Prime Minister will usher in a period in which we do listen to experts, and in which we are prepared to listen to those who might have a different view and a different approach to the world in which we live.

The changes to the National Security Council are nowhere near enough to guarantee good leadership, which means that we are running an unacceptable level of risk with the security of our people, our nation and our world. The referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union is the latest example. I was no fan of our country's previous relationship with the EU. It had to change, but holding a referendum on our membership was, I fear, a strategic blunder that will have an adverse impact on our country and our world over the coming years and decades.

We must avoid further such blunders in the future because we face existential threats, and those threats cross borders. They are by their very nature trans-national: international terrorism; radicalisation; a resurgent Russia and an expansionist China that do not respect current borders; cyber-security; organised crime; pandemics; and environmental degradation. Dealing with all these requires us to work with other nations.

We must now set out our geopolitical priorities. We must properly fund the objective to increase our influence around the world. We must revisit government and how it works. Wisdom and experience must be at the heart of our decision making. We must put people who know what they are doing in charge of delivering, and they must stay in their jobs long enough to see them through.

We must urgently overhaul how we identify and nurture future leaders. Our people must once again be able to trust the aims, intentions and abilities of those who lead our country. We have to provide leaders who are worthy of that trust. Earning it back will be painstaking work. This House must insist that we now go much further. Only then will Members be able, in all conscience, to reassure those whom we represent that our nation will have the leadership it needs, when it needs it.

1.7 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I have had a very long involvement with Iraq. For Members who were not here in the 1980s, the 1990s and even the beginning

of the 2000s, let me say that I spoke many times in this Chamber about the regime in Iraq. I chaired an organisation called CARDRI—the Committee against Repression and for Democratic Rights in Iraq—which had many members in this country and overseas. We published several books by academics and people who lived in Iraq about the situation in the country. Somebody who is now the representative of Iraq in South Korea would come here almost every other week with a list of people who had been executed at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. Sometimes the accounts of their executions and their torture were so dreadful that I would say to him, “Are you sure this is right?” He would then come back, perhaps a week later, and say, “Yes, it was right, and here's another long list.” We therefore had no doubt what the situation was in Iraq, and CARDRI existed for a number of years.

When I came back from the European Parliament in 1984, I was asked to chair an organisation called Indict, which was set up with American and Kuwaiti backing. The Kuwaitis, of course, had a particular interest in finding those Kuwaitis who had been captured during Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. For many years we searched for those missing people—or their graves.

The organisation had a team of researchers and its aim was to collect evidence against Iraqi war criminals. In particular, we had a list of the 12 most wanted, and we collected detailed evidence about a great number of them because the idea was to bring them to court. By the mid-1990s, a body of law existed that allowed human rights abusers to be brought to court. The development of international law was slow; even though laws existed, their application depended on institutions and Governments that had their own political agendas. A new ruling by the International Court of Justice, for example, blocked indictments of ruling heads of state. Therefore, whatever evidence we had against Saddam Hussein, we could not use it in a court of law, unlike in the case of Slobodan Milošević, who was brought before an international court.

That still left key members of the regime open to indictment, however. We had a great deal of evidence, for example, against Tariq Aziz, who was then the Foreign Minister in Iraq. We also had plenty of evidence against Ali Hassan al-Majid—Chemical Ali. I had meetings with the UN special rapporteur on torture, Max van der Stoep, with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, and with Secretary-General Kofi Annan. I also addressed several international conferences and tried to spell out what we were doing.

We needed evidence that would stand up in court, so we dismissed a lot of the evidence that we felt would not. We had guidance from a top human rights barrister, Clare Montgomery, QC. Our researchers worked hard interviewing thousands of people over five or six years to collect testimonies. Once the evidence had been gathered and analysed by our legal team, the role of myself and Indict's other board members was to persuade lawmakers in the relevant country that there was enough evidence to indict the people concerned. We came close to a prosecution in Belgium, but it changed its laws at the last minute because someone had tried to indict Israeli leader Ariel Sharon.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The right hon. Lady is trying to persuade us that Saddam Hussein was a vile dictator. We all accept that, but that

was not the case for war. The case for war was based on weapons of mass destruction. She argued strongly in favour of the war. Has she changed her mind on the basis of the evidence?

Ann Clwyd: When I come to the relevant section in my speech, the hon. Gentleman will get his answer.

We went to Switzerland, Norway and Belgium. We had a good case in Norway, and I travelled there several times to meet senior law officers. However, just as in Britain, there were lots of warm words, but there was no action. We were therefore trying hard to avoid a war; we thought there was an alternative. We tried to make the case—I made it in this Chamber over many years, and the hon. Gentleman would have heard it had he been here—that there were alternatives. Unfortunately, all the authorities prevaricated, and the issue dragged on without getting anywhere.

Meanwhile, our main funders, the Americans, were having a change of heart. The Clinton Administration had originally been enthusiastic, wanting us to campaign in the US as well as in Europe, but they suddenly changed their mind. They had moved to a policy of containment, not indictment, so our activities no longer really fitted in with their plans. However, the organisation had been set up in this country, so we continued collecting the evidence.

We turned our attention, in particular, to Tariq Aziz, because of his involvement in the taking of British hostages. People forget that British hostages were taken in Kuwait, and we never had proper answers about why they were there and why their plane landed there. Saddam Hussein had already taken Kuwait, and those people were taken as human shields.

I presented our evidence to the Attorney General, Lord Williams of Mostyn. I had several meetings with him and continually pressured members of his team to take action, because they were not moving fast enough. They kicked their heels for a number of years, and our top barrister could not understand why, given the evidence that we had presented. We had as much evidence as we could possibly need. Apart from getting a signed confession from Saddam Hussein in his own blood, there was nothing further, legally, we could have done.

I would occasionally spot Lord Williams at Westminster, and I would take off after him, chasing him down the corridors. He would frequently joke that he was having to duck into the gents to try to avoid me. One day he said, “I’ve got good news for Indict.” He said he was going to refer the case against Tariq Aziz to Scotland Yard. I looked at him and said, “You’re kicking it into the long grass,” but he denied that that was the case. The Indict team, which was obviously made up mainly of Iraqis, duly visited a Chief Superintendent Bunn in New Scotland Yard. We talked about the evidence we had and offered to help him by providing more, but we never heard a single word back. That is understandable in some ways; it was not Scotland Yard’s remit, and it had neither the resources nor the expertise, and certainly not the interest.

We came in for some ridicule from the British press—the typical tabloid fare, with cartoons of British bobbies apprehending Saddam Hussein—but a good opportunity was missed. I make that point because

there were alternatives, but those alternatives, for whatever reasons, were not pursued in the way that I and many other Members would have wished.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), who was of great assistance when we were looking at many of these matters. He was a very wise counsel, and he assisted the Iraqis in many ways.

I became aware of human rights atrocities in Iraq before I was a politician, in the 1970s. I met Iraqi students in Cardiff, and I am sure some of my Scottish friends will have met Iraqi students in Scotland. Some of those students had been imprisoned. I met a couple from Basra. One of them—he was a student activist—had been in prison and gone through a mock execution. I came to learn later on that that was only the tip of the iceberg.

In 1991, when I was the shadow Secretary of State for International Development, I stood up in Parliament and described what I had seen in the mountains of Iraq and Iran when the Kurds fled from Saddam’s helicopter gunships. Those scenes were appalling and typical of the attacks made by the Iraqi regime on Iraqis. Sometime later, I met an Iraqi who made the point that Saddam had killed hundreds of thousands of his own people. He said, “The biggest weapon of mass destruction was Saddam. Why did it take so long for him to be removed?” Many Kurds were killed during the genocidal Anfal campaign, including as a result of the barbarous use of chemical weapons in Halabja.

In 1988, I took some women Members of all parties to a London hospital to see a number of the horribly burned victims. Many people were killed brutally, in cold blood, in a maze of prison and torture chambers all over the country. Repression, abuse, ethnic cleansing and extra-judicial killings continued right up until 2003.

Saddam, without doubt, was a serious threat to domestic, regional and global stability. I had hoped that the international community could remove or neutralise him without force, but sanctions failed, international indictment never took place and UN Security Council resolutions were ignored time after time. All had been tried; all had failed. So from 1997 to 2003, I worked to get Saddam and leading members of his regime prosecuted under international law for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, on the basis of rock-solid witness testimony. The evidence was finally used in the trials of Saddam, Tariq Aziz and others when they eventually stood trial in Baghdad. I was very pleased to be there to witness some of those trials. I knew that our evidence was being used; I saw it in the rooms behind the chamber where they were being tried.

In February 2003, the Kurds were terrified that chemical weapons would be used against them again. I saw the rockets in mountains on the Iraqi-Kurdish border. From 2003 onwards, more secrets of this evil and despotic regime were revealed. I stood on a huge mound in the open air, on several acres in al-Hillah, near Babylon, where about 10,000 bodies were being disinterred from a mass grave, mostly Shi’a Muslims.

On one of more than 20 visits to Iraq as special envoy on human rights, I opened the first genocide museum in Kurdistan. It was snowing, the sky was black and people crammed into the building, where their relatives had been tortured, many to death. There were photos of

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skulls and shreds of clothing. Former detainees had written messages on the cell walls. Sometimes, the writing was in blood; sometimes, there were just marks to cross off the days of the week. One very old woman came up to me with a bit of plastic in her hand. I unwrapped it and saw three photos. They were of her husband and two sons, who had been killed in that place.

Over the past few days, since the report of the Chilcot inquiry, to which I gave evidence for a whole afternoon, very few voices of Iraqis have been heard. I have here the words of Dr Latif Rashid, who is currently the senior adviser to the Iraqi President. In 2003, he was appointed as Water Minister in Baghdad, and he was very successful. He managed, over a few years, to re-flood the marshes where the Marsh Arabs had been so cruelly displaced. This is what he says:

“It must be remembered that at the time not only did Prime Minister Blair and President Bush wish to remove Saddam Hussain from power in Iraq, but so did most of the entire spectrum of the Iraqi opposition (including Kurds, Arabs, Shia, and all other minorities that make up the Iraq) and most of the international community.

The Iraqi opposition lobbied Governments throughout the world, and we, as representatives of the Iraqi opposition, believe that Prime Minister Blair and President Bush were acting in response to the Iraqi people and to protect them, on the basis of evidence available at that time.

There was concrete evidence that Saddam Hussain was complicit and had instructed organised campaigns of genocide, torture, war, ethnic cleansing and use of chemical/biological weapons against the Iraqi population as well as neighbouring countries. We are still finding the mass graves of the nearly one million Iraqis murdered as a result of his actions.

Although Iraq currently has its problems, I believe they are the result of Iraqis themselves. We will always remain grateful for the support shown by Tony Blair, and the British Government and British Parliament at that time.”

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have the utmost respect for the right hon. Lady for all the work she has done over the years to try to get evidence against this regime. It is incredible work, and I pay great tribute to her. I have one question. I have never really understood where the chemical weapons went—where did they go?

Ann Clwyd: That is a very interesting question. I can only speculate, as I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has done. There is evidence that some of them went to Syria, but there are still unanswered questions. The Kurds, in particular, truly believed that there were weapons of mass destruction. I myself never used that argument for intervention, because I did not know the answers. However, I did use the humanitarian argument, because I thought it was important that the world should not turn its face away from the horrors that were going on in Iraq.

I want to make a plea for continuing engagement with Iraq. The needs of the Iraqis are great. I, personally, have continued my association with Iraqis and with the Kurds. I am very well aware of their problems at this time, particularly the continuing threat of ISIS and Daesh. It is not true to say that such people did not exist in Iraq before the war. They existed in Kurdistan, for example, under the name of Ansar al-Islam, and at that time the Americans managed to get them out. We

still need to protect the minorities of Iraq—there are so many of them. We have a responsibility to continue to assist that country in any way we can.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. To try to accommodate all remaining colleagues, there will now be a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, with immediate effect. [Interruption.] I hardly think that is a cause for the exhalation of air; 10 minutes is perfectly adequate. I know that what colleagues have to say is immensely important, but I dare say they can do it in 10 minutes each.

1.27 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): So we now have the Chilcot report. Seven long years we have waited for this report of 2.6 million words. It has cost a huge amount of money. After seven years, Sir John Chilcot comes up with this sentence:

“We have concluded that the UK chose to join the invasion of Iraq before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted.”

It took seven years to come up with that conclusion. It took so long that one of the five members of the inquiry actually died during the proceedings. I pay tribute to the speeches that were made yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), and my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), and to today’s speech by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart).

I was absolutely sickened when I saw the interview with the former Labour Prime Minister on television. I thought that if anyone deserved an Oscar, it was him. After everything that we now know has happened, instead of apologising, like the noble Lord Prescott, the then Deputy Prime Minister, who has admitted that he got it wrong and made huge mistakes, the then Prime Minister told us that if he was presented with the same facts—what a joke!—he would do absolutely the same again.

I am delighted that we are having a two-day debate on the Chilcot report, but to be frank, the timing is not great, because both the major parties are distracted by the question of who will lead them. At least the Conservatives have come to a conclusion on that, but I have no doubt that Conservative Members are today distracted by the question of who will become a Minister. Given how distracted we have been over the past two days, the Chilcot report deserves better scrutiny, because it has affected the whole world, not just the future of the Labour and Conservative parties. I am very disappointed that the two Prime Ministers did not intervene and say to Sir John Chilcot, “Seven years is absolutely ridiculous. We should have had the report much more quickly.”

I want to draw on five elements of the report. The first centres on the misrepresentation of French declarations relating to their potential veto of any further UN resolution. Sir Stephen Wall, Mr Blair’s European Union adviser, told the Iraq inquiry that, following Chirac’s statement, he heard Mr Blair telling Alastair Campbell, the director of communications at No. 10, to play the anti-French card with *The Sun* and others. Well, that is nice, isn’t it?

Secondly, on statements relating to suspected Iraqi stockpiles of chemical weapons, Mr Blair gave a speech that gave the impression that the overwhelming evidence supported the view that Iraq had retained significant stocks of chemical weapons, in material breach of United Nations resolution 1441. In reality, the report did not claim that Iraq possessed banned weapons, merely that material was “unaccounted for”.

The third element I want to draw on centres on statements relating to suspected Iraqi stockpiles of biological weapons. Mr Blair confused the distinction between biological weapons existing and their being unaccounted for, and the evidence did not support his representations to the House that Iraq had significant stockpiles of viable biological weapons.

Fourthly, on statements relating to Hussein Kamel’s evidence regarding Iraq’s chemical and biological weapons programme, by selectively quoting from General Kamel’s evidence and by omitting his claims that Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programme had been closed in 1991, Mr Blair misled this House of Commons as to the extent of Iraq’s chemical and biological weapons programme.

Finally, on statements relating to the consequences of the Iraq war on the threat of terrorism to the United Kingdom, Baroness Manningham-Buller—head of MI5, no less, at the time of the Iraq war—gave evidence to the Iraq inquiry regarding her department’s assessment of the effect of joining the war on the risk of terrorism. Responding to the question of whether United Kingdom participation in the Iraq war would increase the threat of terrorism in the UK, she said:

“I think you will see from our report in early 2003, which is reflected in the JIC reporting, that the threat from Al-Qaeda would increase”.

She went on to explain that she thought that the Iraq war

“is highly significant and the JIC assessments that I have reminded myself of say that...our involvement in Iraq radicalised, for want of a better word, a whole generation of young people, some British citizens—not a whole generation, a few among a generation—who were—saw our involvement in Iraq, on top of our involvement in Afghanistan, as being an attack on Islam.”

It is clear from the evidence provided to the Iraq inquiry that Mr Blair was made aware of the evidence that the war would increase the risk of terrorist activity in the United Kingdom, and that he misled the House about how the conflict would impact on terrorist activities.

How many times have we heard someone say today, “There are lessons to be learned from the Chilcot report”? Since I have been in the House, I have seen at first hand how most significant political careers end in tears, so I am not sure how those lessons will actually be learned. My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet has said that he hopes that you would look favourably, Mr Speaker, on a request for a debate on the subject of contempt of this House. If we did nothing, that would be an insult to the families who have lost loved ones in the conflict. Those families will take their own action—I understand that—but this, for goodness’ sake, is the mother of all Parliaments. We cannot just sweep this under the table as if nothing had happened. What is the point of being a Member of Parliament and coming here if we do not admit that we got it wrong? We did get it wrong, and I am one of the people who got it wrong: I voted the wrong way, and I very much regret that.

Many current Members were not here in 2003, but we owe it to everyone to make sure that we put right the wrong for which we were responsible, and hold the former Prime Minister, the then leader of the Labour party, to account for the way in which he misled this Parliament.

1.36 pm

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I listened with great interest to the speech of the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). I was here in 2003 and I am one of the people who got it right. I sat on the Back Bench—I was not called to speak, but I heard the entire debate—and listened to the evidence presented to me by the then Prime Minister. I made my decision based on the evidence, and I believed then, as I believe now, that I made the right decision. I know that the report has taken an awful long time to arrive, but it is very good and valuable.

I want to talk about the context and where we found ourselves in 2003. It is very important that we remember what happened on 9/11 in 2001, because much of what we discussed in the period leading up to the war was seen through the prism of the attack on the World Trade Centre. As a new MP, I visited the United Nations in New York in November 2001. It was an extraordinary time and the visit was a moving experience, but we could also feel the entirely understandable strength of feeling in the United States about what had happened. That resulted in military intervention in Afghanistan, which was broadly supported, not just in this House, but right across the world.

One of the most extraordinary things that I saw at the UN in November 2001 was a committee chaired by UK Special Representative Sir Jeremy Greenstock taking evidence on and auditing terrorist activity in countries across the middle east. For a very short period before the Iraq war, there was a feeling and a sentiment that we could make some progress in dealing with international terrorism. Unfortunately, however, a linkage was very quickly developed between what happened in New York in September 2001 and the issue of Iraq. There were people who developed an agenda trying to draw together what happened at the World Trade Centre and the problem of Iraq. That was in the air, and was referred to in the various discussions that we had. So although there was no direct evidence of any links at all between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda, there was usage of a broad description of international terrorism to justify the steps that were being taken.

John Nicolson: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that it was risible to try to associate the secular Saddam Hussein with fundamentalist Islamists, given that the two had a mutual loathing for one another?

Ian C. Lucas: That is absolutely right. It would have been very convenient for those who wanted to take military action in Iraq if they could have made a linkage, but clearly there was none. In all the discussions we had in the lead-up to the war, no linkage was established.

Immediately after the vote in 2003, there was, for me, a terrible sense of inevitability about the military action in Iraq. I am reminded of the fact that the historian A. J. P. Taylor talked about the importance of railway

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timetables at the beginning of the first world war. When approaching the vote in March 2003, I had that idea in my mind. It seemed to me that we were on a road that was leading to an inevitable conclusion. Very interestingly, paragraph 830 of Sir John Chilcot's report states:

"A military timetable should not be allowed to dictate a diplomatic timetable".

I believe that, at the time of the vote, that is exactly what happened.

I recall very well the work of Hans Blix and the UN weapons inspectors. I watched Hans Blix very closely in the build-up to March 2003, when I was deciding how to vote. It seemed to me that he was doing his best to establish the position on weapons of mass destruction. On 18 March 2003, he was asking for more time. On the basis of the information that I heard in the debate, I thought it was right to give him more time. That is why I voted in the way that I did and why I supported the amendment.

Interestingly, a couple of years after the vote, I attended a meeting in the House of Commons at which Hans Blix spoke. I recall that he said that, in March 2003, he believed that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. I had not known that on the day that I cast my vote, and it is extraordinary that he said it. It seems that he had a similar view to the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair: he had a genuine, honest belief. The difference was that he wanted more time to investigate it further, and the Prime Minister did not allow us more time so to do. In March 2003, the drum beat to war quickened, and that is why military action happened. That is not a good reason for military action.

The then US Government, acting in the long shadow of 9/11, included people with an agenda to intervene in the middle east. They used that context to justify the intervention. In the immediate post-9/11 period, they made some really bad judgment calls. In Iran, moderate forces had been holding sway before 2003. George Bush then made his dreadful "axis of evil" speech, which was part of the process that shattered any chance of a unified response to 9/11. The alienation of Iran also had a massive negative impact on the post-war period in Iraq and undermined progress towards reconstruction. It was a massive mistake for the UK Government and Tony Blair to support the Bush and US agenda at that time.

I am quite certain that Tony Blair acted in good faith. In March 2003, I think he believed, like Hans Blix, that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction. I believe that it was through UK insistence that the US agreed to involve the UN as much as it did. However, when the UN weapons inspectors asked for more time in March 2003, the allies should have given it to them. As Sir John Chilcot concludes at paragraph 339 of the report:

"At the time of the parliamentary vote of 18 March, diplomatic options had not been exhausted. The point had not been reached where military action was the last resort".

On the information available to me, a Back Bencher, at the time, I voted against the Labour Whip for the first time, along with many of my Labour colleagues. The Liberal Democrats—the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) is sitting next to me—the nationalist parties and some Conservatives did the same. The official Conservative Opposition, however, supported military action in a largely unquestioning way.

Clive Efford: I wonder whether my hon. Friend's recollection is the same as mine. My recollection is that, prior to the debate and the statement by the Prime Minister, which was criticised by the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), the Conservatives had been calling for action earlier, before that evidence was presented. For them to turn up now and say that it was all because of what Tony Blair said on that day is a little disingenuous.

Ian C. Lucas: I would not go quite that far, because I am more kindly than my hon. Friend. My recollection is that the Leader of the Opposition got this completely and utterly wrong. The official Opposition failed in their constitutional duty to ask the difficult questions and hold the Government to account. It was left to other parties in the House and the Labour Back Benchers to hold the Government to account. The failure of the official Opposition to challenge the Prime Minister and the Government effectively made his wrong decision easier. This is a big lesson for the official Opposition today.

There were a number of things that the Government did right on the Iraq issue. For example, they did hold a vote. It should be remembered that that was, I think, the first time that that had happened.

Sir David Amess: I think the hon. Gentleman is being slightly disingenuous in this. There were only 165 Conservative Members of Parliament. It is not as though we were a huge Opposition. I think he is slightly misrepresenting things.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not use the word "disingenuous". The hon. Member for Southend West thinks that there has been a misrepresentation, which I am sure he thinks is inadvertent. We will leave it there.

Ian C. Lucas: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I took no offence and understand the hon. Gentleman's point. It is difficult to be a small Opposition. None the less, it is important to ask the difficult questions. I am afraid that the Leader of the Opposition got this completely wrong.

As I mentioned, the Government did do some things right. They made statements on a regular basis and we asked a lot of questions. That changed the nature of the relationship between Government and Parliament on questions of military action. We have seen the consequences of that in the more recent decision on Libya and Syria. [*Interruption.*] I am sorry to interrupt the conversation happening at the other end of the Chamber.

On the main issue of taking military action in Iraq in March 2003, Tony Blair and the Labour Government made a huge, honest error. That is supported by the Chilcot report and is a conclusion with which I agree.

1.49 pm

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): The decision to commit to the US neo-con agenda of an invasion of Iraq was, and remains, the biggest political misjudgement in foreign policy in my political lifetime. I gave evidence to the Chilcot inquiry. The inquiry was an opportunity that the former Prime Minister Tony Blair could have seized to say, "I made a serious misjudgement.

I was wrong, but at the time I thought I was doing the right thing.” Instead, we had equivocal apologies that were really about the circumstances: “Sorry that people got injured and that some people died.” That was not enough. Had the former Prime Minister taken that opportunity, he would have healed not only himself, but a fault line in his party and the hurt that has been suffered, to some extent, by the nation and by people across the globe. I am sorry that he missed the opportunity to say that because these things will remain with us for as long as he fails to do so.

The two biggest rebellions within a governing party in British political history took place in February and March 2003. It will not surprise you, Mr Speaker, to hear that I want to talk about the parliamentary aspect. Parliament could have done better, even in those circumstances. It was used and abused by Executive power in the most blatant way, and I will mention some examples of that later.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: I recall the hon. Gentleman’s role in formulating a cross-party amendment that was put to the House, and I expect to agree with most of what he will say about the role of Parliament. Before he continues, will he reflect on the fact that Parliament did one thing perfectly at that time? It is to the eternal credit of Michael Martin, the then Speaker, that he selected the hon. Gentleman’s amendment over that tabled by the official Opposition, which would have resulted in no material difference.

Mr Allen: I have some things to say about the then Speaker—I will get on to that fairly quickly—but first I will set the context. There was growing unease, certainly from the time of the Crawford talks between Prime Minister Blair and the US President George W. Bush, that we were being set on an inevitable path. It was thought that this was not something that anyone was going to change; it was something that had been agreed and was going to happen, to coin a phrase, “whatever”. That was the thing that frustrated and annoyed parliamentarians. This was a preordained decision, and it was going to happen. That was why I and many, many others felt that, as Chilcot said, this was not hindsight; it was foresight. Anyone who had read in the history books about the religious and tribal composition of Iraq realised that action could set off an incendiary device in the middle east, which was already, even then, in some difficulties.

People talk about the debates and what a wonderful thing they were for Parliament, but we had to drag the Government kicking and screaming to a debate. I wrote to Speaker Martin and suggested the recall of the House. He said that of course we could put our suggestion to the House, when it returned. We therefore would have had to wait for the House to return in order to get the House recalled at an earlier point, and I felt that that was probably not the then Chair’s finest moment.

As there was such clarity among many of the parties in the House about the fact that the House had a role to play, we petitioned, we signed early-day motions and we wrote letters—we did everything humanly possible. In the end, because all that failed, we decided collectively to set up our own alternative Parliament. I hired Church House so that Back-Bench Members of Parliament could speak on the matter. I met the former Speaker,

“Jack” Bernard Weatherill, who kindly agreed, putting his own reputation on the line, to be the Speaker of that Parliament. One of the things we agreed was that people would not be left out, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) and I had been previously. Jack Weatherill said that he would call every single person who wanted to speak, for 10 minutes at least, even if it meant that his House—we were based at Church House, over the road, because we were not permitted to use our own Chamber—sat until 3 am.

Having got a critical mass of willing Back Benchers, I asked the BBC whether it would cover the debate. The BBC ummed and ahed, and it finally said that, since the actual Parliament would not be allowed to meet, it would cover the alternative Parliament from the opening to the end of its proceedings. Amazingly, within a day, I received a phone call from Robin Cook, saying, “You lot have won; we are going to recall the proper Parliament.” As he recalls in his diary, my reply was, “My God, that leaves me with a thousand vol-au-vents and 200 bottles of wine on my slate.” I had ordered them to refresh the members of the alternative Parliament, and I am still working my way through the vol-au-vents from my deep freeze.

This was the House at its best, in the sense that Back Benchers came together. Some are still here today, and some are not. They included Charles Kennedy, Chris Smith, Douglas Hogg, Peter Kilfoyle, Tony Lloyd, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the right hon. Members for Gordon (Alex Salmond), for Moray (Angus Robertson) and for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), and the hon. Members for Arfon (Hywel Williams), for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and for Angus (Mike Weir). I think about a quarter remain. We decided collectively how the resolutions, the amendments and our external relations should be framed. That was an example of Members of Parliament working together in an excellent way. On 24 September, Parliament was recalled and the debate was held. It was on a motion for the Adjournment, so not many people voted at that point.

We raised collectively a series of issues about how the House works, one of which was the question of legal advice to Members of Parliament. We were in a position where some of us could have been arraigned before the International Court of Justice, so we needed to know what the truth was. The then Clerk of the House said, “Yes, Mr Allen, I will get you some legal advice.” I thought, “Wonderful,” and I was sent off to the lawyer that the House employs to deal with health and safety matters, who assumed that some sort of accident had happened in the office and I was being taken to court. That was not of great help, although that was not the lawyer’s fault. The House and Members should have had legal advice, just as the Government had legal advice, which would, in itself, prove to be relatively controversial.

Another issue that arose was the question of war-making powers. We in this House should define how we are involved. The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee worked hard to come up with a sensible set of words that would allow a response in the event of immediate threat of attack, but with the House being consulted where appropriate. In a proper democracy, the Executive and the legislature work together.

[Mr Graham Allen]

Another issue is the recall of the House. Instead of having a farcical arrangement, we should allow the Speaker to say, "On the balance of what I have heard from people on this issue, there is a very strong feeling that the House should be recalled." That would be better than a dozen people doing it, or 550 people not being allowed to do it. The Speaker should be given that power to recall, rather than the Government having the power to ask the Speaker to do that.

A further issue—this could not be dealt with in the Standing Orders—is a free vote on war. In the first vote on Wednesday 26 February, 122 Labour Back Benchers voted against the proposal, while 119 Labour Back Benchers voted with the Government. I am absolutely confident that if those Back Benchers had been allowed to make their own decision rather than being pressured by Whips, being asked to see the Prime Minister—even being asked to see the Prime Minister's wife, on certain occasions—and being got at relentlessly, the number of Labour Members would have been much more than 122. I would guess that a rump of about 20 or 30 Members would have voted with the Government, and that would have put them in a very difficult position.

Some of the Conservative Members who stood with us on that day deserve a mention at this point, after Chilcot. I have not spoken about this issue at any length since the decision for war because I thought my job was to support the young men and women of my constituency who went to war. I put it on record that the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) gave up a potential ministerial career. The hon. Members for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon), for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) and for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner), who are all still with us, also did so, as did good colleagues such as Peter Ainsworth, John Gummer and others who are no longer with us in this House. They all put their necks out very extensively.

Finally, on 18 March, we came to the vote on the amendment stating that the case for war was not established. Some 139 Labour colleagues supported that out of the total number of 217 MPs in favour. The number therefore went up, despite the immense pressure that was being put on people.

We went to war; we won the war. We lost the peace and we are now reaping the whirlwind. Let Parliament be strong "whatever".

2 pm

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) and hear the historical background from his perspective.

Two weeks ago, many of us spoke in a moving debate on the centenary of the battle of the Somme. Throughout these islands and beyond, the events of 100 years ago were commemorated, and one recurring theme in this House and elsewhere was the importance of treasuring the young lives of our soldiers. When we read about the senseless slaughter of the Somme, we like to think that we are more sophisticated and less gullible than previous generations—that we are more concerned with the lives of others, whether our own soldiers or civilians abroad. Yet in this House, in very recent history, we voted for a war that was an unpardonable folly.

On 18 March 2003, 411 MPs followed Tony Blair into the Aye Lobby, unleashing the forces of hell in Iraq; 139 of those MPs still serve in Parliament today. It must be difficult to live with that vote. But rather than accept personal responsibility, too many say, "If I had known then what I know now, I would never have voted for the war." That is what I want to focus on, because I do not buy it. It is too easy a cop-out. Tony Blair has become so discredited that he is a convenient depository for shared guilt. "It was his golden oratory that bamboozled me," say some MPs. They talk of seductive mendacity, or ask who could have questioned our security services in all their wisdom. They say that they believed Colin Powell and his illustrated talk at the UN with its cartoon mock-up of mobile laboratories on trucks and that they fell for his dire warnings that the secular Saddam Hussein was in cahoots with the fundamentalist Osama bin Laden, however culturally illiterate that claim was. It was just all so convincing, they say—if they had only known then what they know now. It is all nonsense.

We did know then much of what we know now, and if we did not, it was because we chose not to absorb the expert opinion available at the time. We knew then that Saddam Hussein had once possessed chemical weapons. He had used them in the 1980s against the Kurds, the Iranians and the Shi'a. However, we also knew that the implementation from 1991 until the war in 2003 of two no-fly zones, one in the north of Iraq and one in the south, prevented any further chemical attacks, as those chemical weapons could no longer be dropped. Even at their height, Saddam Hussein's powers had limits. In 1991, 39 scud missiles were fired at Israel—I was there at the time, as a journalist. They were crudely targeted at Tel Aviv, and killed no one.

Even if Saddam Hussein could not fire his chemical weapons, might they somehow have become a threat on the battlefield? In the aftermath of the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the Gulf war, the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq was set up to inspect Iraqi weapons facilities. It maintained a presence in the country for several years. There was broad agreement among experts that Iraq was not an imminent threat. Those weapons that had been used against Iranian and Kurdish opponents had been destroyed or were degraded beyond use.

Let us remind ourselves of what the experts said at the time. Scott Ritter, a United Nations weapons inspector in Iraq from 1991 to 1998, stated in 2002 that

"since 1998 Iraq has been fundamentally disarmed: 90-95% of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capability has been verifiably eliminated... If Iraq was producing weapons... we would have... proof, plain and simple."

Experts told us repeatedly that chemical weapons do not have a long shelf life. Ritter stated that Iraqi sarin and tabun had a shelf life of approximately five years. Botulinum toxin and liquid anthrax last about three years. As Members debated the war in this House, they knew that at the height of his powers Saddam had never had the capacity to fire chemical weapons long range and that, even if he had had that power, after years of no-fly zone restrictions and the passage of time, his weapons were degraded and beyond use.

Bob Stewart: I seem to recall that the hon. Gentleman and I were together in the television studios at the time and that we laughed at the mock-ups of the vehicles

that he mentioned. We agreed that if those vehicles existed they could easily be photographed from the skies. We therefore thought that they could not exist: why would they need to make drawings of them when they would be able to get photographs of any actual vehicles?

John Nicolson: The hon. Gentleman remembers well. We did indeed sit together in television studios, because we journalists called in experts to ask them for their evidence. It was relatively easy, even as a journalist, to pick apart many of the absurd claims.

Of course, some journalists were screaming for war. *The Sun* ran the absurd headline “Brits 45mins from doom” about a supposed threat to troops in Cyprus. The *Star* wrote “Mad Saddam ready to attack: 45 minutes from a chemical war”. It was all nonsense. The journalists who wrote it knew that, but it was terrifying for some Members.

In January 2003, United Nations weapons inspectors reported that they had found no indication whatever that Iraq possessed nuclear weapons or an active programme of chemical weapons. The International Atomic Energy Agency at the time found

“no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons programme in Iraq.”

The United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission said at the time that it

“did not find evidence of the continuation or resumption of programmes of weapons of mass destruction”.

However, US Vice-President Dick Cheney retorted that he believed that Saddam Hussein

“has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons. I think Mr. ElBaradei”—the director general of the IAEA at the time—“frankly is wrong.”

Who were parliamentarians to believe—the chemical weapons experts, the missiles experts, the IAEA, or Dick Cheney, George Bush, Donald Rumsfeld and the neo-cons? The House had to make up its mind.

In the run up to the Iraq war, I was working as a journalist, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out. Among other things, I was presenting a three-hour daily radio news programme. We had access to experts, as any news journalists do. We called them in and asked them to outline their evidence. Now, I am not a pacifist. I supported NATO action in Bosnia and Kosovo due to the imminent threat to life and the need to save civilians; in fact, I was on the flight back from Iraq—mentioned earlier—with the returning hostages who had fled from Saddam Hussein. However, during interviews with experts and academics in the run-up to the House’s vote, I saw clearly that the case for war was built on exaggeration and deceit. It was blindingly obvious.

Tony Blair frequently told this House and the British people that he was working towards disarming Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction. He repeatedly told the House that his aim was not regime change. The House could have been under no illusion about what it was being asked to vote on. Mr Blair said that Saddam was a “very brutal and repressive” leader but that the aim was

“disarmament of weapons of mass destruction, it is not regime change.”

Regime change was not the basis for war. The challenge for the House on the day of the debate was clear. Mr Blair was asking Members to vote on one basis and one basis alone: the imminent danger posed by Saddam’s weaponry.

What if all the experts talking in public were wrong? Was there an elevated group of experts—an inner core with extraordinary knowledge that was unavailable to the ordinary expert? As Members will recall, Tony Blair often said, “If only you could see what crosses my desk, you’d never doubt the danger that we are in and the pressing case for immediate action.”

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my concerns about recent mission creep and the use of intelligence-led drone strikes that are notified to the House only after the event? What does that mean for lessons learned and transparency?

John Nicolson: Many Members keep saying that we have learned the lessons of war, but I am not convinced, and neither was I when we had the debate on Syria. Tony Blair made a direct appeal that he had seen privileged information that no one else had seen, and he asked the House to trust him. Many Members have said that that appeal for trust was what swayed them.

There was a direct appeal for Members to ignore the available scientific evidence, but there was one embarrassing hurdle in the way: Robin Cook. I had an extensive interview with Robin Cook after his resignation from the Labour Front Bench on 17 March 2003, and I asked him whether he saw the same briefings as the Prime Minister on Iraq. He said, “Yes, I do.” I asked him what it was that had crossed Mr Blair’s desk that he could not tell us about but that contradicted all the expert evidence. Robin Cook told me that there was nothing—nothing had crossed the Prime Minister’s desk that had not crossed his as Foreign Secretary and nothing had crossed his desk or that of the Prime Minister to suggest an imminent threat from chemical weapons. Robin Cook told me that, on that basis, the war could therefore not be justified. Every MP who listened to that interview, who met Robin Cook in the House or who took on board the opinion of experts at the time would have known that the case presented to this House was flimsy to the point of absurdity.

I am, of course, aware of the pressure that MPs were under. Setting aside their promotion prospects in the Government, tabloid newspapers had launched a vicious campaign against opponents of the war. *The Sun* published a traitors dartboard—I note that it has since deleted that from its website in the aftermath of the Chilcot report. It ran a front-page showing a picture of a snake and Charles Kennedy with the headline, “Spot the difference. One is a spineless reptile that spits venom...the other’s a poisonous snake.” MPs were frightened that they would be targeted as cowards and peaceniks.

As we survey the carnage of Iraq, with countless civilian lives lost, soldiers’ lives lost and family lives destroyed, it is easy to look for a single scapegoat. Although I share the disdain widely felt for Tony Blair, there is something gutless about attributing all blame for the votes of individual MPs to him and him alone. The truth is that expert information was freely available to any Member who chose to take it.

2.13 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome the fact that the Government have allocated two days for this debate. This is an opportunity to remind the House that although all Members considered the same evidence, presented to the House by Mr Blair, some—from all parties—came to a different conclusion from others about whether military action was timely or legal.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) is no longer in his place, but I thank him for the service that he has given this country, as have other Members. I reassure him that although I, along with many other Members, marched against the Iraq war, I have always been fully supportive of our troops who were dispatched by our Government to fight that war, or indeed any other war. I have no criticism of them; I might have some for their senior officers, but that is a different matter.

Since the publication of the Chilcot report, Lord Campbell of Pittenweem has provided a helpful summary of events in a speech in the House of Lords:

“We know that the Cabinet was not provided with the full, detailed opinions of the Attorney-General. Sir John Chilcot forcefully finds that that was not proper and should not happen again...He found that military action was not yet the last resort, that diplomatic options were still available, that there was no imminent threat, that Dr Blix and Dr ElBaradei were still able to fulfil their responsibilities, and that there were conflicting views about Resolution 1441. When you add to that Article 2 of the United Nations charter which prohibits regime change, it is a legitimate judgment that this was not a legal war.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 July 2016; Vol. 774, c. 135.]

We also heard from Lord Tyler, who said that Chilcot was explicit that

“going to war without a majority in the United Nations Security Council ‘undermined the authority of the UN’.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 July 2016; Vol. 774, c. 144.]

The Liberal Democrats have always put great stead on the importance of supporting the United Nations.

In the same debate, Lord Beith focused on some of the inadequacies in preparation, from a military perspective, by the Ministry of Defence, and asked why there was inadequate preparation for the known dangers of improvised explosive devices, and a failure to provide adequately armoured vehicles. I would therefore like to speak for a few minutes about the focus on post-conflict reconstruction—an area that has not had much of an outing today. Better planning and preparation for a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq might not necessarily have prevented the events that have unfolded in Iraq since 2003, but Chilcot identified the major issue that there was no planning to speak of at all for the post-conflict stage.

Before I was elected, I worked in project management, and a cursory examination of paragraph 590—on page 78—onwards of the report’s executive summary highlights that if we consider the work done in Iraq as a project, it failed the most basic tests of initiation and execution for even the smallest project. For instance, is it clear who was responsible for which tasks? Paragraph 593 says no, and that

“the UK assumed that the US would be responsible for preparing the post-conflict plan”.

Were there any contingency plans? Paragraph 601 says that none were made for the possibility of the UK being drawn into a huge commitment of UK resources.

Is there clarity about who had the power to take decisions? Paragraph 603 stated that no one had sufficient authority “to establish a unified planning process across...the FCO, the MOD, DFID and the Treasury.”

Was it clear who was in overall control? Paragraph 609 states that no single person was in charge of “overseeing all aspects of planning and preparation”.

Were sufficiently trained and experienced people available? Paragraph 610 states:

“The FCO...was not equipped by past experience...to prepare for nation-building of the scale required in Iraq.”.

Were the assumptions challenged? Paragraph 618 states that assumptions were not systematically challenged, and that in fact, they were very seldom challenged. Any project manager—even the most junior one—in IT, construction, or any other field, who designed a project that was as poorly planned, initiated, resourced and executed as this one, would have been sacked. Yet in 2002-03, our Government planned to invade a country, support regime change, introduce democracy, and rebuild the Iraqi infrastructure without so much as a plan written on the back of a fag packet. This lack of planning for the post-conflict period was one of the most shocking aspects of the Iraq war.

In conclusion, the Iraq war and its legacy—internecine religious war, some 180 UK troops killed, many casualties, car bombs, suicide bombers, hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqi citizens, millions displaced and instability—reverberates around the region to this day. We can argue about whether this was all linked directly to our intervention in 2003, but I do not think anyone could claim that our intervention in 2003 helped to stabilise Iraq—on the contrary. What we need from the Minister today is reassurances that the UK Government will never, ever again launch into such a reckless adventure on such a flimsy premise, with so little preparation. I wonder whether the Minister will be able to give us that guarantee.

2.20 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I was a Member of this House when the decision to invade Iraq was taken. Plaid Cymru was against the war from the start, along with our friends in the Scottish National party and other parties; I acknowledge their part. Elfyn Llwyd, Adam Price, Simon Thomas and I were unanimous in our opposition to the war. As with others, we were subject to vilification way beyond that expected in the usual argy-bargy between politicians with opposing views, or even from a critical press. I made no complaints then and I make no complaints now, for we did not really pay an onerous price. That was paid by those who lost their life, by those who were injured physically and psychologically, by the women and children who were killed “collaterally”, by those who still grieve, and by those whose lives have been blighted forever. It is right to say that now, when opposition to the war is a common-sense accepted view. It was not the case then.

Plaid Cymru is instinctively for peace, but we are not a pacifist party. We are prepared to support military action as a last resort, in extreme circumstances and with international agreement. That is why we supported emergency military action in Libya, with the required support of the United Nations. In retrospect, I regret that we did not then press the case for reconstruction harder. We have seen the effect of intervention in Libya without reconstruction, as we have seen it in Iraq.

Immediately in the report we find two of the reasons why we opposed the invasion of Iraq. The required second UN resolution had not been passed; and, as Chilcot states clearly in point 20 of the executive summary, “the diplomatic options had not at that stage been exhausted. Military action was therefore not a last resort.”

Mr Blair presented Iraq as a real and present danger with a certainty that was not justified. Yesterday, the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) made a very telling point. His colleague, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), persuaded him the night before to vote for the war, having, in turn, been misled by Mr Blair, and that on Privy Council terms. We contend that Mr Blair misled the House. For that, he must be held to account. It is clear from Chilcot, not least from Mr Blair’s memo to President Bush, that he had already agreed to go to war, while giving the House the impression that it had a part in the matter. That is the only reasonable interpretation of the infamous statement on page 72 of volume 2:

“I will be with you, whatever.”

That was Mr Blair’s choice all along. As point 364 in the summary states, the UK Government held

“that it was right or necessary to defer to its close ally and senior partner, the US.”

It was clear that President Bush had already, long before, decided to go to war. My personal experience confirms this. I was with Adam Price, then the MP for Carmarthen East, at the State Department in Washington in mid-September 2002—I think it was 10 September—on a visit with other new MPs arranged by the British-American Parliamentary Group. It was a very useful and instructive visit. It was the first anniversary of 9/11, and feelings were running very high, with myriad official ceremonies to commemorate the dead and support the forces of justice—and with the implied and explicit intention of making someone pay. One felt that it was about not just making someone pay, but making anyone pay for what had happened. That was the atmosphere then, and it is important to remember that.

In Washington, we discussed Iraq with a State Department official. He was not a high official; rather, he was one tasked with briefing rookie MPs from across the pond. It was Adam Price who put the blunt question, “Do you intend to invade Iraq?” The answer was equally forthright: “Yes,” he said, “With our friends if we can, and without them if we must.” This was the commonplace view among officials at that time, one that they could share with insignificant visitors like ourselves. It is our very insignificance that is the significant point. If we, as insignificant visitors, knew what they intended to do, then so did Mr Blair and his associates.

Mr Graham Allen: I compliment the hon. Gentleman on his part in the Iraq rebellions. If I may put the record straight, the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) also played a significant part on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. What the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) says about America going ahead regardless of the UK is absolutely right. One week before the final vote on whether to go to Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld said in a press conference that it was not necessary for the UK to join America: there would be workarounds if the UK decided not to go ahead.

Hywel Williams: The hon. Gentleman makes a very telling point. It was a conscious choice to join our senior ally and defer to their view of the world. The very significant point is that a political choice was made by Mr Blair and his associates. He knew what America intended. We know about the evidence from the meetings at Crawford, so I do not need to go over that, but of course he knew, and his response was:

“I will be with you, whatever.”

In the conversation I referred to a moment ago, American preparedness was confirmed quite casually when I asked what the war aims were. I have a long-standing interest in the Kurdish people, although I concede it is the Kurdish people in eastern Anatolia, or the northern Kurds, rather than the southern Kurds, with whom the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) has been involved for so many years. I asked what the war aims were, and the answer was very clear. The official said, “We are looking for a democratic Iraq within its current borders.” I remember the words quite clearly, because the Kurds in the north were thinking, as they are today, of being at least a semi-independent entity, if not a southern part of a greater Kurdistan. We know the subsequent outcome all too well. The northern Iraqi southern Kurds, of course, have a degree of self-government. A democratic Iraq within its current borders has clearly not been achieved. My point is that there was no secrecy about this; there was no deficiency of vision and idealism, just an enormous deficiency of realism and good sense.

I will finish on this point, as time is short and many colleagues wish to speak. I ask the Minister for action. Yesterday, the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) expressed his doubts and concerns about a process of sanction that could be employed by this House in respect of Mr Blair. He made a very cogent argument and I found it very interesting. I do not know if it was entirely persuasive, but he clearly made his argument very well indeed.

We in Plaid Cymru have called consistently for those responsible for taking the UK to war in Iraq to appear before the International Criminal Court. The crime of aggression is listed in the statutes establishing the ICC, but it is not currently prosecutable by that Court. Some 30 countries have agreed to rectify this, following a convention in 2010. The UK has also said, informally, that it would support such a change, but it has not yet formally ratified that position. Under ICC rules, two thirds of signatories have to agree, which would require 82 countries to sign up, so I call on the UK Government formally to agree to the necessary change, in order to pave the way for prosecuting those responsible for taking the UK into an illegal war in Iraq. I look to the Minister for that assurance today.

2.30 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I begin with a declaration of interest: my brother served on the frontline in the Iraq war, so the decision taken on the Floor of the House that night had a direct impact on both my family and his wife and two children.

I get concerned when we discuss Islam in this House and equate it with fanaticism and fundamentalism. Many belief systems are prone to fanaticism, and I am mindful that, before 9/11, the greatest terrorist act that the US had ever suffered took place in 2005, when a

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

Christian fanatic killed 168 people and injured nearly 1,000 over a 16-block radius in Oklahoma. If Members wish to debate fanaticism, I wish that they would bring it to the Floor of the House and debate it in detail.

Just under three months ago, I and many other colleagues participated in a debate—I was grateful to be able to sum up for my party—that called for publication of the Chilcot report. I am glad, therefore, that we are now debating its publication. Like others, I am grateful to Sir John and all those who participated in its construction for their diligent work and the manner in which they carried out their examinations. I believe that the report will go down as one of the most important documents debated on the Floor of the House and will have far-reaching consequences. I agree with the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), however, that it has sadly been overshadowed by the political events of the last couple of weeks.

The publication and conclusion of the report will come as some comfort to the families of Army personnel such as my own and to casualties in the conflict who have been waiting for answers for far too long about why we were taken to war. I praise those families who, like their loved ones, fought the good fight and never allowed this issue to be forgotten in their quest for justice and truth. The House must note their courage in seeking answers to the conflict. The report should and must send reverberations through the whole British establishment, which has been undermined by the decision to go to war. It must, if anything, enhance the debate about the nature of our constitutional democracy and the duties of Government in their attitude to war and peace.

The words

“I will be with you, whatever”

will be forever associated with the former Member for Sedgefield and will be his political epitaph, yet the phrase is much more than that. It will forever live in and scar the hearts of those families whose relations were casualties of the war, whether as members of our armed services or Iraqi civilians. That is the true legacy of

“I will be with you, whatever.”

That must never be allowed to be forgotten. It is a reminder to all representatives that our actions have wide-ranging consequences beyond this place and our own lives.

Bob Stewart: For me, that phrase really blows apart my belief that Prime Ministers, regardless of political persuasion, always act in the best interests of our country. It is deeply upsetting to think that that phrase was used in a memo to the US President.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am grateful for the intervention from the hon. and gallant Member, whose opinion I often taken on board. I will come to his point further in my speech.

The actions in the lead-up to the invasion had a detrimental and fundamental impact on confidence in our democracy and parliamentary system. We must use the report to rebuild that confidence and trust, as we risk so much if we do not. That is particularly critical as parliamentary democracy is being attacked across the

world as we speak. The report raises damning and fundamental issues about the role of the Government in the run-up to the invasion. The duty of the Government is to carry out their responsibilities in a responsible and transparent manner. In matters of war and peace, that is particularly vital, but it is now clear that, in 2003, the actions of the former Member for Sedgefield flew in the face of that.

We are told that collective responsibility has underpinned our democracy for centuries, but, as the report outlines, that system was abused and ignored by the former Member for Sedgefield. His actions are a warning to the current and future Governments that the mechanism of government itself must not be twisted and subverted by an individual to meet their own delusional, self-appointed, God-like views and that full transparency and accountability must be always ensured. To ensure accountability and transparency, and for justice to be done, those who made the decision to go to war must be brought to order.

That is why, like many other Members, I will be fully supporting the contempt motion against the former Member for Sedgefield that the general public expect and which the House needs to demand. The international community must see justice done. There will be those who question the motion, given the former premier's public apology, but I draw this conclusion from that apology: an act of contrition requires a heartfelt, sincere and full intention not to recommit that sin. In the light of the apology given by the former Member for Sedgefield, I would advise him to seek a longer counsel with his confessor in order that he might understand the full concept of an act of contrition.

In conclusion, I wish to consider the words of the former Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, George Reid, when a motion was placed before that place on this very matter:

“Above the doors of the Red Cross in Geneva, there is a phrase from Dostoevsky, which we should remember in time of war. It states that, in war, ‘Everyone is responsible to everyone for everything.’”

It reminds me of the journalist Michael Ware and his account of his time reporting the conflict: while we might wish to see peace and an end to war, only the dead see the end of war.

2.38 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): A number of people have said today that the 2003 decision casts a long shadow, and indeed it does. There has been much talk about lessons learned and lessons needing to be learned, but I fear that this is largely about: “I was right and others were wrong”. There is a slightly self-righteous tone when people talk about where they stood on the vote in 2003 that I feel will not help us to make the decisions facing us, which are as serious, dangerous and consequential as any.

I was not in the House in 2003; I did not come in until 2005. At the time, I was one of those marching up and down and saying no to war. When I came in, I never in my wildest dreams thought that I would spend most of my time on defence matters, but I came into the Chamber one day and noticed a group of middle-aged men talking to another group of middle-aged men across the Chamber on perhaps one of the most important subjects facing the country. I thought, “I'm not having this”, and I went out of my way to teach myself defence. I

have to say that that is necessary—unless someone has been in the armed forces, they have to go out and learn, find out how decisions are made, what equipment to use, how on earth a decision to go to war is implemented and how it is carried through. It is not enough to be a Member of Parliament and think that defence is something that can be dipped into. Sadly, too many right hon. and hon. Members think it is.

I do not feel that people have the right to criticise unless they have looked and questioned: what equipment are our people going to war with; how many of them are there; what is going to happen when the number of personnel we want to send is balanced against the number of personnel that can be met? We made a disastrous decision when we sent our people to Helmand, but nobody questioned it. We are not having a big two-day debate about that disaster. How many hon. Members have bothered to read any of the Defence Committee reports on anything? Quite honestly, I wonder how many Members have read the strategic defence and security review. How many Members have been worried and concerned at the paring back over and over again of our armed forces? How many have been concerned about the cuts to the platforms that our armed forces will be able to utilise?

It is all very well to go back to 2003 and beat our breasts. It is all very well to spend seven years. Since I have been a Member, I have taken three decisions on going to war—and I spent a lot of time on all three of them. Libya was as great a disaster as Iraq. I spent a lot of time asking whether it was about regime change, and I was told, “No, it is not about regime change.” I do not believe that to be true—I think it was always about regime change. I asked what we were going to do about post-conflict reconstruction, because it was the big lesson from Iraq, and I was told, “We are not putting boots on the ground, so it isn’t an issue for us.”

Bob Stewart: The hon. Lady knows that I have deep respect for her, which will continue. I seem to recall, however, that we had little choice but to intervene in Libya, and I voted for it because I was terrified that people would be killed.

Mrs Moon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that most helpful intervention, because it takes us back to the exact same issue that people faced when dealing with Saddam Hussein. He led people down a track that really made intervention almost inevitable. He ignored all the UN missions and he was obstructive many times to the people who went in to look for weapons.

I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman was with us on the visit, but when we met a group of tribal elders in a room in Iraq, they told us that the last time they had been in it, they had been called there by Saddam to hear a report about the changes he was introducing to the health service in Iraq. Someone had stood up at that meeting and said not that he disagreed with it, not that he thought Saddam was wrong, but that a small change might make it slightly better. The man was marched out of the room and shot at the front door of the building. That is the world that we were trying to understand.

On that occasion, too, I asked why on earth Saddam did not simply say, “I have given up the weapons of mass destruction; I do not have any. I got rid of the chemical weapons; I do not have any.” I asked why he did not just step forward and say that. I was told,

“Because he was more afraid of his own people than he was of you, so he had to convince not you but his own people that he had those weapons.” That, I was told, was why he kept that myth going—not for us, not because he was afraid of our invasion, but because he was afraid of his own people if they thought he showed any weakness.

The situation was exactly the same in Libya. Gaddafi made it impossible for hon. Members to feel that we could sit back and let him say, “I am going to slaughter those people in Benghazi,” which is what he said he was going to do. We acted, but look at the consequences. In seven years’ time, are people going to stand up and criticise us for that vote? Are they going to say self-righteously, “How dare you? You did not do enough on post-conflict reconstruction.” No, we did not; and, yes, it is a mess. There are so many lessons that we have to learn.

I have been to Iraq and to Afghanistan. As a member of the Defence Committee, I believe that if we send our personnel there, we have a responsibility to go ourselves, to see for ourselves and to talk to people on the frontline and ask them, “Have you got the right kit? Have you got the right equipment? Are you being looked after all right? What do we in Parliament need to change? Tell us and we will be your voice.” Those are the lessons we have to learn.

We need to be more robust in our understanding of defence. We have to be more responsible in understanding the tasks and the responsibilities we place in front of our armed forces. We do not want to be sitting here pontificating about whether Tony Blair was a liar, or whether a jolly big “but” continued underneath the sentence when he said:

“I will be with you, whatever.”

I want us to look much more at what we have learned and what we are going to do in the future. I doubt whether many Members have read it, but the Defence Committee recently put out a report about Russia—be afraid, be very afraid, because that is coming down the track.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I may disagree with certain elements of the hon. Lady’s speech, but does she agree that one of the problems during the period was that many of the major partners of the United Nations, including the Russian Federation, did not want to play their part?

Mrs Moon: I look at the Russians in Syria. I look at what the Russians did in Afghanistan. Do I want to stand alongside them? I have my standards. The hon. Gentleman may have different standards, but I am not for the barrel bombing of civilians, which the Russians think perfectly acceptable.

I am not someone who will be happy about coming to the House and just saying, “We made mistakes in Iraq.” We made mistakes in Libya. In fact, we have made mistakes in every war in which this country has been involved. What I would like to know—I am glad that the Secretary of State is present—is whether the historical analysis team that used to be in the Ministry of Defence and that analysed and taught the lessons learnt to military personnel will be reinstated, because that would have more impact than anything else that we are discussing here. That is what we need: we need our personnel to know the lessons that will be learned.

[Mrs Moon]

What about the South China sea? We have 19 ships. Those who are worried about Iraq should worry about the South China sea. Please let us be realistic, because the world is looking and laughing at our tearing ourselves apart. I want a confident Britain. I want a secure Britain. I want a Britain that is not afraid of making difficult decisions, a Britain that is not afraid of sticking its hand into a wasps' nest and a Britain that is well equipped and well trained but will take on its responsibilities in the world. We will look at our mistakes and we will learn, but we will not waste our time casting rude and offensive remarks at people who lead us.

2.51 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). I commend her for her thoughtful and well-informed contribution to the debate. I did not agree with every point that she made—no one would expect me to—but I did agree with her about the tone that we should adopt in our approach to this debate: it right for us to approach it with a degree of humility and to be careful not to reinvent history.

I was here in 2003, and I remember those debates. As I listened to the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), I could hear her speaking from the Opposition Benches, but I kept looking over to the Government Benches, because that is where I remember her sitting when she made her speeches in the 2003 debates, and they were very powerful speeches.

I well remember the atmosphere described by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who recalled the way in which the votes were whipped and the way in which the Government really did make every effort to steamroller the motions through the House. He said that he felt vindicated. I know what he meant by that, but I do not sense anything quite as positive as vindication in this. If anything, I feel slightly depressed, because I think that there was an inevitability that was not addressed by the House at the time, and I fear that we would still not address it if we were placed in the same position today.

I will say a bit more about that later and about how I think the House should deal with it in the future, but I should first place on record our gratitude to Sir John Chilcot and his team for doing a thorough piece of work. Like others, I have been critical of the length of time that it has taken, but there is no denying the thoroughness of the work that has been done. What we see before us on the Table certainly clarifies one thing in my mind: we were absolutely right to set up an independent inquiry. We have been chivvying that man and his team for years, and now we see why it has taken him as long as it has.

The report fills in a lot of the background detail. It does not tell us anything that we did not already know or have cause to believe, in the broadest terms. However, Sir John has placed a number of dots on the page, and it is now for Parliament to join them up to produce a discernible picture. In particular, he says, quite clearly and quite fairly, that he will not express a view on the legality of the war, but he offers us evidence from which we can draw our own conclusions.

We are shown the already infamous memo from Tony Blair to George Bush in which he said:

"I will be with you, whatever."

I think it important for the House to put that in the context of the time. As others have pointed out, Tony Blair was always meticulous in the House in making a case that was based on weapons of mass destruction. That was not true of George Bush. George Bush never pretended this was anything other than an exercise in regime change, so when Tony Blair wrote that memo to George Bush, he was saying, "I will support you even though I know what you are doing is something which is done on a quite different basis than that for which I am seeking authority from the House of Commons." That is significant because, of course, a war entered into for the sole purpose of regime change would be an illegal war, whereas one for which the purpose was the removal of weapons of mass destruction was one for which there could have been a legal basis.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) posed a pertinent question. He asked, "How would the House have reacted if Tony Blair had been more balanced and even-handed in the presentation of the evidence?" That is where the detail of what Chilcot tells us is important, because in fact we see from that memo why Tony Blair was not more even-handed and balanced in the presentation of the evidence: he was working to an objective; he was working to an aim; he was supporting a commitment he had already made.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the Syria vote in 2013. I gently suggest that he might want to refresh his memory of the terms of the motion against which he and others voted, quite legitimately. I do not challenge his right or his reasons for doing so, but it was not a vote to remove Assad; it was a motion instructing the Government to obtain authority from the United Nations and then to come back to this House before any further military action was to be sanctioned. That was why I was prepared to support it.

Dr Julian Lewis: I was not planning to intervene as I have made my speech, but—this is one of the knock-on effects of the matter we are discussing today—by the time we got to that vote we knew perfectly well that if we had passed that motion, the bombing would have started that weekend. All the planes were ready to go, and I am surprised that the right hon. Gentleman is, if I may gently say so, naive enough to believe anything else.

Mr Carmichael: With respect, I do not want to get taken down a side alley and into the question of Syria, compelling though that is, but the bombing could not have started on the authorisation of this House on the basis of the motion put to the House and against which the right hon. Gentleman voted. It is interesting to speculate, although not necessarily wholly germane to this debate, what would have happened had the House gone down the route urged on it in 2013—what might then have been the reaction of President Obama, how things might then have moved on, whether we would have been put in the position we were in relation to the vote we took last year on Syria. What I think is undeniable is that all these decisions and others—Libya is a good example—were taken under a cloud, which still hangs over our foreign policy and our role in the world, as a result of the experience of the debate on Iraq.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) pointed out, it is remarkable that if regime change was the agenda that sat behind the Americans' intervention in Iraq, they did so little to prepare for its aftermath. The removal of the Ba'ath party from government must stand out as being one of the biggest strategic errors we have ever been party to. It completely failed to understand that many ordinary Iraqis who were engaged in Iraqi government and civic society did so as part of the Ba'ath party because it was the only party in town. To remove the infrastructure of government in the way that was done in 2003 has left a void in that infrastructure that remains a problem for Iraq to this day. The country has never recovered from that, and it provided fertile ground from which extremism flourished. That was all predicted by many of us who questioned the decision to go to war in 2003.

The House today is very different from the House that took that decision. Only 172 of the 659 Members who were here in 2003 remain Members today. I calculate that 141 of those 172 voted in favour of taking action, and 21 voted against it. I re-read the *Hansard* reports of the February and March debates before I came here today, and I was reminded that there was not a happy atmosphere in the House at the time. On that, I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire. It was tense and brutal, and deliberately so. It was the creation of that atmosphere that forced many people to vote for the enterprise against their better judgment.

It is important that we approach this matter with some humility. The amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) garnered some support. It said that the case for war had not been proven, and that was certainly the view that I took. I was not going to vote for a motion that said we would never go to war in any circumstances, because, like other Members, I knew that Saddam was a brutish dictator. We also knew that he had had weapons of mass destruction in the past. In fact, we had been quite happy to turn a blind eye to that fact because he had been using them against Iran, whose regime we were also quite happy to see removed.

It was that sort of double standard in our foreign policy that I hoped we might see the end of after the enterprise in Iraq. Sadly, that does not seem to be the case. In the speech that I made in the debate in 2003, I called for the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 242 on the question of Palestine. Sadly, we are no further ahead on that issue today than we were in 2003. If anything, we are further behind. That is why, should we ever find ourselves in this position again, the House must take its duties more seriously. We must ask questions. We cannot accept assertions when we should be given evidence.

3.2 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) is exactly right. The issue of whether the House allowed itself to accept assertions instead of evidence touches on a point made by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), which I think I agree with, that Members of the House must take their responsibilities seriously when it comes to votes on such matters that affect the lives of not only people in other countries, but the servicemen and women who are deployed on the basis of our votes.

There is a huge lesson to be learned from this, as I have heard from people who took part in the debates at the time on both sides of the House. Those debates took place before I was in Parliament. Those people now regret that they downloaded their sense and judgment from the Dispatch Box in the belief that no Prime Minister would tell them such things unless they were firm and true. They therefore believed that what they were being told must be right. Of course, those who demurred from that view were demonised in the House and outside it. If there is any lesson to learn from all this, it has to be that we should never again mistake certitude at the Dispatch Box for certainty about such grave matters.

We are told by some people that the report reveals no smoking gun in relation to the former Prime Minister. People have listed exaggerated versions of the charges against Tony Blair—that he lied, for example, and that he misled Parliament—and say that none of that is in the report. I have stated previously that I know Sir John Chilcot and have experience of working with him in Northern Ireland in various capacities. I also said that while he had many attributes and skills, I was unsure whether he would be found in the “Yellow Pages” under “I” for independent or “C” for challenging. I accept, however, that the report is compelling. It may be written with typical British understatement, but we should not neglect the key truths within and the lessons that need to be learned. Some will say, “There is no smoking gun about the dodgy dossier or anything else,” but I will give an example of Sir John Chilcot's understatement. He says in paragraph 836 of the executive summary:

“The Inquiry shares the Butler Review's conclusions that it was a mistake not to see the risk of combining in the September dossier the JIC's assessment of intelligence and other evidence with the interpretation and presentation of the evidence in order to make the case for policy action.”

That is a telling criticism of what exactly was afoot with the September dossier.

The Prime Minister—well, last week's Prime Minister—highlighted in his statement that Sir John had identified that an “ingrained belief” was genuinely held by people in both the US and UK Governments about Saddam and his weapons. I know that to be true. In November 2002, Tony Blair addressed myself and other socialist leaders in Downing Street and not only told us what he believed was the case with Saddam and what he thought would be found, but shared the view that the US was going to go to war anyway and it was important that he maintained a restraining influence. He described himself as something of a bridge, trying to ensure that America would not go too far on Iraq. I remember saying to him that I did not buy the image that he was selling of himself as a mooring rope, attempting to hold America closer to where Europe was on such matters, and that I felt that America saw him as a tow rope who would pull Europe and possibly rupture it. I do not doubt, however, that he sincerely believed that he was somehow in a position to restrain and influence America by adopting the course that he was preparing to take.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: A very different approach was taken at the time by Canada. Jean Chrétien, the then Prime Minister, said that Canada would not stand with the United States. Now, 13 years down the line,

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

does the hon. Gentleman think that the relationship between Canada and the United States is any the worse for Chrétien's decision?

Mark Durkan: No, absolutely not.

To say that I might accept that there was an ingrained belief, genuinely held, is not to endorse or accept that belief, or to say that it was a wise belief. It was a foolish and rash belief that was, in some ways, deluded.

Alongside that ingrained belief, the report also states that the UK Government, and Tony Blair in particular, had an ingrained intent that was not genuinely expressed either to this House or in public—those are not the report's words, but mine. The ingrained intent was that he was going to war anyway, because he thought that that was where America was going. The report contains example after example of evidence being bent, melted and confected to justify that the preparation for any intervention would be undertaken on the basis of weapons of mass destruction, whereas it was clear that the then Prime Minister knew that the intervention in which he would be joining America really had an agenda of regime change. People in this House and elsewhere knew that that was illegal, so that view was withheld. People might say, "Chilcot hasn't said that Tony Blair lied to or misled this House"—it was not for Chilcot to make such a finding about a parliamentary matter—but nobody can say that there was no duplicity of presentation throughout.

The report's other big indictment is about the paucity of preparation. I refer to the fact that there was a commitment to go to war without the proper equipment to protect and safeguard people who were being put in harm's way, or to allow them to give care to people whom they would be meeting in distress. There was a paucity of preparation for the aftermath with regard to any sort of reconstruction. People had the assumption, "The Americans will somehow sort that out. We assume they have that done." That is serious and must bear on all our minds.

When we have had votes such as those on Syria and on Libya during my time in this House, I and other hon. Members have had to consider what we were being told, and what assurances and assumptions the Government's position was resting on. That is why I have not been convinced on any of those. I say that not from a point of view of self-righteousness, because I was in the small minority of those who voted against the action in Libya and hoped that I was going to be proved wrong. When it looked as though the early intervention had achieved the short-term goals that people had wanted it to achieve, I was more than happy to have been proved wrong.

There were times during the debates on Syria in this House when some of us who were asking about the Government's proposals were advised that we should just listen to what the Prime Minister was saying. During the last such debate, there were people here who still had not learned the lessons from the Iraq war, because they were saying, "If our Prime Minister is telling us this, we should do it. We should proceed." It is clear that in this House we need to do much more to learn the lessons from all this.

The motion is that "this House has considered" the Chilcot report. Obviously, I do not demur from that motion, but we should not pretend to ourselves that this two-day debate is anything like an adequate consideration of the report. I cannot pretend to have read all 2.6 million words, and other hon. Members have not pretended to have read them either. This debate has also taken place in the context of a swirl of other events, which is somewhat distracting. A strong undertone in this debate has been the question of the former Prime Minister, and the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) was right in pleading that we should not just personalise this around the former Prime Minister. The hon. Gentleman also made hugely important points on behalf of people who serve in these sorts of military ventures.

I ask hon. Members who tried to say that the report exonerates Tony Blair to stop making the mistake of polishing its non-findings and trying to rubbish some of its findings. Some people who are highlighting the non-findings are also questioning several of the findings about what the future course should be, and what future requirements should be with regard to upholding UN positions, and proper parliamentary oversight, information and awareness.

The final point I make, in agreeing with the hon. Member for Bridgend about her statement, "People don't have the right to criticise unless they asked about the equipment," is that people also do not have the right to justify the Iraq war and to pretend that the Chilcot report is not an indictment of the decision and how it was taken if they did not ask questions at the time. The report tells us that those questions should have been screaming out to us at the time, and if we look carefully at the report, we see that any reading of the intelligence available to MPs at the time would have told them that they were there.

3.13 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): It is a privilege to take part in this debate on the Chilcot report and to have listened to colleagues who have much greater knowledge and more direct experience of these issues and events than I have. I do not intend to repeat many of the points that have been made. I was not an MP at the time, so my opposition to the Iraq war came from my limited knowledge from outside this House. I made my views known vigorously to my then MP.

In his report, Chilcot has been prepared to be very critical of processes and decisions, and the opportunity to be critical is vital to our democracy. What is important now is that we learn the lessons from the report. I wish to remind Members that it was the Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown who set up the Chilcot inquiry in June 2009. He also set out the inquiry's remit: it would cover the period between 2001 and 2009, including the way in which decisions were made and actions were taken; and identify the lessons that could be learned. There had been calls for an inquiry before, while our troops were still in Iraq, and our response was rightly that we should wait until all our troops had withdrawn and then the Labour Prime Minister would instigate an inquiry.

We now need to learn the lessons, and we as parliamentarians should focus in particular on the decision-making process. The basis for the Attorney General's advice on the legality of the war was:

“The Attorney General understands that it is unequivocally the Prime Minister’s view that Iraq has committed further material breaches as specified in [operative] paragraph 4 of resolution 1441, but . . . this is a judgment for the Prime Minister”.

The legal advice put the onus clearly on the Prime Minister, and the lesson that we should learn is that whether at the level of Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary, or the wider Cabinet, or as MPs, we should scrutinise any such advice carefully before we commit to war.

In 2013, when MPs were considering the vote on military intervention in Syria, events in Iraq were very much in their minds. Put simply, when we see the terrible suffering in Syria, the dilemma is how to deal with it. Would our military intervention cause more suffering and make matters worse? What do we do about a leader such as Assad? Even if he were removed, who would fill the power gap?

As the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) said, we must fund the FCO properly and ensure that we have a thorough, detailed and up-to-date understanding of the complexities of what is happening in many foreign countries where there is the potential for conflict and we could be involved. The FCO is an easy option for cuts as it is out of sight and such cuts are not likely to cause public outcry, but if better understanding and diplomatic efforts mean that we can avoid the devastation and human cost of war, that represents money well spent. The same is true of the commitment to devote 0.7% of GDP to international development, because an important part of that work is conflict resolution. Such work helps to make the world a safer place and reduces the need for military intervention.

During the previous Parliament, it was worrying to note that Sir John Stanley, the Chair of the Committees on Arms Export Controls, reported that since 2010 there had been less stringency about which regimes we were exporting to. It is vital that we are wary of which weapons we sell to whom. The Committees should continue to be vigilant and the Government should be responsive to concerns.

We need to uphold our support for the UN and strengthen its work. On the Security Council, the UK is the informal lead on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Therefore, as chair of the all-party group on weapons and protection of civilians, I am concerned that the UK—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There are still quite a few conversations going on in the Chamber. The Secretary of State for Defence is, I think, going to reply to the debate and it would be a courtesy if Members would listen. There is some middle-ranking Minister sitting next to him and wittering away from a sedentary position, which is not a great sign of intelligence and is discourteous. It is very obvious. The hon. Lady will be heard with courtesy.

Nia Griffith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I am concerned that the UK is not supportive of the UN Secretary-General’s initiative to develop an international political declaration to stop the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas. We must take seriously our responsibilities in the Security Council and do everything we can to avoid war by working through international organisations such as the UN.

3.18 pm

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): I sat through the whole debate yesterday and today, and it has been a fascinating education. I have appreciated listening to many of the Members who were here 13 years ago. I have been disappointed by the lack of numbers on the Benches. I am new to the Chamber. Given the gravity of the issue over the years, and given the long wait for the Chilcot report, I am surprised that there were not more Members present. I will put that down to the fact that so much else is going on in the political firmament, and that there is so much to read. The onus is on those on the Government Benches to think about that, and to realise that this is not the end of the Chilcot investigation. A lot more discussion and thought has to go into that report. I appeal to the Government to take that away and think about how we can come back to, and look into, all the ramifications that the report has brought to this Chamber.

No one has quite given due recognition to the fact that it was the previous Labour Government, under Gordon Brown, who commissioned this report, and that should be recognised, because it was a brave thing to do. I would gently chide those on the Conservative Benches, because after the Suez crisis—the other post-war global diplomatic disaster that Britain blundered into—there were repeated attempts in the remaining eight years of Conservative Government after 1956 to get a public inquiry, but they were systematically rejected, and that was a dangerous precedent. Having got the Chilcot report, we have learned that, when we make mistakes, we have to own up to them and examine the details.

I have particularly—“enjoyed” is perhaps the wrong word—appreciated listening to those on both sides of the House who took part in the debate in 2003. However, I have been surprised by the attempts of some Members—particularly on the Labour side—to justify what was clearly the biggest diplomatic blunder of the last 30 years. I was particularly surprised by the right hon. Members for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), both of whom tried to draw some comfort from the fact that the Chilcot report has not found the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, guilty of misleading the House. I do not know whether that is what Chilcot set out to do, but it certainly comes down to what we mean by “mislead”. There is abundant evidence in the Chilcot findings—even from a cursory read of the report, and even in the summary report—that the facts were pummelled, twisted, jumped on and stretched to the point where no one knew what was going on. That was a deliberate move by the Executive to try to impose their view of the world on this Chamber.

That is abundantly clear, and we have to grasp the fact that, as well as the politics, the diplomacy and the military issues Chilcot deals with, there is a constitutional issue at the heart of the report, which this Chamber and you, Mr Speaker, have to take into account: the Executive, in the shape of Tony Blair and his immediate allies, got out of hand. This Chamber and the Cabinet lost control of the Executive in the run-up to the intervention in Iraq. That is the fundamental finding of the Chilcot report. Yes, the nature of the intervention, and all the disasters that came from it, are important, but if we abstract from that, we see that the Executive were not under control. It has been rare in the history of this

[George Kerevan]

House, and particularly in latter decades, for the Executive to get completely out of control, and that can never happen again.

If we are to have a debate about bringing some of these individuals, including the former Prime Minister Tony Blair, to this House to answer for their actions, the issue should not be retribution, or holding them to account because they were wrong on Iraq and got us into a terrible disaster. That is an issue, but the fundamental issue for the House in deciding whether the former Prime Minister should be held to account in this Chamber is that the Executive got out of control. We have to learn the lessons of that, and we cannot let it happen again. If that is what happened—I believe that it was, and that that is what the Chilcot report shows—we cannot let those who flouted this House and Cabinet Government get away with it. If we do that, it could happen again.

I was rather surprised by the vehemence with which the right hon. Member for Leeds Central and other Labour Members tried to argue that, whatever mistakes were made in the intervention in 2003, the ramifications—the breakdown of law and order and of society in Iraq, and the subsequent calamities that have beset the middle east—were the fault not of that intervention alone, but of the great fragmentation and deep divisions in the middle east, and that, as bad and as mistaken as the intervention was, it cannot be held to be fundamental to the divisions and other developments in the last 30 years. I am sorry, but Chilcot and history show otherwise. For example, Daesh is a horrible amalgam of the former military leadership of Saddam's Ba'ath party and people who were radicalised inside American jails after the intervention in Iraq. There is abundant evidence, and it is a reasonable conclusion, that Daesh, as a movement, would not have existed had we not invaded Iraq and caused the meltdown of what there was of Iraqi society. We have been living with that consequence ever since.

Labour Members are rather misguided in not understanding the role of western intervention, and western support for Saddam in his war against Iran in the decade before America's and Great Britain's intervention in Iraq. The long and horrible war between Iraq and Iran was fundamentally supported by the west as a means of containing Iran after 1979. That war multiplied a millionfold the divisions between the Sunni and the Shi'ite populations of the middle east and north Africa. We are living with those consequences, too. The west cannot claim that it is not culpable for stoking up the divisions in the middle east prior to 2003.

We are not finished with Chilcot, and we are not finished with the ramifications of the failure of this House and of Cabinet government to control and hold to account the Executive. I ask you, Mr Speaker, to bear that in mind when any such issues are raised in this House in future.

3.27 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): During these two days of debate, we have heard from Members in all parts of the House who have contributed substantively and thoughtfully on this extremely sensitive and controversial subject. That has given us the chance to

have a rigorous debate, and to give the subject dutiful consideration and sombre reflection. I thank all my colleagues.

First, I would like to add my own personal tribute to the 179 servicemen and women who gave their lives in the Iraq war for this country while on duty, and to give my deepest condolences to the families from whom they have been taken. Their commitment to our keeping our freedoms, and ultimately their sacrifice for the United Kingdom, will not be forgotten. I also extend my gratitude to the 220,000 personnel who served and wore the Queen's uniform overseas in numerous tours of duty of the southern regions and Basra, some of whom now serve in this House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), and the hon. Members for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and for Wells (James Heappey). I know the whole House would agree that we owe them a great deal for their service, and their continued public service in bringing their expertise to the Floor of the Chamber.

Secondly, I thank Sir John Chilcot and his team for their due diligence and forensic detailing of such a complex matter. At the time of the Iraq war and in the period immediately preceding it, I, like many others, was not a Member of this House. I was working for the NHS as a clinical scientist, and can vividly remember the conversations I had with my NHS colleagues around that time. People I worked with in the laboratory were convinced that Saddam Hussein had chemical and biological weapons at his disposal that could wipe us out in 45 minutes. There was real fear among my friends and colleagues, and many of them supported the action taken by the then Prime Minister. Personally, I was very dubious about the justification for war, and I was concerned that we were being led into action without a second resolution.

For me, the most telling phrase of the executive summary of the Chilcot report is paragraph 339, which states:

"diplomatic options had not been exhausted. The point had not been reached where military action was the last resort."

That one point, which was also quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), encapsulates my feelings at the time, although of course I have a great deal of respect for the thorough and painstaking work done by Sir John Chilcot, and hope that my comments will be taken in the spirit in which they are intended. I am most certainly not presenting myself as an expert in this field.

As I have said, I did not support the Iraq war, nor was I a Member of this House at the time, but I hope that I now have a better understanding of the great difficulties involved in taking these daunting but necessary decisions. However, for me, the inquiry highlights and underlines the key lesson, which is the absolute need to learn from the grave mistake of triggering an event for which we had not fully planned, and from which we did not have a coherent exit strategy. If we as elected Members and a collective legislative body are to grasp fully the extent of those failures, now is the time to do so. We must acknowledge the errors of Iraq and implement the lessons in today's context.

That context came 13 days before the inquiry report was published in the form of Brexit. Some Members have infamously said outside this House that the public

are “fed up with experts”. That, as with Iraq, is flawed intelligence. Now more than ever, the UK needs experts. We face a tumultuous and treacherous period over the coming years as we negotiate our exit from the European Union. The Government, who called the referendum, did not have a contingency plan for leaving the EU, and neither did the Brexiteers, who campaigned so ardently for us to leave.

Both the EU referendum and the invasion of Iraq were peddled and pushed on mistruths, and presented with a certainty that was not justified. The era of post-truth politics that we seem to have entered over the past two months can be traced back to the hyperbole of the “45 minutes to Armageddon” document, which warned of an imminent threat from Saddam Hussain. Now is the time to turn back that tide of tirades against the truth, and that process should begin here in Westminster.

Sir John Chilcot wrote that

“assessments...were not challenged, and they should have been.”

He added:

“Despite explicit warnings, the consequences...were underestimated,”

and that inadequate planning led to fatal errors. Let us not fall into the same perilous trap as we fell into 13 years ago. Some decisions cannot be reversed, but lessons can and should be learned from the Chilcot inquiry, and the parallels are here in front of us now.

I conclude by echoing the words of Winston Churchill:

“Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential.”

3.33 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate on an issue that should have been addressed long ago. Those responsible for such an affront to basic standards of trust and integrity should be held to account. I was interested to hear the speech by the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), and I absolutely agree with him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) in their call for action in this House against Tony Blair.

There is a growing sense in the UK of a protected elite who are above the law, too often because the law seems drafted to permit things that most of us would regard as wholly unacceptable. Voters have watched as organised theft goes unpunished when it is done through manipulation of the financial system. They have seen companies stripped of assets, leaving pensions unfunded and care home residents fearing eviction.

Thanks to this report, a former Prime Minister is exposed as having taken this country to war on grounds that were, it seems, deliberately set in train. Tony Blair’s now infamous memo with the phrase,

“I will be with you, whatever”

seems tantamount to subcontracting to President Bush the decision to invade Iraq, committing UK troops to back his decision, whatever. If anywhere in the 2.6 million-word Chilcot report clarifies a time when he thinks Tony Blair reconciled that private commitment to war with a public statement, I am yet to find it.

When this House was recalled in September 2002 to consider Mr Blair’s dossier, he said that Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction programme was “active, detailed and growing”. That was simply part of a plan orchestrated

by Bush and Blair to take Iraq and the international community to the brink of war, and then push them over. Always the wordsmith, Mr Blair called this his “clever strategy” in a paper sent to President Bush, suggesting it was a strategy for regime change that built up over time to the point where military action could be taken if necessary. It seems that Blair owes more to Robert Maxwell than just the opportunity to rewrite evidence against him before anyone else gets a chance to see it. If, as a constituent said to me at a surgery recently, you are going to tell a whopper, make sure you do it in plain sight so that no one can accuse you of concealing anything—except the truth.

It is instructive to remember who the cheerleaders for Blair’s action were. The inquiry notes that an editorial in the *News of the World* claimed that the dossier would be as devastating as it was vital, and show that Saddam had enough chemical and biological stocks to attack the entire planet, and the missile technology to deliver them. That Government-planted story was a lesson in building exactly the kind of narrative that the dossier was designed to back up, by a Prime Minister intent on feeling the “hand of history” on his shoulder. Instead of the hand of history, it is surely right that the hand of Parliament lands on Mr Blair’s shoulder and returns him to this House to account for his disastrous legacy.

The US strategy for Iraq was described in 2001 by General Wes Clark as to leave Iraq so unstable and chaotic that it did not pose a powerful threat in the region. Thirteen years later, Iraq is indeed unstable and chaotic, and the consequent sectarianism and hatred pose a powerful threat to the region and much further afield. Those consequences cast a long shadow over our age and will not easily be forgiven or forgotten.

At the heart of this decision-making process, we were sending the men and women of our armed forces into conflict. It is incumbent on the Government and the defence staff to ensure that troops sent into battle are properly equipped for the task and their welfare given due consideration. Therefore, I was disappointed to hear General Sir Mike Jackson’s comments on the BBC on the inadequacy of the equipment available to the armed forces in Iraq, saying simply,

“We had what we had”.

The MOD was not given the green light to obtain supplies for the operation until Christmas 2002.

Some of the deficiencies were not unique to the Iraq operation. There should have been standard items for a country whose leaders regularly boast of using our armed forces to punch above our weight. The evidence is that the Government wantonly ran ahead of the armed services’ capacity to deliver without being under-resourced and overstretched. Given the background, no self-respecting commander would want his forces on the battlefield without adequate nuclear, biological and chemical protection, but that is exactly what the Government required of the troops.

The National Audit Office reported major deficiencies in the supply of these protective suits, unusable residual vapour detector kits and a 40% shortfall in tactical nerve-agent detection systems. In this Chamber, the Defence Secretary reassured members that there was at least one nuclear, biological, chemical suit for all personnel. Of course, if the risk of chemical or biological weapons

[Kirsten Oswald]

was being taken seriously, many more suits than that would have been required. In reality, personnel were given suits that did not fit.

The MOD noted that troops and equipment were probably in the same country, but not necessarily in close proximity. In fact, severe shortages of both desert suits and desert boots meant that sand and heat were the real problems for the British forces. Why did it take the MOD until weeks before deployment to find out that that protective gear was in short supply or had been left in storage, unserviced and unusable?

The evidence given by Gordon Brown highlights the financing assumptions for the MOD. Basically, it is funded to be ready in case there is military action. However, all costs of military action are met by the Treasury, thus encouraging the MOD to stretch its budget by saving on maintenance of existing kit. Some of the kit needed in Iraq had been bought for the 1991 Gulf war, and appears to have lain untouched for over 10 years. How many more items on the MOD inventory are in such condition? It also meant that combat-critical items needed to be procured at the last minute. However, in the case of Iraq, no one was authorised to start the procurement process until both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown gave the go-ahead. General Sir Mike Jackson noted, days before the invasion:

“In the name of accounting orthodoxy, we lack basic items, such as desert clothing.”

Clearly, these are key issues to bear in mind in our debate next week on Trident. How can a defence budget that can barely sustain basic equipment, and that is based on ever-declining personnel numbers, stretch to accommodate the UK's own weapons of mass destruction?

Of course, the other way in which the MOD stretches its budget is simply to overstretch members of our armed forces, sending them on deployment more often or for longer periods than should be the case. The House will note that the report highlights considerable overstretch on the Army throughout the Iraq war and occupation. The UK Government aim to reduce the strength of the regular Army by 2020 by an amount that is virtually the same size as the initial land force deployment in Iraq. Clearly, with such a reduction, the potential for overstretch on the Army has increased considerably, but the computerised personnel system introduced in 2007 makes it impossible to measure overstretch.

I would like to close by considering the armed forces waiting in Kuwait for word to move into Iraq, among them the officers and men of the Black Watch. In action, soldiers work around many problems caused by the failure of others. However, special contempt must be reserved for top brass who dodge responsibility for failures of kit by blaming poor, benighted end users.

Three days into the Iraq war, the chain gun on a Warrior armoured vehicle caused serious injuries to one of our men. In the face of compelling evidence to the contrary, senior officers blamed the Warrior gunner, my constituent Tam Henderson. His appeal hearing heard of mechanical and electrical faults with the Warrior vehicle and the chain gun, and he was cleared of all charges, but senior officers held a board of inquiry in secret and pointed the finger of blame once more. When

someone alerted Captain Henderson to that cowardly act, the MOD caved in and settled out of court. Nevertheless, I am told the MOD will do nothing to remove that self-serving finding from its records. Captain Henderson bravely allowed me to highlight his fight for justice in today's debate, but I will seek an opportunity to raise the issue more fully after the recess. It is an irony indeed that those who served in Iraq face such injustice, when those responsible for sending them there face no justice at all.

3.41 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald). I do not necessarily agree with all the sentiments she expressed, but I agree with many of the points that she made.

The Chilcot report was sombre and sobering reading, and I am glad that it was commissioned. I welcome its openness and the debate about it, and I wonder what I would have done had I been here at the time of the vote. I think most hon. Members know this, but for those who do not, I was a serviceman until 1984, which was well before that time. We should always show our sympathy to the armed personnel who served, especially those who lost their lives or were injured, but also to those in the middle east who are still suffering from the consequences of the conflict.

All who served in the armed forces are proud of how well respected they are the world over. We were always brought up to use whatever equipment we were given and to do the best with it, but one lesson that we must learn from the Chilcot inquiry is that, if the equipment is no good, there is a point at which we really cannot do our job. My first point is, therefore, to ask the Defence Minister whether we will make sure that senior Army officers, naval officers and RAF officers are allowed to speak out. Will we ensure that there is never any feeling—caused by political pressure or perceived political pressure—that they cannot speak out early and be listened to? Sometimes, I feel that, when people reach the top, they feel that they cannot speak out and say what is needed. It is evident from the inquiry that that may have been behind certain decisions.

Another key area that we should learn from and watch is the influence of the press, which has been touched on. We are always told that it is dangerous to criticise the press, but they must examine themselves and ask how much of what went wrong in Iraq was due to their pressure. At the same time, we must look at how we use the press, and at how senior politicians push the press to do what they want. There must be more openness so that people feel able to criticise.

I was lucky enough to visit the Kurds in Iraq last year. Seeing the internally displaced persons and all that is happening reminds us that, as we know from the Chilcot report, we did not prepare properly for what was going to happen afterwards. We have a duty. We do part of that duty, and there is good foreign aid going to Iraq, but the IDPs need a legal status and to be properly looked after. We need to try to make up for the mess we have left.

Those are the key issues I wanted to raise today. It is right that this House always looks at the place of the United Kingdom in the world. We did not deal with things in Rwanda or Srebrenica, or perhaps early on

enough in Syria. We should always take our rightful place in the world, but we should also always follow the wishes of this House.

3.45 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): It has been a great pleasure—privilege might be a better word—to sit through the entirety of the debate today and much of yesterday’s debate. In particular, it has been a privilege to listen to those hon. Members who have been here since 2003 or, in many cases, before, during the lead up to the Iraq conflict. One thing I have noticed about the contributions from people who have been here for that length of time is how some of the emotions are still raw. Members on both sides of House still feel strongly about the way they were led into voting for the conflict or how they had to delve around to find the truth before deciding how to vote.

Any reasonable reading of the Chilcot report would conclude that this Parliament was never at any stage given the whole, unalloyed truth about what was in preparation. Indeed, as I was listening to many of the contributions today, including those of the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and of the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), I wrote down a few words to try to summarise some of their points. What I have written down is that the then Prime Minister did not seem to allow the evidence, analysis or expert opinion to get in the way of his intuition or pre-chosen narrative. For me, that is at the centre of the issue—the attempt to deny the exposure of the truth of the matter, as known at the time.

As this House knows, a total of 179 British service personnel were killed in the Iraq conflict. It is less well known that, according to the Ministry of Defence, there were a total of 5,970 casualties, including deaths, up to July 2009. I pay tribute to the courage of those people and hope, above all, that we do right for those left with utterly appalling physical and mental injuries that they continue to endure.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I speak as the wife of a former member of our armed forces personnel. Does my hon. Friend agree that justice and acknowledgment are particularly important for the families? Locally, we grieve Guardsman Stephen Fergusson of the 1st Battalion the Scots Guards, who lost his life aged 31. I pay special tribute to him.

Roger Mullin: I thank my hon. Friend very much for that intervention. I am sure we all wish to pay tribute to the constituent she named.

People living with the consequences—those appalling injuries—need our support and care, but they also deserve justice and the truth. Over the past few days, I have heard one or two Members wonder whether it would be a waste of time to hold the former Prime Minister to account. I would answer that by asking, is justice ever a waste of time? I think not.

I was not a Member in 2003. Like some, I opposed the war at the time, but many people supported it. I have not had time to read the whole report—I have not been to a good enough speed-reading course to accomplish that—but I have attempted to focus on a few issues that I am particularly interested in, not least because I chair

the all-party group on explosive weapons, and I am interested in some of the consequences of conflict and in issues such as reconstruction and preparedness for the aftermath of war.

We now know that, as UK troops poured into Iraq on 20 March 2003, the ill-conceived hope in Whitehall was of a quick victory over Saddam Hussein’s regime, followed by a relatively benign security environment, which of course never existed. Victory in the immediate conflict unleashed a vicious insurgency that some have estimated claimed 250,000 lives or more. That should not have been a surprise. As Chilcot argues, UK hopes were exposed as hopelessly vague, under-resourced and compounded by a complete Government planning failure. Indeed, the report finds that the UK Government’s plans were “wholly inadequate”.

For that failing, Sir John Chilcot laid particular criticism at the door of Tony Blair, and stated:

“He did not ensure that there was a flexible, realistic and fully resourced plan that integrated UK military and civilian contributions, and addressed the known risks.”

Before the troops rolled in on February 2003, the Joint Intelligence Committee—the overarching body that brought together the work of agencies such as MI6 and GCHQ—concluded:

“The broader threat from Islamist terrorists will also increase in the event of war, reflecting intensified anti-US/anti-Western sentiment in the Muslim world, including among Muslim communities in the West.”

A little over two years later, London would become the target of the 7/7 attacks, yet there has been reluctance in some quarters to accept any link between that and the invasion of Iraq, despite the intelligence that was given years earlier.

Before becoming an MP, I worked in places that had suffered from earlier conflict, albeit not to the same extent as Iraq. There is absolutely no shortage of historical information to show that severe conflicts throw up not merely economic, infrastructure and security challenges, but cultural challenges, which are sometimes seen in the strengthening of sectarian attachments of many sorts. Sir John found that the UK Government had completely failed to appreciate the

“magnitude of the task of stabilising, administering and reconstructing Iraq.”

He commented:

“The scale of the UK effort in post-conflict Iraq never matched the scale of the challenge. Whitehall Departments and their Ministers failed to put collective weight behind the task.”

What may have begun as a failure of leadership by a few had become a collective failure of the entire Government. It has become clear that there was one central strand to UK strategy post-conflict, which was to leave Iraq as soon as possible. As Sir John put it,

“In practice, the UK’s most consistent strategic objective in relation to Iraq was to reduce the level of its deployed forces.”

The report found that the Government failed to protect their own troops with appropriate kit and vehicles, as my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) explained a short time ago. Sir John stated that the Government failed to act against known dangers faced by our troops, such as the use of IEDs, and he castigated the MOD at the time for failing to apply appropriate armed vehicles with the appropriate haste. He argued that the troops “did not have sufficient resources”

to conduct simultaneous long-term operations in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2006 onwards.

[Roger Mullin]

On Monday this week, I was in discussions with senior staff at Imperial College's centre for blast injury studies. I was surprised to learn that as far back as the 1970s and the Rhodesian conflict, as it was known at the time, reports and studies demonstrated to the MOD what it needed to do to upgrade and provide better equipment for armed personnel in such conflicts. At that time, the lessons were ignored. This time, the lessons from Chilcot must not be ignored.

Dr Julian Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is making a most interesting speech. Before he leaves his list of failures, may I remind him of a point I raised in July 2003? Another failure is that, 13 days after the fall of Baghdad, it was still possible for journalists to go into the gutted headquarters of the Iraqi Foreign Ministry and intelligence services and pick up classified documents that were available for anyone to take away. One would have thought that if someone was determined to find out about the truth on WMDs and other matters, those ministries and agency headquarters should have been the first targets to be searched by intelligence teams.

Roger Mullin: The right hon. Gentleman makes a wonderfully telling point. I like his use of one word in particular: "if". If they had been interested in finding out the truth about WMDs, these things would have been found much earlier and taken care of much earlier. The fact that there was no planning to do that tells its own tale, I fear.

Returning to my opening points about the people still alive today who suffered terrible injuries in the conflict, I would like to end, with your permission, Mr Speaker, with a quote from *The BMJ* only two days ago:

"No matter how good the short term care, nothing will remove the enduring effects of the deaths and the physical and psychological injuries. The true legacy of the conflict for individuals and wider society in both the UK and Iraq may not be evident for many years to come."

That is why we need to learn all the lessons that have to be learned. We need to hold those to account who deserve to be held to account.

Mr Graham Allen: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it be in order to put on the record Members' thanks for the fact that you have sat through this debate from the very beginning for the whole two days? [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] It has been much appreciated by Members on all sides of the House.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which obviously was unsolicited. It is something for which I am very grateful and I thank colleagues for their response. As far as I am concerned, it is a matter of duty. I feel it is important and I want to hear what people have to say. It is my privilege to hear colleagues.

3.58 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) took the words right out of my mouth with regard to your presence, Mr Speaker. One can tell how good a debate has been when Members find themselves nodding

vigorously, no matter from which side of the House the points are being made. I think that that has happened quite a lot over the past two days.

I am honoured to be closing this debate on behalf of the Opposition. The Chilcot report is an extraordinary piece of work and I hope the whole House will join me in congratulating Sir John Chilcot on his efforts. He took a fair amount of flak during the lengthy writing of it, but it seems clear that it has been worth the wait. The report is in the very highest and noblest traditions of our country. It has unflinchingly shone a light both on crucial decisions made by our leaders and on how those decisions were made. It has not ducked from shining that light at the very highest levels of our Government—indeed, at the very top.

It would be naive to suppose that complete openness is always possible in government, especially over matters as grave as going to war. None the less, openness will always ensure that our policies have a firm moral foundation. As a great American jurist once said,

"If the broad light of day could be let in upon men's actions, it would purify them as the sun disinfects".

The report has let sunlight in on much that some would prefer to remain hidden. It is the most comprehensive and devastating critique we have had of the individual, collective and systemic errors that added up to the failure in Iraq—a failure whose consequences we are still dealing with and will have to deal with for many years to come.

I wish to pay tribute to comments by hon. Members on both sides of the House. Over two days, we have heard contributions from, among others, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on the opportunities the report provides to learn lessons for the future, from the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who emphasised the need for war to be seen always as a measure of last resort, and from the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who ably chairs the Intelligence and Security Committee and spoke with particular insight about some of the legal questions involved in the decision to go to war and about the failures of intelligence, which were also raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett), who has served as Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and therefore speaks with considerable authority on these issues.

Many Members, including the hon. Members for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and for South Dorset (Richard Drax), talked about problems with military equipment, as did the hon. and gallant Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) in what I thought was one of the finest speeches of the debate. The hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) were among the many contributors yesterday who spoke about the lack of adequate planning for the post-war reconstruction phase. As the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) pointed out, the same mistake was repeated in Libya, where the Government spent 13 times more on the military campaign than on post-war reconstruction.

The hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) made the case for better leadership on such matters and urged that the House and the Government learn from the Iraq

report to build public trust in politics, politicians and the big decisions we inevitably must make on the public's behalf. The knowledgeable and right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who chairs the Defence Committee, reminded us that it did not require hindsight to predict the many tribal and religious hatreds unleashed by the war and its aftermath. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) reminded us that we are elected to act in good faith, yes, but also with good judgment.

The speech that I felt best captured my personal anxieties was that of the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), who made more insightful comments than I have time to list. He spoke of the need for a more holistic approach to defence in both soft and hard power, and warned us that the continual budget cuts to the FCO undermine our ability not just to respond to global security threats, but to pre-empt them.

I want to focus on two topics that stand out to me: civilian casualties and equipment failures. Sir John estimates that there were at least 150,000 Iraqi fatalities, but suggests that the number is probably much higher. He notes that a proper assessment of the likely number of civilian casualties was not made before the invasion and that there was no systematic recording of casualties after the war had started. In one of his most scathing remarks, his report concludes:

“More time was devoted to the question of which department should have responsibility for the issue of civilian casualties than it was to efforts to determine the actual number.”

Today, it seems that Whitehall has yet to learn from this mistake. In the air campaign against Daesh, the Government insist that not a single civilian has been lost in almost two years of UK airstrikes. This seems literally incredible. Ministers give cryptic answers to questions about how they assess the damage caused by airstrikes, how they distinguish between combatants and civilians, and what they mean when they say they will consider all credible reports of civilian loss of life. The Government's continued lack of transparency on this issue is troubling. I urge the Secretary of State, in the light of the report, to look again at how his Department monitors and collates information on civilian casualties.

The exposure of equipment failures is one of the gravest findings in the report. Chilcot sheds new light on this by documenting the sheer scale of the problem. Shortages of helicopters and armoured vehicles had terrible consequences. Day after day we saw Snatch Land Rovers that were designed for riot duty in Northern Ireland blown to bits by huge roadside bombs. There were also shortages of uniforms, boots and even such basic necessities as toilet paper. Some units even had to borrow rations from the Americans; one unit became known as “the Borrowers”. Some of the soldiers who died in Iraq were still teenagers, and it is a disgrace that they were sent there so woefully prepared. Although we understand that it is literally impossible to plan for every equipment need and contingency, we can never again let such catastrophic failure occur.

I want to pay a personal tribute to the families of our troops who died for their dogged and persistent pursuit of the truth about these equipment failures. Their steadfastness to the cause was heroic. I and everyone who saw some active service in the years that followed owe them a deep debt of gratitude. We got the kit their sons and daughters did not get. I, for one, will never

forget the commitment to this cause that they showed. It undoubtedly saved many lives, and I hope that that knowledge can bring them some small consolation.

I have spoken about some of the specific failings identified in the report, but I must also speak of the much wider failings that a report of this scale and quality makes clear, such as the failure of this House sufficiently to hold the Executive to account on matters as grave as taking this country to war. Chilcot tells us that we must never allow a rush to war to blind us to facts or their absence. We must never allow a debate to be closed down with snide imputations of a lack of patriotism, or by the kind of macho posturing that suggests that those who urge caution, who demand evidence and who want proof when allegations of the gravest seriousness are made are somehow cowardly or undeserving of a voice.

The guardianship of this country's future and the future safety of the world are issues that require not the posturing bravado of adolescence, but mature wisdom and a readiness to accept that every voice in this Chamber is worthy of our fullest respect, because those voices have been sent here as representatives of the British people, in all their variety and complexity, and we all speak for Britain here. If we speak again of a rush to bomb the odious Government of President Assad, we should not be derided as supporters of the Assad regime. When, just two years later, we are told that we must now bomb President Assad's enemies in Daesh and we ask the question, “How will this bombing achieve our aims?”, we must not be told that we are soft on terrorism. We are demanding evidence of a coherent long-term plan that is backed with credible evidence and sufficient resources to achieve a lasting peace, founded on justice.

I am not a pacifist. My grandfather, of whose armed service I am deeply proud, was a paratrooper in the Normandy landings, and I have already mentioned my own service. I will always demand, however, the highest standard of proof for taking our country to war, and I will never apologise for that. These are literally matters of life and death, and the British people deserve better than political posturing.

Ultimately, if we cannot face and accept the consequences of our actions, we cannot learn the lessons and we cannot make wiser choices in the future. I hope that when we discuss issues of the gravest possible importance next week—those relating to Britain's nuclear capability—this House will do so in a spirit of due humility and awareness of our shortcomings. We are not infallible, and when we are making choices of such gravity, we must speak with the very best part of ourselves and not stoop to political point scoring.

Let me conclude by quoting the words of the former Foreign Secretary and now deceased Member for Livingston, Robin Cook. In his resignation speech, he said:

“The longer that I have served in this place, the greater the respect I have for the good sense and collective wisdom of the British people. On Iraq, I believe that the prevailing mood of the British people is sound. They do not doubt that Saddam is a brutal dictator, but they are not persuaded that he is a clear and present danger to Britain. They want inspections to be given a chance, and they suspect that they are being pushed too quickly into conflict by a US Administration with an agenda of its own. Above all, they are uneasy at Britain going out on a limb on a military adventure without a broader international coalition and against the hostility of many of our traditional allies.”—[*Official Report*, 17 March 2003; Vol. 401, c. 728.]

[Clive Lewis]

There it is in a nutshell: we went to war without the support of international alliances, institutions or our allies, without sufficient evidence and without the support of the British people. Some Members saw that, and they are to be congratulated on their honesty and moral integrity in saying so at the time. We were railroaded into war. That was shameful, and it must not happen again.

4.10 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): This has indeed been a considered and moving debate, as befits such a serious subject. I believe that more than 50 Members have contributed over the last two days, and I join them in thanking Sir John and his colleagues, including the late Sir Martin Gilbert, for their immense efforts. They have produced a report that I think we all now agree is comprehensive, accurate, and an unvarnished record of the events, and they have been unremitting in their efforts to understand the causes and consequences of the Iraq war and its aftermath. We are all in their debt.

I hope that members of the armed forces and their families are able to find some measure of consolation in the report's acknowledgement of their enormous service. Our thoughts remain with them. We should bear in mind what Sir John says about the efforts of the men and women of the armed forces: that the initial war-fighting phase was a military success. They did fight to help topple a tyrant who had murdered hundreds of thousands of his own people, and the subsequent failures in the campaign, at whoever's door they are laid, cannot and should not be laid at the door of those who did the fighting on our behalf.

However, Sir John also makes it clear that the United Kingdom did not achieve its overall strategy objectives in Iraq. There were too many challenges in too many different areas. There was a lack of leadership across Government, and there was too much group-think in our military, security and intelligence cultures, which stopped short of challenging key decisions. That point has been made many times over the last couple of days. There was flawed intelligence, which led to assertions—particularly in relation to WMD—that could not be justified. There was a fatal lack of post-war planning, and lessons from previous conflicts and exercises had not been properly learned. We also failed, as the campaign unravelled, to adapt to the changing situation on the ground, and there were significant equipment shortfalls for our troops, listed in some detail by the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald). There was much in that campaign that—whatever else we do—we must try to avoid in the future.

It will not, I think, be possible for me to refer to every single speech made over the last couple of days. The hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) picked out some of the more memorable. We have heard speeches of anger and speeches of remorse, and we have heard thought-provoking speeches about the overall effect of the Iraq war on our process and our political culture.

We have heard speeches from those who played significant roles at the time. The right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) spoke very illuminatingly of the need for humility, given that so many of those who

were involved professionally were able to reach the same conclusions without properly challenging the existing culture, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) spoke of the drive to converge our views with those of the United States. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) underlined the importance of planning for reconstruction in any military action. The House also had the benefit of the military experience of my hon. Friends the Members for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). I was particularly struck by the speech made by the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), who reminded the House that Islamic terrorism did not start in 2003; it was there long before that, and other countries were also engaged in trying to deal with it.

The question the House has to ask itself is this: given that we all want to avoid this happening again in the future, have there been sufficient, significant changes for the better? I suggest to the House that there have been some changes for the better. First, we in Government are better co-ordinated. We now have the National Security Council, which ensures that decision-making is dealt with in a joined-up way across Government. The NSC includes not only Ministers from the main Departments, but the Chief of the Defence Staff, the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the heads of the intelligence services, relevant senior officials and the Attorney General.

Dr Julian Lewis: The Secretary of State has just listed the membership of the National Security Council. While it is revealing that all the intelligence services are individually represented, it is a fact that all the armed forces are represented only by the Chief of the Defence Staff. Will he give consideration to the Defence Committee's suggestion that the Chiefs of Staff Committee could serve more usefully if it was constituted as the military sub-committee of the NSC?

Michael Fallon: I heard my right hon. Friend's speech earlier today, in which he made that point at some length. I caution him against over-complicating the structure we have and setting up sub-committees of it. The armed forces are represented through the Chief of the Defence Staff, who attends not only the NSC, but the officials' meeting that precedes it.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): My right hon. Friend is, I am delighted to say, serving in his current role under his second Prime Minister, and I trust he will serve under several more yet. [Interruption.] If we keep having leadership crises. As he has experience of Cabinet Government and the NSC, and as he remembers serving in government decades ago under former Prime Ministers, will he, with the new leader of the Government, consider the possibility of the Cabinet sitting for slightly longer than one and a half hours each week, particularly when pressing issues are on the agenda, and of more readily having individual briefings before issues are considered at Cabinet?

Similarly, will my right hon. Friend consider whether the NSC might be more flexible as to the length of meetings, whether briefings might be given to members before the NSC sits, and whether matters might be

returned to at subsequent meetings if there is a basis for challenging the advice given? We obviously have a difficult four years to go through; does my right hon. Friend agree that more collective government might be a good way of proceeding?

Michael Fallon: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend, particularly for his kind words. I am now serving my fourth Conservative Prime Minister; I do not think I have quite matched my right hon. and learned Friend's record, but I am closing in on it. I will not be drawn on the possibility of serving yet another, given that my right hon. Friend the new Prime Minister has only been in office for a day. She and I did sit together on the NSC, as well as in Cabinet, and one can always look at these things again. It is not for me to instruct the new Prime Minister on how to run her Cabinet, but I will certainly ensure that my right hon. and learned Friend's suggestion is passed on.

The NSC is a significant improvement on what went before it, in my right hon. and learned Friend's time in government, and it is certainly an improvement on the kind of sofa government that the Chilcot report exposes. The NSC does not operate in a vacuum. The National Security Adviser, who attends it, is now a well-established position in Government, supported by a strong team, and the NSC and the adviser are supported by a structure of cross-government boards and sub-committees, to which the Ministry of Defence makes a full contribution. To answer the point raised by the Chairman of the Defence Committee, there is no shortage of ways in which the views of the chiefs are brought forward in that structure.

Dr Julian Lewis: I see a slight contradiction in the Secretary of State saying that it would over-complicate the machinery of the National Security Council if the heads of the armed services were allowed to form one of its sub-committees, given that there is evidently no shortage of other sub-committees. The fact remains that it is easier for politicians with bees in their bonnets to sweep aside the views of the Chief of the Defence Staff as a single individual, which appears to have happened in the case of Libya, than it is for them to sweep aside the views of the heads of the armed forces collectively. I wish that the Secretary of State would not be so resistant on this point.

Michael Fallon: As I have said, the heads of the armed forces are represented on the National Security Council by the Chief of the Defence Staff, and the Chief of the Defence Staff who has been serving up to now is certainly not likely to be disregarded by the politicians who sit on the committee. Both he and his successor—I hope that the House will welcome the arrival of the new Chief of the Defence Staff today—are well able to hold their own against the politicians.

Clive Lewis: Would the Secretary of State acknowledge that Baroness Neville-Jones, one of the architects of the NSC, has said that the secretariat that co-ordinates the NSC is understaffed and under-resourced? Another criticism is that there is a lack of outside expertise being brought into the NSC, and that more use could be made of such experts.

Michael Fallon: I read the Baroness's speech, and I advise all Members to have a look at the debate on this matter in the other place. It had some memorable contributions, including from people who were actively involved at the time. The point that the hon. Gentleman makes about the need for external expertise has been made before. External expertise is of course available to the different Departments, and I am convinced that the new machinery is a massive improvement on what was there before.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I think that the Secretary of State has laid to rest the canard that the NSC operates without expertise, but I should like to reinforce that point. It is evident from the 2010 example of the strategic defence and security review that we on the NSC conducted, and from subsequent events, that expertise from the greatest experts in the country is frequently heard and always available to the NSC. Such expertise also populates the significant briefing papers that go before the NSC and informs the judgments that it makes.

Michael Fallon: I can confirm that that is exactly the position. There is no shortage of briefing for members of the NSC. They are able to bring that expertise to the regular meetings of the council and to question the experts who are present. The recent strategic defence and security review shows how a cross-Whitehall approach is being implemented in practice and leading to better decision making.

Tom Brake: On that point about cross-departmental arrangements working more effectively, does the Secretary of State feel that any of the lessons identified in Chilcot in relation to reconstruction in Iraq might already have been fed through in relation to what happened in Libya? It is not obvious that that is the case.

Michael Fallon: I shall talk about the lesson on the importance of planning for reconstruction in a moment. I just want to finish this important point about the machinery of government.

The Ministry of Defence has revamped its strategy and policy making with the institution of an annual defence plan that reflects the outcomes of the strategic defence and security reviews, with senior leaders in the Ministry being individually held to account for their role in delivering it, and a defence strategy group, chaired by the permanent secretary and the Chief of the Defence Staff, to address how Defence can best contribute to delivering defence and security policy objectives.

Mr Baron: I am listening carefully to what my right hon. Friend is saying, but this is not just an issue of how best to encourage communication and expertise within the system; Chilcot was also saying that there was a lack of investment and proper sighting of events on the ground. That can be put right only through long-term investment to ensure that we are better sighted, so that we have a better idea of what is actually happening on the ground and the consequences of our actions. Does he agree that that is another important lesson to take from the Chilcot report?

Michael Fallon: Yes, I do. Defence intelligence and the gathering of information on the ground have improved and are more available to those taking the key decisions back in London.

Ian C. Lucas: This is an important area, but the right hon. Gentleman has focused almost exclusively on the Executive. One of the most important lessons of Chilcot is that the most effective opposition to the decision, which many now accept to be wrong, was from the Back Benches. When the Front Benches agree, group-think—to use his own phrase—applies. The lesson is that we need to listen to independent-minded Back Benchers who present their views to Government honestly and passionately regardless of the consequences for their careers and who make difficult decisions that Ministers need to listen to much more closely in future.

Michael Fallon: I accept that. I was here at the time and voted in that particular Division. It is important that the Government listen to their Back Benchers. We were not in government then, but it is important that Members are free to speak their minds independently. Indeed, they have done so in the debate that we have been having over two days—on both sides of the argument. There are those who still maintain that the action taken in Iraq, although it did not turn out as well as we wanted, was justified and right.

Alex Salmond: Speaking as a Back Bencher, the right hon. Gentleman's new colleague the Brexit Secretary, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), said that in situations of peace and war the House must rely on the Prime Minister of the day telling

“the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”.—[*Official Report*, 13 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 362.]

Does the Defence Secretary agree?

Michael Fallon: Members and Ministers should speak the truth in this particular House, but whether the Prime Minister of the day deliberately misled the House was investigated exhaustively by Sir John Chilcot in the report and I do not want to add any more to what he said.

I turn now to the issue raised by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) about stabilisation. Since the Iraq war, the Government have increasingly focused first on prevention rather than intervention. We have been helping to build capability with partners and tackling the problems of fragile states at source, which has been possible only because we are now spending 0.7% of our GDP on international development. By helping fragile states to promote good governance, tackle corruption, and build capacity in defence and security forces, we can stop crises turning to the chaos that we have seen. That requires insight and understanding, often into complex situations. We have set up the cross-Government conflict stability and security fund, building on the conflict pool that had been in place for some time and supporting delivery of country or regional NSC strategies.

All that promotes a much stronger culture of cross-Government working on strategy, policy and delivery in fragile and conflict-affected countries. An example of our success in that so far was the recent deployment to

Sierra Leone to combat Ebola, where diplomats, the military and officials from the Department for International Development worked alongside each other. The stabilisation unit that we set up has continued to develop, so we now have experts on hand to deploy in post-conflict situations anywhere in the world, at short notice. I have seen for myself how civilian advisers are now routinely part of military exercises, ensuring that military and civilian staff gain experience of working together before they are deployed, so that development and humanitarian needs get the consideration and attention they need, alongside the military planning.

We are now trying to make sure our armed forces are properly equipped and resourced. Not only are we meeting the NATO commitment to spend 2% of our GDP on defence, but our defence budget is growing for the first time in six years. That is on the back of the successful efforts we have been making since 2010 to return financial discipline to the Ministry of Defence and balance the defence budget. That is the foundation for the strong focus now on delivering an affordable 10-year equipment programme, allowing us to invest in the right equipment for our armed forces. That programme will total at least £178 billion on new military equipment over the next decade.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am glad that the Secretary of State has come to this point about members of the armed forces and their equipment. Will he expand on how this learning opportunity will support those who come back from conflict—crucially, the reservists, who take up much of that challenge and who fell off the radar after Iraq?

Michael Fallon: We have taken a lot of measures to involve the reserves more closely with the regulars now. After Iraq, we have been learning more rapidly the lessons from each deployment, particularly those from Afghanistan, to ensure that in future we do not have to wait for the kind of report that Sir John Chilcot has produced, and we are able to learn the lessons as we go and as units return, so that they can be applied to the next units taking up those roles.

Strategic defence reviews take the balance of investment decisions, including where our main equipment priorities lie. Routinely, decisions on how that money will then be invested rest with the service chiefs, giving them the freedom, and the responsibility, to make decisions on how best to apply their resources, and obliging them to be very clear about where they are carrying risk in respect of potential equipment failures or shortfall. Where changing circumstances or unexpected threats lead to shortfalls, we should be ready and able, quickly and effectively, to make good any shortcomings.

The Chilcot report recognises that the MOD and the Treasury, between them, worked hard to develop and refine the urgent operational requirements process. As the former Prime Minister told this House, that process did deliver results and new, improved equipment into theatre quickly in the Afghanistan campaign, responding immediately to the needs of our armed forces there. One of Chilcot's most troubling observations is the lack back then of a clear focus of responsibility for identifying capability gaps during enduring operations. The new post of Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff for Military Capability that has since been established fulfils that role.

As well as properly equipping and resourcing our people, the Government have a duty to ensure the welfare of our armed forces and their families, and then to ensure that they suffer no disadvantage when they return to civilian life. By putting the armed forces covenant into law and committing resources to it, we are making sure that all those who put their lives on the line for this country get the help and support they need.

But however much we have done, and however much things have changed and improved since the Iraq campaign, the question for this House is to judge whether or not we have done enough. My answer is: no, of course we have not yet done enough. It is evident that the Chilcot report contains many harsh lessons still for us to learn. Given its length and forensic detail, it will take us some more time to analyse and to do it full justice. What is clear to me is that we now need to take a long, hard look at our decision-making processes and our culture to satisfy ourselves that misjudgments similar to those made at the time could not recur.

Pete Wishart: The Secretary of State is right that we must take account of all those things, but surely the public expect somebody to be held accountable for what was the biggest foreign policy disaster, probably, since the war. What is he going to do about that? The public demand to know that somebody will be held responsible for what happened.

Michael Fallon: The Chilcot report itself holds to account those who were involved and took the key decisions, and it makes its judgments on them. It is for them, not for me, to respond to those judgments and to account for the actions and the way in which they took their decisions at that time.

On the decision-making culture, the detail of the committees and the machinery of government which we discussed a few moments ago is not the stuff of headlines and speeches, but Chilcot shows us that some of these internal procedures of government are important. He sets out in pretty stark terms what happens when those structures—and the opportunities that they provide for the proper flow of information and challenge—are missing or are bypassed.

In defence, we have transformed in recent years our approach to risk. We have a clear focus of responsibility in each key area. We have designated risk duty holders and it is their responsibility to come to me if they believe that the levels of risk in their areas are becoming excessive. I expect military chiefs and commanders now to show the same degree of rigour and transparency with respect to operational planning.

Our organisation and culture must not prevent our people from challenging and questioning institutional assumptions, even if those assumptions are made by their superiors. That was a point eloquently made yesterday by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), and it was made again by the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) today.

That view is fully shared by the current Chiefs of Staff—each of whom served in different roles during the Iraq campaign, including the outgoing and the incoming Chief of the Defence Staff—and it is shared by the permanent secretary. We are committed to leading defence through a period of rigorous reflection, analysis and improvement, and I am determined to make that improvement happen. I need, and the House would want me, to be absolutely sure that when our servicemen and women are deployed in future—and, inevitably, that is when, not if—nobody will be able to point to Sir John's report and justifiably accuse us of repeating the same mistakes. I want to give the House an assurance that Sir John's report will not be the last word.

In conclusion, our strategic defence and security review reminds us that we are living in an ever more dangerous world. Despite the report and the Iraq campaign, we must still be ready to act, as we have shown in our participation in the international coalition campaign against Daesh in Iraq and Syria today. We must remain as committed as ever to protecting our people and standing up to any kind of terrorism or aggression that seeks to destroy our very way of life. Sir John and his team, I repeat, have done us all a great service. Their work will enable us to learn the vital lessons from those operations in Iraq and ensure that we are not condemned to make the same mistakes in future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Report of the Iraq Inquiry.

Detention under Mental Health Act

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(George Hollingbery.)

4.40 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): As an ethnic minority immigrant to this country, I am intrigued by the way the House works. We have had two days of a deeply serious international debate, and now an ethnic minority immigrant has an opportunity to put a point on a small but important issue that is almost local by comparison. I am referring to the possibility of a small change in the Mental Health Act 1983 to enable our policemen and women to act somewhat more promptly in the care of any person they find to be in need of mental health assessment and immediate care.

I raised this issue in a ten-minute rule Bill in 2014. I did not proceed, as I was informed that there was an ongoing review. That review has come and gone, and I have read it, but this small point was not referred to in it. However, there will possibly be a negative change—from my point of view—in the Policing and Crime Bill as it progresses through the other place.

I was initially prompted to seek changes having seen the need for them first hand. I was on a police parliamentary scheme in 2014, as part of which I went round Wandsworth on foot or by car. I joined two young uniformed police officers in their response car. The first call was a dash to a flat on the 14th floor of a council residential tower block. The mother of the household nervously let the officers in to see her daughter—aged 22—who was standing on the window ledge and threatening to jump.

It was quickly established that the daughter had a short history of suicide attempts. With the back-up of two plainclothes officers, and with great expertise, the young woman was persuaded to come down. A young female officer sat on the bed beside her, and they calmly discussed the problem. The police officer suggested the young woman might want to go to a place of safety for psychiatric and medical help. That was refused, and when the woman was pressed a little further, it was followed by agitation and threats to jump out of the window.

Meanwhile, police officers outside the flat had contacted the psychiatric unit at St George's hospital for assistance. After a couple of hours, an individual from the hospital arrived with an ambulance and crew. There was further alarm and rejection, and a struggle ensued, but in due course this sad lady was transported to the hospital as a designated place of safety.

The whole pantomime had occupied five police officers and three NHS staff, and it had taken about three to four hours to sort out. It was obvious from the beginning that the police themselves could have taken care of the young lady very quickly, therefore reducing the police and NHS manpower hours needed and the risk of the young lady leaping out of the window.

I have a second personal case, which involves a Mole Valley resident. A lady in a block of flats has been threatening neighbours with bizarre and often aggressive behaviour to such a degree that some other residents actually fear for their lives, let alone obtain any peace at any hour of the day. Contact between the mental health team and the police has not coincided until very recently.

I asked the police officer in charge about section 136. Predictably, I was told the lady's home was a private place, so no police action was legally possible. From discussions with Met police officers, I have found that that situation is far from unusual.

A more tragic case was the death of Martin Middleton in 2010. He was taken to a Leeds police station by officers who had visited him in his home and noted his serious preparations for committing suicide. The police officers believed they had arrested Mr Middleton under section 136. When they arrived at the police station, the custody sergeant refused to detain Mr Middleton, as the arrest had taken place in his private residence. The police officers therefore had to take him to what they hoped was some form of safety—a relative's home. Sadly, later that day or the following day, he hanged himself.

At the inquest, the coroner had no hesitation in agreeing with Professor Keith Rix, who was called to give expert evidence, that Mr Middleton fell into a category of mentally disordered persons for whom there is no appropriate provision under the Act. Subsequent to raising this issue, I have heard from many front-line police officers and again from Professor Keith Rix, who is an academic psychiatrist and an expert in this area. I still have no doubt that the Act needs amending fully to protect the police and, of course, those suffering a mental illness crisis.

I am reliably informed that in the Republic of Ireland, the Garda Síochána have a clear operational advantage in that, under section 12 of Ireland's Mental Health Act 2001, where there is

“a serious likelihood of the person causing immediate and serious harm to himself or herself or to other persons”,

a garda can

“enter...any dwelling or other premises or any place if he or she has reasonable grounds for believing that the person is to be found there.”

There are instances recorded in England where the police have had to act outside the boundaries of the law out of concern for the safety of the individual. There are also recognised incidences of the desperate police persuading the person out of their home, and therefore into a public place, to effect an arrest under section 136 and take the person for proper and appropriate care, thus preventing a suicide. Over the 10 years between 1997-98 and 2007-08, admissions to hospital as a place of safety increased from 2,237 to 7,035. The Minister is noted for his quick arithmetic, and he will recognise that that is a threefold increase.

It was calculated that 17,417 people were detained under section 136 in 2005-06. By 2011-12, the overall number of incidences of its use was recorded as 23,500. As I have indicated, although the powers under section 136 are limited to persons who are found by the police in a public place, there is evidence that the powers are sometimes used to remove an affected person from their home. In fact, one London-based social services authority's audited figures indicated that some 30% of section 136 arrests were recorded as having been made at or just outside the detainee's home. In other words, in desperation, the police have had to manoeuvre the individual outside their private residence. This is an indication of the desperation of the police to obtain care for disturbed individuals, and hence it supports my desire for a change in the legislation.

Put bluntly, on a strict interpretation of section 136, the admission to hospital of hundreds, if not thousands, of potential suicides is delayed or denied, thus risking their suicide or self-harm, merely because the police, who sometimes have to just observe the situation, cannot act because it is happening in the person's home or someone else's home. In many instances, as I found in Wandsworth, the police have to spend considerable time waiting until they can obtain a medical practitioner or a health official to give them the nod to transport the patient to care.

One argument against the amendment that I am suggesting is that the police already have sufficient powers. It is quite clear, from my own observation, that that is basically incorrect. The second argument is that it would extend the right of the police to enter people's private properties. Clearly, in those circumstances, that is appropriate because somebody is in need of mental health care, and that is the whole point of the change I am seeking. It is already possible for the police to enter an individual's private home to investigate a possible breach of the peace, assuming that the police would be utilising that eventuality to enter the property. Often, they have to help someone who is clearly suffering mental disorder. In many cases, other residents in the property can allow the police in, but having done so, as in the first case I cited, they are then still unable to act.

In my belief, and in my experience, the police are acting only in the very best interests of the individuals concerned and of the safety of the public, and we should give them the legal mechanism to do so. Doing nothing is not an option. I suggest that a simple solution would be to amend section 136 by simply removing the words

"in a place to which the public have access".

I am hopeful of a positive answer from the Minister; I know that he is extremely flexible. I would be happy to work with him to seek a ten-minute rule Bill, or take a different direction through a tiny change to the Policing and Crime Bill in another place. If he has a problem with my suggestion, I would be grateful if he met me and Professor Rix to discuss a solution to help the police to save lives and injuries, and not, as the Department appear to be doing, produce exactly the opposite effect.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of State for Policing, Crime, Criminal Justice and Victims, at the Home Office and at the Ministry of Justice, to reply to the debate.

4.49 pm

The Minister for Policing, Fire, Criminal Justice and Victims (Mike Penning): Far be it for me to ever contradict you, Mr Speaker, but I lost crime some time ago and now have fire. The title you gave me is correct, except that I now have no crime, but lots of fire.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) that it is a pleasure to respond to this debate. We have met to discuss his concerns before. I have received delegations on the subject and it was discussed extensively during the Committee stage of the Policing and Crime Bill.

To be fair, my hon. Friend does highlight an issue, and I am not going to run away from that. He is absolutely right to say that there are concerns about extending powers into a place of safety that is deemed to be someone's abode. I have been on patrol with the

police when they have encountered very similar situations to the first case that he mentioned. I have also heard people say, long before I got this position, "If only we could get this person outside their home, we could help them under the existing legislation."

I am sure that all custody sergeants, who do a fantastic job, are as diligent as the one who my hon. Friend has met. I once heard a custody sergeant say that section 136 would not be appropriate when a person was in a public place. I do not think that that is right, either, but police officers are not mental health experts. One of the problems with section 136 is that it is specifically designed as a last resort when all other measures to help an individual have been exhausted. I will touch on other matters relating to the expertise that police officers do not always have, including the street triage initiative and resources for custody suites, and, importantly, the situation outwith officers.

Before we consider changing section 136, we need to ask whether it is being used correctly. We are concerned about the number of section 136 orders that are being used, and the data that I asked for show that forces in some parts of the country almost never use section 136, while others use it extensively.

Sir Paul Beresford: It would be interesting to compare and contrast those statistics with the suicide statistics. By law, anyone arrested under section 136 must be seen within 72 hours by a psychiatrist or a medical practitioner with psychiatric training, which represents an enormous safeguard.

Mike Penning: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We will break down the analysis for information not just on suicides, but on criminal assaults, which are often carried out on loved ones. When I was out on patrol with the Metropolitan police in Camden, we went to what the neighbours described as a "domestic situation"; in other words, someone had allegedly been assaulted. When we arrived at and eventually got into the flat, the one thing that the person who had been assaulted desperately did not want was for their loved one to be arrested and taken to a prison cell, because they were ill. They were ill in a similar way to someone who had broken their leg or who had a medical illness. They were ill and they needed to go to a suitable place of safety.

All too often over the years, that person would have been arrested and ended up in a police cell. If they were not subject to section 136, they would not necessarily have the safeguard of being seen by a medical or psychiatric specialist. That is one of the reasons why the amount of time that someone with a mental illness can be kept in a police cell is massively restricted by legislation.

I would argue that this is a matter not just for the police, but for social services and the NHS in particular. It is not for a police officer to diagnose instantly whether someone having a mental health episode is drunk, has taken illegal drugs, or has had their medication go wrong. I may not be the Minister with responsibility for the police as the reshuffle goes on, but at the moment they are my police officers in England and Wales, and very often they have to make split-second decisions. However, I am desperate to make sure that they are not put in the difficult position of being the first port of stoppage rather than being, as they should be, the last resort for those in desperate need.

[Mike Penning]

When I was fireman, I regularly attended incidents with the local police force. At about a quarter to five on a Friday, social services would phone the police and fire stations to say that they were going home for the weekend, but they had not seen Mary or Jonny—vulnerable people—during the week, so could we make sure that they were okay. Sometimes we had to break into the premises. I argued then and I argue now that that is not the role of the emergency services, and it is certainly not the role of the police. However, that has become the norm in all our constituencies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley will be pleased to know that an inter-ministerial group is looking at this. When I was disabilities Minister, I sat on the group and argued my point about not just people with mental illnesses, but people with learning difficulties. The two are often confused in this area, because people with learning difficulties can also become very confused as we desperately try to look after them.

If someone has a mental illness, the place of safety that we take them to is not a police cell. We do exactly what it says on the tin and take them to a place of safety, which means a medical setting provided by the NHS or social services.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I support my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) in everything that he is trying to do. Does the Minister agree that the time limit in the safeguards in section 136, which require an examination by a registered medical practitioner or an interview by an approved medical health professional within 72 hours, could be reduced to perhaps 12 hours? That would mean that the person in question would get more immediate help.

Mike Penning: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is exactly what will happen under the Policing and Crime Bill. The police will not be able to hold a person in a police cell for the length of time that they previously could while waiting for that medical examination to take place. However, to be honest, I think we can all agree that 12 hours is too long. Would we find it acceptable if someone with a broken leg had to wait in A&E for 72 hours? My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley is a qualified dentist. Would someone wait 72 hours if they had a huge abscess in their mouth that needed urgent treatment? Why is mental health treated so differently from other illnesses? That is something that my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) has been working on extensively, although sadly he has decided to return to the Back

Benches. When the coalition was in power, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) accepted that the NHS was letting these people down, and that the men and women in our police forces were having to pick up the mess by dealing with those in desperate situations. That really is not the role of a police force.

Unless the Government come together to deal with this, my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley is right to be concerned about sections 136 and 135. I hope that he will take up my offer of our working together. I am sorry that I did not manage to be with him to meet the professor, although we did bump into him. If the concerns cannot be dealt with in the way that my officials and the three Departments that handle this suggest that they can, we will absolutely need to amend section 136, but let us first try to get to the right place. This will sound critical of other Departments, but I do not want the police to be seen, yet again, to be picking up something that another Department needs to address. That is what has happened over the years.

When I have said that we should restrict the length of time for which these very vulnerable people can be held in a police cell, one argument that has been put to me is: where will they go? How many specialist A&E facilities and places of safety are there, besides the cells in the local prison? The answer is that provision has to be made to ensure that the cells are not the first port of call.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*George Hollingbery.*)

Mike Penning: To conclude, it is absolutely right that this issue has been brought to the House, although I am aware of it. I was aware of it before I took on my portfolio and, to be fair, even before I came into the House, because my mother was a mental health nurse for more than 40 years. We are in a much better position today than we have been in the past, and we have a better understanding of mental health and learning difficulties—[*Interruption.*] The phone in my pocket is buzzing; it may well be someone trying to get hold of me urgently.

It is important that we work together. I give my hon. Friend a commitment that if we cannot get this right using the measures that we are working on, an amendment to section 136 might be exactly what we need.

Question put and agreed to.

5.1 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 14 July 2016

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Co-operatives

1.30 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of cooperatives to the economy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to be here with colleagues from across the House, and with many fellow members of the Co-operative party, to discuss this important issue. I stand here not only as a member of the Labour party but as a Co-operative MP, along with many other colleagues here. I am pleased to work with colleagues across the legislatures, councils and different political institutions of the United Kingdom to stand up for co-operative values and the co-operative ideal in our politics, which enjoy support even from non-Co-op members. I am glad to see representatives from other parties here, and I am sure that they will make some excellent contributions. There are 25 Co-op MPs, 1,500 councillors, three police and crime commissioners, eight Members of the Scottish Parliament and 11 Assembly Members, but many others also share our ideals and interests.

Members may be aware that the timing of this debate is no coincidence. We recently celebrated Co-operatives fortnight, which ran from 18 June to 2 July. Co-operatives fortnight brings great attention to the issues every year, as do numerous other events throughout the country and indeed around the world. Co-operatives fortnight is a time when co-operatives up and down the country remind people of the many good reasons why we should all choose the co-operative model and of the significant impact that co-operatives have had for many years and continue to have on the British economy.

That is important to recognise, as we are going through difficult times both politically and for business and the economy. Unfortunately, as always, the difficult cases and mistakes made by some businesses tend to predominate. The BHS crisis, the scandals involving non-payment of tax and lots of other issues have dominated the business and economic agenda in recent months but, overall, we should be proud of the success story that surrounds the role of co-operatives and mutuals in our economy. That is what I wish to draw attention to in my remarks.

The movement has seen incredible growth over the past number of years. The number of people who own and control the UK's co-operatives has grown by more than 10% to 17.5 million, nearly a quarter of the UK population, meaning that the number of co-operative members continues to outstrip the number of regular shareholders in the UK. The sector is set to benefit further from the recent Co-op Group announcement that it wants to add 1 million new members over the next five years. It is important to make it clear that, although the Co-op Group tends to dominate the news that we hear about the co-op sector in the UK, it is not

the whole sector. The sector is much wider, more diverse and more extensive than just its most well-known brand name.

Overall, the co-op sector has grown by £3.5 billion over the last five years. That growth is accounted for by a combination of success among retailers such as John Lewis, the Midcounties Co-operative and the Central England Co-operative, and steady growth in the agricultural sector. It is worth noting some of the largest sectors within the co-operative economy by number of co-operatives and turnover: agriculture, which has 416 co-ops with a turnover of more than £5.8 million; retail, which has 505 co-ops with a turnover of £24.3 million; sports and leisure, which has 2,890 co-ops; and health and social care, which has 88 co-operatives and a very large turnover.

That is matched by more than 225,000 jobs created in the co-operative economy throughout the length and breadth of the UK. We should applaud and welcome that, recognising that many of those jobs are in thriving businesses that provide a huge role for employees as well as co-op members. They often offer excellent pay, conditions and involvement in the direction of where the co-operative goes, not just the employer/employee relationship of many traditional businesses.

Co-operatives and mutual societies play a pivotal societal, social and economic role throughout the UK. They are created, governed and run by members, and set up by members for members. The idea of membership-led engagement is the distinguishing element that makes co-operatives and mutual societies different from other legal entities, and it is unique as far as participation in economic life is concerned. It is important to recognise that because a mutual society is created and managed to fulfil its members' needs, it inherently pursues long-term goals. That pursuit of long-term goals marks mutuals as reliable, stable and durable elements in many sectors of the economy.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I know that my hon. Friend was a strong supporter of the Co-op party's successful campaign during the last Parliament for the Government to establish a military credit union to help protect our military personnel and their families from being exploited by payday lenders. Does he think that this debate might be a good opportunity to hear from the Minister about what progress there has been in terms of people joining the three credit unions established to help military personnel?

Stephen Doughty: That is a crucial point. My hon. Friend, who has been a leader on the co-operative ideal in this Parliament, across the country and within the Co-operative party itself, led the campaign for a military credit union. I would certainly be interested to hear from the Minister about that. As a member of a credit union myself—Cardiff and Vale Credit Union—I know that many Co-operative supporters also belong to and promote credit unions in their communities. I also recognise that fair lending and fair access to finance can help different sectors: particularly, as my hon. Friend pointed out, veterans and those serving in our armed forces. It is crucial that they do not fall prey to the payday lenders who create such a problem in our economy.

[Stephen Doughty]

We have seen progress not only in fair lending but in fair tax, an issue on which the co-operative movement has shown leadership. It is worth noting, and the House will be interested to know, that Britain's top five co-ops pay more UK tax than Amazon, Facebook, Apple, eBay and Starbucks combined. That is very much in line with where the public stand. Only 34% of the British public believe that most big businesses in the UK pay their fair share of tax, and, sadly, just 6% trust a company of any size to provide accurate information on the tax that it has paid. Recent research undertaken by KPMG shows that trust in companies' approach to tax is the fourth most significant factor in how much overall trust an individual places in a company or brand.

The Fair Tax Mark campaign has been established to set a new standard in responsible tax practice, from the smallest shop to the biggest multinational. The pioneers of the campaign have, as we would expect, been co-ops and social enterprises. From the beginning, the Co-operative party, Co-operatives UK and Social Enterprise UK have been highly supportive of the fair tax mark. I am proud to say that the Co-operative party is the first political party to achieve the mark. That is something that we could all aspire to. Co-operative retail societies such as East of England, Midcounties, the Co-operative Group and Scotmid have also achieved the fair tax mark. It is clear and evident that co-operatives have seized the opportunity to benefit from the public's willingness to punish tax avoiders.

The co-op movement's enthusiasm for adopting fair tax policies further demonstrates that the co-operative model is an inherently social and responsible form of business. I would certainly be interested to hear from the Minister what lessons he thinks there are for the rest of the economy in the example being set by co-operatives and those leading the Fair Tax Mark campaign. Achieving the mark certifies that a company is making a genuine effort to be open and transparent about its tax affairs and pays the right amount of corporation tax at the right time and in the right place. I am proud of the work done on that.

Co-operatives clearly provide new and innovative solutions to some of the other challenges of our changing economy, one of which is the growing number of self-employed workers. There are now more self-employed workers than at any time since modern records began. Some 4.6 million people, around 15% of the workforce, are now self-employed. Data from the Office for National Statistics show that two thirds of new jobs created in the UK in recent years are down to self-employment. Current projections are that by 2018 self-employed people will outnumber those working in the public sector. That is a huge challenge for Government, for tax authorities and for trade unions, but a challenge that the co-operative movement has risen to. Self-employed workers often do not enjoy the employment rights and protections at work or any of the implicit services associated with being an employee, such as payroll or workplace insurance, let alone such things as pensions or sick pay. They also face additional challenges related to being paid on time, the right to contracts and so on. As we all know, self-employed workers often end up being some of the lowest-paid and most put-upon workers in the country.

With that in mind, it is particularly interesting to note that throughout the country freelancers and self-employed people are coming together to form co-operatives for shared services, in some cases with support from entrepreneurial trade unions that see the opportunity to support members who are self-employed, not just those who are employed in traditional workplace arrangements in larger businesses.

I have some interesting examples. In Wales, the Oren Actors Management co-op allows actors to work between roles as agents for other co-op member actors, marketing their services—a two-way process in which they mutually support one another. That is a very good example of co-operative principles in practice. In Swindon, 50 music teachers have come together to form a co-op to market their services to schools with support from the Musicians Union, with which I enjoy a proud association—indeed, I should state for the record that my register of interests shows that I have enjoyed support from it in the past. The Musicians Union does an excellent job in that respect and I am very excited to see it working to help self-employed music teachers. In London, interpreters came together in a co-op in November 2012 after changes in their terms and conditions when the firm Capita took on the contract to provide interpretation services in judicial courts. I do not want to get into a lengthy debate about Capita and its good and bad aspects, but that is a fascinating situation of a co-op of interpreters coming together.

Compared with practice in some countries overseas, these initiatives are only in their infancy. They have to potential to grow tremendously, like other models witnessed in other parts of the world. I am certainly interested in whether the Minister thinks we could play a bigger role in promoting best practice and supporting such initiatives from other countries. In the United States, for example, Freelancers Union, which was formed for the self-employed, has attracted over 280,000 members. In the Netherlands and Spain, general unions for self-employed workers have emerged and developed since the late 1990s and provide a range of services as well as representation. The Assemblée Nationale in the French Parliament has also introduced legislation, which came into force this January, to recognise the role of 72 business and employment co-operatives, supporting members with accounting and access to the sickness pay and benefits of conventional employees.

It is worth highlighting that the Wales Co-operative Centre, another body with which I enjoy a close association—I work closely with its head, Derek Walker, locally—and Co-operatives UK have recently published the “Not Alone” report, which sets out some key findings on how the co-operative movement and trade unions can come together in the UK to build support for self-employed workers.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that recent legislation that erodes travel and subsistence benefits for freelancers and that affects their tax reporting will hinder our freelancers and those working in the environments he describes?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely agree. The challenges, the additional pressures and the disproportionate impact that legislative and other changes can have on the self-employed are often not highlighted enough in

this House; they can have a much bigger impact than they would have on a larger company, for example. We need to do all we can about that, and the co-operative movement is clearly playing an innovative and key role in trying to address those changes. The interests of self-employed workers are not well represented in our policy making, with the result that they face unnecessary regulatory burdens and barriers. I am proud that the co-operative movement is championing our self-employed, who make such an invaluable contribution to our economy and represent such a growing proportion of our labour market.

As a Welsh Labour and Co-operative MP, I want to highlight some of the work that is going on in Wales and the contribution that co-ops make to the Welsh economy. In 2015, the Wales Co-operative Centre launched its report on social businesses in Wales. That report outlined the scope and scale of the sector, its performance and the many opportunities for further development. The term “social businesses” includes social enterprises, co-operatives, mutuals and other employee-owned businesses. We have seen the statistics for co-operatives’ contribution to the UK economy as a whole; the report found that the total value of the social business sector in Wales is £1.7 billion and that it employs over 38,000 people. Social businesses tend to be more active in deprived areas than other small and medium-sized enterprises and to employ and procure locally, which suggests that they make an important economic contribution—perhaps a disproportionate contribution—in some of the poorest areas of the country.

Social businesses are a robust and dynamic sector, confident about the future. Indeed, 69% of social businesses in Wales expect turnover to increase in the next two to three years. Women are also keenly represented in leadership positions, with 35% of social businesses reporting a majority of women in leadership roles, compared with 19% of SMEs. Women’s leadership in business and the corporate sector is often discussed in this House, but here again we see the co-operative sector leading the way in putting principles into practice and ensuring that women are occupying a majority of roles. Some of the larger corporates and businesses in this country would do well to learn from that example of the benefits that come from ensuring that the equality that exists in the country is reflected in the boardroom, in decision making and in economic practice locally. It highlights how the co-operative movement is at the forefront of addressing some of the key problems that exist in our labour market as a whole and shows innovative practice in moving forward.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman support the work of the Wales TUC and the Wales Co-operative Centre, which is dealing with some of the challenges he describes in the labour market, including middle-aged unemployment, school drop-out rates and increasing youth employment?

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely. As the hon. Gentleman rightly mentions, there is a strong link between the Wales Co-operative Centre and the Wales TUC, and indeed with other trade unions in Wales. It is that type of partnership and co-operation between those who share common aims and values that is driving forward some of these agendas that do not get a lot of attention

but should. I know my colleagues in the National Assembly are driving this issue forward in the areas where Wales enjoys devolved responsibility. We often work closely together as Co-operative MPs and Assembly Members to address those issues and to ensure that we are doing what we can, both here in Westminster and in Wales. I am sure that is also the case elsewhere with our many councillors throughout the country.

I know other Members wish to make contributions—I am looking forward to hearing them. I believe that co-operatives are a great and important example of how people can come together to help each other. They are also a great example of self-reliance, which we should continue to support and celebrate. Co-operatives have brought about trust and a sense of values and ethics that we sometimes do not see in other parts of economy but, crucially, this is not about some slightly odd, unusual or marginal part of the economy. Co-operatives are a growing, vibrant and dynamic sector, creating jobs, delivering growth and providing opportunities in areas and sectors of the economy that are simply not being provided by other forms of business model. I hope the co-operative sector continues to grow and to have the support it needs from all levels of government in the UK to go forward in the years ahead.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate is due to finish at 3 pm; the guideline limits for the Front Bench speeches, assuming that Front-Bench personnel are the same at the end of the debate as they were at the beginning, are 10 minutes for the Scottish National party, 10 minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Government. I shall call Front-Bench Members no later than 2.28 pm; even though I am a bear of little brain, I can see that that gives us 40 minutes, with seven Members standing. I shall not impose a time limit, because this is a debate about co-operatives. This is a test for all seven Members to share the time equally between themselves—otherwise, the last Member will not get to speak. I am putting the clock on to give you a guideline. Please make sure that everybody gets in. At the end, Stephen Doughty will have the chance for a two-minute wind-up.

1.49 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): You are a rock of stability on this turbulent day, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to see that my hon. Friend the Minister is still in his post; I hope he is still there later.

“Society is co-operation; it is community in action”.

That is a pithy line from my favourite economist, and one of the most free-market writers. It not only encapsulates the essence of this debate but gives a key insight into the market economy. In a market economy, people should co-operate with one another to serve each other’s needs. It should not be a selfish process, even when it is competitive. It should be a process of service to other people. That plays into the recent speech by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. She has articulated clearly a sentiment that has come out of the EU referendum: the global economy is not working for ordinary, normal working people. Co-operatives can play a crucial role in reforming the institutions of the market economy, so that it works better for those people.

[Mr Steve Baker]

Our great challenge is to remake the institutions of a market economy, not to abolish them, whatever some may say. The only way to co-ordinate our economy and society is through the price system, which is why co-operatives are so important. The former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr Cameron), promised us a co-operatives Bill some years ago. Indeed, the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act became law in 2014. I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will not mind my saying that unfortunately it was something of a disappointment, because it was only a consolidation Bill, so as it passed through Parliament it was not possible to consider, debate or amend it. We could have perhaps innovated on co-operatives.

I refer the Government to “The Co-operative Advantage”, a book edited by Ed Mayo of Co-operatives UK. It lists the areas in which co-operatives are being applied, to great social benefit: agriculture, community food, renewable energy, retail, insurance, banking, creative industries, sport, tourism, education, social care, health, housing, criminal justice and transport. There is huge scope in our lives and society to advance co-operatives, to general benefit. Indeed, one of the most inspiring people I met in the previous Parliament was a young woman working as a careworker for an employee-owned co-operative. She spoke about issues of employee engagement, capital, administration and accounting as vibrantly as a venture capitalist might. She was fully engaged in what she was doing. More than that, the users of her service, as participants in the ownership of the service they used, were also fully engaged.

In deference to the Opposition Members who want to speak, I shall curtail my remarks and not talk about the particular advantages of employee ownership. This Parliament has almost four years left to run. Knowing that the Prime Minister intends to adjust the institutions of the market economy to make it work better for normal working people, I very much hope that we can do a little better than a consolidation Bill in this Parliament.

1.52 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I declare an interest as a proud member of the Co-operative party, the sister party to the Labour party. I am one of the 25 Labour and Co-operative MPs.

I am proud to be taking part in this timely debate on the contribution of co-operatives to our economy. For me, a co-op is about more than a collection of shops and companies and enterprises, brilliant though they are. For me, co-operation is a sign that there is a better world possible than the one delivered by pure free market and small-state ideology, and a better way to deliver social justice than overarching Government and state control.

Co-operation is about three things. First, it is about the best instincts of decent people: the desire to work together, play together and get along with one another. It is about the human instinct to band together, co-operate with one another and offer selfless, mutual support—proof that we achieve more together than we do alone.

Secondly, co-operation is an international creed. The co-operative movement is a truly international movement, because the values of decency apply across the continents, no matter which country one comes from.

Thirdly, the co-op has a celebrated history, but it is really all about the future. We know the story of the Rochdale pioneers who, all those years ago, started the first co-operative, but when it comes to the challenges of tomorrow—tackling global poverty, helping the poorest nations to build their economies and meeting the challenge of climate change—it is the co-operative ideal that best equips us to succeed.

When I look at a co-op, I see a glimpse of the future and get a sense of what might be. In so many ways, the co-operative movement prefigures the kind of society that I want to see: democratic, equal, fair, just, accessible to all and owned by everyone. That is especially true in the current economic climate. The economic impact of Brexit is just starting to be felt and there are very uncertain times ahead. There are big changes coming down the line, and there is fear—certainly in my constituency—that employers might move to Dublin, Frankfurt or Madrid. To survive Brexit, we will need new trading arrangements, access to new markets and new firms to fill the gaps. That is where the co-op and mutual sector, with its emphasis on fair trade and trade justice, can step in.

We wait to see what a Government led by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) will bring. I hope she will maintain all the workers’ rights that are currently guaranteed by the EU. Again, the co-operative and mutual ideal can be made to work for workers who are self-employed or in small firms. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), freelancers in particular can form co-operatives to protect themselves. An exciting and important example is how the Musicians Union has worked with and supported 50 music teachers in Cardiff. I hope we will see more such cases.

Co-ops can provide greater stability and support in a post-Brexit world of insecurity and risk. It is a real shame, and a missed opportunity, that both the coalition Government and, more recently, the Tory Government have paid so little attention to co-ops. We have come a long way since the days of the Conservative Co-operative Movement—one of the more audacious pieces of repositioning by the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr Cameron). The Conservative-led coalition was no friend to the co-op movement. Between 2010 and 2015, Ministers withdrew support for solar renewable energy co-operatives, forcing many to close down; took funding away from the co-operative schools project, which was making a real difference for many schools throughout the country; and shelved plans for more co-operative Sure Start centres and housing trusts. I am a passionate believer in education about alternative models of ownership. In too many schools throughout the country, from primary right through to secondary, young people are not learning about the co-operative and mutual alternative.

What about the current Government? It will be interesting to hear what the Minister has to say, but their record could be better. I welcome the new Prime Minister’s announcement that she intends to put employee representatives on company boards—a policy advocated by the Co-operative party. I sincerely hope that a workable

scheme is brought forward that we can all get behind. I wonder what the new Prime Minister and the Minister will make of the other policies that we co-operators have been championing. They include having a proper scheme whereby all businesses with more than 50 employees are obliged to set up a profit-sharing scheme with their staff, with a minimum profit share pot set aside based on a calculation of annual profits. We know from the Office for National Statistics that approximately 36,000 companies would be in that bracket, affecting 12.9 million people. That would make a massive difference.

We co-operators want to introduce a duty to involve, with employees given a formal role in making decisions about how a company is run through works councils. The Co-operative party is calling for all publicly listed companies to have a duty to involve their employees. We want tax incentives for employee ownership. As it stands, the Government spend £615 million every year on tax incentives for employee ownership, but that is poorly targeted towards individual shareholdings and the remuneration of senior executives. That could be refashioned to ensure that all employees benefit.

We also want tax incentives for community energy. What could be better or more important than allowing communities to create energy and own it themselves? That would not only reduce our reliance on carbon sources and do more to meet our renewables target, but ensure that all the people in a community could own their own energy. Over the past two years, the Government have radically changed the regulatory environment for community renewable energy schemes and withdrawn tax incentives that encouraged community investment in those schemes. I sincerely hope that they will revisit that decision.

Tax incentives should also be used to ensure that sports clubs that meet stringent criteria for fan involvement and engagement can secure special tax status. If we reflect on the recent Euro 2016 championships, it is notable that many of the star players play for co-operative clubs such as FC Barcelona, Real Madrid and Bayern Munich. Indeed, in Germany, 33 out of 36 clubs in the Bundesliga are co-ops. As the new Prime Minister formulates her plans for Britain post-Brexit, I hope that she will look to the co-op and mutual model for ideas.

I am grateful to the House of Commons Library for putting together a really extensive list of all the different co-ops in my local area, including the Lodge Lane and District Credit Union in my own constituency, which I am proud to be a member of. However, the list did not include a new co-op, a café that is going to be situated on a road that goes through my constituency. I wish that co-op every success.

Co-ops and mutuals are about the future, not the past. I am proud to call myself a co-operator, and I will continue to campaign to ensure that we see more co-operatives and mutuals flourishing. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the debate.

2 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I note that, as yet, you have not received your phone call to go to No. 10. Good luck with that.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate and on his excellent speech. I have always been a supporter

of different ownership models within the economic sector, including co-operatives. Co-operatives should be encouraged. Furthermore, a clear indication of the co-operative model is when co-operatives work with the trade union movement. That should not come as any surprise to us, because the key goals of the trade union movement and the co-operative movement are very similar. They have mutual aims and deal with shared challenges in areas such as employment, innovation, education, lifelong learning for working people, social inclusion, equality and looking after our environment.

It comes as no surprise to me to learn that workers in co-operatives have good working conditions and that co-operatives act in the interests of workers' experience and ensure that workers have strong labour rights. There is dialogue with workers, who are kept involved; co-operatives ensure that workers participate in decision making. As I have said, co-ops and unions share similar historic roots and common values and aims, including the social and economic wellbeing of the community and the promotion of economic sustainability and social innovation.

Of course, that work includes democratising the economy and making sure that there is a fair distribution of resources, because the economy cannot just be left to multinational companies, which do not often follow the aims of the co-operative movement.

There is high trade union membership in the co-operative movement. Therefore, workers are paid more in the co-operative economy than they are elsewhere; they have better contracts, such as open-ended employment contracts; and there is a low level of conflict between those working in the co-operative sector and those in management.

Job creation and protection is a key driver of joint work between the trade union movement and co-operatives. There is participation in co-operatives even in the building sector. I welcomed the dialogue in 2012 between Co-operatives UK and the TUC, which have a common agenda, to develop a common statement of best practice so that workers' co-operatives can emerge from the public sector to deliver services across the UK. As I mentioned in my intervention on the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, work has also been done in Wales to tackle the issues affecting the Welsh labour market. Such work has to be encouraged, because we have middle-aged unemployment on the increase, we have to deal with those who have dropped out of school without qualifications, and of course we need to continue the work increase youth employment.

The Scottish National party manifesto in 2016 said:

"We will encourage and support third sector organisations, social enterprises, and credit unions to enter the market place to fill gaps in the provision of services or to offer alternatives to current providers that are not offering services people can access easily or affordably. This includes energy, banking, payday loans, debt management, and funeral planning."

The most sensible decision that I have ever made about my finances was when I was an employee of Glasgow City Council and I joined the Glasgow Credit Union, the largest credit union in the UK. It was probably the best financial decision I have ever made, because membership of a credit union encourages sensible borrowing as well as saving. I would like the credit union movement to flourish over the next few years, because too many areas in our country are falling into bad debt and having to deal with the associated issues.

[Chris Stephens]

Research has shown that money worries and debt problems can lead to ill health, absence from work and low productivity. So just as I received an education when I was a young person entering the workplace and joining a trade union, we need to educate young people about money and make it easier for adults to save and borrow via credit unions. If we continue to promote credit unions, it will save public funds in the long term.

It also comes as no surprise to me that the co-operative model is a success story in these difficult times, when we see austerity across the EU. As someone who lives in Scotland—I assure you, Mr Hollobone, that Scotland will remain in the EU—I know that co-operatives add 5% to the GDP of every single EU nation, and so they are hugely important for economic and social development. I will support the motion this afternoon.

2.6 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you as Chair this afternoon, Mr Hollobone.

It is a great honour and privilege to give my maiden speech as a Labour and Co-operative MP; I am No. 25. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate. I am proud of what the co-operative movement has achieved in the UK, Wales and Neath.

The history of co-operatives in Wales is a rich one. Indeed, the father of the co-operative movement, Mr Robert Owen, was Welsh, as was William Hazell, a little-known but important figure to emerge from the south Wales coalfield. Typically for a man living in the valleys at that time, Hazell was a miner and endured much hardship. A modest and humble existence belies his great achievements, and it is in his deeds of promoting collective wellbeing and solidarity that we must seek inspiration for a modern world riven with individualism and self-interest. He may not have been born in Wales but his values are all Welsh—camaraderie, learning and success. I will take this opportunity to applaud my good friend Alun Burge on his excellent biography of William Hazell.

The need for co-operatives has never been greater than in the 21st century. Only eight years ago, we witnessed the deepest recession since the great depression and a banking crisis that almost brought an end to the world as we know it. Capitalism has lived through a 20-year victory crisis, during which the accepted model of societal organisation has continued to leave behind 20% of the population. Only three weeks ago, the UK voted to leave the European Union, which has been criticised for its contribution to globalisation but which actually offers a viable route to a united, socially just Europe, with workers' rights, structural funding and the values of internationalism.

As we move through the early part of the new millennium, it is clear that business as usual simply will not do. Co-operation, consensus and community are notions that are the founding principles not only of co-operatives but of the Labour party, and it is by adhering to these shared values that figures from across the Labour and Co-operative movement have led the development of organisations that have anchored communities during difficult times and helped to create a buffer against global economic shifts.

I only have to look at my constituency of Neath for examples of such activism. If you will allow me to indulge myself for a moment, Mr Hollobone, I would like to take you on a tour of co-operatives in Neath—past, present and future. I will resist the temptation to furnish you with the details of the many employee-owned businesses that have formed in Neath during the last century, and instead share with you the stories of a few key organisations that have emerged since the dawn of deindustrialisation and that have provided us with jobs and services in places where they scarcely exist.

Dove Workshop and Glynneath Training Centre are two such organisations, operating in the more remote villages towards the north of my constituency. Those groups were established as community co-operatives to provide education and opportunities in places where those things would not otherwise happen. They run courses from unaccredited entry-level classes to part-time degrees, provide nursery places, operate cafes and develop community activities. Crucially, they employ more than 60 people and together turn over £1 million a year. That is a significant contribution to the local economy, and evidence tells us that that money and those jobs stay local.

Another example of the sophisticated simplicity of the concept is the humble food co-operative. We are well-versed in the best-known incarnation, and indeed I am sure many of us do our shopping there, but let us remember the most basic version, where groups of people get together for the benefit of collective purchasing or growing accessible and affordable fresh fruit and vegetables. I commend those who continue to operate across Neath.

Most recently, we have seen the rise of Neath Port Talbot credit union, a member-owned bank that provides affordable loans and savings accounts and delivers financial inclusion in practical terms. I am a member. We all know the benefits of credit unions, but we must not underestimate their ability to help to lift people out of real poverty. Co-operatives in Neath, Wales and further afield are demonstrating the stakeholder economy in action. While I have described organisations that have fought against hardship, co-operatives are not merely about progress in the face of adversity; they are a proactive substitute to the usual model of business, which is unpredictable and exploitative.

It is important to point out that William Hazell believed co-operation to be the alternative to capitalism. What we see in examples such as Tower Colliery, Welsh Water and John Lewis are businesses that work differently and put the customer, worker or stakeholder before any bottom line. Tower was bought out by workers and management through the sheer will of combined effort. They made a success of a mine in a community that had so heavily relied on it and from which the private sector had retreated. Welsh Water is a members co-operative set up by people driven by their passion to provide the people of Wales with the best possible services and not compromised by the need to maximise a profit on an essential utility. John Lewis is the company whose workers are all partners, where the chief executive's pay is linked to that of the cleaners and whose employees share equally in any surplus, regardless of their position.

Co-operatives make a huge contribution to the economy, both financially and socially, and have done so for many years. Society is made up of stakeholders and partners,

not shareholders and owners, and co-operatives offer an opportunity to build an economy on the values of collectivism, democracy and fairness.

2.12 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, am extremely proud to be a Labour and a Co-operative MP. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for bringing this debate.

It is always a pleasure to talk about co-operative values and principles and the contribution that co-operatives make to our economy. It is not just a dynamic that we see today. The impact historically over a huge amount of time, going all the way back to the Rochdale pioneers, shows that co-operative principles were as relevant then as they are today. Those principles, which we see around the world, are voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, economic participation of members, autonomy, independence, education and training, co-operation and concern for community. Those principles all have a great deal to offer for the economic challenges that we face today. Never have the values of self-help, responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity been more important.

With those values in mind, it is incredible to reflect that we see more than 7,000 co-operatives in this country. Co-operatives make a huge contribution of £34 billion to the British economy and are a vital part of the economic picture. A quarter of the UK population are members of co-operatives, and the importance of those values should not be underestimated.

Those values are particularly important today because of the climate and the challenges we face with the global economy. Since the crash in 2008, we have seen a lack of trust in our financial institutions, growing insecurity and instability in globalisation, a wealth of unethical practices and a casino capitalism that brought the crash that has had such devastating consequences. The pressures of the global economy have brought huge opportunities as well as that great disruption. As a result and as the Brexit vote showed, particularly in my constituency, many people feel insecure and left behind by the benefits of globalisation.

As we look forward, the technology-driven change that is reforming the world we live in is opening up exciting possibilities to improve the way we live and work, creating new industries and new kinds of work, and bringing down social barriers. However, it also poses real challenges, particularly in this transition period as the status quo in many areas of our society and economy is swept away. The job for life is now rarer, replaced with less secure work and more self-employment. The next generation of automation could see more jobs replaced by robots. For policy makers, that means grasping new means to manage the resulting economic and social change. For those on the centre left of politics, particularly those of us who are co-operators, the task is even greater, as our commitment to working for an equal and just world faces new frontiers. The need for progressive and co-operative policies—that ensure the gains from the changes of the technology revolution are shared, that people are empowered and that those at threat of losing out are protected—is greater now than ever before.

It is often said that globalisation diminishes the power of the state and renders the traditional levers available to Governments less effective. For the political right, that conforms with their deeply held belief that markets work best without state intervention. As a co-operator, my view is that a co-operative state can play an important role in supporting and encouraging better co-operation, more self-help, more mutual support and fairer regulation.

Co-operative and mutual ideals can help to tackle the growing inequality in the global economy and some of the global insecurities that are seeing communities left behind. As co-operators, we would like to see freelancers coming together to form co-operatives for shared services. Colleagues have given examples of music teachers coming together. We know of examples of co-operators in social care locally and in our co-operative councils movement. There is real flexibility and an opportunity for people to come together to share their services. Instead of being self-employed, with all the flexibility and insecurity that that involves, they have an opportunity to work together and support each other.

We would therefore like to see the Government recognise this growing self-employed workforce in an insecure world and develop organising strategies for self-employed workers, bringing together trade unions and the co-operative sector to find solutions. The development of organising strategies should involve consideration of key priorities for action, including the primary sectors, such as the creative industries, care services and the green economy. In primary services, that includes: credit unions for freelancers, the provision of micro-insurance and related services such as debt collection, tax accounting and legal advice, the scope for platform co-operatives and sources of capital for co-operative business development. Those are vital steps that the Government could support to create a better environment for local co-operatives to thrive.

We would also like to see more profit-sharing proposals. The Co-operative party calls on the Government to legislate to ensure that all businesses with more than 50 employees can set up a profit-sharing scheme with their staff, with a minimum profit share pot set aside based on a calculation of annual profits and financial position. We would like to see duty to involve, in which the European stakeholder approach to business would be embraced. Through duty to involve, employees are given a formal role in making decisions about how a company is run, with works councils operating in workplaces. We welcome the commitment and perhaps belated conversion of the former Home Secretary, now Prime Minister, to co-operative values and principles.

We would like to see employees on company boards. The Co-operative party is calling for company law to be modified to ensure that representation is given to employees and other identified stakeholders in all publicly listed companies. We would like to see tax incentives for employee ownership. As it stands, the Government spend £615 million a year on tax incentives for employee ownership, but it is poorly targeted towards individual shareholdings and the remuneration of senior executives. We would like to see tax relief offered to all-employee share ownership schemes, which require employees to purchase and hold shares for a number of years to benefit. That would save the Government £285 million a year. We are calling for £50 million a year to be invested in giving permanent employee benefit trusts

[Anna Turley]

the same tax treatment as other schemes, with the other £235 million targeted at schemes that give employees a collective, democratic voice.

We would also like to see tax incentives for community energy and supporter-owned sports clubs and the statutory right to request employee ownership. Employee buy-outs can often be an attractive route for business succession, because they transfer ownership to people with a genuine interest in an enterprise's long-term success and can increase the likelihood of the enterprise continuing to provide trade and jobs locally.

Those are some of the proposals we would like to see. It is clearer than ever that the principles that we have seen over the last 100 years remain as relevant and vital today, as we face the future challenges of technology and an insecure globalised world, as they were at the time of those great pioneers back in 1844.

2.20 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and I join my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) and other hon. Members in praising my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this Back-Bench debate. He and my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), for Neath (Christina Rees) and for Redcar ranged strategically in their contributions across the co-op sector. I do not intend to do that, but hope to pick out one or two particular issues to press the Minister on.

I welcome the contribution of the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker). I am not sure I would have travelled the same path to get to the enthusiasm for co-operatives and mutuals that he described, but I recognise that his commitment to the sector is genuine. I will not say any more—I do not want to damage his prospects for advancement today—but it is good to have a Conservative speaking up for co-operatives as well. Normally, it is left to Labour Members, so it is a welcome change.

One area in which the hon. Gentleman and I have co-operated is advocating for co-operative change to the way that some of our major public service institutions are currently governed. I wonder if I might encourage the Minister and shadow Minister to take an open-minded view of the proposals to turn Channel 4 and the BBC into mutuals. What do I mean by that? I mean allowing those who watch Channel 4 and those who pay the BBC licence fee to become members and therefore to have a vote on who should sit on the board of those bodies—putting the public back into two critical public services.

I also hope that, in time, we will see the new Mayor of London seek to do the same with Transport for London, giving commuters the chance to vote on who should sit on its board alongside the Mayor. In that very direct way, people who depend on these vital public services will have more influence over their direction and future strategy.

Mr Baker: May I just assert my complete support for the idea of mutualising both Channel 4 and the BBC? Channel 4 would be an enormous mutualisation, but a much smaller one than the BBC. I would encourage the

Government to look very seriously at recapitalising ordinary people by giving them the opportunity to take a real ownership stake in those very important public institutions.

Mr Thomas: Having ruined my own career, and probably his too, by praising the hon. Gentleman, let me move on to other areas that we have not discussed prior to the debate.

One of the things that many co-operative businesses active in their communities point out is the way that the internet is changing the nature of retailing. By definition, many internet retailers do not have large property footprints in particular communities and therefore pay substantially less in property tax than those who are offering a direct service on high streets in communities up and down the land. I support the call of many in the co-op retail movement for a review of the business rates they have to pay by comparison to the taxes that online businesses such as Amazon have to pay at the moment, which are substantially less.

In my earlier intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, I raised the potential contribution of the military credit union. I hope Ministers in the new Government will go further than just support for a military credit union and will recognise the huge benefits of trying to extend credit union membership. In particular, I would like to see a right to save, so that anybody who wants money deducted at payroll and sent to their credit union should be allowed to make that request and have that implemented without question. At the moment, it is at the discretion of the employer. Everybody knows that this is a service that can be offered incredibly cheaply by employers, but it is a matter of will. The very best employers do it, but sadly too many do not. Perhaps putting a right to save on the statute book could help to boost membership of credit unions.

I have always very much supported the idea of a British version of the Community Reinvestment Act, which would place a requirement on major banks to account for the services that they provide to the communities from which they take deposits. When those major banks leave those communities and shut branches, there should be an obligation on them to continue to work there, albeit perhaps through credit unions or other community banks operating there. That legislation works extremely well in the United States and is long overdue here in the UK.

I add my voice to those who have called for a profit-sharing requirement on big companies. There is merit in the French idea that 5% of profits should be shared among those employees who have helped to create that profit in the first place. That would seem to be one further way in which we could create an economy that works for all. I commend my hon. Friends and other hon. Members who have participated in this important debate.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the first of the Front-Bench speeches. The recommended guidelines are 10 minutes for the SNP and for the Opposition, and if the Minister could end his remarks at 2.57 pm, we can then allow the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) to wind up the debate.

2.27 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mr Hollobone. I will do my best not to take such an extensive amount of time. I am sure we would all agree that the last few days have felt like something of a marathon, so I will keep my remarks brief.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). We have crossed proverbial swords in this Chamber recently, but I think today's debate will be more conciliatory than previous ones. There have been many important and significant contributions today and I look forward to hearing the answers from the Minister on issues such as the mutualisation of Channel 4 and a public stake in Transport for London. There are many interesting ideas. I hope that we can work across the House on areas of mutual interest and agreement.

I am very happy to be participating today. My family have a great tradition in the co-operative movement. Both my grandmother and my great-grandmother travelled with the co-operative and I still remember some of the artefacts that my grandmother brought back from Russia in the 1920s.

It is particularly important to discuss and focus our attention on the role and benefit of co-operatives in our society at the end of the Co-operatives fortnight because of the Brexit vote and in the light of the Finance Bill. In this time of economic uncertainty, we would do well to highlight the contribution of co-operative, employee-owned businesses in our economy. Those employee-owned businesses contribute an estimated £34 billion a year to the British economy and there are nearly 7,000 independent co-operatives across the UK. I will not take hon. Members on a full tour of my constituency, but I would like to mention a couple: West Lothian Credit Union, of which I am a member, Pentland Garden Services, based in Kirknewton, and Eliburn Tenant Management Co-operative, all of which have an employee-owned structure and make a great contribution to the local and Scottish economy.

Two of the largest co-ops in the UK are the Co-op and John Lewis, of course. All co-operative retailers, including those two, account for £24.3 billion of the sector's turnover. With the two strongest areas in the co-operative sector being retail and agriculture, Arla Foods and United Oilseeds contribute £5.8 billion. We cannot ignore their contribution to the economy. Nor can we ignore the co-operative sector's contribution to the job sector. When John Spedan Lewis, the son of the founder John Lewis, handed the business over to his employees in 1928, he was driven by the desire to improve the working lives of his employees, shaking up the old ways of doing business. Today, the John Lewis Partnership is the largest employee-owned business in the UK. Its 91,500 staff members are partners in the business, and together they own 46 John Lewis shops and 349 Waitrose supermarkets across the United Kingdom, manage their respective websites and run a production unit and farm. That is a significant contribution to the United Kingdom.

John Spedan Lewis was ahead of his time. Studies now show that staff members who are also owners of their businesses are more motivated, engaged and productive. They also experience higher levels of wellbeing. In the John Lewis Partnership, absenteeism is at 3.4%, which is less than half the retail sector's average.

Given the increasing demand placed on workers today and the impact that 24-hour access to work through phones and emails can have on employees' mental health—I am sure we and our staff are all well aware of that—putting more ownership in the hands of employees is a model with a lot of merit. The numbers speak for themselves. The White Rose Centre for Employee Ownership, based at the universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York, found that 70% of companies that convert to an employee-owned model report an increased quality of goods and services, 57% report better productivity and 55% report better financial performance.

The co-operative sector currently employs 222,000 workers across the United Kingdom, and co-operatives affect even more of the population than they employ. There are 17.5 million members of co-operatives across the UK—about a quarter of the total population.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said, the co-operative sector has proven resilient during this period of austerity. Figures from the Cass Business School show that, in the recessionary period of 2008-09, job growth dropped 2.7% but rose to 12.9% in employee-owned firms. Their importance has endured among uncertain economic conditions. Given the current economic conditions and the recent Brexit vote, their importance to the economy is even greater. There is evidence that employee-owned businesses are more resilient and are able to create jobs at a faster rate than their non-employee-owned counterparts during periods of economic instability.

Successive Governments have consistently supported employee ownership. I pay tribute to the coalition Government, which in 2014 introduced a series of tax changes to level the playing field for employee-owned businesses. As a result, shares of profits in indirectly owned and employee-owned businesses are now income tax-free up to the value of £3,600. Business owners can also now benefit from capital gains release when they transfer control of their company to their employees.

However, we must ensure that that legislative support continues. Co-operatives are presently expressing legitimate concerns about details in the 2016 Finance Bill, specifically—I have spoken to a number of businesses that have this concern—that the calculation of the apprenticeship levy will leave employee-owned businesses at a disadvantage compared with conventionally owned businesses. Even worse, there is a real fear that that action could disincentivise the creation of employee-owned businesses in the future. I would be grateful if the Minister commented on that. There has been some speculation about the apprenticeship levy. Given the change in Government, he probably will not be able to clarify that, but any insight he can give will be of great help. A number of businesses, not all of them employee-owned co-operatives, have approached me recently with concerns about the apprenticeship levy. The recent example of BHS and the devastating impact that that has had on its workers shows how important co-operatives and employee-owned businesses are to our economy.

The numbers I have cited demonstrate how important co-operatives are to the economy and the job sector. I do not want their contribution to be diminished in any way by the apprenticeship levy. The present wording of the Finance Bill dictates that the apprenticeship levy does not include dividends to shareholders, but does include bonus payments to employee owners. That will

[*Hannah Bardell*]

affect about 70 employee-owned businesses across the UK, based on the criteria of companies with a payroll bill of £3 million and over.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government have pledged to encourage more challengers to mainstream service providers and to give consumers more options when choosing a loan or savings. In 2013, Alyn Smith MEP, who received a standing ovation in the European Parliament for his speech following the Brexit vote, said:

“Scotland has a long heritage in the cooperative movement.”

He noted that Scotland was home to the first co-operative—the Fenwick Weavers, in Ayrshire. It is a tradition that brings us great pride. Before I finish, I also want to mention the Edinburgh Bicycle Co-operative, which has a proud heritage in Scotland.

The message from both co-operatives and the statistics gathered by academics is clear: that alternative ownership structure makes an important and sustained contribution to the UK economy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Before the hon. Lady finishes, will she give way?

Hannah Bardell: I would be delighted to.

Jim Shannon: I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on bringing this debate to the House. It is not anti-business to suggest that big business needs to change, and co-operatives are one way of doing that. I would like to make a plea for farming co-operatives, if that has not already been done. We have done that in my constituency. A single farmer by himself cannot make a change, but collectively, with a number of other farmers, they can secure contracts, move forward and employ more people. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is an example of how things can improve? Co-operatives can move things forward and make things happen that big businesses cannot. Sometimes a change is good.

Hannah Bardell: I could not agree more. I am always interested to hear what the hon. Gentleman has to say. He is such a regular contributor here and in the main Chamber. The point he makes about being small and agile, and being able to respond and do things in a different way, can be applied to co-operatives—it can also be applied to small nations. I will leave that with the House.

2.36 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to serve opposite the Minister in our first debate together. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for bringing this debate to the House and for his eloquent contribution. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions and their pertinent questions, which I hope the Minister will address in his response.

As a Co-operative party Member and the MP for Salford and Eccles, I am proud that the seeds of this radical movement began in my city, before the Rochdale pioneers set up shop. However, I will concentrate not on history, important though it is, but on our co-operative sector's contribution to the economy.

The vote to leave the EU was a stark confirmation that too many people in our country have been excluded from the fruits of economic growth for too long. Britain's relationships with the rest of the world are now open for renegotiation, but so is our previous economic model, which was not working in the interests of many communities up and down the country. Labour's red lines on the economy, which the shadow Chancellor, my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), set out last week, made it clear that we will not allow any future renegotiation to damage the interests of people here. Equally, we should no longer think it is acceptable for the wealth of our society to pile up in the hands of just a few people or in just one corner of our country. We need an economic model that can deliver shared prosperity across the whole country. Business as usual is not an option any more.

Labour Members are clear that co-operatives must be a critical part of rebuilding a new, fairer and more prosperous economy. As we have heard today, the opportunity for co-operatives is huge. Our co-operative sector is currently worth £37 billion. That is substantial, but far smaller than that of similar economies such as Germany and the US. Our co-operative sector is just 20% the size of Germany's, but it has grown by 15% since 2010—faster than the rest of the economy—and 15 million people now own a share in a co-operative, up 16% since 2010.

Growth is also occurring across different sectors. Co-operatives UK reports that large numbers of tech co-ops are now being established. The logic of supporting collaborative tech development with a collaborative business model is clear. Platform co-ops, which are online tools that provide collaborative working spaces, are spreading rapidly, especially connected to the work that is carried out in my constituency. Although it is still in its infancy, the co-operative internet is becoming a reality.

Community ownership of energy has boomed in the past five years. The number of community share offers per year increased fivefold between 2010 and 2015, and £60.8 million was invested last year alone. The expansion has been particularly striking in the renewables sector. One study by Cardiff University found that each megawatt of community-owned, small-scale hydrogenation created 10 full-time equivalent jobs. For rural communities with access to natural resources but isolated from other economic activity, that represents a huge boost.

Given the rise of precarious employment and the so-called gig economy, co-operatives have a clear role to play, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth eloquently illustrated. Earlier this year, Co-operatives UK published an excellent paper making that case convincingly. By sharing the costs of necessary administration, co-operatives set up to support the self-employed and micro-businesses can play a vital role in reducing the risks of self-employment. For example, as we have heard, the Musicians Union organising music teachers into co-operatives, rather than letting them sink or swim as individual freelancers, is a fantastic idea.

On the economic case for co-operatives, the vote to leave has clearly brought some of the UK's economic difficulties into stark, full view. The vote was about more than just the impact of six years of needless austerity. Too many places felt that they had been left to languish in economic and industrial decline, starved of resources and investment. Britain has worse regional

inequality than any other EU member, and our economy has become far too dependent on poorly paid, insecure work. In fact, the stagnation in productivity since 2007 is clear macroeconomic evidence of a failing national economic model.

Britain's output per hour now lags far behind comparable economies in the G7. Every hour worked in the UK produces about a third less, on average, than the typical hour worked in Germany, the US or France. The productivity gap, frankly, is now the worst it has been for a generation. That matters, because productivity growth is the engine of economic growth in a developed economy; without it, economic growth is harder to come by. A major part of the productivity problem is that investment in the UK is simply too low, and it has been for a long time. Boosting investment by both Government and business will be essential. Changing business models, however, can also boost productivity, and that is where co-operatives can play an important role.

Worker-owned companies have a clear productivity advantage over conventional businesses. Recent research by the Institute for Public Policy Research has highlighted the potential importance of co-operative business models in driving productivity in otherwise low-paid parts of the economy, such as retail. If we want a secure economy, we need businesses that can grow and succeed. Evidence also suggests that co-operatives are more resilient than conventional businesses. Twice as many co-operatives than other businesses survive the crucial first five years.

I hope the Minister is listening, because we should be more ambitious about what can be achieved through policy. We want to see resilient, high-productivity businesses in an economy that is fairer for everyone. My hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor has previously expressed his ambition to at least double the size of the co-operative economy, which would be a £40 billion boost to the economy, but too much existing Government policy works against that. Cuts to renewable energy, and community generation in particular, make little economic sense. The damage done to genuine community-owned energy schemes through the withdrawals of incentives to investment, such as the seed enterprise investment scheme, has been significant.

The consolidation Act—the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014—was welcome recognition of the importance of the sector, but it did not go far enough in actively promoting co-operative ownership. Opposition Members would like to see greater support for co-operative forms of financing in particular, and we would welcome the Minister commenting on that in his response. Our financial system is simply not delivering as it should be for small businesses. By pooling resources and risks for small business borrowing, mutual guarantee societies could help ambitious small and medium-sized enterprises access the funding they need. Helpful legislation to assist with the formation of such societies would be along the lines of enabling the mobilisation of funds for small businesses through them clubbing together to raise credit.

Another major challenge that has been touched on today is business succession. Large numbers of small business owners are coming up to retirement over the next few years. Family businesses in particular face what the press has described as a succession crisis. Preston City Council, in Lancashire, inspired by the

example of Cleveland, Ohio, developed an extensive programme of work to support its growing co-operative economy. It is actively seeking opportunities to create local co-operatives as part of local business succession, working with the local chamber of commerce to inform local businesses. I point the Minister in the direction of that council if he is looking for ideas.

Labour's firm belief is that the co-operative sector in general should, and will, continue to make a critical contribution to Britain's future economic success. We face a period of uncertainty, and the renegotiation of the UK's relationship with the world is one part of that, but so is the widely admitted failure of the previous six years of austerity policy. A future economic direction has not been set, so the opportunity is there to make a clear break with the failures of the past. Co-operatives, by helping spread the wealth and providing better incentives for investment in capital and in the skills we need for the future, will be an essential part of our new economic direction. What is needed now from the Government is a clear commitment to make that happen. I would appreciate it if the Minister outlined the Government's future policy direction and tell us his thoughts on my comments and those of other hon. Members.

2.45 pm

The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Rob Wilson): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I hope you will indulge me today, because I feel slightly nervous, as I always do on the first morning of a test match.

I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate. I also compliment him on his excellent timing for it, following as it does the International Day of Co-operatives only a couple of weeks ago.

I congratulate my new shadow, the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), and I wish her the best in her new job. It is a bit disconcerting to have a new shadow here, but with an old shadow, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas), sitting just behind her.

We have heard some important things today. Certainly, everyone has commented on the huge value we all see in co-operatives in this country. We in the Government share that enthusiasm, because we believe that a balanced economy is the best way to create a healthy economy. That involves a number of different aspects, from rebalancing our economy across the various regions of the UK, to bringing in greater balance in terms of gender diversity in our industries, all of which means encouraging and supporting a diverse range of business models as well.

Co-operative enterprises have a proud history in this country, as a number of hon. Members have commented. Back in the 1760s, weavers in Fenwick were already forming a society to sell cheaper oatmeal and to help their members with savings and loans. Hon. Members might recall the famous work of the great Welsh reformer, Robert Owen, and the Rochdale principles agreed by pioneering artisans in 1844, which paved the way for the co-operatives that exist throughout the world today.

We want to uphold the co-operatives tradition and ingrain it ever deeper in this country. We have nearly 7,000 independent co-operatives across sectors and across the UK—my own constituency has the True Food

[Mr Rob Wilson]

Co-op, a not-for-profit community shop that has been selling local food at affordable prices since 2004. I hope you do not mind the constituency plug, Mr Hollobone, in particular today.

I am pleased that the model is increasing further in popularity, with the co-operatives sector growing by 6% a year—that is about 250 new co-operatives every year. Together, as others have said, they make a huge contribution to our economy, worth more than £30 billion and owned by about 17.5 million of our citizens. What makes co-operatives so unique is the democracy that runs through their core: they are run by their members, for their members. From farming co-operatives to football club co-operatives, they are all about their members working together to shape their own service, and their own success.

I noted the interest of the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth in the armed forces credit unions. To remind him, the Government gave £0.5 million from LIBOR funds to establish payroll deductions to allow armed forces personnel to access credit union savings and loans. I understand the project is up and running well, with members joining in large numbers. In due course, it will also serve people in receipt of an armed forces pension. I hope that deals with his concerns.

It is the fact that the co-operative model gives members a stake in their futures that makes it so powerful. A study by the industry trade body Co-operatives UK found that that stake gives members of co-operatives much more motivation and boosts the UK's productivity to the tune of almost £60 billion. The model is not only productive but highly resilient, as was shown by the financial success of the co-operative sector in the years following the economic downturn of 2008, when it continued to increase its average turnover.

Co-operatives are more productive and more resilient, but they also give their members more control over what matters to them. It is not distant shareholders who have a say; the customers, residents, suppliers or fans that own those businesses set their direction and priorities. Therefore, co-operatives often have a real focus on the social and environmental benefits that those owners want to see. That is why they should undoubtedly be seen as a force for enormous good, not just here in the UK but across the world.

I was asked about learning from overseas. Officials have met the leaders of the co-operative movement in the US to learn about how they have achieved a thriving co-op sector. The Government's mission-led businesses review, which I commissioned at the turn of the year and co-ops are considered part of, will draw on best practice from around the world.

[Ms KAREN BUCK *in the Chair*]

Hannah Bardell: The Minister is making some interesting and important points. I hope that he will come on to the apprenticeship levy, which businesses have raised with me. I would be grateful to hear his thoughts and reflections on that and the point about not discouraging apprenticeships in the current business environment.

Mr Wilson: I will certainly come to that if I have time, but I have several questions to address, so I will write to the hon. Lady if I do not.

It is important that we create the right kind of environment to help co-operative businesses to flourish, and in 2014 we introduced several measures to do just that. My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) raised the question of further ambition for the sector. He was a bit harsh on what we did in 2014. With those measures, we started by consolidating laws to make it easier for societies to understand and apply the legislative framework and rules governing them. We also simplified the electronic registration process to help new societies get going, and more importantly, made it easier and cheaper for them to raise capital by increasing from £20,000 to £100,000 the withdrawable share capital an individual member may invest. To ensure that any business claiming to be a co-operative functions properly and lawfully, we gave the Financial Conduct Authority further powers to investigate any suspicions of impropriety.

The new Prime Minister has set out her commitment to public service mutuals and co-operatives as a means of safeguarding public services. I was interested to hear the views of the hon. Member for Harrow West. I know that many hon. Members would support the notion that he raised about Channel 4 and perhaps the BBC, but we will see in due course what the Prime Minister has to say about that. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has published its White Paper on the future of culture in the UK, and the Government will consider the future of key public bodies in light of consultation responses. That will ultimately be for the new Secretary of State at DCMS to consider, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will want to get his views heard in that consultation.

I want to say a few words about the important role that co-operatives play in the social investment market. The Government are committed to helping to develop the retail social investment market, which allows people to invest in causes that they really care about. Community shares, which enable local people to buy shares in local assets and invest in causes that they care about, are a great example of social investment models in action and make up an estimated 6% of the overall UK social investment market. We are excited to see large-scale community share-raising by organisations such as FC United of Manchester, which raised £2 million from 2,000 local people. The Government support such share offers through the social investment tax relief, the second anniversary of which we recently celebrated. Several community share offers have benefited from that relief, which has allowed local people to buy shares in Clevedon pier, Portpatrick harbour and Burley Gate community shop and post office.

We have also taken specific measures to support credit unions, which are financial co-operatives. We have around 500 credit unions in the UK, ranging from large and complex financial institutions to much smaller organisations run by volunteers for just a few hundred members. British credit unions combined have a membership of 1.6 million, more than £2.8 billion in assets and more than £1.2 billion in outstanding loans to members, and play an essential role in broadening the range of financial services on offer to customers in the UK. They aim to promote savings and provide an alternative source of finance. That is good for competition, and it is good for customer choice when it comes to the question of whom to bank with.

Mr Baker: The Minister is quite right: I was slightly harsh. He has reminded us of the Government's spectacular achievements with co-operatives and mutuals. I simply look forward to us doing even better in this Parliament.

Mr Wilson: I have addressed that point, and I am sure that the Prime Minister will be thinking carefully about what she will do in the coming few weeks. To add to the success that my hon. Friend refers to, we have taken significant steps to support the credit union sector. We are running a credit union expansion project, backed by an investment of almost £40 million. That will help to create a tool to automate loan decisions and help credit unions to decide which loans to make and which to refuse, thereby speeding up that process, and a shared IT system and banking platform will be developed for credit unions to use. Overall, the project aims to help meet the growing demand for modern banking products for people on low incomes by modernising and expanding the credit union sector. Around 7 million people have fallen into the trap of high-cost credit. Some are charged more than 6,000% in interest on short-term loans. By helping credit unions to grow, we aim to save consumers up to £1 billion in loan interest repayments by March 2019.

In short, the Government see enormous value in the co-operative sector because of the contribution it makes not just to our economy but to our communities. That is why we have taken steps to support co-operatives of all kinds and will continue to look at further ways in which we can broaden that support.

2.57 pm

Stephen Doughty: I thank all Members, including the Minister and the Front-Bench spokespeople, for a very co-operative debate. I know it is trite to say that, but we have had some excellent contributions and some significant ideas have been put forward. Whether the Minister continues in his role or someone else takes over, I certainly hope that those ideas are taken forward. According

to the wires, we have a new Department for business, energy and industry. I would like co-operatives and driving forward the co-operative agenda to be not just some adjunct on the edge of a Department but at the heart of the Government's forward strategy for business, the economy and industry. We must provide an environment that facilitates the role of co-operatives in all the sectors that we have discussed in the debate.

Co-operatives and the co-operative model have been an inspiration for many years. They are an inspiration across the world and in some quite difficult economic times. My family has even longer co-operative traditions than some Members might realise. My great-great grandfather, a Mr Wagstaff, actually worked in the co-operative bakeries in Hulme in Manchester in the mid-1800s, not long after the Rochdale pioneers. I was inspired by finding that out and also by joining a co-operative in Canada—the famous Mountain Equipment Co-op, which is one of the most successful in terms of its growth and the contribution that it makes to the Canadian economy—as a teenager.

We have talked about international examples, and it is important that we learn from the co-operative sector in other countries—particularly the United States, Canada and continental Europe. There are examples of where we could do more, particularly in financial services but also in certain other sectors. Facilitating co-operatives is about not just the legislative and regulatory environment but a cultural shift in the economy and society, and a recognition of the role that co-operatives play.

I thank all the Members who have participated in this fruitful and healthy debate, in which we have paid tribute well to co-operatives fortnight. My Co-operative party colleagues and I will continue to work hard with others across the House to pursue this agenda in the months and years to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the contribution of cooperatives to the economy.

Maternity Discrimination

3 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered maternity discrimination.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this subject for debate and to my co-sponsors of the application, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). But for long-standing constituency commitments, the latter would have been keen to take part in the debate. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to a former Member of this House, Jo Swinson, who in her role as a Minister in the previous Government commissioned the report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission that forms the backdrop to the debate.

This issue cuts to the heart of the debate about gender inequality. Discrimination against pregnant women and new mothers is a major societal failure. If we are to achieve sustained progress towards women's economic and social empowerment, achieving compliance with the law on pregnancy and maternity discrimination and extending workplace cultures that support women during their childbearing years is now urgent.

Serious people who have studied this issue in greater depth than I have believe that as a country, we are heading in the wrong direction—according to some, back towards the 1950s. I came to the issue relatively recently as friends and constituents have informally reported their experiences of discrimination as mothers and mothers-to-be. One constituent who had worked for the same firm for 11 years struggled to get any sympathetic hearing for her request to come back part time after giving birth, even though her maternity leave had been covered by two new members of staff, allegedly on a temporary basis. She was eventually told that she would have to come back full time or not at all, before finally being told that her job had disappeared.

Other cases brought to my attention include that of Woman A, who, when she returned from maternity leave, found her maternity cover presenting her with a new team structure, with her reporting to him. Another woman suffered a traumatic miscarriage at work at 12 weeks, and she was met with anger from her manager rather than empathy.

In the case of a woman on secondment, her manager tried to tell her that she was not entitled to her higher duty pay when she was on maternity leave, which understandably caused her considerable distress. In another case, a woman was about to go on maternity leave, and her manager told her that her maternity cover would be in place permanently; they would stay when she came back, so the two of them would be doing the same job. In another case, a woman's employer learned she was pregnant and gave her project portfolio to another director, effectively making her redundant.

Those are all personal examples that bring to life some of the shocking findings in the Equality and Human Rights Commission's research. The numbers it produced are stark. Its research was based on interviews with more than 3,200 mothers and more than 3,000 employees. It found that overall, three in four mothers—77%—had had a negative or possibly discriminatory

experience during pregnancy, maternity leave and/or return from maternity leave. If scaled up, that could mean that as many as 390,000 mothers a year experience some form of discrimination.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this extremely important topic to the House. Does he agree that the potential funding cut to the Equality and Human Rights Commission is of significant concern, given the research and work it does and its vital importance to all societies across the UK?

Mr Thomas: The hon. Lady draws attention to an important issue that I am sure the Minister will want to take up. I sympathise with the point she makes.

It is worth saying that the Equality and Human Rights Commission's recently published research is not its first such work in this area. When it first commissioned research back in 2005, 45% of women reported experiencing discrimination, so it is extremely worrying to find that the situation facing mothers-to-be and new mothers has worsened so dramatically.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Speaking as an employer of someone who has had two children in the last two years, I think it is important to recall that our employees, who ultimately are employees of the House, have rights and protections in their jobs. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that whenever we hear cases of those who are not given those rights, that shows the real need for stronger legislation, regulation and monitoring to ensure that everyone gets what my employees have through their employment by me and the House?

Mr Thomas: I will argue that although there is a need for some legislative change, the major requirement is cultural change. In that regard, there are a number of things that the Government could do to help.

It is worth coming back to the EHRC's research findings. It pointed out that about one in nine mothers reported that they had felt forced to leave their job, which included those being directly dismissed and made compulsorily redundant and those treated so poorly that they felt they had to leave. About half the mothers who had submitted a request for flexible working said that it resulted in negative consequences for them at work. Potentially, as many as 150,000 mothers a year could be affected. One in 10 mothers were discouraged from attending antenatal opportunities, which could mean 53,000-plus mothers a year. The right to time off to attend antenatal appointments is vital to ensure that women can access the care they need early in their pregnancy and get continuous assessment and advice during pregnancy.

It is welcome that the report shows that the majority of employers were positive about managing most of the statutory rights relating to pregnancy and maternity and recognised that it was in their interests to support pregnant women and those on maternity leave, as that increases staff retention and creates better morale. However, 70% of employers surveyed said they felt women should declare up front during recruitment if they are pregnant—surely a recipe for further discrimination if ever there was one—and 27% felt that pregnancy put an unreasonable cost burden on the workplace.

There can be long-term effects on a woman's career if she has a baby. According to the TUC, poor treatment at the time of pregnancy or maternity leave can have long-lasting consequences for a woman's future employment and pay. About a quarter of women do not return to work after maternity leave, and only a minority of those women have made a personal choice to become stay-at-home mothers. Women are more likely to consider stopping work altogether if they experience ill treatment during pregnancy or maternity leave. Discrimination at work can cause stress, anxiety and depression, which in turn can have a long-term effect on the health of a woman and her baby.

We have a strong legal framework to promote family-friendly workplaces. What is lacking at the moment is leadership to change attitudes to pregnant women on the ground in workplaces. I hope the Government will lead a high-profile, ongoing campaign to change attitudes in the workplace. Government-led campaigns down the years have led to significant change. One thinks of the difference we see now with gay relationships—the work of Governments of various parties has led that change. One thinks, too, of action down the years on drink-driving and to promote the use of seatbelts and action that has radically improved road safety. Government-led campaigns can make a significant difference in workplaces and among wider society, and such a campaign is clearly needed now on maternity discrimination.

As I will explain shortly, women knowing what they are entitled to is not sufficient on its own to ensure that they can exercise their rights, but access to information is an essential first step. Maternity Action has called for all women to be given a hard-copy leaflet at their first antenatal appointment, outlining their maternity rights at work and signposting them to other key sources of information and advice. The leaflet would also include a tear-off sheet for women to give to their employers to ensure that they too are aware of their employee's rights. I understand that the Government have committed to reviewing the existing guidance and the accessibility of information for employers. Perhaps the Minister will update us on the progress of that review and respond specifically to Maternity Action's suggestions.

Maternity Action has raised the concern that it receives 30 times more calls than it has the resources to answer, prompting the question of how much more needs to be done to ensure that women seeking advice and information on their statutory rights can get the help they need. As I said earlier, access to information is the first step to ensuring that women can enforce their rights, but access to advice and justice is a necessary further step in many circumstances. According to the EHRC's research, less than 1% of women who believe they have experienced maternity discrimination have made a claim to an employment tribunal.

In June last year, the Government launched a review of the impact of employment tribunal fees. Thirteen months later, we are still waiting for the results, but the numbers already point in a significant direction. Pregnancy-related discrimination cases fell from 1,589 in 2012-13 to just 790 in 2014-15. Sex discrimination cases fell from almost 19,000 to almost 5,000 over the same period—a 76% drop. So although the evidence from the EHRC's research suggests that maternity discrimination is increasing, the number of women accessing employment tribunals

to enforce their legal rights is falling. Indeed, the Select Committee on Justice recently criticised the delay in concluding the review, and its review of court and employment tribunal fees recommended that special consideration be given to women who allege maternity and pregnancy discrimination.

Along with the financial barrier to pursuing a claim, many of the women who took part in the EHRC's research reported that the three-month time limit for lodging an employment tribunal claim was a significant barrier to accessing justice, as they simply were not in a position to jump through all the hoops associated with putting in a tribunal claim while they were new mothers. The EHRC has specifically recommended that the time limit be extended to six months.

The Minister will not be surprised at my disappointment that the only recommendations that the EHRC made that the Government have not accepted relate to employment tribunal fees and time limits. Will she at least update us on when the results of the Government's review will be published? Action is urgently needed to ensure women's access to justice to enforce their rights, particularly when they are pregnant or new mothers.

Employment tribunals should act as the final backstop to enforce women's maternity rights, but we should surely do everything we can to ensure that things do not reach that stage and that discussions between employees and their employers are approached in a constructive rather than antagonistic way. The EHRC's first recommendation to the Government was that they work in partnership with the commission and business leaders to develop a joint communications campaign underlining the economic benefits of unlocking and retaining the talent and experience of pregnant women and new mothers. I look forward to hearing from the Minister exactly when and how that will happen.

One key element of supporting pregnant women and new mothers is supporting employers, so that any health and safety risks for expectant mothers can be identified and effectively managed. The EHRC found that one in five employers that had identified risks took no action, and one in five mothers ended up leaving employment because of the risks involved. Too many pregnant women today worry that they are being put in a position of having to choose between their job, their health and the health of their unborn baby.

The excellent trade union USDAW has carried out research among its members and found that employers did not carry out risk assessments for seven out of 10 women. Many USDAW members do manual work stacking shelves or lifting heavy items in warehouses or at checkouts. Such examples underline the importance of making progress in developing support for employers, so that they can access all the information they need about maternity and paternity rights and entitlements in one place. Perhaps the Minister will tell us how the Government are encouraging employers to recognise the health and safety needs of pregnant women and new mothers.

The EHRC's research also demonstrated that much more needs to be done to support women when they return to work and to give stronger rights to flexible working. Roughly 70% of the women who took part in the research requested some form of flexible working arrangement on their return to work. However, half the mothers who had their request formally approved

[Mr Gareth Thomas]

felt that they had experienced unfavourable treatment as a result, and one third said that they felt uncomfortable asking for any additional flexibility or time off.

The TUC has done research in this area, too. It suggests there is a significant motherhood pay penalty. By the age of 42, mothers in full-time work earn 11% less than women in full-time work who do not have children. Women who leave their job during pregnancy or who do not return to their job after maternity leave, whether because they have been unfairly dismissed, because of inadequate health and safety procedures or because of inflexible working patterns, often find it very difficult to get back into work at all. There is a clear need to help employers think through how and why they should create a family-friendly workplace. Will the Minister advise us of what steps are being taken to encourage employers to offer different forms of flexible working?

As the EHRC has said, women are still far more likely than men to work part time, but more needs to be done to make flexible working the norm not only for women but for men too, so that all parents are better able to balance their career and family responsibilities, rather than feeling that they have to choose between the two.

I welcome the steps that the previous Government took to introduce shared parental leave, and I am interested in the Minister's assessment of how that has worked to date. The evidence from other countries that have implemented similar schemes suggests that fathers are much more likely to take up leave that has been designated as father's leave rather than shared and transferable leave. If we are to see a cultural shift to more family-friendly workplaces, it is crucial that opportunities are opened up for women to progress at work and for men to care for their children. One important step might be to uprate the amount of paid leave for fathers. It would be good to hear the Minister's initial thoughts on that.

The EHRC's research has demonstrated the importance of building up a long-term evidence base on maternity and pregnancy discrimination, so that we can better understand how we can tackle it. The TUC has suggested that employers be required to analyse and publish information on how many of their female employees return to work after having children. I welcome the steps that the Government have taken towards reporting on the gender pay gap; that seems an ideal opportunity to gather more information on how employers are supporting their employees through pregnancy and maternity leave.

It is important that employers continue to evaluate their own internal practices and, crucially, their retention rates for pregnant women. It would be instructive to know how many women are still working for their employer one year after returning from maternity leave, for example. Tribunals should be given the power to make recommendations that an employer change its practice when a finding of discrimination is made, so that other women are protected from similar treatment in future.

I have focused so far on how we can better ensure that existing maternity and paternal rights can be upheld, but I want to suggest an additional area for the Government

to consider in extending such rights. My constituent Kathryn Stagg is a campaigner on breastfeeding, and I have spoken to her about the problems that many mothers encounter in that area when returning to work. Going back to work is often the first time that a mother will be separated from their baby for a prolonged period. It can often be challenging for mothers who wish to continue breastfeeding to do so, particularly if there are no nursery facilities at or near their workplace. One in five women who have stopped breastfeeding say that returning to work influenced their decision, and half say they would have liked to continue for longer. A number of countries, including the USA, have enshrined in law the right to breastfeed and to express milk, and I urge the Minister to look closely at whether a similar right would be beneficial and appropriate for mothers in the UK and their babies.

There are many examples of good businesses supporting pregnant employees and supporting mothers in their return to work, but overall it appears that we are going backwards. Discrimination is almost twice as bad as it was 10 years ago. The legislation appears to be progressive, but attitudes in the workplace need to change. It is surely the Government's responsibility to lead the charge, change minds, and ensure that pregnant women and new mums are valued, respected and encouraged at their place of work. This debate gives us the opportunity to speak for women who have experienced maternity discrimination and tell them, "You are not a burden or a troublemaker, and you are entitled to have your rights enforced and respected."

3.20 pm

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) for so ably introducing this important debate. I also thank the EHRC, which provided an important research base. The hon. Gentleman took us through that very capably. I join them and the other hon. Members involved in obtaining the debate in saying, with the EHRC campaign, "Power to the Bump"—that is why we are here. Perhaps, Ms Buck, you will forgive me a moment of lightheartedness; it is not my style when speaking in this place to draw attention to what I look like rather than what is up here in my head, and I should not take this approach when addressing any other subject matter, but I think, as the Member of the House who is currently pregnant—I am 28 weeks expecting—it may be helpful if I speak in the debate. As I have said, I would not normally encourage this, other than for the sake of my dear mum. She often watches the debates on screen. I do not know whether the camera can take in the full works, rather than just the face and voice.

Joking aside, I am obviously not the first Member of Parliament to have a child and I hope I will not be the last. This place now has a good and evolving history of Members who participate fully in family life, which is an excellent thing. I do not in any way believe that being a prospective mother makes me a better person, or gives me more of an entitlement to speak, but I believe that Parliament is, collectively, better for having young women in it and young parents who can speak on this subject.

Hannah Bardell: Does the hon. Lady agree that the elephant in the room—this is a matter for all parties and Parliaments—is perhaps our failure to find a solution

to the fact that there is still no maternity or paternity leave for elected Members, although there is for Ministers? Because of our electoral systems, none of us has found a solution to the question of what a Member does when they become pregnant or become a parent, and what happens when they must return. For example, in this place we must still walk through the Lobbies to vote.

Chloe Smith: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady on that. There is much to do. Given the developing history that I have mentioned of women and young parents—it is not only women—who are Members here and who have young families that they want to look after, it is high time for a more concerted approach across the House. However, the debate is not only about us; this is but one example of a workplace.

Hannah Bardell: In all that we do and all our legislation, we must start with ourselves. We must look inward to look outward and make the changes at home as we make them in the country.

Chloe Smith: I will gladly work with the hon. Lady and others on that point. Now is the time to take such a look at our working practices here. I would be proud to be able to contribute a little to that, from my own experience, and perhaps also to bring others together to do it.

I want to make a short speech to provide some reassurance that we have representatives here who could be role models and talk from deeper, more current experience of raising a young family, while dealing with the important issues of discrimination and the legislative questions that follow from that. I want to make two points. First, speaking directly to young parents who may be watching the debate, I will cheekily borrow the very recent words of our freshly appointed new Prime Minister, who said yesterday that

“life is much harder than many people in Westminster realise. You have a job but you don’t always have job security.”

She added:

“I know you’re working around the clock, I know you’re doing your best, and I know that sometimes life can be a struggle.”

I think that is the point we should start from in the debate. I wish the new Prime Minister well in making good on all the aspirations she set out in Downing Street yesterday, and which she will continue to press forward. Our theme in this debate should be that we want to speak for those who may well feel as the Prime Minister described, and who perhaps still need our help, through the right legislative and cultural changes, so that life can be a little less of a struggle as they bring up young families.

My final point is a simple one that relates to something the hon. Member for Harrow West covered briefly—the impact of shared parental leave. Of course it is a point about life after pregnancy rather than maternity discrimination per se—I do not know how specific the hon. Gentleman wants to be about the terms of the debate—but the issue is culturally very important. Shared parental leave gives employers no further justification for making gender-based assumptions about the likelihood that a current or prospective member of staff will be caring for children in the future. It is therefore wholly to be welcomed. I look forward to sharing parental leave

with my husband, who intends to take leave after I do. I hope that that will serve as a small working example of something that has the potential to suit families of all shapes and sizes. Like the hon. Gentleman, I want that new legal concept to be used more, and to become a comfortable part of mainstream culture. There should be no gender attached to caring for children. There is no need for it; we have come past that point.

I will close there, but I want to repeat how much I welcome the debate and how important the research base is, and my hope that all of us who speak here can give a little bit of power to the bump.

3.28 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) and those who signed the request to the Backbench Business Committee to secure this important debate. It is also a pleasure to follow the speech of the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith). I look forward to testing the family-friendliness of this Parliament on Monday, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), as we are both bringing our children down next week. We will see how that goes.

I find it difficult to believe that we in this House continue to have to debate and protest about maternity discrimination. It says an awful lot about the way women and children are regarded in society, and we must all seek to improve the situation through our words and deeds, in this place and beyond. Maternity Action has said

“both pregnancy and maternity discrimination is both widespread and deeply entrenched, with a significant minority of employers holding outdated and wholly inappropriate attitudes.”

It is absolutely unacceptable that 77% of women experience discrimination or negative treatment during pregnancy or maternity, or on their return to work. Maternity discrimination is not a niche issue; it is something that can happen to any woman during pregnancy or while going through the early stages of IVF treatment. Equally, it can happen to people who are adopting, or those seeking paternity leave. It also applies to the period after birth and to breastfeeding, as I was glad to see the hon. Member for Harrow West highlight. There is no explicit legal obligation to provide breastfeeding breaks. One of Maternity Action’s excellent series of cards says:

“While there is no explicit legal right to breastfeeding breaks and facilities at work, employers must meet their obligations to a breastfeeding employee under health and safety, flexible working, and anti-discrimination law. And, not only is it simple and inexpensive for employers to do so, but it brings real business benefits such as increased productivity and staff loyalty.”

I absolutely concur with those sentiments. As someone who has breastfed both children at work, being away from them is very difficult and can be painful and embarrassing.

We need to think of ways to get around that and to support mothers when they return to work. We cannot have women giving up breastfeeding, which is so important to maternal and child health, because their employer will not make reasonable adjustments to allow them to do it. We cannot just accept that that discrimination happens. We must find a way of making that kind of discrimination as publicly unacceptable as any other. Ignoring this important issue leads to the extreme

[Alison Thewliss]

circumstances we saw in the Sports Direct case, in which a woman gave birth on a toilet floor. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, the impact on child and maternal health during pregnancy and the early weeks of life can be significant and long-lasting, and we need to think about that when we consider this issue.

It was only recently that we were discussing this issue in this place, in November last year, just prior to the publication of the EHRC report and research from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. During that debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) made a number of reasonable demands on the Government, which I will briefly repeat. First, he asked that the Government take a key role in ensuring employers are well-informed and clear in their obligations and that smaller businesses in particular are supported; secondly, that the Government do all in their power to inform women of their rights, highlighting best practice and protecting vulnerable groups of women, particularly young women, ethnic minorities, those from other nations who might be unfamiliar with their rights under UK law, agency workers and those in non-unionised workplaces; and thirdly that the information services that support women be well-funded. We cannot rely only on trade unions or websites or on picking things up by chance. We need to fund the services that will actively represent and advise women. Fourthly and lastly, he asked that women be able to access justice via employment tribunals. Since fees were introduced in 2013, there has been a significant and disturbing drop in the number of cases brought. The hon. Member for Harrow West mentioned some of the statistics earlier on, so I shall not repeat them, but it can cost up to £1,200 to make an employment tribunal claim, which can rise to £5,700 if more than one person makes a claim, with further potential costs such as, for example, £1,600 if the decision is appealed.

Those costs represent an enormous barrier to justice, particularly at a time when women are at their most vulnerable. The number of women who actually reach that final tribunal is less than 1%. That is tiny. We need to do much better in ensuring women receive the justice they deserve. At the excellent event earlier on, hosted by Maternity Action, it was highlighted that there can be a gagging clause put in the settlement for women who settle out of court, so they cannot even talk about the experience they have had with that employers. Those employers will get away with that. Fellow women in that company might not know that has happened and other women seeking employment with that company will not be aware it is an employer they need to be wary of.

I am proud to say the Scottish Government are committed to abolishing tribunal fees, which is a significant step. We are not at all complacent in Scotland about the challenges. To that end, my good friend, Jamie Hepburn, the Minister for Employability and Training, announced at the end of June that he is going to chair a working group to identify action to tackle this unacceptable discrimination. That group will work with NHS Health Scotland to ensure that work environments are safe and healthy for pregnant women and new mothers and to provide employment rights information for pregnant

women at that first contact. The group will also create guidelines for employers to ensure best practice in the recruitment, retention and development of pregnant workers. The Scottish Government also pledged earlier this year to improve public monitoring of pregnancy and maternity under the Scottish public sector equality duty. As might be expected, the EHRC has welcomed that announcement, saying:

“These commitments from the Scottish Government are very encouraging and show the leadership for change that is needed to create a positive workplace that supports pregnant women and women returning from maternity leave.”

I will briefly touch on some of the issues of returning to work after pregnancy. I asked on Twitter for people to share their experiences of returning to work after pregnancy. They are fairly typical and depressing. One woman said she had left her stressful workplace when pregnant because it was not worth the hassle to stay, while one commented on the discriminatory attitudes and mindset of her managers. Another woman who had worked for eight years with her employer in a reasonably senior role submitted a request on returning to work after maternity leave to go part time or job share, only to be told it was full time or resignation. She felt she was being asked to choose between her child and her job. Those are by no means the worst stories I have heard and colleagues will no doubt share more. They are very much the tip of the iceberg.

Joeli Brearley, of Pregnant Then Screwed, who is at the back of the room with her gorgeous little baby, has been collecting those examples. I urge the Minister and her team to look at the Pregnant Then Screwed website for those examples because they are absolutely brutal. They must be seen and they must be challenged. I encourage all women who are watching this debate to contact their MP and to contact Government Ministers to let them know it is happening. If we do not know which employers are involved we cannot challenge them and we cannot make change.

I also highlight a man who contacted me about paternity leave. He asked about paternity leave in his workplace, only to be met with the response, “Can we say no to that?” No, they cannot; that is not possible. There needs to be more education about the rights of families in the workplace more widely. I visited One Parent Families Scotland last weekend, which highlighted the treatment of pregnant women and new mothers by Jobcentre Plus. It has identified that women are being forced to come off the benefits they are on and encouraged to start thinking about going back to work. They are asked to attend appointments that are not necessary, but they are being called in anyway. That is something that needs to be looked at more widely.

I also highlight young women, in particular, and the EHRC’s “Power to the Bump” campaign, which is absolutely excellent. It highlights that, among all women, those under 25 are six times more likely to report being dismissed as a result of their pregnancy. Will the Minister reflect on that and see what more specifically we can do to support young women? Young women may not know their rights and may not expect to be pregnant. They might suddenly end up in circumstances in which they are having to make serious choices and perhaps there is something to be put in school curriculums to inform young people of their rights around the issue. There is a bit of a gap there because we are not doing that at the

moment. All women should know what their rights are for when that time comes. School is a good place to start with that.

In their response to the EHRC report on maternity discrimination, the UK Government said they are

“committed to creating a strong workforce that is fit for the future. To do this we need to make sure that there are no barriers to everyone fulfilling their potential, enabling pregnant women and new mothers to participate fully if they choose to, and giving employers access to the widest possible pool of talent.”

As has been said, the Government accepted many of the report’s recommendations. However, they notably rejected some of those concerning maternity and pregnancy discrimination, in particular around making changes to the employment tribunal fee system to ensure fees are not a barrier for women experiencing pregnancy and maternity discrimination. They said:

“It is too soon to consider whether any action is needed here. In June 2015 the Government announced the start of the post-implementation review of the introduction of fees in the Employment Tribunal. This will consider, insofar as this is possible, any equality impacts that have resulted from the introduction of fees. The review is well underway and will report in due course.”

I urge the Minister to bring forward the response. We need to know the Government’s views and the results of that review.

The further Government response was that:

“There is no evidence from the responses to the research into pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination to suggest that there is a need to increase the time limit for a woman to bring an Employment Tribunal claim.”

As has been said earlier, three months is not good enough; perhaps even six months is not good enough. Some of the women whose cases I have seen only found out about their rights after the event, which is not good enough either. There needs to be less of a bar on that, so that employers do not get away with dismissing somebody because of their pregnancy.

Hannah Bardell: Does my hon. Friend agree that having access to justice is the bedrock of a civilised society? If we cannot offer that to our women and men, and to parents across the country, we are doing them a disservice and we do ourselves a disservice, in terms of our international standing.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is so important that there is not only action, support and information, but that, if employers do not comply with the law, that there is recourse and a means of testing those employers and making them accountable for what they have done.

I hope what I and others have said in the debate will change the Government’s mind and will bring about improvements. Society and business are losing the talent and skills of women in those jobs. Women feel devalued. They may be lost to the labour market or end up in self-employment, not of their own choosing, which brings its own set of challenges. Maternity discrimination is the reinforcement and perpetuation of the gender pay gap, and it undermines women’s place in society. We have a new Prime Minister who claims to be a feminist. I call on her and on the Government to take leadership and to ensure that that is true in deeds and not just words.

3.39 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms Buck. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) on securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us this privilege. It is an honour to follow the hon. Members for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who made prescient remarks. I would particularly like to thank Maternity Action and the other organisations that have briefed us for this debate; the facts and the evidence are really important.

When I was expecting my first child 24 years ago and sought sympathy from my mother, she pointed out, “It’s not an illness. Just get on with it.” However, she went on to provide useful advice about what to expect during the different trimesters, how to look after myself, what to ask for and so on. I sought and found information about keeping myself and the growing baby healthy, and I was lucky to work for a sympathetic employer who allowed me paid time off for antenatal appointments, the ability to keep my feet raised, flexible hours to avoid the most crowded times on the tube and so on. I was lucky—I had some statutory rights, even then, and I had an understanding employer, but as we know, that is not true for many women. In fact, it is not true for a growing number of women.

Roll on to 2016. I am a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, and we have been carrying out an inquiry into maternity and pregnancy discrimination. We still have to report, but some of our evidence is available, so I am able to refer to that today. What has shocked us as a Committee is not only that things have not improved recently, but that we appear to be going backwards as a country in our treatment of pregnant women. Our inquiry followed the BIS-EHRC research published in March this year. The EHRC made strong recommendations, as has been mentioned, and we felt it was very important to do a detailed inquiry, to pick up the lead from those findings.

The research found that three out of four mothers said they had a negative and possibly even discriminatory experience during pregnancy and maternity leave and after maternity leave. As others have said, scaled up, that could mean almost 400,000 mothers a year. It is estimated that between 21,000 and 54,000 women feel they have to leave the workforce while pregnant or after giving birth because of risks not being tackled in the workplace. Fifty per cent of all discrimination happens at the point when the woman tells her employer she is pregnant, and the scale of the problem is growing. The percentage of mothers experiencing discrimination has grown by 22% since the equivalent survey of 2005.

With more and more women entering the workplace, it is imperative that maternity discrimination is not allowed to negatively affect the experience of women at work. The business case alone goes without saying. If we lose people from the workforce, or if we lose people in highly skilled jobs to less skilled jobs, that affects all businesses, as well as women’s self-esteem and rights at work. Most employers—over 84%—say they believe it is in their best interests to support pregnant women in their organisations, as well as those on maternity leave, yet only 27% feel that all women’s statutory rights are

[Ruth Cadbury]

reasonable. In addition, 70% of employers feel that pregnant women should give notice of their pregnancy at the recruitment stage. There is obviously a discrepancy between the reported enthusiasm of employers to support pregnant women and the experiences women face of institutional discrimination that requires pregnancy to be known about.

The issue is not specific to particular sectors; it is wide-ranging. Women in areas as diverse as arts and leisure, manufacturing and agriculture all reported high levels of negative experiences. I want to cover a couple of case studies from Maternity Action, which has provided examples of women in a variety of fields who have been subject to discrimination ending in job loss, whether through forced redundancy or treatment so discriminatory it resulted in them having no choice but to leave their jobs. The examples I am about to cover are symptomatic of the universal nature of maternity discrimination, with workers in both office environments and more active occupations being negatively impacted by institutional discrimination.

One woman was working in a salon as a hairdresser. She worked long days, standing for most of the time, and was experiencing severe back pain as a result of her pregnancy. She asked her manager for extra rests between appointments as a health and safety adjustment, which was promised, but whenever she asked to take a break her manager refused. She also asked if she could work shorter days, so that she would not need so many breaks, but that was also refused. She had originally wanted to start her maternity leave two weeks before her due date but ended up bringing it forward to the earliest start date—11 weeks before her due date—because she was struggling so much at work and was concerned for her health.

Another woman worked in childcare, for a small independent nursery. She had been there for five years and had a good relationship with her manager. When she told her manager she was pregnant and asked to discuss her health and safety, she was immediately moved from a room where she was working alongside other colleagues to one where she was working on her own. Her manager started to criticise her work in front of her colleagues and refused to give her time off to attend her antenatal appointments, insisting that she use annual leave. She tried to talk to her manager about those issues, but was told she should be glad she still had a job and that her performance was being monitored. She ended up being signed off sick for stress and resigned before her maternity leave was due to start, as she did not feel she could ever return to work for that employer.

Another woman worked in administrative office work. She had done the same job for three years and always had a good relationship with her employer, so she notified her boss when she was 10 weeks pregnant. She suffered from severe morning sickness and was signed off sick for a week. When she returned, she found that her shifts had been reduced from 40 to 10 hours per week. She was told that it was because there was less work available, but none of her colleagues had seen any changes to their hours. When she challenged that, she was told that as she was unwell, it was better for everyone that she work fewer hours and that her employer

was “just looking after her”. As a result of her reduced hours, unsurprisingly her average earnings fell to £80 a week from her 13th week of pregnancy, so she did not qualify for statutory maternity pay.

Those are just some examples that illustrate the scale of the problem, which is massive and growing. What can we and the Government do to address the issue of pregnancy discrimination? There is a raft of legislation to protect the rights of pregnant women and mothers in the workplace, including the four core legal rights: paid time off for antenatal care; maternity leave; maternity pay or allowance; and protection against unfair treatment, discrimination and dismissal. However, it is clear that many employers are not adhering to those rights. It is our duty to ensure that those rights are safeguarded and that the recommendations of the EHRC report in March are upheld.

As has been said, the EHRC recommended improving best practice to promote family-friendly workplaces, effective management and open communication, and improving health and safety management in the workplace, so that employers manage risks effectively and women are not forced to choose between their job and their health or the health of their unborn child. However, we need to push for regulations to become context-specific, because issues of pregnancy are more critical in some work environments, such as firefighting. It is clearly not appropriate to be on active service as a firefighter when pregnant, but that does not mean that women should have to give up their job.

Most of the employers interviewed by the EHRC were willing to accept requests to work flexibly. However, mothers reported that requesting flexible working had negative consequences for them. More than half of mothers reported negative treatment, such as job responsibilities being removed, as a direct consequence of making a request.

The Women and Equalities Committee has already stated, through our “Gender Pay Gap” report, that all jobs should be offered flexibly from the word go, unless there is a reasonable justification not to. At present, employees must wait six months before they can request flexible working. We have been calling for the Government to encourage employers to offer different forms of flexible working when advertising jobs and to allow new employees the right to request it as soon as they start a job. To make flexible working a norm for all genders is to normalise it as a practice, as well as normalising the notion of men in a caring role. There is currently a gap of 38% in median hourly earnings when comparing part-time women with full-time men. In addition, offering senior jobs as flexible or part time would go a long way towards stopping the opportunity gap between men and women as well as between those who have children and those who do not.

The Select Committee had quite a lot of evidence from casual agency and zero-hours workers. Those workers did not even have the rights of employees. We were concerned that they do not have, for instance, a right to paid time off for antenatal appointments; maternity or shared parental leave; a right to request flexible working; or protection against unfair dismissal. Some of our witnesses saw that as a reason for the increase in pregnancy and maternity discrimination. With the increase in casual working and zero-hours contracts, we consider that that

problem will only increase. Citizens Advice suggested to us that the “increased job insecurity” experienced by such workers “impacted on” their

“confidence in challenging discrimination and other workplace problems.”

On redundancy and job loss, a key finding from our evidence was that pregnancy and maternity discrimination has increased since that was last researched. Many more women are now under the pressure of being made redundant or being forced to leave their job. Rosalind Bragg of Maternity Action told the Committee that 30,000 women lost their jobs as a result of pregnancy discrimination in 2005, but that figure jumped to 54,000 in 2015.

Your Employment Settlement Service—YESS Law—said that employers who understood the law made women redundant after their return to work so that the protection provided under regulation 10 of the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999 did not apply. That regulation provides that an employee who is made redundant during maternity leave is entitled to any existing and suitable alternative work in preference to other employees, including those at risk of redundancy. I feel that we should go for better protection from unfair redundancies. That is just one of a number of recommendations that I would support; others have been mentioned today.

We know, and the Select Committee found, that the issue of information and advice is critical. With 50% of all discrimination happening at the point at which the woman tells her employer that she is pregnant, it is imperative to provide information to women via channels such as midwives and GPs before the meeting with their employer. As all women go to their first maternity appointment, would that not be a good time? That said, a midwife, in our briefing, said that an appointment of 15 minutes was not long enough to cover both the clinical information that a newly pregnant woman, and particularly a first-time mum, needs and the workplace information. It takes long enough to get the clinical information over, let alone covering essential workplace information as well. I suggest that the Government work with the NHS and others and consider providing information, in a written and online form, that midwives can forward to pregnant women at that first appointment. The Government could also do a lot more in the way of communication on protecting health and wellbeing. That needs to be improved.

We heard particular concerns about women leaving their jobs because health and safety risks had not been tackled. The BIS and EHRC research found that one in 25 of the women surveyed—scaled up, that could be 21,000 women—left her job because health and safety risks had not been tackled properly. Evidence focused particularly on whether employers should be required to do a risk assessment specifically for new and expectant mothers or whether the current generic risk assessment is enough to ensure that risks are dealt with. The EHRC suggested that employers need to get better at talking to women about health and safety throughout their pregnancy. However, Maternity Action said that the general risk assessment was “woefully inadequate” and that employers should be required to do an individual risk assessment.

I have already covered casual and zero-hours contracts. The rights of workers in those jobs need to be considered in relation to any future Government action.

My colleagues have covered access to justice, the appalling institutional discrimination that the fees for employment tribunals involve and the impact that that has had on employees’ rights to take action against discrimination—

Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Lady that the winding-up speeches will start at 4 pm and suggest that she might like to draw her comments to a close.

Ruth Cadbury: I will do so, Ms Buck.

In conclusion, we need not just specific action but overall leadership for change, so that employers attract the best talent, create the conditions for their staff to perform well and avoid the loss of skills and experience that happens as a result of the kind of decisions that women are making when they get pregnant, as we have heard today. I am concerned about the lack of urgency displayed by the Government in tackling pregnancy and maternity discrimination and I hope that, under the new Prime Minister, the Government provide a better model for leadership and look out for the report of the Women and Equalities Committee and our recommendations in order to improve the situation. This is a very important issue.

3.57 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) on securing this extremely important debate.

For many women, the excitement of telling friends and family about their pregnancy is matched by the apprehension about telling their employer. In 2016, that fear should be unfounded, but unfortunately the evidence clearly suggests otherwise. The hon. Gentleman highlighted that in discussing some of the findings from the EHRC and BIS research. He talked about 77% of new mothers experiencing negative treatment at work and about the difficulties faced especially by younger and single mothers, who are most at risk of being badly treated by an employer. Also, 11% of mothers reported that they had felt forced to leave their job. Maternity discrimination is now more common than ever, with 54,000 women forced out of the workplace each year.

The research found that one in 10 women had been discouraged from attending antenatal appointments. Indeed, many women feel uncomfortable about asking for the time off—I know that from my own experience. During my first pregnancy, I was a teacher with an extremely sympathetic employer, but although my employer was supportive, I felt bad about asking for time off to go to my appointments, and I missed several simply because I did not want to burden my colleagues with more work. Many women feel the same. It is now incumbent on employers show some leadership and challenge those ideas when they have pregnant employees.

Those in precarious employment are at even greater risk. How does a woman with unstable employment defend herself against a discriminatory employer? Even

[Carol Monaghan]

in professions such as law, accountancy, business and education, many women fear challenging the discrimination they face in the workplace.

It was great to hear the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) talk about her own experience, how the experiences of MPs would enrich this debate and how we could be positive role models for the nation. She mentioned “Power to the Bump”; we are all looking forward to welcoming the new arrival in Parliament; let us hope that Parliament is as family-friendly as it purports to be.

This morning, I met women who had experienced maternity discrimination and organisations including Maternity Action, which offers advice on women’s rights. Some of the stories I heard were disturbing, and a comment was made that we are moving back to 1950s employment practices. The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) described her own experience of maternity leave and why she feels we are moving in the wrong direction. She described her thorough work on the Women and Equalities Committee and mentioned that discrimination has increased by 22% since the last report was produced.

The hon. Lady also highlighted the need for more flexible working and mentioned some case studies, but I would like to talk about a couple that I heard this morning. We heard from an agency teacher who had an administration fee deducted from her statutory maternity pay by her agency. This illegal practice, sadly, is not isolated. Another woman had worked for a company for 15 years as a currency trader before having her first child. When she returned to work, her desk had been physically moved to the side of the room, isolating her from the main office activities. Despite her asking two or three times a week for a back-to-work interview, it was six weeks before anybody sat down with her. No attempt was made to train her on the new systems that had been installed during her absence, and although she was now working longer hours than in her previous 15 years, she felt there was no way back after her pregnancy. When she told her employer she was expecting her second child, he threw a pen across the desk at her—as she says,

“all because I dared to use my womb.”

During a recent university visit I met some female academics, including a postdoctoral researcher who was pregnant. Although her employer was supportive, she felt that she would have to leave academia when the baby arrived. She talked about the potential difficulties of juggling caring for a baby with an experiment that ran on into the night, and the expectations her peers would have of her behaviour. She said:

“To be successful in academia, this has to be your life.”

Employment tribunals are the last resort for many women, as a number of Members have highlighted this afternoon. Yet the introduction of employment tribunal fees, coupled with the three-month time limits, has done nothing to tackle workplace discrimination. We now have a situation where three quarters of women are experiencing discrimination for having children, but only 1% are taking their case to tribunal. When the UK Government introduced those fees in July 2013, in reality they introduced a barrier to women’s access to

justice and a charter for rogue employers. The hon. Member for Harrow West mentioned the review of employment tribunal fees; we have been waiting for the review since July 2015 and still there is nothing, so I ask the Minister whether we can really push forward with that. It is of absolute importance that we get some review of the fees.

Anti-discrimination laws have been in place for 40 years, but women who have experienced discrimination are often not aware of exactly what rights are in place for them. That is compounded in cases where there is no trade union representation. For new mothers and pregnant women, seeking justice from an employer will not be the first priority at that point in their lives, so the three-month time limit on making a claim must be extended to ensure those women have full access to their rights. That point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who also mentioned the importance of breastfeeding breaks to both an employee’s productivity and their loyalty to a company.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the steps the Scottish Government have taken and the leadership they have shown. The immediate future looks brighter for Scottish women. The Scotland Act 2016 will mean that power over employment tribunals will reside with the Scottish Parliament. I welcome the commitment made by Scotland’s First Minister to taking action to tackle the issue and the announcement that the Scottish Government will abolish tribunal fees in Scotland. In practice, that will mean that Scottish women face fewer barriers when exerting employment rights and in access to justice, and will not face the same financial penalty when trying to tackle rogue employers. Women across the UK must have the same access to that justice; it is to everybody’s advantage; it increases productivity; it is good for the economy; it is good for the health and wellbeing of employees and, most importantly, it is good for children, who are the future of the country.

4.6 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Buck. It is also a pleasure to serve opposite the Minister for the first time. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) for securing this important debate and being the only male speaker in it. I also thank the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) for her excellent contribution and I wish her absolutely well in her pregnancy and in becoming a mum.

Discriminating against women because they are pregnant, breastfeeding or have recently given birth is illegal. It cannot be tolerated and deserves the full force of the law. I am pleased that it seems that some things have moved on a little from the experiences of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) when she was pregnant—but not enough, as she clearly demonstrated in her speech. She reminded us that this is a growing problem and that we need to do more.

A Britain that discriminates against women is not the Britain that I love. I can think of no better Minister to respond to the debate—I admire her for her strong, robust and straight-talking nature, and I am sure she will tackle these issues in the brilliant, no-nonsense style that she normally brings to the Chamber.

Too many women are suffering discrimination in the workplace, and too many are forced to suffer in silence. Maternity discrimination is incredibly common. Three out of four working mothers experience some form of discrimination in their working life. That cannot be tolerated any longer. We have heard many examples outlined today, and we cannot be silent. As lawmakers, we have a duty to uphold the law, and we must demand change on behalf of the 54,000 new mothers a year who lose their job.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) outlined, for too long women have been treated unfairly or discriminated against in the workplace. Too many women feel that having a baby and taking their lawful maternity leave will threaten their job, lead to trouble in the workplace, harm their promotion prospects or, potentially, end their working careers. Unfortunately, we have heard many factual examples of why people feel that way. Pregnant women are told by their midwives to avoid stress for the safety and wellbeing of their unborn baby, but how is it possible for an expectant mum to avoid stress if she faces daily discrimination in the workplace?

Maternity discrimination in the workplace does not have to be obvious or blatant. My constituent Joeli, who has been in the Public Gallery with the little one throughout the debate, is a magnificent and successful project manager. When she was four months pregnant with her first child, her main client sacked her suddenly, without warning. After her experience, she founded the organisation, Pregnant Then Screwed, which collects women's personal experiences of discrimination and unfair practices at work. It hears from women who feel that they have been punished and pushed out of the workplace for daring to want both a career and family.

Women report being harassed out of their job or forced to take voluntary redundancy. As we have heard, they have very few places to turn for help. Access to an employment tribunal is impossible for women on low pay, shift work or zero-hours contracts. As many Members have said, they face whopping tribunal fees that make it virtually impossible for them to take legal recourse. No wonder less than 1% of women who have experienced maternity discrimination bring claims to tribunal. What good is the law when it is out of reach for too many women? Will the Minister explain how the Government are working to remove the various barriers to women raising complaints, therefore ensuring that all members of society have fair access to justice?

As a proud mother of three, I, like millions of women, know how tough it is to balance the demands of working and raising children; I am sure the Minister can relate to that as another powerful working mum. I appeal today for greater understanding at every level of society of the pressures that new mums face. A lot of questions have been asked today and we have limited time, so I shall stop there, because I want to hear the Minister, who I am sure will respond robustly to those questions.

4.11 pm

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) not only for securing this debate, along with other hon. Members,

but for being the only man who has taken part. It is perhaps a pity that more men have not even attended this debate and listened to the wise words of so many other hon. Members, all of whom happen to be women. Let us be honest: it is very difficult to stand and talk about these issues, because as we know it is invariably the case that women are remarkable—far more remarkable than men. We have the most amazing ability to multi-task. Incredibly, we are often the more courageous and the more relaxed, and the better warriors in our lives, and I apologise to any man who takes offence at that.

We are quite remarkable because we produce children, and yet, having produced children, we have this incredible ability to carry on as though nothing else was happening in our lives when we are either carrying those children, because we are pregnant, or when we go on to give birth. I do not want in any way to lessen those women who, by choice or just by bad fortune—whatever it may be—do not experience what I thought was the hugely enjoyable experience of being pregnant. That might place me as a very odd person, but I thought it was great. I do not talk about these things normally, because it is always dangerous to raise people's expectations. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) has enjoyed her pregnancy and I can assure her mother that she looks absolutely brilliant. She is at one of the best stages—when we seem to be full of energy and we look fabulous. Not all women have that experience.

We have heard stories about women who suffer from often terrible bouts of sickness—the Duchess of Cambridge was extremely poorly in the early stages of her pregnancy—and there are no excuses for employers not to know, understand and take that into account. Being pregnant is not an illness; we do just get on with it, which is another mark of how brilliant we are as women. But for some women, it is not a breeze, and it is not right or fair of employers in any way to discriminate against them and not to understand that.

I am horrified to hear that in this day and age there are still employers who would have any problem—it is not so much about not allowing them—with a woman who needs to go to the clinic on a regular basis. It is not acceptable. If someone had hurt their foot or their arm and had to go and have their cast off or their stitches out, nobody would say to them, “Oh, it's not really very convenient.” There should be no discrimination at all, including no discrimination when the women have had their babies. I have gone completely away from my prepared speech, which is not unusual.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Minister very much for the points she is making. For women who are diabetic or are having a particularly difficult pregnancy after a previous pregnancy loss, does she accept that they need those hospital appointments very dearly? They should be encouraged to go to them and nothing should stand in their way.

Anna Soubry: Absolutely. Let us be quite scary about this: as a society, we need people to have children. That is not because they bring us huge amounts of pleasure and joy, which is almost impossible to articulate. Again, I do not like to talk about that because not everybody has the sort of experiences, especially with babies, that some of us do. A lot of people suffer with postnatal depression and a lot of people do not find that they

[*Anna Soubry*]

immediately fall in love with this wonderful bundle and so on, so I think it is really important that we do not talk too much about that, apart from privately, when we can discuss these things. However, we need people to have children—not, as I say, just because it brings great pleasure, especially when it comes out of a loving relationship, and what could be greater and more wonderful than that? We need to have babies as a society because we need the workers and contributors of the future, especially as we are all getting older. That is putting it in hard, callous economic terms, but that is the reality. It behoves us as a society—that includes business and employers—to do the right thing. They should be grateful and happy when somebody in their workforce becomes pregnant—not only to share their pleasure and joy, but for the fact that for society this is a good and beneficial thing. If we can persuade employers to understand the huge wider benefits, it might be part of that improvement in the attitude that we clearly need to see.

In the excellent speeches and contributions we have heard, I do not think anybody mentioned that we need to make it clear that good childcare provision is essential to making mums and dads happy. I am delighted that this Government have committed to providing 30 hours of free childcare for working families and that we provide up to 85% of childcare costs for people on lower incomes and universal credit. We are investing more than £5 billion a year in early education and childcare, which will increase to more than £6 billion in 2019-20. Those are important statistics to put on the record. None the less, we can always do better—that is the reality.

Until we get really good free childcare that every woman and every father can access, it will not make the huge improvements we need. It makes a huge difference, as my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North will discover, if people know that they have rock-solid childcare. There is nothing worse than being at work and having that awful sinking feeling of, “Oh goodness! I’ve got to go off to the childminder”—or the nursery, or wherever—“and pick the children up.” That does working women no favours, so the answer is good childcare.

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend is a Business Minister, so will she also put out a clarion call to potential entrepreneurs to start up childcare businesses with a view to the new policy coming in from 2017? It should be a win-win all around.

Anna Soubry: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but we have to ensure that the fees are right as well. That is the downside for parents, especially if they are not earning a great deal of money, because the cost of childcare can be extraordinarily high. For many families, it becomes a really difficult balancing act of going back to work and working the hours they want to work, while also having enough money to pay for the childcare. That is why I would love us to work towards a situation in which we can all enjoy free childcare. It is the stuff of dreams, but a great goal to have.

Ruth Cadbury: I welcome the Minister’s comments on childcare, which has not been mentioned, so she is absolutely right to bring it into the debate. Will she pay attention to the funding of the 30-hour option, because

in the past few weeks I have met several childcare providers in my constituency who are worried that they will struggle to keep afloat as businesses because of how the 30-hour offer is funded? If that is not sorted out, we will lose childcare places, rather than gain them.

Anna Soubry: Absolutely. It is really important—and I think that somebody said this in their speech—that people complain and bring all these cases to their MP. This is the place to raise such issues, and not just in debate. Write those letters to Ministers and hold them accountable.

As hon. Members know, there is a reshuffle under way. Some people might be surprised to see that I am here, but here I am replying to this debate—actually for a Minister who resigned yesterday. I will not go into all that or into the fact that this morning when I went into the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, my office no longer existed; it had been moved. Hey ho, these are happy jolly times and we move swiftly on.

Many points have been made about tribunals. We have a woman as the new Secretary of State for Justice—for the first time ever, we have a woman Lord Chancellor, which is brilliant news. She is a mother herself. Let us hold her to account on this matter. We now have a new Minister for Women and Equalities. I pay huge tribute to the former Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan). I have no doubt that our new Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), will take up these issues with the rigour that she applied in her previous brief in the Department for International Development. Maternity discrimination issues are really important and we must put them absolutely at the door of Government and our brilliant new woman Prime Minister.

Pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination have no place in today’s workplace and no place in a progressive society. I will not be able to answer all the points raised today, but I undertake that I—or whoever is in my shoes—will write to hon. Members after the debate. Female talent and experience make a huge contribution to the productivity of individual businesses and the economy generally. It does not make sense for employers to alienate a key group of their workforce, as many employers—but not enough—recognise and understand, so for a number of reasons it is surprising that we find ourselves debating pregnancy discrimination.

In response to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), I think it is fair to say that some jobs genuinely are full-time jobs. When somebody goes on maternity leave and wants to come back and change their hours, it can cause problems for a lot of small business employers, in particular. We have to understand that it is not quite as simple for the smaller businesses as it is for some of the larger ones. Some jobs cannot be shared and some really are full-time jobs, but perhaps that is for another debate.

The EHRC has considered the research findings in depth and its recommendations to Government and others reflect that maternity discrimination is in part a cultural issue and that we are not going to change attitudes and behaviours that fall far short of what we expect in the modern world overnight. I am grateful to the EHRC for the work it has done and continues to do with the Government to take the Government’s response

to its recommendations forward. It is right that we debate this important issue and take it to the highest level of Government.

We need to get it right, and it is important to work with businesses and others to bring about the required change within a legal framework that is already clear. That is why the commission, the Government and our partners, such as ACAS, are doing all the things that they are. We are exploring opportunities with the EHRC to bring on board businesses to articulate the benefits of supporting women and share their good practice across the business community, encouraging peers to join the initiative. That includes exploring how behavioural insights or nudges—techniques that can raise awareness of legal obligations and best practice—can make employers realise and understand that a happy workforce results in high production and all the things that they want to make their business successful and make it grow.

On that note, I thank all contributors to the debate and promise that they will get letters on all the various points raised. I urge them to continue to raise the issue at the highest levels of government, and I will do my part.

4.23 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas: I welcome the Minister's robust and direct condemnation of the discrimination of pregnant women and new mothers. Getting that restatement from the Government is important. As someone who has been told in no uncertain terms that it is my turn to pick up our daughter from nursery, I understand the Minister's point about the significant relief of having rock-solid childcare arrangements.

The debate has been extremely useful and wide ranging. I am grateful in particular to Maternity Action and the series of excellent campaigning groups that are working on the issue. I again pay tribute to the EHRC for its work, which formed the backdrop to the debate. I hope the House will indulge me if I take the opportunity to praise my constituents Zenobia Hammond, Sophie Kathir and Kathryn Stagg, who have provided useful insights.

I welcomed the contribution of the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) and I wish her well with

her pregnancy. She made important points about the "Power to the Bump" campaign and the benefits of shared parental leave. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), among many points, underlined the cost of tribunal fees as a further major hurdle for women who have borne the brunt of discrimination taking their employers to tribunal and holding them to account.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), in her excellent speech, drew attention to the work of the Women and Equalities Committee, which will be hugely important in ensuring that the debate is not a one-off, but that the issue continues to receive scrutiny in the House.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) helpfully underlined that, amid the joy of being pregnant, the unease of having to tell an employer that one is pregnant is an experience that many who read the proceedings of the debate will recognise and share. She also made an important point about how discrimination has a particular impact on those whose working situation is precarious. One thinks of the rise of those who do contract work and the additional difficulties they will face.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) underlined the fact that there is a growing body of evidence, both anecdotal and serious research, about the scale of pregnancy and maternity discrimination and the need for the Government to take further action, particularly on tribunal fees. The House will have to return to the issue a number of times before we get to the situation we all want, where every pregnant woman and new mother is properly valued by their employer. However, this has been a helpful and useful debate and I particularly welcome the Minister's contribution.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered maternity discrimination.

4.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 14 July 2016

TREASURY

Ecofin

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council took place in Luxembourg on 17 June 2016. EU Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

Anti-tax avoidance directive

The Council reached political agreement to the anti-tax avoidance directive.

Financial transaction tax

A brief update was provided on the progress regarding implementing a financial transaction tax in participating member states. The UK is not taking part in the financial transaction tax.

Strengthening the banking union

Council conclusions were agreed on measures to strengthen the banking union.

Current legislative proposals

The presidency updated the Council on the state of play regarding a number of financial services dossiers.

State of play of the banking union

Belgium provided an update on its transposition of the bank resolution and recovery directive and the deposit guarantee scheme directive as the only remaining member state yet to complete this.

Analysis by the Commission on temporary VAT derogations (reverse charge mechanism)

The Commission agreed to bring forward a legislative proposal to allow certain member states to apply a generalised reversal of liability for VAT payments.

Implementation of the stability and growth pact

The Council endorsed decisions to close the excessive deficit procedures for Cyprus, Ireland and Slovenia.

Report of the European Court of Auditors on the excessive deficit procedure

The Council adopted conclusions on a report of the European Court of Auditors regarding the excessive deficit procedure. This item moved to an "A" point with no discussion.

Contribution to the European Council meeting on 28-29 June 2016

The Council prepared a number of items ahead of June European Council. Specifically, Ministers endorsed the 2016 country specific recommendations, part of the European semester process.

Following this, views were exchanged on a number of issues including economic and fiscal governance and the investment plan for Europe. The item on national productivity boards moved to an "A" point with no discussion.

[HCWS93]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): My noble friend, the Lords spokesman for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Lord Gardiner), represented the UK at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 27 and 28 June in Luxembourg.

Commissioner Hogan made a short presentation with an overview of the various agricultural commodity markets and summarised all the support measures already in place to support farmers. The commissioner urged those member states yet to declare their expenditure from the September package to make full use of it. The UK distributed its share of targeted aid in December 2015 to help producers with their immediate cash-flow. The commissioner concluded by confirming that he will bring forward a new package of measures at the July Council which was supported by a number of member states, most notably Germany, France and Poland.

The Chair of the Agricultural Markets Taskforce (AMT), Cees Veerman, presented the Council with an update on the proposals being prepared for autumn 2016. The AMT is focusing on helping producers manage price volatility by identifying new structural measures.

The presidency explained that its compromise text on sustainable management of external fishing fleets, now took account of member state requests to simplify the management systems and ensure consistency with the control regulation.

Commissioner Vella presented his policy orientation for the setting of fishing opportunities in 2017. He noted the good progress made in many seas and stocks, for example cod and plaice in the North Sea, but also the continuing problems in the Mediterranean. The UK argued that exceptions to reaching maximum sustainable yield targets would need to be made in some cases in order to avoid clashes with other objectives of the reformed common fisheries policy. Other MS, including the UK, pointed to the difficulties inherent in implementing the landing obligation, which will see an end to the wasteful practice of discarding of dead fish at sea.

Any other business items

The Commission updated the Council on the various initiatives which were tackling the serious state of the Mediterranean's fish stocks.

Finland called on the Commission to resolve an issue connected with an oversight in the common provisions' regulation.

Council conclusions for FLEGT were adopted.

The presidency announced the final report of the expert group on sustainable plant protection.

Commissioner Andriukaitis presented the recent Commission communication on endocrine disruptors.

[HCWS89]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

The agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) is expected to include Latin America, China, and external migration. Ms Mogherini is expected to raise in her introductory remarks a number of topics, including: climate diplomacy; security sector reform and capacity building for security and development; the quartet report on the middle east peace process; Afghanistan ministerial conference; and an EU external action service Iraq options paper. Ministers will have an informal discussion on the EU global strategy over lunch.

Latin America

On Cuba, discussions will focus on a new EU-Cuba political dialogue and co-operation agreement. Ministers will also discuss preparations for the EU-community of Latin America and Caribbean states (CELAC) ministerial summit, which will take place in the Dominican Republic in October. Council conclusions are expected on Venezuela.

China

The High Representative will update Ministers on the outcomes of the recent EU-China summit, which she attended in Beijing on 13 July with Presidents Tusk and Juncker. This was the first such meeting following the publication of the new EU-China strategy in June 2016.

Migration

Ministers will discuss the June European Council conclusions on the Commission communication on establishing a new partnership framework with third countries under the European agenda on migration. We remain committed to helping tackle irregular migration flows to Europe and support the broad thrust of the proposed partnerships-improving co-ordination between the activities of EU institutions and member states in targeted source and transit countries and making better use of all available tools. We also expect an exchange of views on priorities for the UNGA high-level event on large movements of migrants and refugees, which provides an opportunity for the international community to build a sustainable global response to large population movements and the issue of irregular migration.

[HCWS87]

HEALTH

Infected Blood Payment Scheme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): On 21 January 2016 the Government launched their consultation on reform of the current ex-gratia payment schemes for individuals infected with HIV and/or hepatitis C following treatment with NHS-supplied blood or blood products before September 1991. They sought views particularly from the beneficiaries of the current schemes and their clinicians but the consultation was open to all to respond. The full analysis of the responses, the detail of the final decisions for the new scheme and an overview of the transition arrangements are set out in the Government's formal consultation response published today.

The response is attached and can be found on the Department of Health's website at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/infected-blood-reform-of-financial-and-other-support>. The impact assessment and equalities impact assessment will be published on the same website before summer recess.

The Government recognise the suffering experienced by people as a result of this tragedy and the Prime Minister apologised on behalf of the Government in March 2015. Since 1988, successive Governments have set up five schemes to provide financial and other support to those affected. This Government committed further funding of up to £100 million (in January 2016) on top of the additional £25 million pledged by the Prime Minister in March 2015 and the existing baseline budget. This additional money will more than double the Department of Health's annual spend on the scheme over the spending review period. This is significantly more than any previous Government have provided for those affected by this tragedy.

Over the years, there has been criticism from different groups of beneficiaries and their representatives about the way that the current system has been set up and operates. It was clear from this criticism that a more accessible and equitable system of care and support was needed.

In making their decisions for the new scheme, the Government have taken full account of the 1,557 formal responses to the consultation and considered other feedback such as backbench debates on the issue, 21 parliamentary questions and 69 individual pieces of correspondence related to the consultation. The detailed description of the reformed scheme is contained in the consultation response document published today.

The key principles for the reformed scheme are that support will be simple, equitable and responsive to individuals' circumstances, and available resource will be focused on those whose health is most affected.

Specifically, the key aspects for the reformed scheme will be:

All infected individuals will now receive an annual payment. These annual payments will be linked to the consumer price index (CPI) and include the £500 winter fuel payments as a standard payment without the need to apply for it:

Those infected with hepatitis C at stage 1 will receive a new flat rate annual payment of £3,500 (rising to £4,500 from 2018-19) that is not linked to an individual assessment, as was proposed in the consultation—this will be the first time ongoing financial support will be provided for approximately 2,500 stage 1 beneficiaries.

Those with hepatitis C at stage 2 or those with HIV will see their annual payments increase to £15,500 (rising to £18,500 from 2018-19).

Those co-infected with HIV and hepatitis C at stage 1, will receive £18,500 (rising to £22,500 from 2018-19)

For those co-infected with HIV and hepatitis C at stage 2, will receive £30,500 (rising to £36,500 from 2018-19)

Discretionary support will not only continue but will be enhanced from 2018-19

A new special appeals mechanism for those at hepatitis C stage 1 who consider that the impact of their infection on their health may mean they could qualify for stage 2 payments will be introduced from 2017-18

Continuation of a £50,000 lump sum payment for those infected with hepatitis C stage 1 who progress to stage 2

In addition, partners/spouses at the time of death of a primary beneficiary will be entitled to a £10,000 one-off lump sum where the HIV/hepatitis C infection contributed to the death of their partner/spouse. This will apply to those already bereaved and newly bereaved.

All elements of the published reform package apply to the current spending review period of FY 2016-17 to FY 2020-21, during which a review of the scheme will

be undertaken. This review will particularly take account of the numbers being treated for Hepatitis C and the implications for the future operation of the scheme.

All payments will continue to be ex-gratia, which means they are funded voluntarily by Government. These payments will also continue to be additional to any other income a person may receive, and are disregarded for the purposes of calculating income tax and eligibility for other state benefits.

Increased annual payments and new annual payments will take effect this year and be backdated to April 2016. Lump sum payments for bereaved spouses/partners will also be implemented this year. Arrangements for a single new scheme administrator will be progressed in the current financial year and become operational in 2017-18.

The proposals for scheme reform described in the consultation document are for beneficiaries infected in England. Information gathered through the consultation has been shared with the health departments in the devolved Administrations and we will continue to work closely with them.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-07-14/HCWS88/>

[HCWS88]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Minister for Security (Mr John Hayes): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force (as of 31 May 2016)	1
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 31 May 2016)	1
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)	1
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)	1
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)	0
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	0
The number of current subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (as of 31 May 2016)	1

The TPIM review group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The TRG met on 22 and 23 March 2016 and 7 June 2016. The next TRG meetings will take place in September 2016.

[HCWS92]

SCOTLAND

Scotland Act: Commencement

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): In March this year, Her Majesty the Queen gave Royal Assent to the Scotland Act 2016, marking an important milestone in fulfilling the UK Government's commitment to make the Scottish Parliament one of the most powerful devolved parliaments in the world.

On 23 May, two months since Royal Assent, a number of important provisions in the Act came into force. These included new powers in relation to consumer advocacy and advice, gaming machines, equalities and transport, and marked an important milestone in the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government.

The Joint Ministerial Working Group on Welfare met in June to take forward discussions on commencement of the welfare sections of the Act. This was the first meeting of the group since the Scotland Act 2016 gained Royal Assent and since the new Scottish Parliament was elected. The UK and Scottish Governments both agreed an approach to commencing the welfare and employment support powers set out in the Act. This approach included bringing into force 11 welfare sections of the Scotland Act 2016.

I can today inform the House that, with the agreement of the Scottish Government, we will now commence the following sections of the Scotland Act 2016:

Section number: section title

24: Discretionary payments: top-ups of reserved benefits

25: Discretionary Housing Payments

26: Discretionary payments and assistance

28: Powers to create other new benefits;

29: Universal credit: costs of claimants who rent accommodation

30: Universal credit: persons to whom, and time when, paid

31: Employment support

32: Functions exercisable within devolved competence

33: Social Security Advisory Committee and Industrial Injuries Advisory Council

34: Information-sharing

35: Extension of unauthorised disclosure offence

Commencing these powers brings into force substantial new levers which will allow the Scottish Government to design a welfare system tailored to local needs, while maintaining our social union and the benefits of being part of the United Kingdom. For example, these regulations bring into force the power for the Scottish Parliament to create its own new benefits in any area of devolved responsibility.

The UK and Scottish Governments have been working together constructively to enable this and will continue to do so. We recognise the importance of ensuring the safe and secure transition of powers. Work is continuing on the remaining welfare sections of the Act and both Governments are committed to reaching an agreed approach on how they should be commenced. A further meeting of the Joint Ministerial Group on Welfare is expected to take place in the autumn.

I am pleased that the commencement regulations also include section 65 of the Scotland Act which enables Scottish Ministers to appoint a member to the Ofcom board. The section also requires Scottish Ministers to lay Ofcom's annual report and accounts before the Scottish Parliament and underlines my commitment to implementing the Scotland Act 2016 and the Smith Commission agreement.

The commencement regulations I have made today represent another milestone in making the Scottish Parliament one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world.

[HCWS90]

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

Electoral Registers

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (*Representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission*): The Electoral Commission has today published the last in its series of reports on the transition to individual electoral registration (IER) in Great Britain. This final report presents the findings from its study on the accuracy and completeness of the registers published in December 2015, at the end of the transition. The report also makes clear the commission's gratitude for the hard work done by parliamentarians, civil servants and, most significantly, electoral registration teams around the country to deliver this historic change to our electoral system.

The commission's study on the last household registers from 2014 found both accuracy and completeness to be 86% for the parliamentary registers, and 87% and 85% respectively for the local government registers. The new study on the December 2015 registers shows that the parliamentary registers were 85% complete and 91% accurate, while the local government registers were 84% complete and 91% accurate.

This means that, during the transition to IER between 10 June 2014 to 1 December 2015, the overall accuracy of the registers increased by an estimated four percentage points, and that completeness, while broadly appearing to be stable, has seen a decline of just under one percentage point. The commission estimates that, in December 2015, between 7.6 and 8.3 million eligible people were not correctly registered to vote.

These findings suggest that most, but not all, of the entries removed at the end of the transition to IER in December 2015 were inaccurate, largely due to people moving home, although not all of the improvement in accuracy can be attributed to the removal of entries at the end of the transition.

Parliament chose to bring the end of the transition—and hence the deletion of these entries—forward from December 2016 to December 2015. At the time, the commission recommended that the end of the transition should not be brought forward as it had no data on which to judge the nature of the entries that would be removed. In the absence of data, it also believed there was a risk that removing the entries ahead of the planned May 2016 polls would put the onus on individual voters to need to re-register rather than on EROs to check the accuracy of these entries.

These accuracy and completeness findings suggest that there was no notable effect on the completeness of the registers from the removal of these entries and that the main impact is likely to have been the improvement in accuracy.

The commission has identified issues which need addressing. On the 1 December registers, there has been a decline in completeness among nearly all the younger age groups, including an approximate nine percentage point decrease for those aged 18 to 19. There have also been declines among other groups associated with a more mobile population such as those renting from a private landlord.

These estimates of accuracy and completeness are for December 2015, a "snapshot" in the lifecycle of the registers. Historically, the December registers, published at the end of the canvass, were at their most accurate and complete.

However, evidence indicates that, under IER, people are increasingly likely to register to vote in the run-up to an electoral event compared to at other points during the year. The size of the electorate was larger in May 2015 and in June 2016 than it was in December 2015. At the EU referendum, the commission announced that there were 46,500,001 entries on the registers compared to the 43,478,635 that were on the equivalent 1 December 2015 registers, an increase of nearly 5% between December and June. This and other evidence indicate the completeness of the registers was likely to be higher in May 2015 and May/June 2016, when high-turnout polls took place, than it was in December 2015.

The commission is clear that more work is needed to improve the system of electoral registration and to ensure that as many voters as possible are registered.

It has made a number of recommendations for improving the system and has called on the Government to both respond and then move on these quickly. These recommendations include that Government should explore how the online system can be upgraded so that people can check whether they are registered and also begin a programme of feasibility studies to examine in more detail how future systemic changes could be delivered, with pilots conducted to support this. The commission has suggested that initial priorities for this should include exploring options for the automatic registration of 16 and 17-year-olds and a focus on ways to ensure home movers are less likely to drop off the register. These should be the start of a co-ordinated strategy to move to a system of more automatic registration that could also eventually lead to "election day registration".

The commission welcomes the work currently being undertaken to introduce online registration for electors in Northern Ireland.

The commission is aware that legislation for the current review of UK parliamentary constituencies has already been approved by Parliament. It has, however, invited the UK and Scottish Parliaments to consider whether it would be more appropriate in future to base constituency and boundary reviews on electorate data taken from the registers used for elections, instead of a snapshot of the electoral registers from December.

Copies of the commission's report have been placed in the Library and it is also available on the commission's website: www.electoralcommission.org.uk.

[HCWS91]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 14 July 2016

JUSTICE

Safety of Prison Staff

The following is an extract from the urgent question on the Safety of Prison Staff on 11 July 2016.

Michael Gove: I hope the hon. Lady will excuse me as I turn to my notes in order to give her the exact figure. The last year for which we have figures was 2014-15 and

the National Tactical Response Group was called out 400 times during that year, so that was just over once every day.

[Official Report, 11 July 2016, Vol. 613, c. 42.]

Letter of correction from Michael Gove:

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) during the urgent question on the Safety of Prison Staff.

The correct response should have been:

Michael Gove: I hope the hon. Lady will excuse me as I turn to my notes in order to give her the exact figure. The last year for which we have figures was 2014-15 and the National Tactical Response Group was called out **360** times during that year, so that was just over once every day.

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Thursday 21 July 2016**

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