

Tuesday
18 October 2016

Volume 615
No. 44



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 18 October 2016

House of Commons

Tuesday 18 October 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Kashmir

1. **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the political and security situation in Kashmir. [906637]

12. **Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): What recent diplomatic steps the Government have taken to support resolution of the conflict in Kashmir. [906649]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) cares deeply about Kashmir and has visited the region. I am concerned by recent events in Kashmir. I have in recent weeks met representatives from the Governments of both India and Pakistan and urged calm and restraint on both sides. I will continue to do so.

Jason McCartney: Has the Minister seen the reports of hundreds of Kashmiri protesters suffering eye injuries because of the indiscriminate use of pellet guns, and will he please speak out against it?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am of course concerned by those reports. He may also know that the use of pellet guns in Kashmir has come under review by the Government of India. The results of that review have not yet been shared publicly, but it has been indicated that alternative methods of crowd control will be introduced.

Kelvin Hopkins: The tragic recent history of Kashmir arose from the partition of India, which was managed by Britain after world war two. Does not Britain therefore have a special responsibility to help to find a solution to Kashmir's troubles and the suffering of the Kashmiri people?

Alok Sharma: The UK of course has very good relations with both India and Pakistan, but our long-standing position, held by successive Governments of all hues, is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a

lasting resolution to the situation, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or act as mediator.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): There are no winners in Kashmir. The recent clashes have impacted on thousands of people and the economy is struggling, with over £1 million or 10,000 crore being lost in 100 days. A military solution is not working. I urge the Minister to encourage a political solution that involves not only India and Pakistan, but the Kashmiris themselves.

Alok Sharma: We should of course do all we can to promote trade and prosperity in the region, and that of course follows stability.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): As has been stated, in Kashmir we have seen more than 100 civilians killed, hundreds blinded and over 13,000 injured through the indiscriminate use of pellet guns against protesters. Will the Minister today condemn this shocking abuse of human rights? Does he not believe that we, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, have a responsibility to support and uphold UN resolution 47 and allow the sons and daughters of Kashmir their birth right to self-determination?

Alok Sharma: As I have noted, I am of course concerned by reports of the use of pellet guns, and of course any allegations of human rights abuses should be investigated thoroughly, promptly and transparently.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Will the Minister speak to officials at No. 10 and urge the Prime Minister to raise this issue during her forthcoming visit to India?

Alok Sharma: The UK of course shares a long-standing and deep friendship with India, and I am delighted that the Prime Minister has announced that she will visit India in November. The visit will be an important opportunity to discuss the full range of bilateral issues with Prime Minister Modi.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The previous Foreign Secretary said in March that the question of Kashmir should be a precondition for the resumption of talks between India and Pakistan. Since then, Kashmir has seen more than 100 days of unrest and the exchange of artillery fire between Pakistan and India. What specifically is the Foreign Secretary doing to bring about an end to the violence and to assist in the resumption of talks?

Alok Sharma: As I have said, of course we have very good relations with both India and Pakistan, including strong diaspora links. They are two proud nations. We encourage both countries to maintain good relations but, as I have noted, we recognise that the pace of progress is for both sides to determine.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): With both India and Pakistan facing immense issues in their own countries to sort out, one would have thought that there would be an appetite to resolve this issue. Why does the Minister think that actually that appetite does not seem to exist in either country?

Alok Sharma: This is of course a very important matter, and we raise these issues with both Governments. Ultimately, however, it is for both sides to progress the issue and determine the outcome.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): On behalf of the Opposition, I associate myself with the Minister's remarks. The recent upsurge in violent clashes and terrorist attacks in Kashmir is deeply disturbing. We urge all sides to engage in dialogue, halt the cycle of violence and keep innocent civilians from harm. We have heard today about the use of pellet guns against protesters in Kashmir, which is totally unacceptable. Will the Minister and the Secretary of State urge the Indian authorities to make good on their commitment to stop the use of those weapons?

Alok Sharma: As I have noted on a number of occasions, the use of pellet guns in Kashmir has come under review by the Government of India, and our understanding is that alternative methods of crowd control will be introduced.

Russian Federation

2. **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the UK's relations with the Russian Federation. [906638]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Of course it is right that the UK and the Russian Federation should continue to co-operate and to engage in all the areas where we have common interests, but in view of the ruthless and brutal behaviour of the Russians in Ukraine and in Syria, I hope the House will agree that it is right that the UK should be in the lead in keeping the pressure on sanctions, and it cannot be business as usual with Russia.

Chris Bryant: I agree. Putin's behaviour has been despicable: murdering his own opponents—assassinating political opponents such as Boris Nemtsov—as well as the invasion of Georgia and Crimea, and now the despicable behaviour in Syria, where he tries to draw a moral equivalence between British and American bombing of military installations run by Daesh and Russia's and Assad's bombing of innocent civilians in hospitals in Aleppo. This is immoral. I am not sure that demonstrations outside the Russian embassy will make any odds, but what might make a difference is if we stopped Putin's cronies coming to London. Why on earth do we still allow those who were involved in the murder of Sergei Magnitsky to come to this country? Will the Foreign Secretary go and demonstrate against the Home Secretary to make sure she changes the rules?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful for the question, because the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out that there is no symmetry whatever between the actions of the Russians and the Assad regime, and the Americans and others on the other side. Just in the last 11 months, Russian bombing alone has been responsible for the deaths of 3,189 civilians, of whom 763 were children. In those circumstances, it is absolutely right that we should be keeping up the sanctions regime not just on Russia but on key members—key associates—of the Putin regime.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the particularly vile activities, which he has so eloquently described, of Russia in Syria have been allowed to happen because of several years of weakness and inconsistency in western policy towards that area? Does he further agree that if we want to hold the ring, the importance of being seen to be absolutely solidly behind NATO has never been stronger?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is of course absolutely right to say that the vacuum left by the decision of, I am afraid, this House and, indeed, the Obama Administration in 2013 not to oppose the Assad regime has allowed the Russians to move into that space. It is vital that we keep up the pressure not just with sanctions but with the threat of justice in the International Criminal Court.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Is it not unfortunate that, in Russia itself, print and social media are being gagged? Hence the reason I have little sympathy for the complaints made today by Russia Today, which is undoubtedly a form of propaganda constantly used by Putin and his gang. What is now happening as far as the media are concerned is surely the same as happened under communism and, before that, tsarism: repression at home, and hostility and aggression abroad.

Boris Johnson: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I noted the decision of NatWest bank to withdraw support for RT. That was a wholly independently taken decision, I wish to assure the House, in spite of what we may have heard this morning from Moscow. One of the things we are doing to promote free and fair information in Russia is, of course, to support the BBC World Service.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Oleg Sentsov is a Ukrainian film maker imprisoned for 20 years in Russia for his pro-Ukrainian views. Will the Government send a strong message to the Russian Government condemning Sentsov's imprisonment and demanding his immediate release?

Boris Johnson: We are indeed concerned by the number of Ukrainian nationals who have voiced their opposition to what has happened—the illegal annexation of Crimea—and who face lengthy jail sentences, including Mr Sentsov and Mr Oleksandr Kolchenko. We are appealing to the Russian authorities to release them immediately.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Last March, President Putin was praised for his ruthless clarity in retaking Palmyra. By August, the Foreign Secretary had said that he wanted to normalise relationships with Russia, and last week he called for the people to demonstrate outside the Russian embassy in London. Where is the political consistency, and how does this approach build trust in the diplomatic community?

Boris Johnson: I think the House will have heard very clearly that on matters where we can co-operate with Russia it is absolutely vital that we do so. On the point about demonstrations outside the Russian embassy, I merely draw attention to the paradox and the peculiarity that the Stop the War Coalition has never seen fit to demonstrate against the barbarism taking place in Aleppo.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary take this opportunity to welcome the visit this week of Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, who is meeting the Queen? I know a bit about Russian Orthodoxy, having been married within the Church. The Russian Orthodox Church has suffered appallingly, particularly in Soviet times, but it is growing now. This is an opportunity for the Foreign Secretary to make it clear that whatever our differences with the Russian Government at the moment, we have absolutely nothing but support for the Russian people and her faith, and their perseverance in times of trial.

Boris Johnson: I defer to my hon. Friend's knowledge of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is important that we keep open all lines of communication. Archbishop Kirill may have some interesting points to make. It would be even more important if he took back a message from the UK that we do not tolerate what is happening in Crimea, in eastern Ukraine, and, above all, in Syria. I hope that his visit will be a factor for change in the Kremlin.

EU Referendum

3. **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on the outcome of the EU referendum. [906639]

8. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with his counterparts in other European countries on the timetable for the UK leaving the EU. [906644]

10. **Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on the outcome of the EU referendum. [906647]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Since becoming Foreign Secretary, I have engaged with many of my counterparts across Europe and beyond, including partners as far afield as Turkey and Japan. Those discussions have of course touched on the outcome of the referendum and the Government's plans to enact the result.

Lucy Allan: My right hon. Friend kindly visited my constituency last year, so he will know that there are many Japanese employers in Telford. Will he please tell the House what assurances he has given to his Japanese counterpart that post-Brexit global Britain is still a great place to do business?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend will know that since the referendum result there has been a £24 billion investment from Japan in this country from SoftBank alone, and Japanese investment continues to come into this country. I think that all Japanese investors, and indeed investors around the world, can be secure in the knowledge that we will get the best possible deal for goods and services that will allow their companies to flourish and to prosper in this country as never before.

Chris Law: The Secretary of State will be aware that the timetable for leaving is triggering instability and uncertainty in the economy, so much so that the Cabinet is considering spending billions to keep single market

access for the City of London. What is the timetable for the same support to be applied to Scotland, where 62% of us voted to remain?

Boris Johnson: The people of Scotland obviously had a referendum in 2014 and voted convincingly to remain in the United Kingdom. This was a United Kingdom decision. We will continue the negotiations as a United Kingdom, and we will get a fantastic deal for this country and a strong deal for the EU—both a strong UK and a strong EU.

Alberto Costa: The Honourable Luigi Di Maio, the deputy speaker of the Italian chamber of deputies, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and I met three weeks ago, confirmed in yesterday's edition of *The Times* that Britain should retain access to the single market and control its migrants. Will the Foreign Secretary reciprocate by confirming on Italian media the welcome comments made by the Honourable Luigi Di Maio? Will he also confirm that Italians continue to be welcome across the United Kingdom?

Boris Johnson: Tutti gli Italiani sono benvenuti a Londra.

Chris Bryant: Not allowed!

Boris Johnson: I am sorry—forgive me.

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I think that Rai TV has been requesting an interview with me for some time on this matter, and that is the most ingenious interview application I have yet heard. I will certainly do what I can to assist. Italians and all nationals from EU member states can have the assurance that their status here will of course be protected, provided that there is symmetry and reciprocity on the other side.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): When the Secretary of State met John Kerry recently, did he have the opportunity to discuss the American chamber of commerce report, which will apparently land in the Cabinet Office this week and which warns that American companies with \$600 billion-worth of investment in Britain are currently reviewing the situation because of uncertainty about our future unfettered access to the single market? Next time the Brexit Sub-Committee of the Cabinet meets, will the Secretary of State support the Chancellor in standing up to the hard Brexiters, who seem to want to do such untold damage to our economy?

Boris Johnson: I have not yet seen the American chamber of commerce report because, by the right hon. Gentleman's own account, it has not yet been published. I have no doubt that American companies, in common with all companies around the world outside the UK and the EU, will find the UK in future an even better place to invest in and to bring their corporations to, because of the natural advantages of time zone, language and skills that this country enjoys.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Given that the 170-odd countries outside the EU successfully trade with it—some have trade deals and some do not—what does the Secretary of State have to say to those pessimists and remoaners who continue to believe

that we, with the fifth largest economy in the world, cannot thrive outside the EU, particularly given his additional list of suggestions and the fact that business costs are relative and it costs a lot more to do business on the continent?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I deprecate the terms “pessimists”, “gloomadon-poppers” and “remoaners”. We are all in this together and everybody wants to make a great success of Brexit. I have no doubt at all that this country will be able to do a fantastic deal with our friends and partners in the European Union, and simultaneously become even more attractive to investors from around the world, with a new series of stunning free trade agreements.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): How does the Foreign Secretary explain to his counterparts his support for Turkey’s accession to the European Union, since that was used by the Brexiteers as a reason for getting the UK out? Did he campaign for Turkey’s accession in order to get the UK out, or did he campaign for the UK to get out in order to support Turkey’s accession?

Boris Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman will know, because we had a debate on this very subject during the course of the referendum campaign, that I am a passionate advocate of Turkish membership of the EU, if that is indeed what the Turks want—sometimes they seem to change their minds these days—always provided that the UK has left before that day.

Alex Salmond: I have here an article written by the Foreign Secretary—I think there is only one of this one—in which he argues, immediately after the referendum campaign, for full participation in the single marketplace. If it was okay for the leader of the Brexiteers to argue for full participation in the single marketplace after the referendum, why is it not okay for people on this side of the House to try to force that issue to a vote in the House of Commons?

Boris Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman will know full well that it is completely unrealistic to expect the Government to put their negotiating position to a vote in this House before those negotiations are concluded. That has never happened before. I remember all sorts of negotiations on Maastricht and other European treaties, and they were never put to this House before they were concluded, as he knows full well.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): There has been reference to the draft newspaper column in favour of remain that the Secretary of State wrote in February. He wrote:

“This is a market on our doorstep, ready for further exploitation by British firms...Why are we so determined to turn our back on it?”

The argument he made back then is exactly why we on this side of the House are so concerned about a hard Brexit that would put our access to the market at risk and risk the jobs of British people. Why does the Secretary of State no longer agree with himself?

Boris Johnson: Most people will understand that the arguments have moved on and that the people have spoken overwhelmingly. Indeed, one of the most powerful cases that could possibly have been made for leave

was to be found in the article that I wrote for remain. Everybody who has read it has told me that they emerged from it feeling a profound sense of obligation to leave the European Union, and they were quite right. That analysis, I am afraid, is absolutely justified and I am delighted that the people voted accordingly.

Syria

4. **Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab):** What progress he has made on diplomatic negotiations with his counterparts in countries bordering Syria to allow (a) aid to reach refugees and (b) refugees to leave safely. [906640]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): We support the UN’s response to the Syria crisis and its regional impact. We have allocated £1.1 billion to Syria’s neighbours to help them to meet their humanitarian obligations, while maintaining border security. We work closely with them to provide humanitarian aid, as well as job and education opportunities for refugees.

Thangam Debbonaire: An estimated 75,000 to 100,000 refugees, mostly women and children, are trapped without food and with little aid in the Berm, an area of no man’s land on the Syrian-Jordanian border. Given that Jordan already has thousands of refugees, if the next military target is to be Raqqa, the capital of ISIS, with an inevitable further flow of refugees towards the Jordanian border, what will the Foreign Secretary do to assist Jordan now and in the future?

Boris Johnson: We are in regular contact with the Jordanian authorities to assist the humanitarian situation in the Berm. We are one of the biggest deliverers of aid to the area. In recent months we have had meetings on several occasions with the Government of Jordan to try to address growing concerns about conditions, and I know that the Prime Minister has raised that.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): One of the many barriers to creating safe routes out of Syria is the Syrian Government’s practice of declaring stolen passports belonging to those who oppose them. Will the Foreign Secretary, as a matter of some urgency, speak to his colleague the Home Secretary about the position of Zaina Erhaim, an award-winning Syrian journalist who recently had her passport confiscated as she came into Heathrow?

Boris Johnson: I am aware of the case. It is very difficult, because we must, in law, confiscate passports that have been stolen, but we are doing what we can to assist the lady in question.¹

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for that update. As he knows, the United Nations envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has described the presence of some 1,000 jihadi fighters in eastern Aleppo as an “easy alibi” for the Russian and Syrian forces to justify their bombardment. Will the Secretary of State today support de Mistura’s proposals to offer the jihadi fighters some sort of passage out of the city so that they can be dealt with in an international criminal court?

1. [Official Report, 8 November 2016, Vol. 616, c. 4MC.]

Boris Johnson: The reality is that no such proposal can conceivably be made to work in the absence of a cessation of hostilities by the Russians and the Assad regime. That is the precondition. A durable and convincing ceasefire must be delivered by the Assad regime before any such proposal can conceivably be made to work.

Somalia

5. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the security situation in Somalia; and if he will make a statement. [906641]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I visited Mogadishu in August and was pleased to see that after decades of civil war and transitional governance, Somalia is now making significant and remarkable progress. However, security and governance need to improve, and al-Shabaab is far from defeated.

Sir Henry Bellingham: The Foreign Office deserves great credit for making us the only EU country to reopen its embassy in Mogadishu, as announced in the Anglo-Somali summit in February 2012 at Lancaster House. Does the Minister agree that now that al-Shabaab has been pushed out of Mogadishu and other cities such as Kismayo and Baidoa, it is essential that local government structures are built up so that communities can be properly represented? What is the Foreign Office doing to help that?

Mr Ellwood: First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for organising, as former Africa Minister, the very conference that he mentioned on Somalia in 2012, which helped to galvanise international support for Somalia. He is absolutely right. We need to work on the governance structures, and a federated model has come to the fore. We need to support the AMISOM troops as well. There is much work to be done. Although al-Shabaab has been pushed out of the capital cities, it is still in the south of the country.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): While considering the security situation in Somalia, how does the Minister assess the role of Ethiopia, and what impact is the continued detention of British citizen Andy Tsege having on our relations with the Ethiopian regime?

Mr Ellwood: I am aware of the state of emergency that Ethiopia has introduced, and I will certainly look at the consular case that the hon. Gentleman raises and perhaps write to him with more details. However, I would pass on congratulations to Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and the other countries that are providing forces and making an important contribution to the support and stability of Somalia.

Aleppo Bombings

6. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What representations he has made to his Russian counterparts on the bombings of civilian areas and humanitarian aid convoys in Aleppo. [906642]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I met Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in New York on 21 September, which was two days after the bombing of the aid convoy, and we obviously focused on Syria in those discussions. As I have told the House already, I pressed him to do what I think the world wants Russia to do, which is to bring pressure to bear on the Assad regime to have a ceasefire.

Dr Huq: The Foreign Secretary may not be its biggest fan, but even the European Council yesterday found that Russia's use of chemical weapons and its targeting of civilians are war crimes. Having now distanced himself from demos at the embassy, will he make sure that the UK leads in advocating UN veto restraint, because as long as Russia has such a "get out of jail free" card, resolutions will be ignored and an appalling situation will get worse?

Boris Johnson: The hon. Lady will be interested to know that at that European Council—I participated in it fully and, if I may say so, happily, because we are still fully paid-up members—the UK delegation introduced language specifically targeting Russia and took out language seeking to create a false equivalence between Russia and the US.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend remember that in 2005, Her Majesty's Government, along with every other member of the General Assembly of the United Nations, signed up to the responsibility to protect? Having just voted to take back control in this country, is it not appalling that we are bowing down to a bully in the middle east who, instead of taking seriously their responsibility to protect, is brutalising and murdering millions of people in Syria?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is quite right. As you will appreciate, Mr Speaker, the UK has been in the lead in the UN Security Council in bringing pressure to bear on Russia not just on its use of chemical weapons, but on its continuing refusal to get the Syrian regime to have a ceasefire. Furthermore, we are in the lead in trying to bring all responsible parties to the International Criminal Court.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): In response to this and other atrocities, the Foreign Secretary said in the Commons last week that "more kinetic options" should be considered, but then only the day before yesterday, emerging from his talks, he said there was little interest, to say the least. Please will he reassure the House that the UK will play its full role in urging other nations to accept that that may be the only way to make Russia back down?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I have to say that I admire his spirit and the urgency that he has brought to this debate. I think the mood is certainly changing in this country. I do not yet detect a sufficient appetite in the capitals of the west, and certainly not yet in the White House, for the kind of action that I think could be useful, but, as Secretary Kerry said, nothing is "off the table".

Trade with Africa

7. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on promoting trade with Africa during and after the process of the UK leaving the EU. [906643]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Following the EU referendum result and the formation of the Department for International Trade, both the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for International Trade have been engaged in positioning us as a partner of choice for countries across Africa.

Chi Onwurah: As chair of the all-party group on Africa, I recently led a delegation to Namibia and South Africa to look at trade and economic development. There is huge concern there and across Africa about the impact of Brexit, particularly on the European economic partnership agreements that currently govern trade agreements. This is undermining developing economies. Will the Minister confirm that leaving the single market will mean abandoning these agreements, and will he estimate how long it will take to negotiate agreements with each of the 54 African countries?

Mr Ellwood: May I first pay tribute to the work the hon. Lady does on the all-party group on Africa, and indeed to the work of all such all-party groups and of the Prime Minister's trade envoys, many of whom are in the Chamber? That work reflects our desire to do more business post-Brexit. We are trusted, we are engaged and indeed we are committed to doing more in those countries, and South Africa is just one example of that. She raises the very important point that a number of countries have signed deals or are about to sign deals with the European Union on trade; some of them are now bowing out, saying, "Let's wait to see what happens with Brexit." It is important that we strike the necessary bilateral deals as we move forward.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): As well as encouraging trade with Africa, what can Her Majesty's Government do to increase trade between African countries, particularly in the Great Lakes area?

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to my predecessor as Minister for Africa for the superb work he did in pioneering and strengthening Britain's relationship with this important continent. These countries want to do business with us; we want to do business with them. It is important that they are also encouraged to do business with each other. The Great Lakes is a great example of that—a massive infrastructure project is being carried out to get oil out of the country through a number of other countries. It will also assist countries such as South Sudan, which could do with the revenue. Britain can come forward with our expertise in that area.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It took the European Union 12 years to negotiate the economic partnership agreement between itself and Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and

Swaziland, which was finally signed in June. Will the UK Government seriously have to begin that process all over again?

Mr Ellwood: I suggest to the SNP that they understand where we are now. The result is there and Brexit is where we are—that has been made clear already. We now have an opportunity to embrace it and go to those countries and sign deals. That is where we should be, not looking through the small print to ask why we cannot do any of those things.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): From the Gambia to South Africa, the Commonwealth offers great potential for expanding trade with Africa. Will the Minister make sure that we make full use of those opportunities to secure trade deals and get exporting to those emerging economies?

Mr Ellwood: When trade opportunities arise, it is not simply just having companies that want to work there, it is also the element of trust that exists between the two nations. Our legacy, heritage and history—and the trust that exists—are exactly what we need to leverage, as well as the wonderful companies that we have to provide support across a wide range of sectors.

Iraq

9. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his (a) Iraqi and (b) other international counterparts on the political situation in Iraq. [906645]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I met the Iraqi Foreign Minister, Dr Ibrahim al-Jaafari, last week here in London at the Iraq-UK bilateral forum. The Foreign Secretary and I met other Foreign and Defence Ministers at the Washington conference on defeating Daesh held in the summer.

Stephen Metcalfe: As my hon. Friend will know, the Kurdistan regional government has, for a long time, been short-changed—if not cut off completely—by the Government in Baghdad. Although there are some promising signs, Iraqi federalism needs to be genuine, with reliable revenue sharing. Will my hon. Friend convey that to his Iraqi counterparts and remind them of the contribution that the Kurds and the peshmerga are making in pushing back the advances of Daesh?

Mr Ellwood: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the incredible work and bravery of the peshmerga. They are one of the toughest fighting forces in Iraq, and it is important that they are working with the newly trained Iraqi forces in the liberation of the city of Mosul, which has now begun. He is also right to raise concerns about the relationship between Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq. We have long maintained that it is important, and in our interests, to see a united Iraq, but recognising the federated models. It is in the constitution and, to that end, I was pleased that the bilateral forum that we had last week also included Falah Mustafa, the spokesman on foreign affairs for Kurdistan.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): When I visited Iraq earlier this year with the Defence Committee, it was clear that we were moving much more slowly politically than we were militarily. What support is the Minister providing to Iraqi politicians more broadly to help to keep up with the military solutions as we progress in Mosul?

Mr Ellwood: I welcome visits such as that conducted by the Defence Committee. The more engagement we have to see what is happening on the ground, the better we can understand the challenges that are faced. The hon. Lady is right to highlight one challenge that Iraq faces. As Daesh is pushed out of the country, more and more focus will be on the domestic matters that will then start to plague it. Sectarian tensions remain, the de-Ba'athification process still needs to come through, and we still need to look at counter-terrorism laws and accountability laws that must be pushed through. I can guarantee, however, that our embassy and our ambassador, Frank Baker, are doing excellent work to support the Government of Iraq.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I know the good work that Ambassador Frank Baker and his colleagues are doing in Baghdad and Erbil to make progress move along, and we should be very appreciative of their efforts.

On political developments in particular, what are the Minister's observations on whether lessons have been learned on the issue of Sunni exclusion, which has so bedevilled political development in Iraq in recent years, and does he have greater hopes that the current Government will address that issue as the country moves forward?

Mr Ellwood: This is quite a collection, as my right hon. Friend is now the third former Minister for either the middle east or Africa whom I have addressed. It is an honour that they are here providing their wisdom to the Chamber—[*Interruption.*] I will watch my back.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on the sectarian tensions I mentioned. We got it wrong, or rather Iraq got it wrong under the Malaki Government back in 2013. The absence of including Sunnis in Iraqi society led to the creation of the space for Daesh in the first place. The United Nations Development Programme and the Iraqi Government are working extremely hard to make sure that we get this right. The day after the guns fall silent in Mosul, what happens next? There must be a Sunni-led approach to ensuring that there is peace in Mosul.

Mr Speaker: No one can dispute the comprehensiveness of the Minister's answers, for which we are grateful, but we do have time constraints.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) mentioned the Kurdistan Regional Government, and the Minister will be aware that the KRG is hosting not just hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria, but potentially 1 million internally displaced Iraqis. As they are not refugees, they do not receive the support or recognition that they need. If the conflict in Mosul leads to hundreds of thousands more refugees, will the Minister provide more support from our Government to the KRG?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman touches on a very serious matter that is challenging, to say the least. The UNDP recognises that once the liberation of Mosul takes place, refugees will flood out of the capital city in different directions, including into Kurdistan. When I visited, the camps were not in place. The refugees were in schools, preventing the beginning of the school curriculum in September. We pay tribute to the work of Kurdistan. Indeed, much in our DFID programmes has gone to support refugees in that part of Iraq.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The effort to free all areas of Iraq from Daesh control is fully supported on the Labour Benches. The ongoing effort to retake Mosul will play a vital role in that strategy. How does the Minister plan to ensure that the civilian population will be protected from the fighting and that civilians fleeing Mosul will receive the humanitarian help that they need?

Mr Ellwood: As I mentioned, the UNDP is co-ordinating all aspects of the UN. Working with the Iraqis, it is taking the lead on the stabilisation and reconstruction of the city. Prime Minister Abadi has made it clear that no peshmerga—no Kurdish forces—or Shi'ite mobilisation forces should enter the city. This is a predominantly Sunni city and it should be liberated initially by Sunni Iraqi forces. A civilian-trained police force will provide important security after that.

Syria

11. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Syrian opposition. [906648]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I spoke to Dr Riad Hijab, the general co-ordinator of the Syrian High Negotiations Committee, on 6 October and again on 13 October. We discussed the importance of the Syrian opposition's continued commitment to the political process.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What importance does my right hon. Friend attach to countries in the region in bringing together the Syrian opposition?

Boris Johnson: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend. As the House may know, on 7 September we had a meeting in London, together with the High Negotiations Committee led by Dr Riad Hijab, of the interested parties in the region. He set out what I think was a very compelling case for a post-Assad Syria with a broad-based Government and pluralist democracy. I think they have a plan for 30% female representation in their politics, which is perhaps better even than the Labour party. He answers one of the key questions: is there a future for Syria after Assad? There most certainly is—and a great one, too.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am saving the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) up. I call Alison McGovern.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is not just the Syrian opposition but Syrian civil society and non-governmental organisations in this country who are

calling for our Government to lead on a comprehensive strategy to protect civilians, including a no-bombing zone. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that our Government will now take a lead in considering this strategy?

Boris Johnson: I pay tribute to the forcefulness with which the hon. Lady has advocated this course. I must say that I wish that, three years ago, the then Labour Opposition had been as resolute in wishing to see that kind of engagement to protect the people of Syria. A critical decision was taken then, as the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) well remembers, which has made things much more difficult for us today. I want to see the will of this House clearly expressed in support of what the hon. Lady has said.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The fact of the matter is that with America increasingly absorbed by a sometimes surreal presidential election, France and Germany facing elections of their own next year, Secretary Kerry soon to leave office and a change of leadership at the UN, a degree of paralysis has entered into the negotiation process on Syria—

Mr Speaker: I call the Foreign Secretary.

Boris Johnson *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I rather thought that the right hon. Gentleman had finished. That was a fairly long inquiry, but if he has a short sentence, will he please blurt it out?

Boris Johnson: I thought my right hon. Friend's question was excellent. It goes to the heart of what is happening at the moment. As I said earlier, the space vacated by western powers has been occupied, I am afraid, by the Russians. We need to do whatever we can now to put pressure on the Russians—through sanctions, through the threat of the International Criminal Court—*[Interruption.]* Indeed, and through measures such as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) suggests from a sedentary position. These measures are already in place in this country.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Foreign Secretary aware that although many people in Syria and in the aid agencies can understand the sort of bombastic bluster that he is so good at, the fact is that serious diplomacy will require a calm, rational approach if we are to secure peace in Syria?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman but, alas, I think that what is really needed at this stage is a tough approach, because the primary cause of the suffering of the people of Aleppo is the Syrian regime. That is overwhelmingly responsible for the deaths of 400,000 people in the conflict so far. That regime is backed by its Russian puppeteers, and it would be a fatal mistake if we were now to lose sight of that priority, and to give up on applying the pressure that is needed on Russia and its Syrian clients.

Italian Passports

13. **Richard Fuller** (Bedford) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Italian embassy in London on ensuring the timely provision of Italian passports to UK residents. [906650]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The issuing of Italian passports is a matter for the Italian authorities. There have therefore been no discussions so far with the Italian embassy about the issuing of Italian passports to Italians.

Richard Fuller: Bedford is proudly home to a large multi-generational Italian community that has relied on our local honorary consul for the provision of their Italian passports. There has been a sustained and large increase in demand for Italian passports, and I am told that capacity at the Italian embassy is limited. Will the Minister please raise this issue with the ambassador?

Sir Alan Duncan: There are in the UK, and especially in Bedford, a number of British nationals who are eligible for an Italian passport and have recently applied for one. That is, as I said, a matter for the Italian Government, but I can assure my hon. Friend that I will raise the matter with them as appropriate.

21. [906659] **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): Due to the uncertainty created about the future of EU citizens living in the UK and the Government's obsession with reducing immigration, does the Secretary of State agree that it is now easier and more secure for EU nationals to become a citizen of Asgardia—a recently founded nation state in space—than it is to remain a valued citizen of a country where they have lived and to which they have contributed for many years?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think that the issue of the fate of such people is rather more serious than the tone adopted by the hon. Lady in the House today.

Mr Speaker: We are short of time, but I want to hear Kelly Tolhurst.

Yemen

14. **Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): What support his Department is providing towards the finding of a political solution to the conflict in Yemen. [906651]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Foreign Secretary hosted a meeting on Yemen with key international partners and the UN envoy, Ismail Ahmed, on Sunday, when it was agreed that the UN would present a road map for a political settlement to both parties as soon as possible. The UK and the US have called for an immediate ceasefire on all sides.

Mr Speaker: I understand that this is being grouped, at the request of the Government, with Question 15.

Mr Ellwood: With your permission, Sir.

Mr Speaker: Indeed. That was what I was volunteering.

15. **Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): If he will review the UK's support for the Saudi-led coalition forces operating in Yemen. [906652]

Kelly Tolhurst: The Yemeni population continues to suffer from preventable military incidents carried out by both sides in the conflict, most recently at the funeral where 140 were killed and 500 injured. Given the Minister's timely and important visit to Riyadh last week, what

assessment was he able to make of the standard of the regional initiative seeking to address the high number of civilian casualties?

Mr Ellwood: This was a tragic event, and our sympathy and concern go out to all those affected by it. It was also a huge mistake, and it is important for Saudi Arabia to be able to investigate it properly. My purpose in travelling to Saudi Arabia was to enforce that message from the Prime Minister, and to say that we needed an accurate understanding and investigation of what had taken place. Saudi Arabia has already produced an initial document that shows that its hand is going up in recognition of a huge breach of standard operating procedures. According to that document, at least one individual will be charged, and there are now plans to provide humanitarian support for those who have been injured.

Catherine McKinnell: The scenes of destruction and starving children in Yemen put the international community to shame. Does the Minister agree that in no circumstances should British weapons be used to target civilians, and if so, what are the Government doing to prevent that from happening?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady has raised the important question of who is doing the bombing, what is actually happening, and how those responsible can be made accountable. There is no doubt that this is a very difficult war. One of my reasons for inviting the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, to the House yesterday to meet parliamentarians was to ensure that everyone here could put those very questions, and so that he could hear from our Parliament about concerns that have been expressed not just yesterday, or indeed today, but over a number of months. A coalition has been put together under United Nations resolution 2216 to support President Hadi. We must ensure that that war is legitimate, but let us not forget that the devastation has been caused by Houthis as well.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The whole House will welcome the announcement of a 72-hour ceasefire in Yemen, which will begin on Wednesday night. We share the hope of the United Nations that that can become the basis of a lasting peace, and that the children of Yemen can now receive the humanitarian relief that they so desperately need. However, as the Secretary of State observed in respect of Aleppo last week, and indeed today, the end of a conflict does not end the need to investigate possible violations of international humanitarian law. When can we expect full, independent, UN-led investigations of the thousands of airstrikes on civilian targets in Yemen?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady received her answer when she posed the very same question to the Foreign Minister yesterday. It is standard for any country engaged in warfare, when a mistake is made, to conduct its own investigation and produce a report. I have said in the Chamber that if I feel that that report—or any report—is undervalued and is somehow to be dismissed, I will certainly join the hon. Lady and others in saying that there should be an independent UN-led investigation. After I visited Saudi Arabia, however, we saw a report that made very clear exactly what had happened. I have

encouraged people, as I did at yesterday's meeting, to say that there are reports outstanding. There are not thousands, as the hon. Lady suggested—that is to mislead the House—but there are a number with which we are concerned that need to be clarified.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure that the word “inadvertent”, or the word “inadvertently”, was in there somewhere. One cannot accuse other Members of misleading the House.

We now come to topical questions. I remind the House that topical questions are supposed to be brief, and so are the answers.

Topical Questions

T1. [906627] **Natalie McGarry** (Glasgow East) (Ind): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): My priority for the rest of 2016 is to ensure that there is a robust and measured response to the crisis in Syria, while pressing home our campaign against Daesh and working alongside our allies to protect the rules-based international system against the ambitions of Russia, and to achieve an ambitious and outward-looking global Britain.

Natalie McGarry: Military action in Mosul could result in the displacement of 1 million civilians, and the International Committee of the Red Cross has claimed that it can provide for only 300,000 people, with the United Nations providing for 60,000 more. What provisions, measures and plans have been agreed to guarantee civilian safety, the security of food and water resources, and the prevention of a catastrophic humanitarian crisis?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): As I implied in my reply to an earlier question, it is important that we get what happens when the guns fall silent correct. We cannot afford to have a refugee crisis of the scale that has been suggested, which is why the international community has come together on several occasions, including at Washington DC—the Foreign Secretary and I attended—to ensure that we have the necessary measures in place to support those who are fleeing, that any chemical weapons attacks that might take place can be dealt with, and that there will be a form of processing so that we can capture people who have committed war crimes and put them on trial.

T2. [906628] **Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend outline the state of UK-Turkish relations, particularly following claims made during the Brexit debates earlier in the year?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Turkish Government appreciated our early condemnation of the coup attempt of 15 July. We work very closely on migration, counter-terrorism and other matters, and I will be paying my second visit to Ankara later today.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): The attempt by members of the former Libya Dawn Government to retake control of Tripoli is deeply worrying to all of us who want security and stability to return to Libya. Who

does the Foreign Secretary believe is currently in charge in Libya, what is his strategy for achieving that security and stability, and who does he think is responsible for the mess Libya now finds itself in?

Mr Ellwood: I could speak for an hour on that last question and say how misleading—inadvertently misleading—it is. It does not help us to suggest that somehow what happened in 2011 is applicable to what is happening today. There was a Libyan Government, there was a Prime Minister and there were elections, and many of the international community were asked to leave in 2011-12. After 40 years of misrule under Gaddafi, society is now trying to develop, and that is the challenge we face today.

T4. [906630] **Rishi Sunak** (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): My constituent Nicholas Simpson and five other ex-servicemen are being held in a jail in Chennai. May I urge my right hon. Friend and the Government to do everything in their power to work with the Indian authorities and resolve this situation for all the families concerned?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): My heart goes out to the families. I raised this case with Minister Akbar when I was in India in July, and I raised it again on 5 October with the Indian high commissioner to the UK. I know that my hon. Friend is working incredibly hard to highlight this issue and I look forward to meeting him and hon. Members representing the other families tomorrow.

T3. [906629] **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) asked earlier about Londoner and British citizen Andy Tsege, a political dissident who was kidnapped in June 2014. In June this year, the Foreign Secretary's predecessor announced in a press release that he had

“secured assurances from the Ethiopian Government that Mr Tsege will be granted access to a lawyer”.

Those assurances have not been honoured. Will the Foreign Secretary now formally request the release of Mr Tsege?

Boris Johnson: I have set out our position on Mr Tsege in an open letter on gov.uk. I cannot, I am afraid, comment further, because our handling of this case is the subject of ongoing legal proceedings.

T6. [906632] **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Evidence from Syria of hospitals and aid convoys being deliberately targeted and bombed have horrified and outraged people around the world. The Foreign Secretary has already said those responsible should be held to account in the International Criminal Court and that the Russians and the Assad regime are primarily responsible for what is going on. What measures would he therefore support to charge, arrest and prosecute either Putin or Assad, or both?

Boris Johnson: The most important thing at this stage is that the UK is leading the way in accumulating evidence against those responsible for these crimes. It will be essential, ultimately, that we have good secure

testimonials against those responsible and I have no doubt that in due course they will be useful. The mills of justice grind slowly, but they grind small.

T5. [906631] **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Last week on a cross-party visit to the west bank I was deeply concerned by the human rights abuses being perpetrated by the Government of Israel. Can the Foreign Secretary tell me when the follow-up legal report into the Israeli treatment of Palestinian child detainees will be published and outline the reasons for the delay?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. and learned Lady raises an important aspect of what is a very complicated challenge in the middle east that has been rumbling on for far too long. I raised this issue with the Deputy Foreign Minister during my last visit. We have tried to get further access and further conditions put in place to make sure those child detainees are provided with the support they deserve.

T8. [906634] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): As chairman of the all-party group on Argentina, may I congratulate the Minister on the steps that he has taken to bolster UK-Argentine relations? Does he agree that there are important consequences for the continued improvement in relations between our two countries?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, I am happy to confirm that. Indeed, the Government are building a much more constructive relationship with the Government of Argentina. During my visit to Buenos Aires, I agreed an historic joint statement that established closer co-operation across our bilateral relationship, which includes some important benefits for the Falkland Islands and for Argentina.

T7. [906633] **John Nicolson** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary hosted diplomats from nine countries as well as the United Nations special envoy in London on Saturday to discuss Syria, but apparently no agreement could be reached on the delivery of aid and no future date was set for a further meeting. Will he tell us what went wrong?

Boris Johnson: On the contrary, the meeting on Sunday was extremely successful in the sense that there was a unanimous agreement from all the parties concerned—not only France, Germany and Italy, but Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, the United States and ourselves—that we should proceed to put pressure on the Assad regime and its puppeteers in the form of the Russians on the basis that I have already outlined to the House: economically, diplomatically, through the United Nations and through the use of the International Criminal Court.

T10. [906636] **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What support is the United Kingdom giving to international efforts to address the dangerous political situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

Mr Ellwood: I have had the opportunity to visit the DRC, a country that my hon. Friend knows extremely well. President Kabila is refusing to step back; he wants to continue after his two terms. We have made the case

forcefully that he must honour the constitution and allow the democratic process to take place. It is a large country, with 80 million people, and if it goes back into a dark chapter, there will be consequences for the surrounding countries. We are in a very delicate place in the development of democracy in that country.

T9. [906635] **Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): Excluding Cabinet meetings, how many times has the Foreign Secretary met the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the Secretary of State for International Trade to draw up a plan to secure our continued access to the single market, which will protect the economy in Northern Ireland?

Boris Johnson: I have a constant exchange of views with my friends and colleagues from the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Department for International Trade. We are a nest of singing birds, Mr Speaker, as you can imagine. Things are working extremely well, which might come as a surprise to the hon. Lady, and I have no doubt whatever that we will do a fantastic deal in the interests of the UK and in the interests of a strong European Union.

Mr Speaker: I have not heard the right hon. Gentleman sing, but I feel sure that it would be melodic and that it is only a matter of time.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): In the light of the EU referendum, we have heard that there is lots of international interest in signing trade deals with the United Kingdom. What practical steps is my right hon. Friend's Department taking to contribute to the effort to ensure that we get those deals signed, sealed and delivered?

Boris Johnson: One of the most extraordinary things that I discovered on becoming Foreign Secretary was the full extent of the network that the UK has around the world. We have more coverage overseas than the French with only 70% of their budget. My experience of UK diplomats and trade officials is that they are superlatively well informed about the needs of UK business and industry, and that they will assist us in doing first-class free trade deals in every capital.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to Questions 1 and 12, is not the British Government uniquely placed to bring Pakistan and India together in some form of talks, particularly given the fact that tensions are probably higher than they have ever been and that we are dealing with two nuclear powers?

Alok Sharma: As I noted earlier, we have regular dialogues with the Indian and Pakistani Governments. I reiterate that, at the end of the day, it is up to the two countries to come together and to work on the pace of bilateral relations.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is not just the Foreign Secretary's bank manager who will miss his many newspaper columns. Like the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), I read the one he wrote in *The Daily Telegraph* on 26 June in which he said that the only change that Brexit would make to our country would be that we would extricate ourselves from EU laws. Can the Foreign Secretary assure us today that he

has not changed his mind again, and that he still believes that it is in our country's interests to remain within the single market?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question. I can tell her that my view remains absolutely crystal clear—adamantine—that we will be better off extricating ourselves from the toils of the EU legal system. As the Prime Minister rightly said, we are going to leave the penumbra of European legislation and that is the right thing to do for this country. We will go forward with a fantastic free trade deal in goods and services that will be good for this country and good for the EU.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Given the deteriorating security situation in and around Lashkar Gah, what lessons has the Foreign Secretary learned from the British deployment to Helmand?

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's work—he knows the country extremely well indeed. It is important that we provide support to Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. Unfortunately, the Taliban have pushed back from the Pakistani border and until we get some sense of governance back into the capital city of Lashkar Gah, I am afraid that the Taliban will continue to push towards Kandahar.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Following the Government-commissioned study into the resettlement of the British Indian Ocean Territory, when do Ministers envisage making a decision on the resettlement of the Chagos islanders?

Sir Alan Duncan: I assure my hon. Friend that we are still considering the issue and will report back to the House in due course.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I cannot stop raising this matter until the Martin family from my constituency get the support that they deserve. Their daughter, Claire Martin, died in Italy four and half years ago following multiple stab wounds to her throat. Her last words were "a man". Her death was recorded as a suicide. Will the new ministerial team reply to my letter and agree to a meeting with the Martins?

Sir Alan Duncan: We have a dedicated consular team that often has to deal with issues of this sort. I will undertake to write to the hon. Lady. If she wants to come to see me and consular officials, I would be happy to arrange such a meeting.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I thank the Minister for his answer on Kashmir, where I was born. He says that it is up to India and Pakistan to come forward on the matter, but to get a long-term, lasting solution, the people of Kashmir must be given the right to self-determination in accordance with the 1948 UN Security Council resolution. The Prime Minister has said that she supports the rights of the United Nations—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I indulged the hon. Gentleman and the least he could do was to be brief.

Alok Sharma: As I noted earlier, we of course want a lasting peace in Kashmir. As for the resolution, we should be taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have overrun, but I am keen to accommodate colleagues. The last person whom I will be able to accommodate is Mr Rob Marris.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What recent discussions have Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom had with Her Majesty's Government in Canada on the outcome of the European Union referendum?

Sir Alan Duncan: There are regular discussions with the Government of Canada, which I look forward to visiting in due course. As for trade deals, they are a matter for the Department for International Trade.

Liberation of Mosul

12.38 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the liberation of Mosul and progress in counter-Daesh operations in Iraq and Syria.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): In the early hours of Monday morning, Prime Minister al-Abadi announced the start of the Iraqi-led operation to liberate Mosul. Iraqi forces are converging on the city from the east and south in the biggest offensive of the counter-Daesh campaign, designed to break Daesh's grip on the largest city still within its grasp.

Iraqi forces have been preparing for the operation since the capture of Qayyarah in August. The aim is to drive out Daesh, but in a way that protects civilians. Thousands of Iraqi security personnel have passed through the coalition's building partner capacity training programme, to which the UK makes a major contribution. Alongside other coalition aircraft, the RAF has been providing intelligence-gathering and intensive air support to Iraqi ground forces. More than half of the RAF's recent strikes have been in and around Mosul. On the ground, British military instructors are, with coalition colleagues, helping to train, mentor and equip many of the forces engaged in the Mosul operation.

We recognise, as do the Iraqis, that this will be the greatest challenge that their security forces have yet encountered, and it will have significant humanitarian implications. The United Nations, in co-ordination with the Government of Iraq, is putting in place critical supplies of life-saving assistance, such as shelters, medical services and food, and the United Kingdom recently committed £40 million for the Mosul aid plan, bringing the total amount pledged by the UK to help Daesh's victims in Iraq to almost £170 million since 2014. This will not be a quick operation, and we can expect Daesh to fight hard to keep Mosul. When I visited Baghdad and Erbil three weeks ago, senior Iraqi and coalition commanders outlined their plans for Mosul. Their confidence is high, and it is clear that Daesh is now failing. This year, it has suffered a series of crushing defeats: Ramadi was liberated in February, as was Hit in April and Falluja—the first city to be seized by Daesh—in June. Overall, the Daesh extremists now hold only 10% of Iraqi territory.

Ridding Iraq of Daesh was never going to be quick or easy, but as we enter the third year of the campaign, real progress is being made. Defeating Daesh in the long term will help make the streets of Britain and Europe safer. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to the vital role of our armed forces in defeating this evil.

John Woodcock: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer and, on behalf of the whole House, I pay tribute to the UK forces and all those involved in this incredibly dangerous operation. All of us who live free from oppression and go to bed each night in relative safety owe a debt of gratitude for what is being done to counter Daesh, as that evil force would destroy all our ways of life, no matter where we are.

I thank the Secretary of State for the detail he gave on current UK involvement, but can he say more about how he thinks it may evolve as the operation goes forward and as the question becomes one not of liberation but of maintaining security in Mosul and elsewhere? What is the UK doing to press our coalition partners to ensure that the protection of civilians is given the utmost priority? Everyone will know that he does not go into the details of operations and targeting, but it is well known that the UK has a more rigid procedure than applies in other areas and so what can he say about that?

What the Secretary of State said about Daesh being beaten back is so important, as we know. Daesh set itself up in Mosul as a caliphate that was to precede, in direct time, the “end of days”, which would secure Daesh's particular perversion of Islamic law across the whole world. What can coalition partners do to get the message out to those who might otherwise be attracted into this madness that it is failing on its own terms and should not in any way be supported?

Finally, in Foreign Office questions, which helpfully preceded this urgent question, mention was made of reconstructing Mosul and Iraq. How will we show that we have learnt the lessons of previous failures over the past decade in Iraq, where we left a vacuum which the extremists were able to fill, both geographically and in the minds of Iraqi people?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am particularly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding us of the overall purpose of this campaign, which is not simply to help defend the new democracy of Iraq, but to eradicate a threat to us all and to our way of life. He asked me a number of questions. The UK will continue to assist this campaign; the RAF will be closely involved in air support of ground operations. We have already been targeting key terrorist positions, and command and control buildings in and around Mosul. The specialist mentors who have been helping to train Iraqi forces will continue to provide that support, although away from the combat zones. The rules of engagement that I set at the beginning of this campaign two years ago are not changed by the operation in Mosul, although it will of course be more difficult to conduct this operation in a closely packed urban environment.

So far as the future is concerned, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that when Daesh is eventually driven out of Iraq, as I hope it will be, we will have to continue all our efforts to combat its ideology and look more deeply at what attracted people to join up in the first place. We will need to work with moderate Islam right across the world to ensure that that perversion does not increase. Above all, as he said at the end, we need to learn the lesson of this campaign, which is that we must ensure that the Sunni population of Iraq has sufficient security in future and that we do not have to be asked back to do this all over again.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): One lesson of the campaign in Iraq is clearly that if air power is to make a valid contribution, it must be in support of identifiable ground forces. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it has been much easier to identify ground forces that we can support from the air in Iraq than it has been, or will be, in Syria? Does he also agree that

[Dr Julian Lewis]

when Daesh is pushed out and ultimately defeated, there will be no shortage of other groups that adhere to the same poisonous totalitarian theology as Daesh, but that are not as vulnerable as Daesh because they do not propose to seize and hold territory?

Sir Michael Fallon: On the first point, my right hon. Friend is right. In Iraq, we have an operation that is being led by the Iraqi Government. These are Iraqi troops who are fighting for the freedom of their own country and to protect their own people. In Syria, we have some moderate ground forces—the Syrian democratic forces—who are ready and willing to take on Daesh. Although we see the liberation of Manbij and other towns and cities in the north of Syria, I accept that the situation in Syria is very much more complicated. If his final question was that we should despair and simply do nothing, I do not accept that. We must confront evil where we see it in this world, and, given the professionalism and power of our armed forces, I believe that where we are able to help those nascent democracies that ask for our help then we should do so.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The horror that Daesh has inflicted on the people of Mosul since it captured the city in June 2014 is unimaginable: women killed for not wearing full Islamic veils and gay men thrown from buildings. We fully support the operation to liberate the city, because Daesh, in its evil ideology, must be defeated wherever it emerges. I say that not only to protect the people of Iraq and Syria who have suffered such a great deal, but to protect our citizens here in the UK from the global threat posed by Daesh.

I appreciate the answer that the Secretary of State gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock). Although I fully accept that he cannot divulge the operational details on the Floor of the House, I ask him to set out in greater detail the full extent of the RAF's involvement in the future, and how he intends to keep this House informed?

A number of forces are assisting with this important offensive, including militia groups and paramilitary figures, but there is concern about what would happen if some of these groups were to go into the city. What assurances has the Secretary of State had from the Iraqi authorities that, as the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), indicated earlier, it is only the Iraqi army and Iraqi police who will enter Mosul? We expect this offensive to last weeks and possibly months, but, once it has been completed, there will be a need to secure and defend Mosul to ensure that Daesh is driven out for good and that the city does not descend into sectarian fighting. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what preparations are being made to protect the citizens and to rebuild the city, including the city's infrastructure?

On the humanitarian situation, the United Nations has warned:

“In a worst-case scenario, up to 1 million people could be displaced”

as a result of this offensive. Will the Secretary of State set out in greater detail what humanitarian assistance

the UK will be providing, not just in the immediate term, but in the longer term, to support any displaced people?

We stand in solidarity against Daesh and its wicked ideology, and with the brave armed service personnel who will be assisting vitally in this important campaign.

Sir Michael Fallon: Let me welcome the hon. Lady to her position. I think she is the fifth shadow Defence Secretary in the past two and a bit years, but she is welcome for all that. I particularly welcome the full support that she gave to this operation and the role that British forces are playing in it. I hope the House will continue to support the operation through thick and thin. It will be a complicated operation militarily, involving the liberation of a very large city, and I am grateful for her support.

The hon. Lady asked me five specific questions. First, the role of the RAF will continue to be to strike deliberate targets, particular positions and command and control centres in and around Mosul, as well as offering close air support to the ground assault as it begins. Secondly, we will keep the House regularly informed. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is due to give the next of a series of regular updates. I gave one earlier in the summer and he is due to do that shortly, but I certainly undertake to keep the House fully informed. Thirdly, the hon. Lady asked me about some quite well-founded concerns that different groups—the Popular Mobilisation Forces, the peshmerga and so on—will go into areas of Mosul where they might not be particularly welcome. That has been very carefully evaluated by both the Iraqi and Kurdish leadership. Red lines have been drawn and everybody involved is very keen that those lines should not be crossed.

Fourthly, on the security of the city, Mosul is a very complex city, not entirely Sunni, but it is extremely important that the day after the city is liberated, the population there feel that they have sufficient reassurance—not just the reconnection of essential services, but sufficient reassurance—in the security of the city to be able to return. Finally, the hon. Lady asked me about the humanitarian assistance. Yes, as I think I said earlier, we will be providing tented accommodation and food supplies as part of the United Nations programme. The Minister of State, Department for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), has people ready in Iraq, and we are ready to go in and provide that help as soon as the fighting finishes.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Defence Secretary rightly commented on the contribution being made by British forces to this successful operation. He is correct to do so, but does he agree that this is an opportunity to reinforce our messages about the military covenant and the support that our armed forces in their turn need from us? In that context, will he particularly bend his mind to the new accommodation model that the Ministry of Defence is currently considering?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am happy to look at that again. As my hon. Friend knows, we have made great strides with the covenant in recent years, enshrining it into the law of the land and following up its implementation with local authorities and others. We are looking at new

ways of providing or assisting with military accommodation. We are consulting on that and I will certainly bear my hon. Friend's comments in mind.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): We all earnestly hope that the liberation of Mosul will be swift and decisive and that Daesh will finally be driven out of Iraq for good. As we have heard, lessons must be learned from previous such military operations in Iraq, particularly the recapture of Falluja earlier this year, when non-Government militia were allowed to enter the city before the Iraqi security forces. Can we make sure that this does not happen in Mosul where, because of its huge strategic importance and the multi-ethnic composition of its inhabitants, the risks are much greater and the mistakes cannot be repeated? What discussions have the Secretary of State and his Department had with the Iraqi security forces, the Iraqi Government and the peshmerga to make sure that the 1.5 million civilians, including the hundreds of thousands of children, are protected both during the liberation of the city and in its rebuilding thereafter?

Sir Michael Fallon: I thank the hon. Gentleman and I hope he fully supports the operation. Four Scots were killed on a beach in Tunisia by extremists a little over a year ago, and we all have an interest in making sure that Daesh is finally driven out of Iraq and the threat to our own people is reduced. He asked the question at the front of everybody's mind—that there should be no reprisals from one group or another as these cities are liberated. We have to learn the lessons each time and, city by city, improve the way in which security and reassurance can immediately be provided. That is something that I reviewed with the Iraqi and the Kurdish authorities on my recent visit, and everybody is aware of that danger.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, which we welcome. It is early days in this conflict and we hope all goes well. I hope we can spare a thought for the journalists who are covering this conflict, whom we expect to bring us back the information and who can themselves be in a very vulnerable position. How does my right hon. Friend assess the contribution of Iranian forces, and how will the 80,000 to perhaps 100,000 who have been working in Iraq against Daesh be kept free from the sectarian problems that affected that country, to make sure that their contribution and influence in the future may be for good, rather than adding to the sectarian problems that may occur after the conflict is over?

Sir Michael Fallon: My right hon. Friend is right to praise the contribution of the British media, which have been following preparations for the assault and some of which are now close to the frontline. He raises an important point about Iranian influence not simply in Iraq, but in a number of these countries. Iran has the opportunity now, following the signing of the nuclear agreement, to show that it can be a force for good in these countries, and it is up to Iran to live up to its undertakings. The Iranians have given clear undertakings that they will not intervene malevolently in these cities as they are liberated in Iraq and we expect them to stick to that.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): We all wish the forces embarking on this operation well. Is the Defence Secretary aware of any arrangements that are being put in place as the liberation proceeds to collect evidence, including forensic evidence, of crimes that have been committed? As well as defeating Daesh in this city, it is important that those responsible for the most awful crimes are held to account in a court of law.

Sir Michael Fallon: The whole House would endorse that. The answer is yes, it is for the Iraqi Government to lead on that. This is an Iraqi operation, but my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made it clear in New York recently that we will be looking for sufficient evidence to indict in some form or other the leaders of this barbarism in recent years and see that they are held properly to account. With other countries in the coalition, we are also looking to see how we will treat our own foreign fighters who may be detained and potentially returned to this country, to make sure that they, too, are held to account for any crimes that they may have committed.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Further to the question from the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), does the Defence Secretary agree that there is a need for specialist UK input into investigating those crimes, which are utterly horrendous?

Sir Michael Fallon: I will certainly look at that. We have specialist expertise in this country, as my hon. Friend probably knows better than anybody, and the Iraqi Government are aware that they can call on that expertise, but I will remind them of it.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State say a little more about how he hopes the liberation of Mosul will impact on the campaign against Daesh in Syria, to which Parliament quite rightly extended consent for RAF involvement last year?

Sir Michael Fallon: Daesh regards Mosul as one of the two centres of the caliphate, alongside Raqqa, so we expect its defeat there to be a body blow more generally. It will sever the lines of communication between the two cities, and as a result, Raqqa will become more isolated as the border is increasingly sealed. The Daesh fighters who remain in Raqqa will have no other place to go. There will certainly be a military impact, but I hope that the liberation of Mosul will go further by helping finally to banish the mystique of Daesh, because it is not a successful organisation; it is a failing organisation that can and will be defeated.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I add my thanks to the serving UK personnel for all the work they are doing in the region. It is clear to me that there is already a serious humanitarian crisis in Daesh-controlled Mosul. What forward planning has been undertaken to ensure that those who have already been affected get humanitarian aid and those who sadly and inevitably will be affected receive the assistance they need?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is important for the House to understand that there is already a humanitarian crisis inside Mosul. People there have been living under this appalling regime for over

[*Sir Michael Fallon*]

two years, suffering all the barbarities associated with it. That is the situation at present, even before the liberation has begun. To answer her question directly, the Department for International Development is part of the United Nations development programme. The Iraqi Government will ensure that civilians, where they can get out in advance of the final assault, are transported easily to safer areas, and then our agencies are ready to go in alongside the United Nations to ensure that there is sufficient food, medical supplies and tented accommodation for the others.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), aid agencies estimate that more than 700,000 people will be displaced by the conflict—more than the population of Glasgow. Save the Children is concerned that we do not yet have tents in which to put those people up or safe routes to ensure that they can get out of the city unimpeded by Daesh and other forces. Can the Secretary of State provide some reassurance on what the Government can do to provide safety on those routes, and tents and services when those people arrive?

Sir Michael Fallon: Those are very valid concerns that arise from what is now becoming a warzone in and around Mosul. As I have said, the Iraqi Government are fully aware of the need to cope with any increase in the displaced population, to arrange transport for those who can get out of the city to safer areas and to be ready with additional tented accommodation—winter is coming—to house the others. There has been a great deal of planning all summer for this operation and its consequences—what we call the day after Mosul is liberated.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend know whether Iraqi and peshmerga field medical units are as far forward as possible, so that they can tend for the wounded on all sides when they come in, and quickly?

Sir Michael Fallon: On my recent visit to Erbil, I saw for myself some of the medical evacuation training that British troops are offering to the peshmerga, showing them how to get casualties away from the frontline as rapidly as possible. That has been a big part of the training that we have been able to offer. They are now relatively seasoned troops; they have been doing this kind of operation for many months in other towns and villages, both in the north of Iraq and along the Euphrates valley, although not on this scale. They certainly understand the importance of getting casualties off the battlefield as quickly as possible.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The taking and holding of territory has been central to Daesh's philosophy, in contrast to some earlier manifestations of that kind of ideology, so what is the next step in reducing the territory that will be held by Daesh after this operation, as well as combating the ideology, which in recent years has been used to justify not only what Daesh has done, but the killing of innocent civilians, from Mali to Tunisia, France and many other countries?

Sir Michael Fallon: The next step in Iraq is to push Daesh beyond the border, which will mean some mopping-up operations in the north of Syria and to the north and west of Mosul, and clearing Daesh out of some remaining smaller towns along the Euphrates river valley. Members of the coalition, in our regular meetings—we will be meeting in Paris next week—are already looking at what more can be done to counter Daesh globally and whether we can set up structures now that will enable us to respond much more quickly and come to each other's aid should Daesh resurrect itself in different parts of Africa, or indeed in the far east.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Given the Abadi regime's inability to deliver reform, would not we be wise to plan on the basis that Iraq is unlikely to survive as a unitary state and is more likely to break into its constituent confessional and ethnic parts?

Sir Michael Fallon: With respect to my right hon. Friend, I do not think that it is for us in this House to question now the integrity of Iraq or start designing a different shape for either it or Syria. We tried that around 100 years ago—indeed, it was a Conservative Back Bencher, Sykes, who first drew the line that runs between Syria and Iraq and presented it to Prime Minister Asquith. My right hon. Friend knows from his own ministerial experience how frustrating the pace of reform has been in Iraq—for example, to get the security and policing right, to delegate sufficient powers to the governors and to ensure that the army is properly accountable. Slowly, those reforms are being put in place. I think that we must continue to do what we are doing, which is accepting that these things are slow, but there is a democratic Government in Iraq who genuinely at the moment represent Shi'a, Sunni and Kurds in Iraq, and we have to work with them.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): First, on the Secretary of State's point about driving ISIS out of Iraq, what assurances can he give the House that we will not see a repeat of the situation that followed the surge in 2006-07, which would allow ISIS to re-emerge from the deserts and move into Syria? What steps has he taken to stop that, working with the coalition partners? Secondly, when the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) and I were in Iraq a couple of years ago, we were appalled by the dearth of intelligence. Is he satisfied that there have been significant improvements in intelligence on the ground?

Sir Michael Fallon: On the first point, nobody in the coalition—it includes some 60 countries, all involved in one way or another—wants to be back in Iraq doing this all over again in five or 10 years' time, so we need to ensure that the political settlement that is left when Daesh is pushed out of the country endures and is as embedded as it can be and that both Sunnis and Shi'as can rely on sufficient security to get back to their cities, towns and villages and live their lives. We will therefore continue to encourage the process of political reform, which has been far too slow—in many respects, it has been behind the military progress that has been made. We will continue to encourage that.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): My right hon. Friend will recall that after the fall of Baghdad in the Iraq war, the allies were roundly criticised for not having a plan for reconstruction, thereby creating a vacuum, which, as we know, is extremely dangerous. Is he confident that an adequate plan for reconstruction will be put in place immediately after the fall of Mosul?

Sir Michael Fallon: As I said before, this is an Iraqi-led plan—an Iraqi-led campaign—to liberate Mosul, but from everything I have seen from visiting Baghdad recently, the Government are planning to get security into Mosul and to ensure that the essentials of life are restored there as quickly as possible, working through the local administration and the governor of Nineveh province, to make sure that people feel safe and can return to their homes. We will encourage that process politically, and we will also back it materially, with assistance from the Department for International Development.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be well aware of some of the horrific war crimes that have been committed against the Yazidi women in Mosul. Will he speak a little about what specialist services he and his colleagues will be able to provide for those women when they come out of that desperate situation?

Sir Michael Fallon: The Department for International Development has some specialist programmes already in preparation to deal with some of those victims of the barbarity we have seen. It is also important that those who are responsible for that barbarism, if it was done on a genocidal basis specifically against the Yazidis, are properly held to account, and that is something we are working on with other members of the coalition.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): It is good to hear about the positive progress that is being made in the counter-Daesh strategy, and particularly about the important role that is being taken forward by the peshmerga Kurds. What role did UK forces play in training those forces, and what other needs may have been identified for further assistance?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is perhaps worth saying that, when my hon. Friend refers to progress, we are at the very start of this campaign to encircle and then liberate Mosul. I must remind the House again that this may not be easy; there may well be setbacks along the way. We have trained a large number of peshmerga forces, as well as Iraqi troops, over the past two years. We can be proud of the role that the British Army has played, particularly in training them to deal with improvised explosive devices, which have been seeded on a much larger scale than in any previous campaign we have come across—far greater than in Afghanistan or in the original Iraq conflicts—and in helping them to deal with evacuation to face snipers. It has been a consistent training effort over the past two years, and I hope that, as a result, the peshmerga are better able to deal with what will be a very difficult assault.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): This conflict is taking place in a globalised world with social media. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to send

out the very clear message that, although we have not seen the crimes and atrocities carried out inside Mosul by Daesh, terrible things will be portrayed from this conflict, which could take weeks or months, and many people will die, but that is a necessary part of saving the world and particularly of protecting Muslims around the world, who are dying as a result of the horrors carried out by this caliphate cult?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has experience of chairing the Foreign Affairs Committee in previous Parliaments. He is right: horrors are being perpetrated every day in Mosul, and that was the case long before the liberation and the assault started. We should not forget that some of these horrors have been perpetrated on our own citizens—on the hostages taken back in 2014—and others have been subject to atrocities ever since. It is important that the world does not forget just how evil Daesh has been in the extremes to which they have gone in punishing or killing those who happen not to accept the perversion they believe in.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Militias have been relied on to help defeat the death cult Daesh, but concerns have been raised about the involvement of Shi'a militias in liberating Mosul, based on the atrocities witnessed by Sunni residents during Falluja's liberation from Daesh. What assurances has my right hon. Friend received that the very sectarian tensions that facilitated the rise of Daesh in the first place will not be stoked by Shi'a militias in Mosul?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is a very legitimate concern, rooted not just in some of the earlier operations but in earlier conflicts. Those were assurances that I pressed for, and examined very closely, on my recent visit. There are red lines drawn on which units are allowed to go where as the encirclement operation begins. All I can say to my hon. Friend is that everybody in Baghdad and in Erbil—the Sunni and Shi'a members of the Iraqi Government—is very much aware of the need to do this operation, in what is essentially a Sunni city, but not entirely a Sunni city, in a way that gives the majority Sunni population of Mosul the confidence to return to their city in the knowledge that they will be able to live safely there thereafter.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): As the offensive continues, it is likely that many Daesh fighters will try to blend in with the local civilian population. Can any specialist training be undertaken for the peshmerga and other forces to ensure that, if that does happen, any terrorist atrocities that may emerge in the longer term from within civilian life are limited?

Sir Michael Fallon: That is an important point. We do not yet know whether Daesh will stand and fight, which they have done in some cities, or whether they will try to melt away. All we know at the moment is that Mosul is a very well-defended city; preparations for its defence have been going on as long as preparations for the assault, so all the signs are that Daesh will defend it for some time. However, the hon. Gentleman makes a valid point about training. Specialist units in the Iraqi forces are trained in this counter-terrorism work, and

[*Sir Michael Fallon*]

we have every interest in making sure that the Daesh leadership, in particular, as well as the rank and file of the terrorists, are detained wherever possible.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): A successful ground offensive will require a huge improvement in the morale and fighting spirit of the Iraqi forces. What part have the UK and her allies played in making that improvement to the morale of Iraqi forces, and is my right hon. Friend confident that he can continue that work, so that Daesh has no respite and no chance to re-establish itself?

Sir Michael Fallon: I was impressed by the confidence of Iraqi commanders on my most recent visit, compared with their approach to all this, say, a year ago. They have been encouraged by the relative ease with which cities and towns along the Euphrates river valley were liberated. They were—certainly a few weeks ago—very much looking forward to the Mosul campaign and regard it as something that is difficult but doable. They have that confidence, and the Iraqi troops that I have seen being trained by our own forces are a very different army from the army that first fled in front of the Daesh advance in the spring and summer of 2014.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): First, I would like to wish our armed forces a safe and successful campaign. We have heard that up to 1 million civilians may flee Mosul, many of them children who will have been deprived of education, who will have suffered the psychological impact of warfare and who, in the case of young teenagers, may be screened by the Iraqi forces as they come out. What ability do the UK Government have—on the ground, directly—to monitor the safety, education and health of young children?

Sir Michael Fallon: Counselling of children, and indeed child protection, will be central to the work of the International Development Department and the United Nations programme after the liberation of Mosul, but the right hon. Gentleman is right to caution us. This is a military assault on a very large city; this is likely to be a war zone for some weeks and months. The Iraqi forces have done their best to warn the population of what lies ahead, but this is going to be difficult, and they are going to make every effort to protect the civilian population from the assault itself.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq, I thank the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for tabling this urgent question and for visiting the region and engaging with the group. I also personally thank my former colleagues in the Royal Air Force for their service in this operation. Military support to the peshmerga is ongoing, but will the Secretary of State update the House on what rehabilitation and medical support there might be, particularly bearing in mind the wonderful facility at Headley Court, for any injured peshmerga fighters?

Sir Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to the Royal Air Force. We have touched on the role of the British Army, but over the past two years, since the House gave its authority for strikes in Iraq, we

have seen the most intense campaign being managed by the Royal Air Force from Akrotiri and other bases in the Gulf, at a tempo we have not seen since the first Gulf war. I know the House would want to pay tribute not only to the pilots who fly the planes but to the huge back-up operation that sits behind them. On his particular point about medical support, perhaps he will allow me to write to him.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Secretary of State is absolutely right to stress that this is an Iraqi-led campaign but our armed forces are there because it will make a material difference to our own safety here. On that basis, what can he do, and what can we all do, to ensure that people in this country realise that we are engaged in this campaign not because it is a war against Islam but because it is a war that is being undertaken to support a democratically elected Muslim Government against those who would pervert that religion for their own barbaric ends?

Sir Michael Fallon: On the first point, we must all continue to remind our constituents of why we got involved back in the summer of 2014: the horrors that were being inflicted on our hostages; the barbarity of the treatment of women and of gay people in Daesh areas; and the indiscriminate slaughter that Daesh has inflicted, as we have seen in western Europe, on people whether they shared the Islamic faith or not. We do have to remind people of why we are there. Then we have to do much more to support moderate Islam in some of the very good work that is being done in this country and elsewhere, through programmes run here and in other countries, including Saudi Arabia, on how we de-radicalise those who might be tempted to join this kind of extremist terror in future.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the start of this operation, but it is worth bearing in mind that it could turn into a fire fight in a large urban area with an enemy that is absolutely fanatical and has absolutely no respect for human rights law. How satisfied is the Secretary of State that the forces taking part have the ability to conduct this operation according to the current rules of engagement, and that we will have measures in place to allow civilians to flee while making sure that the cowards in Daesh, who are likely to run away from the onslaught, will be identified and captured?

Sir Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend is right to warn the House that this will be a fire fight—a series of fire fights. I have been at pains to indicate that it is not going to be easy; it is going to be difficult in a very crowded urban area. Inevitably, there will be damage, and no doubt civilian casualties as well. As regards rules of engagement, the Iraqi Government have assured the coalition that their troops are bound by the rules of international humanitarian law—the Geneva conventions—just as western forces are. Indeed, that has been part of the training that we have been able to offer.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Bruno Geddo, the Iraq representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, is reported on the BBC as saying three days ago that if the situation in the city

“is arranged in a proper way—everything will be controlled by the Iraqi army—people will not be allowed to flee Mosul”.

What will

“people will not be allowed to flee Mosul”
mean in practice?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is already quite difficult for the civilian population to get out of Mosul. They are being restricted, in the first place, by Daesh, which does not want them to leave Mosul, but the city is now, of course, being increasingly encircled by the forces that are there to liberate it. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Iraqi Government are ready to help civilians who can get out of Mosul by getting them easily to much safer areas well away from the frontline. As he suggests, the United Nations will be working with its agencies to make sure that help is brought forward as quickly as possible to those civilians who do escape.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Television news coverage yesterday seemed to suggest, first, that the balance of forces between the Iraqi army and the peshmerga and Daesh was about 10:1; and secondly, that the Iraqi army had access to very heavy armour whereas the peshmerga did not. Are both those things correct, or was I not paying enough attention?

Sir Michael Fallon: I think my hon. Friend pays quite a lot of attention to most things, and I would not want to accuse him of inattention. I am not sure about the exact percentage that he quotes, but having visited Erbil recently and been out with the peshmerga and seen the training they receive, it is clear that they have sufficient equipment to participate in this operation, and have a well-defined role within it.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments in support of our armed forces, but also send our thoughts and prayers to the people of Mosul who will be living through the liberation. As the Secretary of State knows, what became clear after Ramadi was the industrial use of IEDs to undermine people's lives as they tried to move back into their homes. There were huge human casualties associated with that within the Iraqi forces. We have very specialist expertise in this area. Given the scale of Mosul, with 1.7 million people, we can only imagine what they are doing. What additional support are we giving to the Iraqis in terms of training to deal with the counter-IED operation?

Sir Michael Fallon: This conflict has a much larger dimension than previous ones. We have seen industrial-scale use of IEDs in cities such as Ramadi and elsewhere, where IEDs have been built into the walls of houses, concealed in rubble, and put under desks in schools and colleges. We have had to help the Iraqi army learn how to deal with that. A huge part of the training effort that we have been putting in at the four building partner capacity centres across Iraq has been specifically dedicated to counter-IED training that helps troops to recognise

different types of IED, to recognise the traps that may be laid within IED devices, and to clear the IED once they have identified it.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The previous al-Maliki Government pushed a sectarian agenda against the Sunnis that led to the rise of Daesh. Bearing in mind that the composition of Mosul is predominantly Sunni, what steps have been taken to ensure that the Iraqi army is reflective of that, given that Turkey has indicated that it will be sending troops into Mosul to ensure that Sunnis' rights are protected?

Sir Michael Fallon: We all want to make sure that Sunnis' rights are protected. It is incumbent on the Iraqi Government, who have Sunni, Shi'a and Kurdish representation, to ensure that all parts of Iraq are fully protected. The aim of the Government in the reforms that they are driving through is to devolve more power to the governor of Nineveh province, in which Mosul sits, to ensure that he and the local administration can provide such reassurance. It is critical to the campaign that Sunnis in Iraq understand that the Iraqi forces are for them as much as for the Shi'as.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I am sure the Defence Secretary agrees that one of the positive developments is that the peshmerga and the Iraqi forces are working together against Daesh for the first time. Can he suggest ways in which that constructive co-operation might be continued in other operations?

Sir Michael Fallon: That co-operation is essential not only for the liberation of Mosul, a city that sits very near to the Kurdish region, but for the future of Iraq. I am encouraged by the recent negotiations over the distribution of the oil revenue and some of the other accommodations that have been reached between Prime Minister Barzani and Prime Minister al-Abadi down in Baghdad. I hope that that will bode well for the integrity of Iraq as well as for the future of the Kurdish and Iraqi populations.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I also support our Government's role in this operation. There are already reports that Daesh is threatening to use civilians as human shields and to execute anyone trying to flee. Can the Secretary of State confirm that that is accurate, and is there anything that can be done to counter that particular form of barbarism?

Sir Michael Fallon: I have seen reports along the lines of Daesh being prepared to put women and children in military buildings in order to prevent those buildings from becoming a target. We are dealing with a ruthless enemy that has not hesitated, over two years, to kill anybody, including woman, child and fellow Muslims. There is very little that we can do to control that, other than to show our absolute determination, whatever the cost and difficulty of this campaign, to deal with Daesh and to get it out of Iraq altogether.

Points of Order

1.31 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Public Accounts Committee has summoned witnesses from the Department for Communities and Local Government to come before it tomorrow to explain reports that the troubled families programme has not been achieving its aims. Since 5 October, my Committee has been asking the Department to release six evaluation reports on the scheme. After much delay, they were finally published on the Department's website at 6 o'clock yesterday evening. The reports amount to 800 pages of evidence. I am very concerned that, with the tardy release of that important information, the Government are trying to obfuscate proper parliamentary scrutiny of an important Government flagship programme and the money spent on it.

I seek your support and guidance, Mr Speaker, on how we can ensure that Ministers are reminded of the importance of providing proper information to this House so that we can carry out our task for citizens and taxpayers in scrutinising the Government's business.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, both for her point of order and for her courtesy in providing me with advance notice of it. There is a clear expectation that Government Departments should co-operate fully with Select Committee inquiries, not least inquiries of the Committee of Public Accounts, and that they should furnish information in a timely fashion. That does not appear to have happened in this case. If for any reason there is a problem, the Department should communicate it promptly to the Committee so that it can, if it so wishes, adjust its schedule. I am sure that the hon. Lady's concerns have been heard on the Treasury Bench and that they will be conveyed to the relevant Ministers. Meanwhile, she has made her point clearly, and she has done so on the record.

Quite how the hon. Lady and her Committee wish now to proceed in the light of the untimely provision of a vast tranche of information is, of course, for them to consider. Upon the whole, one would expect that a Committee would undertake its work without also

considering Chamber devices for scrutiny of Ministers. The two, however, are not automatically and necessarily mutually exclusive, so if at some point the hon. Lady, a member of her Committee or any other Member wishes to probe a Minister in the Chamber on the substance of the issue or the reason for what appears to be an excessive delay, it is open to them to seek that route. I make no promise as to whether it would be successful, but it is open to Members.

The key point is that Committees hold the Government to account, and it is up to the Government to co-operate with the Committee, not only in accordance with the letter, if you will, but in accordance with the spirit.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on information provided to MPs in written answers regarding military matters. It is customary—and necessary, of course—not to provide information about some security matters to Members. No doubt that is why, in answer to a written question about whether the UK Government will display online the flight paths of Russian planes over Syria, I was told that that information could not be made available for security reasons. Could you advise me, Mr Speaker, whether I could challenge that ruling, given that such information is readily available in relation to commercial planes, that the Russians know that they are being monitored and, indeed, that they have to be, to avoid conflict in Syrian airspace?

Mr Speaker: I had no advance notice of this and I know that the right hon. Gentleman is inclined to invest me with sagacity and powers that perhaps I do not possess. I am disinclined to respond substantively on the matter at this time, but my advice to the right hon. Gentleman, which I hope he will welcome, is that at this stage his best course is to write to the Secretary of State and seek either to elicit a written reply, which he can then study and evaluate, or alternatively to request a meeting to discuss the matter. If that route does not avail him, he can come back to Chamber, and I have a strong hunch that he will do so.

If there are no further points of order and the appetite has been satisfied, at least for now, we come to the ten-minute rule Bill.

National Health Service Staff (Reporting and Registration)

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

1.35 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a bill to make provision for the central reporting and registration of agency staff employed by National Health Service trusts, facilities and services; to make provision for the central reporting and recording of absence from work of permanent NHS employees; and for connected purposes.

The NHS has a budget of £116.4 billion for 2015-16. It is distributed among NHS providers, including 11 NHS trusts in England, one of which is the Wye Valley NHS Trust, which administers my constituency of North Herefordshire. In 2014-15, the Wye Valley NHS Trust budget was £183.637 million. Most of the trust's expenditure is on staffing, which last year cost it £115.4 million—63%—of its total expenditure. That includes all staff—permanent, bank and agency.

Agency staff cost more than permanent staff directly employed by the NHS, because private companies dictate what our public NHS pays for them. The Government are working to limit that cost to the NHS by introducing a cap on fees paid to agency workers. I support and congratulate the Government on their work to limit the increasing privatisation of the NHS, because I am against the principle that private agencies can control NHS spending and I do not want the NHS open to abuse, which can be the case under our current system.

I propose the creation of a database of all workers in the NHS—agency and direct employees—and that it takes note of when they are working or claiming sick pay. Those data already exist in NHS bodies, and I would like them to be pooled to benefit the whole of the NHS.

There is too much reliance on locums and agency workers. We all know that our NHS staff are some of the most hard-working individuals, as they strive to keep our communities healthy and safe, but there is a struggle to fill certain gaps in staff owing to a lack either of individuals or of specific skills. That is a particular problem in rural areas, where there are simply fewer people with the specific skills that some NHS bodies require. That is compounded by the fact that those who are qualified can become agency workers and do the same job for more money. That, in turn, leads to the NHS employing more agency staff.

Between February and April, the Wye Valley NHS Trust used agency workers in the posts of band 2 healthcare assistants and band 5-plus registered nurses for an average of 1,966 shifts a month, at an average cost of £746,000 a month. That equates to £8.9 million a year for agency staff in those two categories alone.

That is why the Government's work to cap the amount paid to agencies for their staff in NHS organisations is so important. Agency work cost £3.3 billion last year. So far this year, the price cap has saved £300 million, as the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon.

Friend the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), said in response to a question on 12 September, although I have heard that the figure is now much closer to £650 million. In order to support the excellent work that the Government are doing, we should accordingly require agency staff—and, in particular, information about their sick days—to be centrally registered on the NHS. Because information about agency workers is not detailed centrally on the NHS, staff may be employed directly with an NHS trust and also registered with an agency. These two employers do not share information about their workers, even though agency workers are based in NHS organisations. People may say that there are not enough staff in the NHS, but it is clear that there are if we count them properly. A register like the one I am proposing will also demonstrate the areas in which we need to focus our training resources, to make sure that we train the right people.

The vast majority of workers who are employed by both organisations are hard-working, honest people, but there are always some who seek to abuse the system. In 2015, a nurse who worked for an NHS hospital trust was struck off after making £10,000 by working agency shifts while on sick leave, and that is not an isolated case. Such cases cost the NHS not only through fraudulent sick pay but more generally as a cost to the public purse, and we also lose the individuals involved.

The NHS is aware of the risk of payroll abuse and sick leave fraud, and it has sent leaflets to members to make them aware of it. However, without a central system of data sharing between these bodies, organisations have to rely on hearsay to report abuse of the system. This is a good starting point, but it does not eliminate the risk of fraudulent activities, and we need the money to be saved for patients.

The lack of communication between the bodies needs to be rectified. We need to combat those who take advantage of the system by making information about employees more accessible to employers, to make sure that employees are paid fairly and the NHS does not suffer unnecessarily. The Bill would support the Government's hard work to reduce unnecessary costs to the NHS by making it harder for those who take advantage of the system to do so. The Bill would create a centrally kept register of all the agency staff used across the NHS. The register would indicate when those staff were off sick and claiming sick pay. If those data were pooled, abuse could be spotted. The small cost that would be involved in pooling agency data is far outweighed by the risk of abuse and lack of control. All the data already exist, after all; it is simply a case of sharing them.

Information about the sick pay of NHS employees is already stored and reported on. For Wye Valley NHS Trust last year, the figure was just 4.33%. By the same yardstick, agency workers are paid by a public body, so their sick pay data should be stored and shared. There is no better way of managing the enormous agency bill than by ensuring that the data are used wisely.

People speak against the privatisation of the NHS, but that is exactly what will happen if the NHS loses control of its staff requirements. Agencies provide the staff our patients need for their safety. That must be controlled; otherwise, we will never be able to achieve

[Bill Wiggin]

the worthy target of getting the right pay for the right people, doing the right jobs. Our NHS staff deserve no less.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Bill Wiggin present the Bill.

Bill Wiggin accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March 2017, and to be printed (Bill 76).

Broadcasting

[Relevant documents: First Report from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Session 2015-16, BBC Charter Review, HC 398; Third Report from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Session 2016-17, BBC White Paper and other issues, HC 150; Oral evidence taken before the Defence Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on 11 October, on the future operations of BBC Monitoring, HC 732; First Report from the Welsh Affairs Committee, Session 2016-17, Broadcasting in Wales, HC 14; and the Government response, HC 697.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of John Nicolson, whom I will call to move the amendment formally at the end of the debate.

1.44 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): I beg to move,

That this House approves the draft Agreement (Cm 9332), between the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation, which was laid before this House on 15 September 2016.

I start with an apology. Although I am delighted to be here for the debate, I will have to leave at some point this afternoon—I hope that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the House will forgive me—because we have, as Members will know, a magnificent celebration of our Olympic and Paralympic athletes. It was an enormous pleasure to be in Manchester with them yesterday, and I look forward to seeing them again today.

I am delighted to welcome the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) to his place. It is a great pleasure to see him sitting opposite me, and I am sure that we will enjoy many happy debates across the Dispatch Box.

The BBC is the best broadcaster in the world, and it is widely recognised as such throughout the world. Despite what some people would have the world believe, the Government know that the BBC is one of our greatest institutions and must be nurtured and cherished. The fact that we received more than 190,000 submissions to our consultation shows how deeply people care about the BBC. It is, therefore, quite right that the changes we are making to the BBC will strengthen it, secure its funding, protect it, decouple the charter from the electoral cycle and ensure that the BBC not only survives but thrives.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has talked about providing appropriate funding for the BBC to make sure that it is funded well. At the same time, the Government have inappropriately imposed on the BBC the costs of free licences for the over-75s and of overseas monitoring for the security services and the Foreign Office. What does she have to say to that?

Karen Bradley: I have also enjoyed sparring with the hon. Gentleman across the Dispatch Box. I will come on to the details of the funding later, but I believe that this funding settlement is a strong one that puts the BBC on a sustainable footing with an inflationary increase in the licence fee.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The former arts Minister, the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), does not think so, as he told us last time we debated the matter. Many of us in this House think that the idea of suddenly forcing the BBC to pay for free television licences is a complete disgrace.

Karen Bradley: The BBC has agreed to this through negotiations and discussions, and I am confident that the funding settlement puts the BBC on a sustainable long-term footing.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab) *rose*—

Karen Bradley: I will take one more intervention, and then I will make some progress.

Christian Matheson: I must correct my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). This funding mechanism is not to pay for free TV licences; it is, surely, to pay for a Conservative manifesto commitment.

Karen Bradley: The funding settlement is to pay for the very best BBC, which we all want to see. I am absolutely confident that this funding settlement will provide that.

Kelvin Hopkins: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Karen Bradley: No, I will make some progress, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me. I will come back to funding shortly, but I want to put on record the fact that the draft charter contains a few small, technical omissions and errors. We will publish shortly a revised charter that includes all those points, on which I know some hon. and right hon. Members have picked up.

The BBC royal charter and agreement will support a BBC that makes and broadcasts world-class content; that provides impartial, high-quality news; that is independent, transparent, and accountable; and that works with, rather than against, the rest of the United Kingdom creative sector. The BBC director-general, Lord Hall, hailed the draft charter as

“the right outcome for the BBC and its role as a creative power for Britain”.

The new royal charter will make the BBC stronger in a number of ways. It will increase the BBC’s independence, improve its regulation, make it more transparent and accountable to licence fee payers, and make it better reflect the whole United Kingdom. First of all, the BBC will become more independent.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Karen Bradley: I cannot resist the hon. Lady.

Helen Goodman: The Secretary of State has just said that the new royal charter will maintain the BBC’s independence, but I draw her attention to paragraph 4 of the draft agreement that she laid before the House last month, which states:

“By entering into this Agreement, the BBC has...assumed obligations which restrict, to some extent, its future freedom of action.”

How can that possibly be consistent with what she has just said about its independence?

Karen Bradley: When the hon. Lady looks at the charter as a whole, she will see that the BBC will become more independent. It is very easy to take one

line from an agreement and try to demonstrate the opposite. As a whole, the charter will make the BBC more independent.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Karen Bradley: No, I will make some progress.

A majority—nine out of 14—of the members of the new unitary board will be appointed by the BBC. That contrasts with past appointments by Governments of every member of the BBC governing board. The new director-general will be editor-in-chief and have final responsibility for individual decisions on the BBC’s editorial matters and creative output.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State not understand the difference between appointments to a unitary board that has overall editorial control over the BBC and appointments to a system of trustees or governors who do not have such editorial control?

Karen Bradley: I understand that point, but I think this structure will give the BBC more independence. The fact that the majority of directors will be appointed by the BBC makes it clear that the Government want the BBC to be independent, to be strong and to succeed.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): On that point, does my right hon. Friend accept that the director-general remains the editor-in-chief and that the role of the unitary board is only to scrutinise, post-broadcast, decisions the director-general has made?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend exactly sums up the position.

The longer—11-year—royal charter will separate charter renewal from the electoral cycle, which has been widely welcomed. I reiterate that the mid-term review after six years will be a health check, not another charter review in all but name. It is surely eminently sensible to check how effectively new arrangements are working before 11 years have gone by. Moreover, article 57 of the charter states:

“The review must not consider...the mission of the BBC;...the Public Purposes of the BBC; or...the licence fee funding model of the BBC for the period of this Charter.”

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that there will be a further huge change in viewing habits from traditional television to online and on-demand viewing over the 11-year charter renewal period? Will she consider decriminalising non-payment of the TV licence for viewing the iPlayer and will she in effect implement decriminalising non-payment of the TV licence over the charter renewal period, which would be widely supported and welcomed?

Karen Bradley: I know my hon. Friend has campaigned strongly on this issue, and I understand the point he makes.

I will go through some further points about the new charter. The BBC will be regulated more effectively under it. The charter and agreement set out Ofcom’s new role as the BBC’s independent regulator. Ofcom

[Karen Bradley]

will monitor and review how well the BBC meets its mission and public purposes, regulate editorial standards, hold the BBC to account on market impacts and public value, and consider relevant complaints from viewers, listeners and other stakeholders where complainants are not satisfied with resolution by the BBC.

Maria Eagle: Given the high number of extra roles and duties that Ofcom is taking on, will the Secretary of State undertake to the House today to ensure it is properly remunerated and given enough resource to do the extra job it will now have to do?

Karen Bradley: Ofcom has been asked about that point, and it has set out that it has the capabilities and the competence to do this work. The charter is the result of extensive negotiations between the BBC, Ofcom and others, and I am confident that Ofcom has the resources to be able to fulfil its obligations.

It is fundamentally important that the BBC should be impartial. Colleagues have been keen to impress that point on me in the run-up to and following the EU referendum. Although it is not for the Government to arbitrate on such matters, I will make sure that Ofcom never forgets what a vital duty it has in this regard. These are big new responsibilities for Ofcom, and it is rightly going to consult with the industry on its new operating framework for the BBC next year.

It will also be Ofcom's job to set regulatory requirements for the BBC to be distinctive. Schedule 2 to the agreement makes it clear that the BBC's output and services as a whole need to be distinctive, so concerns that this is a way for the Government to interfere with specific programmes are totally unfounded. The provisions in the charter that place new duties on the BBC to consider its impact on the market are not about reducing the BBC's role per se.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I would be very interested to know the right hon. Lady's personal perspective on what "distinctive" means. Does it mean distinct from other channels or from international broadcasters? Will she clarify what it means in this context?

Karen Bradley: I think "distinctive" means both those things. It means that the BBC is a unique and distinctive broadcaster that offers a range of outputs across television and radio, appeals to a wide variety of the population and offers programming that simply would not be delivered in a commercial context.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): One of the distinctive areas and advantages of the BBC is its ability to take forward policy initiatives such as commitments to minority language broadcasting. Does the Secretary of State understand the concern felt among those in the excellent operation at BBC Alba that the framework agreement as currently drafted is not entirely to their advantage? It needs to be looked again, particularly with regard to the fact that the funding source should continue to come from the BBC UK pot as part of a commitment to minority languages across the whole of the UK.

Karen Bradley: BBC Alba is a wholly owned subsidiary of the BBC. The charter and the framework set out very clearly the requirements on BBC Alba. I would be very happy to meet representatives of BBC Alba if they feel that something has not been considered, although, from our previous conversations, I think such points have been addressed.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the most distinctive forms of BBC output and the way in which it probably comes closest to meeting its public service requirements is BBC local radio? It provides the very focused and, I would argue, often unique output that is very valuable to many communities up and down the United Kingdom.

Karen Bradley: I agree with my hon. Friend that BBC local radio is very important for all our local areas. I will give BBC Radio Stoke a plug, because I know it would be disappointed if I did not do so. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) seems to agree with that point. I am sure we all feel the same about our local radio. The point of the charter and the framework is to provide such a regional focus and to ensure it is maintained.

Ian C. Lucas *rose*—

Kelvin Hopkins *rose*—

Karen Bradley: I have taken several interventions, and I am afraid I want to make some progress.

We are making the BBC more transparent and accountable, as is only right for an institution that receives so much public money and means so much to the public. The salaries of individuals who earn £150,000 and above will be made public. There will also be a full, fair and open competition for the post of chair of the new BBC Board. The National Audit Office will become the BBC's financial auditor, and it will be able to conduct value-for-money studies of the BBC's commercial subsidiaries. The NAO is held in very high regard, and it has extensive experience of scrutinising commercial and specialised organisations such as Network Rail and the security services.

Finally, the Government have listened carefully to those who said that the BBC must better reflect and represent each of the home nations. They are right. The charter provides for a strengthened public purpose, emphasising the fact that the BBC has a central role in the creative economy across the UK's nations and regions. Appointments to the unitary board of members for the nations will need the agreement of the devolved Minister or, for the England member, the Secretary of State. The charter obliges the BBC to appear before Committees and to lay its annual reports and accounts in the devolved legislatures.

Ian C. Lucas: The Secretary of State commends BBC Radio Stoke, and I know that local radio is hugely important. Is it not unfortunate, therefore, that we do not have BBC local radio in Wales? One station alone represents the whole of Wales—BBC Radio Wales, along with Radio Cymru. Is it not time that we had local radio services in Wales in the way we have them in England?

Karen Bradley: Clearly that is a matter for the BBC. I sometimes pick up BBC Radio Wales in my constituency in Staffordshire—it seems to have a wide and long reach and is clearly reaching areas outside its normal remit.

The BBC must fully reflect the diverse nature of the UK. For the first time, diversity is enshrined in the charter's public purposes and requirements on minority language provision are strengthened. The charter will be considered by the Privy Council before the Government seek Royal Assent.

We had an excellent debate in the other place last week and I am pleased to have another opportunity to debate the world's finest broadcaster in this Chamber. Our changes will secure the future of the BBC, strengthen it, give it an unprecedented degree of independence and make it more transparent, accountable and representative. This Government believe in the BBC.

2.1 pm

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I particularly draw Members' attention to the fact that I have only recently stood down as vice-chair of the all-party group on the BBC.

May I say how much we are looking forward to working with the new Secretary of State and her team? She was generous and engaged in constructive dialogue when she was a Home Office Minister, and I hope that we can continue that relationship in our new posts. I also wish to thank my predecessors in this role, my hon. Friends the Members for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), who has shown that he has not lost his tenacity or his energy in this policy area, and for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), who offered such robust scrutiny of the White Paper when it was discussed earlier in the year.

The Labour party welcomes the fact that the charter provides the BBC with the funding and security it needs as it prepares to enter its second century of broadcasting. The BBC embodies those enduring British values of hard work, creativity, innovation and co-operation. It helps to ensure that Britain's voice is heard around the world, and it has informed and entertained countless millions of listeners, viewers and web users. It did so once again over the summer with its truly exceptional coverage of the Olympics in Rio, and I know that the whole House will agree that we should acknowledge that on the day we celebrate the achievements of our athletes by throwing a fantastic party in Trafalgar Square later.

While we welcome the charter, we have some misgivings, as the Secretary of State has seen, about the responsibilities that the BBC has been obliged to accept. In particular, we are extremely concerned about the Government's decision to force the BBC to meet the cost of providing free TV licences to the over-75s. That was done without meaningful public consultation and little parliamentary debate, and it was part of a deal that was made behind closed doors.

Kelvin Hopkins: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment as shadow Secretary of State; I am sure he will enjoy the job.

The imposition of the cost of licences for over-75s was carried out at the same time as the charter was being negotiated. Does that not imply that a degree of duress was involved in making the BBC accept that decision?

Mr Watson: It is certainly not the most ideal of circumstances to face when negotiating for survival. We do not think that there was a meaningful public consultation and we had hoped that those days were behind us. We feel strongly that that situation cannot be allowed to happen again. This was the second time that the Government had approached their deliberations with the BBC by placing a gun to its head. In 2010, the coalition Government forced the BBC to take on the cost of paying for the World Service. The Government approached the negotiations in 2010 and 2015 with the subtlety of a ram raider approaching a jewellery shop. Their approach was described as a "smash and grab raid".

We expect the Secretary of State to reassure us that the next licence fee settlement will be agreed in a transparent manner and according to a clear timetable. It must be subject to parliamentary scrutiny and put out to public consultation, so that whoever is in power cannot railroad a settlement through again. Please will the Secretary of State give a guarantee to the House that such a system will be put in place? We will work with her to achieve that.

I am sure that some people believe that asking the BBC to pay £700 million a year for free licences was clever politics, but I think it was political irresponsibility, verging on negligence. The BBC is not an arm of the Government. It should not be asked to meet the cost of Government policies and it should not be asked to implement changes to the Government's social security policy.

Karen Bradley: It is worth putting on record that the BBC licence fee has been frozen for the last six years. The Government have agreed to increase the licence fee in line with inflation, which will result in additional income for the BBC of £18 billion in the period up to 2021. That is more than enough compensation for the money the hon. Gentleman is talking about. The issue of licences for over-75s was dealt with outside the charter arrangements. This is a fair settlement that gives the BBC good funding and the licence fee payer good value for money.

Mr Watson: It is certainly a settlement. The BBC has accepted it as a settlement, and that is why we will not oppose the motion, but it is not unreasonable for us to press the Secretary of State on why an instrument of social security policy is being passed to the BBC. We are considering carefully whether we can challenge the measure in the Digital Economy Public Bill Committee, because the extra cost imposed on the BBC is the equivalent of a 20% budget cut. I know the deal has been struck and different income streams have been negotiated within it, but the manner in which it has been done is distinctly unfair. The Government are passing responsibility for social security cuts that they should take on to a British institution.

Ian C. Lucas: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Watson: Yes. I should point out that I have a bad ear infection and can hardly hear a thing today, so hon. Members will have to shout if they want my attention.

Ian C. Lucas: When my hon. Friend considers trying to amend the Digital Economy Bill, will he bear in mind that £630 million of public money was taken from the BBC to fund broadband in the previous Parliament? The Government have real form with raids on the BBC.

Mr Watson: We will of course take on board my hon. Friend's wise advice.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Watson: Hmm, yes.

Mr Vaizey: I am sorry to shout so dramatically, but I took on board what the hon. Gentleman said—I listen to every word he says—about his ear infection and I wanted to grab his attention. May I point out that the money from the BBC television licence fee that was used for broadband was actually the surplus left over from Labour's highly successful digital switchover programme? That programme was so successful that it underspent its budget, and we used the surplus to pursue our own extremely successful broadband programme.

Mr Watson: I am being slightly diverted from the motion. I have only been in this role for 10 days, so I may not have my facts entirely right, but I think that the £630 million that my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) described has also been underspent to the tune of £60 million. It would be very useful if the Government could give that money back to the BBC so that it could be put into diverse broadcasting such as children's broadcasting, in which the right hon. Gentleman and I both have an interest.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that in an age when all other public bodies are being asked to make efficiency savings, it is reasonable for the BBC to be asked to share some of the burden, especially given the fact that the BBC overspends on a lot of programme making? For example, it took twice the number of people to the Olympics than other broadcasters took? Salaries are still going up, the top echelons have not been reduced and huge pension settlements are still being given to those who leave the BBC.

Mr Watson: I hope that I have not given the hon. Gentleman the impression that I do not think viewers need value for money—they certainly do. The transparency measures agreed by both sides of the House have helped to ensure that the value-for-money case is made internally within the BBC.

Kelvin Hopkins: Hon. Members are eliding public spending, which is paid for by taxation, and licence fee spending, which might be seen as a relatively regressive form of taxation, but is not public funding in the same sense.

Mr Watson: My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

We will always make the case for a strong, independent and well-funded BBC. That was what we did in government and it is what we intend to do in opposition. I hope that we can move on from the days when a small group of campaigners routinely questioned whether the BBC should exist at all. For a handful of people, the licence fee that has funded the BBC for nearly a century is an aberration. They believe that the only reliable, durable and perpetual guarantor of independence is profit.

Perhaps they believe that 40p a day is an outrageous price to pay for the BBC's startling array of television and radio news coverage, current affairs programmes, natural history, drama, comedy and children's programmes. Perhaps they would rather see the BBC smaller and a little duller. I do not believe that and the British public do not believe it either. That was why there were 192,000 responses to the Government's consultation on the future of the BBC, and why the overwhelming majority were favourable and supportive.

I pay tribute to the campaigners whose tireless work helped to deliver a BBC charter that is likely to secure its future: the Great BBC campaign, founded by Lord Waheed-Alli and Charlie Parsons; the Save our BBC campaign; the 38 Degrees petition to protect our BBC, which now has over 390,000 signatures; and all the creative industry trade unions, including the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union, Equity, the Musicians' Union, the National Union of Journalists and the Writers' Guild of Great Britain. All came together in a coalition to defend the BBC. They raised awareness, generated support and helped to deliver those 192,000 responses to the Government's consultation. On both sides of the House, we are indebted to them all.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I agree completely that there was some very effective campaigning, but will the hon. Gentleman accept that there was also a lot of unnecessary scaremongering? For example, an accusation was sent to Government Members' mailboxes about the wholesale destruction of the BBC by the Tories. That was never the intent and never the case, and some people need to apologise.

Mr Watson: I am afraid that I am not quite sure of the specific allegation of scaremongering, but the hon. Gentleman has made his point and it is on the record.

We welcome the royal charter and the security it gives the BBC. In particular, I welcome the Government's U-turn, as the consultation on the future of the BBC that they published in July 2015 was very different in tone and intention to the proposals before us now. We welcome the fact that the BBC's funding settlement will now be decided every 11 years; it is particularly helpful to remove it from the five-year election cycle.

We welcome the settlement, but we know that an institution the size of the BBC can never be perfect. We believe the BBC has a responsibility to look and sound like Britain, both on screen and off. It should do far more to identify, employ and promote talent from every background and every walk of life. That means recruiting far more people from our black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. It means more women of every age in senior roles off screen and in leading roles on screen. It also means employing people from every social background.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Thinking about the pupils of Ashfield, I would like to make a practical suggestion. The BBC should go into schools in constituencies such as mine and tell pupils that work experience is open to them. Their parents pay the licence fee, so they should have the opportunity to work there.

Mr Watson: That is a fantastic idea. Perhaps we can build up a case to allow the BBC to extend its reach into schools in areas like my hon. Friend's constituency.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman also agree that in the light of Ofcom's new diversity obligations, the make-up of the UK population should be better reflected in terms of personnel and senior management?

Mr Watson: That is a very insightful point about something that we can work together to monitor.

I was talking about employing people from every social background. The BBC has a duty to reflect the nation it serves. That means informing and entertaining licence fee payers, as is set out in the charter, but the BBC must also do more to encourage and support British talent regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability or social background. It is well placed to do that because, almost uniquely, it has a strong and visible presence across the country. There are BBC studios in Birmingham, Bristol and Belfast. The BBC has offices in Leeds, Nottingham, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Cardiff and many more places too numerous to list. It has a duty to reach out to the communities on its doorstep.

The BBC has significantly expanded its apprenticeship programme. I commend director-general Tony Hall for that but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) points out, there is far more we can do. According to research carried out in 2015 by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, over nine in 10 jobs in the creative economy are done by people in more advantaged socio-economic groups, compared with 66% of jobs in the wider economy. That has to change.

Karen Bradley *indicated assent.*

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock) *indicated assent.*

Mr Watson: Ministers are nodding in support of that, so I hope that they can reassure me that the new and explicit commitment to diversity will also cover social class. I grew up in an era when working class actors such as Michael Caine, Glenda Jackson and Julie Walters were giants of popular culture.

Helen Goodman: You're not that old.

Mr Watson: I am; I am feeling it, anyway.

I have nothing against Benedict Cumberbatch and Eddie Redmayne—I admire their talent hugely and they are great ambassadors for our country—but we need more people like Julie Walters, Christopher Ecclestone and Paul McGann. And it should not fall to Lenny Henry and Idris Elba to be the face of the BBC's diversity programme.

Matt Hancock: This is an appropriate point in the debate to underline the cross-party support for this direction of travel. The BBC knows that it has a lot more work to do. As the hon. Gentleman says, diversity is explicit in the charter, and that means diversity in all its forms: yes, protected characteristics such as ethnic background, gender and sexual orientation, but also social background—wherever people come from and from whatever walk of life.

Mr Watson: I welcome the Minister's reassurance about that. We will work constructively with the Government to make sure there is a framework so that the BBC can actually achieve its targets. As Andrew Rajan wrote only last week:

"there have been decades of lip-service being paid in praise of diversity by the various gatekeepers of finance and programming, but nothing has changed at all".

The BBC has published its own national target, which commits it to hiring 15% of staff from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups by 2020, but I am afraid it has a poor record on this. In its evidence to the Puttnam inquiry, the Campaign for Broadcasting Equality said that despite the BBC's many diversity initiatives and programmes, it has consistently failed to meet its own targets. This cannot continue, so I welcome the Minister's commitment to making sure that that does not happen.

The people we see on screen, the people who create what we see on our screens and the people who lead television must look more like the people we see on our streets. That means seeking out talent, on screen and off, from the black and minority ethnic communities. It means ensuring that roles do not mysteriously disappear for older women and it means creating roles that do not automatically exclude candidates with disabilities or mental health issues. The charter's new commitment to diversity is welcome and Ofcom's role as the BBC's new regulator will be vital. It will help to bring about a truly diverse BBC that reflects the nation it serves. The point the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) makes is well taken. Will the Minister tell us how Ofcom will monitor and enforce its new diversity duty? Will it publish data about the number of BBC employees from minority groups? Will it monitor on-screen talent and publish information about where that is drawn from? Any detail that the Minister could provide today would be extremely helpful.

The charter introduces a host of other changes, some of which are more welcome than others. The National Audit Office already helps to ensure that the BBC delivers value for money to licence fee payers, so we have no objection in principle to extending its role so that it scrutinises the parts of the BBC that spend public money. We have some concerns, however, about the expansion of the NAO's remit to cover parts of the BBC that are not directly funded by the licence fee, particularly BBC Worldwide. There might be a danger that allowing the NAO to access BBC Worldwide's books could place it at a commercial disadvantage, so that risk will need to be addressed.

The charter attempts to resolve that possible problem by stating that the NAO cannot question any "creative or editorial judgements" on the grounds of value for money, but it also allows the NAO to define exactly what that phrase means. It will need to be defined more precisely in the charter in the future. Will the Minister be able to provide us with some comfort that it will not be interpreted too widely? An independent dispute resolution process needs to be established so that disagreements between the NAO and the BBC can be resolved.

We give cautious welcome to the proposal that Ofcom becomes the BBC's regulator. I have already mentioned the critical role Ofcom will play in monitoring diversity, and it will also monitor distinctiveness and consult the industry on its new operating framework next year.

[Mr Watson]

Given the issues at stake, can the Minister confirm that Ofcom will also consult Parliament and the public about this matter? The BBC Trust struggled to reconcile its twin roles of the corporation's regulator and its cheerleader. It is right that these two functions and responsibilities, which were often confusing and sometimes contradictory, are to be officially separated.

We welcome the fact that the majority of appointees to the BBC's unitary board will now be drawn from the BBC, rather than being appointed by the Government. We note that that was not the Government's original intention, but I commend them for performing a heel turn and pivot on that issue—Ed Balls would have been given a 10 from Len if he had managed to pull that off with such style. As Lord Foster of Bath said in the other place, the fact that the Government appoint the chair of the new BBC board and the chair of Ofcom raises questions about their independence. Does not the Secretary of State agree that one way of guaranteeing independence would be to require that every non-executive is independently appointed?

The new charter rewrites the BBC's 90-year-old mission statement. The commitment to be "impartial and distinctive" has been added to the time-honoured duty to "inform, educate and entertain". We need assurances from Ministers about that, because distinctiveness is poorly defined, and Ofcom has admitted that it is still working out exactly what it means. Distinctiveness is a vague notion, and there is a risk that the BBC's commercial rivals could use it as a stick with which to beat the BBC whenever they wish.

Despite these reservations, I sense that this Secretary of State wants to create a new climate in which the future of the BBC can be discussed without political posturing. I do not think she wants to return to the days when David Cameron could describe the prospect of cuts to the nation's favourite broadcaster as "delicious". The new approach is welcome. As I said, I believe that the Secretary of State has the BBC's best interests at heart. I can detect no desire on her part to use the BBC as a political football. I really hope those days are behind us. The aim of the charter settlement should be to give the BBC the space, time and resources it needs to adapt to huge technological change. That is the only way the BBC will remain relevant to a younger audience who are consuming content in myriad ways.

We will work with the Secretary of State to secure the future of the BBC. Let us hope that this is a new benign era for the Beeb. After all, when Government Ministers are loudly complaining about you in public; when Back-Bench Government MPs insist that you have an inbuilt left-wing bias; when Front-Bench Opposition MPs insist that you have an obvious right-wing bias; when the left-wing columnist, Owen Jones, says you are a threat to democracy; when the Foreign Secretary finds you infuriating; when politicians and activists of every stripe and persuasion think you are against them; when two thirds of the British public see you as a bastion of editorial excellence and journalistic integrity; and when the American public would rather get their news from you than from their own news sources, there is one thing the BBC can be sure of—it is doing things right. We should be proud of one of the nation's greatest assets.

2.25 pm

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome the publication of both the draft charter and now the agreement. This is the culmination of a process that started a year ago with the publication of the consultation paper on the future of the BBC. As both Front-Bench spokespeople have mentioned, that produced a very wide-ranging and voluminous response, ranging from the 192,000 people who responded by email or letter to a number of luminaries of the creative industries who wrote to defend the BBC against the threat that they saw, but that I believe, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) pointed out, never really existed.

Karen Bradley: I just want to put on record my thanks for the amazing work that my right hon. Friend did as Secretary of State. It was a joy to come into the job and find such comprehensive and technically excellent work done on the charter, which really puts the BBC on an excellent footing. I want to thank my right hon. Friend for that.

Mr Whittingdale: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend. It is gratifying, and it is a positive sign, that the charter and the agreement essentially reflect the contents of the White Paper, which was the result of a great deal of work. At the time, it was very much welcomed by the BBC as putting it on a sound footing for the future. I believe that that is the case and that the charter and the agreement are, if anything, a bit tougher on the BBC than the White Paper was. The changes made to the charter and agreement go further—in ways that I welcome. Indeed, I might have recommended myself the changes to the salaries publication regime, whereby the Government have decided that it is right to publish the salaries of not only those earning over £450,000, but over £150,000.

The issues that attracted perhaps most comment when the White Paper came out—they have featured in the debate we have had thus far—are the independence and the governance structure of the BBC. The governance structure was widely recognised by Members of all parties as having failed. The BBC Trust had virtually no defenders. When I chaired the Select Committee, we produced a robust report, saying that the trust model did not work. The Lords Communications Committee also produced a report making precisely the same point. The idea that the BBC should have a management executive and then this arm's length body, which was part of the BBC but not in the BBC, was simply a recipe for confusion, leading to a succession of problems, including severance payments, the appointment and then departure of the director-general within a space of 54 days and huge wastes of money such as the digital media initiative, which cost the licence fee payer over £100 million.

We asked David Clementi to come up with a recommendation for a new governance structure, and he came back with the one that most people had always felt was the right solution—a strong unitary board with external governance from Ofcom. Then the debate was about the appointments made to that management board—the unitary board—and whether the Government should have a role in it.

The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) reads some sinister meaning into paragraph 4 of the agreement, where it says that the independence of the

BBC's appointments is important, but nevertheless has to take account of external factors. Let me explain that that particular paragraph is word-for-word identical to the paragraph in the agreement published in 2006, when the Labour Government were in office. It simply translates the same provision from 2006 into the new agreement. So if there was a sinister purpose, it was the creation of the hon. Lady's party, not that of the present Government.

There was then a debate about the fact that, obviously, the unitary board was a more powerful and directly responsible body than the trust. It was recognised, I think, that it was right for the appointment of the chairman to remain a Government appointment, although my own view was that because the board was such a new creation there should be an open competition, and that was the view that the new Secretary of State and the new Prime Minister subsequently reached following the publication of a report by the Select Committee. I think that that was probably the right decision.

The Government appoint the four independent directors, each of whom will represent or speak for one of the nations of the United Kingdom, and, as has been pointed out, the BBC will appoint five non-executive directors. Even the Government's appointments will, however, be made through the public appointments process. As I have said, they will not be in the majority. Perhaps most crucially of all, the unitary board will not have a role in editorial decision-making, although it will have a role in reaching judgments about complaints post-transmission. That crucial safeguard will ensure that those people cannot be accused of political interference.

I find it extraordinary, I must say, that all the people who suggested that the creation of the board somehow constituted a threat to the independence of the BBC—although, as was pointed out, it would have no involvement in editorial decision-making—have been strangely silent about what strikes me as a more dangerous precedent: the appointment of James Purnell as director of radio and education. When the BBC appointed James Purnell as director of strategy in 2013, just three years after he ceased to be a Labour Member of Parliament and about five years after he ceased to be Secretary of State, I questioned the director-general about the appointment in the Select Committee. I asked him whether he could think of any precedent for the assuming of a management role in the BBC by someone who was not just politically affiliated, but had been a very active party politician. He could not do so, but he did say this to the Select Committee:

“I think the key thing is—James's job of course is not editorial”.

James Purnell has now become director of radio and education. As director of radio, he has overall responsibility for the output of a large amount of BBC content, and it is impossible to say that he has no involvement in editorial decisions. Indeed, we are told that he has been groomed as a potential candidate for the job of director-general, a position which, of course, is also that of chief editor of the BBC.

I like James Purnell. We get on well, we have robust discussions, and we agree about quite a lot. I have absolutely no doubt that James Purnell is absolutely committed to the impartiality of the BBC, just as I am; I merely suggest that if I, as a former Secretary of State, were to be invited, in a few years' time, to take on a management role in the BBC—[HON. MEMBERS: “I'd back you!”] I suspect that, despite the support that I

might enjoy from some on my own side, it would give rise to howls of outrage, and I do not think it would be appropriate. This is not to criticise James Purnell, but his appointment does establish a very dangerous precedent, which is far more of a direct threat to independence than the appointment of the non-executive, independent directors.

Helen Goodman: The right hon. Gentleman is making a fair point. What it all goes to show is that more appointments of this kind should be made through independent processes, and that is precisely our criticism of the new board structure. The right hon. Gentleman has just given another example in which the independence comes into doubt.

Mr Whittingdale: The hon. Lady has made an interesting point. The Government have no involvement in the appointment of management executives in the BBC, and—this is another issue—we understand that, just as there was no competition when James Purnell was appointed director of strategy, there was no advertisement or external competition for this particular post. However, that is a matter for the BBC. It is something that the Select Committee has previously questioned quite vigorously, and although I am no longer a member of the Select Committee, my successors may well wish to take it up with the director-general in the future. I hope that they will.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that James Purnell had a career in the media before becoming a Member of Parliament—he was a special adviser at No. 10 in that area—and that there is a general view that he has done a very good job? He is a good friend of mine, but is not the real purpose of advertising to ensure that we do not just get white men who are hand-picked for such jobs? That must be the criticism, rather than, necessarily, James Purnell's own background and the expertise that he clearly possesses.

Mr Whittingdale: I am not sure that the fact that James Purnell was a member of Tony Blair's policy unit is hugely reassuring to me. As for the right hon. Gentleman's point about the need for diversity, it has already been covered in the debate, and I absolutely sign up to it. The right hon. Gentleman has acknowledged and welcomed the fact that we have included it in the BBC's public purposes for the first time. I think that the BBC is committed to trying to increase diversity, but, as has already been said, there is more to be done.

Damian Collins: The appointment of James Purnell to his new role is important not just in relation to James Purnell himself, but in relation to the process. This is one of the most senior positions in the BBC, and there is no internal or external advertising of that position. There is a great deal of criticism of the way in which BBC executives are appointed and how much they are paid, and an element of transparency and competition is important in that context.

Mr Whittingdale: I entirely agree that that is an important issue, but I think that the issue of the political precedent is, if anything, even more important. People complained vigorously about the suggestion that the Government might appoint, as non-executive independent

[*Mr Whittingdale*]

directors, people who might be political friends. That caused howls. This, however, is not an independent position. It is not a non-editorial position. It is a position within the management executive which involves responsibility for editorial content. Obviously, it is a much more directly responsible position, and it is therefore even more important that it should be politically independent.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): This, of course, makes it all the more remarkable that when the right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State, Rona Fairhead was appointed chair of the new BBC board by the Prime Minister with—as we subsequently discovered—absolutely no competition, and behind closed doors.

Mr Whittingdale: She was originally appointed following a very open and widespread competition when she became chairman of the BBC Trust. Obviously that post was advertised, there were a number of candidates, and the process was subject to the full public appointments procedure. The fact that the then Prime Minister and I told the House that it was felt that she could serve during the transition following a transfer to the new position is a matter of public record. However, as I said earlier, I think that the later decision that it would be better to put the post out to open competition was the correct one.

Maria Eagle: The BBC may or may not have made a mistake in the way in which it appointed a particular individual—James Purnell, about whom the right hon. Gentleman has been talking—but it made that decision as an independent organisation. Is not the difficulty that we face, and the issue of political interference, caused by the fact that we in this place seek to control? When the right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State, it was argued that the appointment of a majority of board members by the Government of the day was a matter of concern, because it was felt that there would be a route for political interference from this place and from the Government, rather than the BBC's making its own mistakes—or not; as it may or may not do.

Mr Whittingdale: That was obviously a separate debate. I understand the concern expressed by the hon. Lady, but I do not agree with her. Even under the original suggestion, the BBC would have had a majority when the non-executive and executive board members were taken together. Moreover, as I sought to point out, the non-executive members will have been through the public appointments process. They will have had to demonstrate their competence and qualifications for the role, which most people regard as a pretty good safeguard. Of course, the BBC Trust, which the board replaces, was wholly appointed by the Government, so this is quite a big shift.

Sammy Wilson: Apart from the political connotations of the appointment, does the right hon. Gentleman not find it even more bizarre that, because of either the perceived inexperience of the appointee or other internal factors, the BBC has had to create another management

post to support Mr Purnell, with a salary of more than the Prime Minister's, at a time when it says it has no money?

Mr Whittingdale: Again, the hon. Gentleman raises some valid points. There are a number of curiosities about this appointment. As I indicated earlier, I am sure the Select Committee will want to think about some of them when the director-general next appears before it.

I want to touch on a couple of other aspects of the agreement and charter, which, as I have said, I very much welcome. The introduction of distinctiveness as a key requirement for the BBC is important. It is right that an organisation that enjoys £4 billion of public money should not be competing with the independent sector, and that it should look different from the commercial sector in television and, just as importantly, in radio. I hope that putting that in and then having Ofcom adjudicate it will make a difference.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): I agree on the distinctiveness point, because the BBC receives this public money, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the distinctiveness should go across all the channels, as opposed to the BBC just putting some distinctive programmes on certain niche channels? It should be spread across the whole range of the BBC, not just concentrated on a small element of it, leaving the major channels free not to be as distinctive as arguably they should be.

Mr Whittingdale: I agree, and it will ultimately be for Ofcom to decide whether the BBC is meeting that requirement. I do not think it should be applied to every individual programme, but each channel should be able to demonstrate that it is markedly different from an equivalent commercial channel. That should apply to radio as well as the mainstream TV channels. That is a significant change.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): When the right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State, did he ever look into the disproportionate amount of money distributed to the regions in comparison with London? I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows that some of the regions are very concerned about that.

Mr Whittingdale: I understand that, and there are particular regions—and indeed nations—that feel underserved and hard-done-by. In my view, the BBC made a good move in transferring a lot of its production and facilities to Salford—I was in favour of the establishment of the Media City in Salford—but that was not sufficient for the BBC to then sit back and say, “Right, we’ve done our bit for the English regions; we don’t have to worry any longer.” The west midlands has felt underserved, as has been debated in this House, and I have no doubt that the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson), speaking for the Scottish National party, will talk about the provision of the service, and indeed employment and production, in Scotland. This is a live issue, and I believe the BBC needs to do more.

I want to touch briefly on two particular policy developments that I promoted and remain keen on. The first is the public service content fund. The hon. Member

for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) talked about the underspend on the provision for broadband and what will happen to it. I hope it will go to establish the public service content fund, which will provide programming in areas that are currently underserved, of which children's television is certainly an example. It will be administered outside the BBC.

Mr Watson: Does the right hon. Gentleman not think that there may be a chance with that development of an onerous bureaucracy being created that may cost the licence payer more, and may mean that the expertise in commissioning content is diminished?

Mr Whittingdale: I very much hope that there will not be additional bureaucracy. The precise way of administering it will need to be worked out. There is a valuable consequence of this: this is a very small pot of money, but it will mean that there is an alternative route—other than the BBC—for the obtaining of funding from the public purse for public service content. At present, the BBC has a monopoly in commissioning content with public money. That is in large part necessary, but it is worth exploring this alternative route.

Mr Watson: My memory is not great and I have only been reading into the brief for 10 days, but I think that the figure is about £60 million. Does the right hon. Gentleman envisage that being an ongoing demand on the BBC, or will it be a one-off pot as a result of the underspend?

Mr Whittingdale: Where the money is coming from has been identified: it is coming from the underspend, as the hon. Gentleman flagged up in his remarks, and that is obviously over a set period; it is not ongoing. We will judge the success of it. It will be to some extent for the BBC to decide whether it is a success, and also for the Government to decide, but I am content that, certainly for the next three years, it is in place.

The other innovation I am very committed to, and to which the director-general has given a lot of support, is the provision for the BBC to support local media through the establishment of local news reporting and the buying-in of content. The purpose of that is first to address an extremely serious issue: the decline of local media and the consequences of that for local accountability and democracy. This alone is not going to solve that as it is a very big issue, but it is a recognition that the BBC has taken content from local newspapers often without even attributing it to the local paper, let alone giving any money for it. This will ensure that local newspapers continue to cover local institutions—local councils, courts proceedings and so forth, which are extremely important for the functioning of local democracy. It seems to me a legitimate use of the licence fee to do this and I welcome the support the BBC has given to the move. It is important that the BBC should not directly employ these people: if it turned out that a local newspaper could reduce their employment even more because the BBC would pick up and employ those people, it would further harm local media rather than helping. The important thing is that, through a tendering process, the BBC establishes a relationship in each area with a local media organisation—it does not need to be a newspaper; it could be a radio or television station—and supports it in ensuring that there is proper coverage of local political issues. That is new, and I hope it will help to sustain local media and local democracy in this country.

Finally, I want to touch on the future of the licence fee. I think I have been quoted in the past as saying that the licence fee was worse than the poll tax. When I said that, it was simply an observation that the licence fee is a flat-rate charge payable by every household and, unlike the community charge, no help is available even for those on very low incomes. It was simply an observation of that. The licence fee has many flaws—it is regressive, it is hard to collect, and there is the iPlayer loophole enabling people to evade it, which we are now closing—but I think the Government are right that for this charter period the licence fee should continue. The speed of change in the way that people receive television is very fast and there may well come a moment when the technology has advanced so that the old argument that everybody consumes the BBC in one form or another is no longer true. Also, if television is distributed via the internet, which is coming and I believe will eventually be the universal method of distribution, that will be the moment when it is possible to experiment with things like conditional access subscriptions. I therefore welcome the fact that the BBC has agreed to put a small toe into the water and use the iPlayer perhaps to supply some additional content on a voluntary subscription basis. That is a small step, but it will shed light on our potentially one day moving towards a voluntary system of subscription to the BBC. The technology does not permit that now, and I do not think it is appropriate now, but I welcome the fact that the BBC has agreed to make that first small step.

I conclude by saying once again that I believe the draft agreement and charter represent a sound foundation for the future of the BBC. I would like to take some small credit, despite all those who told me I was hell-bent on destruction. That was not the case, and I hope this proves it.

2.49 pm

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I beg to move the amendment in the name of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

The BBC is one of the most important and influential cultural, social, economic and democratic institutions in our country, and I welcome this opportunity to debate its future further. I think we all agree on many things, including how important the BBC is, but there is also significant agreement on the areas in which we criticise it.

The new shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson), illustrated very effectively how worried many of us are about the lack of diversity in the organisation, and the debate initiated by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on diversity in the BBC won widespread agreement throughout the House. There is a shocking shortage of senior black and minority figures at the very top of the BBC. We all believe that the BBC should reflect the nation. When we turn on the television, the nation should be reflected back at us, but too often it is not. We do not see enough black and minority faces on screen. There are also not enough lesbian and gay people in senior management positions or, more importantly, on screen as authority figures, where they should be seen. I have made this point before. The BBC has always been absolutely fantastic at attracting gay people into comedy roles and on to gameshows, but they are not the authority figures who present the news, as they should be.

Mrs Helen Grant: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point, but does he agree that off-screen and back-office representation is just as important?

John Nicolson: Indeed I do. That is a very fair point. The BBC would probably argue it has been effective at hiring minority figures backstage and at the more junior levels, but the real problem arises when it comes to promotion. That is very obvious when we see the most senior presenters on screen or when we are in meetings with the most senior management figures. The BBC clearly has to address these concerns as a matter of urgency. It is great at setting targets, but it is not so good at actually delivering them. They are often set years in advance, and by the time we get to the end stage, we have all forgotten what the target was in the first place, so it sets new targets for us to get excited about. It is time for that to stop. It is time for the BBC to deliver.

I associate myself with the widespread criticism of the agreement over the licence fee for the over-75s. That deal was done in secret between BBC managers and the Government. When Tony Hall appeared before us in the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, he told us that his staff were delighted with the deal. I had to pinch myself. Anyone who has spent a nanosecond talking to any of the BBC's staff knows that they thought it was absolutely disastrous because of the effect it will have on programme-making budgets. Also, importantly, it is not the role of the BBC to deliver social provision. The BBC is a broadcaster. It is the Government's role to deliver social provision. This was clearly not a satisfactory development, and it is one that we deplore.

I suggest that the BBC management should have taken a leaf out of Channel 4's book. When faced with a deal that did not look as though it will be good for them, they should have phoned a couple of politicians who were on their side to see whether they could intervene on their behalf, rather than negotiating in secret. That negotiation turned out to be disastrous because they were not that good at doing deals behind closed doors. If they had asked their pals for a bit of assistance, they might have done better.

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about those negotiations. To be fair to the BBC, however, the blame lies with the Government, who took the BBC to the brink and then offered it a deal that it had no choice but to accept.

John Nicolson: Except, of course, that the previous director-general, when faced with precisely this threat, threatened to resign. The Government blinked first on that occasion. The BBC has enormous power if it plays its cards well.

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that the BBC probably breathed a sigh of relief at getting off so lightly in that deal? It now has an increased licence fee and a five-year review, which probably means nothing, but it has had enough money this year to increase its wage bill by £21 million.

John Nicolson: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about BBC salaries, and I shall say more about that later. They are ludicrously inflated at senior levels.

The director-general often says, "We pay these huge salaries because that is the going rate in the outside world." The BBC does not actually know that, however, because nobody ever wants to put it to the test by leaving a senior post in the BBC. They know that they will never achieve such high salaries in the outside world. I asked the director-general if he had ever conducted a study on what his senior staff got when they left the BBC and went into the industry outside. He told me that he had never conducted such a study.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree that in any other business, whatever it might be—even local government—those outside salary levels would be tested. The market is always tested when setting salaries.

John Nicolson: That is precisely the point I made to the director-general. I asked him whether he had tested this, given that he always argued that he was paying the going rate. His answer was that he had not tested it, so his whole argument for paying people ludicrously inflated salaries fell with that one answer.

As the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) predicted, I am now going to talk about Scotland. It has been clear for a significant period of time that the BBC is not delivering for Scotland in the way that it should be. Audience satisfaction ratings show that Scots do not feel that the corporation fully represents their views and interests. Appreciation measures in Scotland are lower than the average for the rest of the UK, and people in Scotland think that the BBC is poorer at representing their lives in news, current affairs and drama, compared with people in other parts of the UK. Members do not have to take my word for that; the BBC fully acknowledges that problem.

We on the Scottish National party Benches here in Westminster and our colleagues in Holyrood and the Scottish Government are committed to high-quality, well-resourced public service broadcasting, and we want a BBC charter that allows this. Charter renewal has been a valuable opportunity to provide a framework for the BBC that enables it to maintain its important role as a public service broadcaster, to improve its performance for Scottish and UK audiences and to provide further support for the Scottish production sector and those in our wider creative industries. For the first time, the Scottish Government and Holyrood have had a formal role in the charter renewal process, following the recommendations of the Smith commission. The SNP has delivered a clear and consistent message on the straightforward changes we believe would help to transform the BBC in Scotland for the better. We welcome a number of elements in the charter, but it is vital that the BBC now delivers.

The SNP has argued that the BBC needs an enforceable licence service agreement for Scotland and a dedicated board member for Scotland. There are clear reasons for this. A Scottish board would allow BBC Scotland to have greater control over its budget and to be given meaningful commissioning powers. The charter accepts SNP proposals for the BBC to report on its impact on the creative industries for the first time, but it does not make provisions for a fairer share of the licence fee raised in Scotland to be spent in Scotland. Such a provision could deliver up to an additional £100 million

of investment annually in those creative industries. We welcome the commitment to continued support for the Gaelic language, but the Secretary of State refrained from going just a little further and moving towards parity with the Welsh channel S4C for MG Alba, as recommended by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, on which I serve.

The Select Committee supports many of the wider proposals in the draft charter. We welcome the abolition of the BBC Trust and its replacement by a unitary board, although, as I suggested in an intervention on the right hon. Member for Maldon, we were alarmed to see what I will gently describe as the rather relaxed method of selection for the new chair, when Rhona Fairhead moved seamlessly from her old job as chair of the BBC Trust to her new job as chair of the unitary board. The right hon. Gentleman said that the transition period was important because, to paraphrase slightly, the transition meant that she was effectively continuing in the same job. However, Ms Fairhead herself said that it was a completely different job, which is precisely why it should have been subject to open competition, rather than having arisen from a cosy chat between her and the Prime Minister, with no civil servants present. I discovered that during a heated Select Committee cross-examination that resulted in Ms Fairhead accepting that she should perhaps go.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman had a go at the director-general earlier, but Rona Fairhead should have been screaming blue murder when the Government were forcing their settlement on her. The whole point of her post is that she is meant to be independent and able to say to the Government, “No. You will not do this.”

John Nicolson: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. That is precisely Ms Fairhead’s role and precisely why many of us found it disturbing that she had been appointed without open competition. What was the quid pro quo for getting a job such as that with no competition? She would have to be truly saintly not to feel slightly beholden to the people who had appointed her in that way.

Scotland’s frustrations with the BBC often focus on the provision of news, which is why I have led the calls for a new Scottish Six. The national news programme, “Reporting Scotland”, is treated as a regional news programme under current arrangements. It is under-resourced and cannot report on news outwith Scotland’s borders. The current six o’clock news does not work in the post-devolution age. Scottish viewers often have to sit through stories on devolved issues that are of no relevance to them, such as English health or English policing. It is a blast from the past and it needs to change.

Ian Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify something about the bit in his amendment about the Scottish Six? During the BBC charter statement last month, the Secretary of State said that

“it is for the BBC, which has operational independence in this matter, to determine how exactly”—[*Official Report*, 15 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 1060.]

the Scottish Six would happen. The hon. Gentleman tweeted shortly afterwards:

“Good to hear Secretary of State confirm #ScottishSix is a matter for the BBC not government.”

Does the amendment not push the Government to make a decision about the Scottish Six, rather than leaving it in the hands of the editorial commissioning of the BBC, which he has been arguing for in the rest of his speech?

John Nicolson: The hon. Gentleman confuses structure with editorial policy. It is perfectly reasonable for any of us to argue that there should be devolution of broadcasting and structural changes. That is why the all-party Culture, Media and Sport Committee came out unanimously in favour of a separate Scottish Six. It did not presume to tell the editors of a Scottish Six what the content should be. That is an editorial matter. Simply to recommend and advance the cause of the Scottish Six is structural, not editorial. It is important not to confuse the two.

Ian Murray: I want to press this matter, because the Scottish Six is an incredibly important issue in Scottish broadcasting. I am undecided on whether it is a good thing, because I want good-quality Scottish news rather than a forced programme that may not be of the quality that people would expect, but that is a funding issue and a different argument. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that whether BBC Scotland initiates a Scottish Six is an editorial judgment for the BBC or a policy judgment for charter renewal?

John Nicolson: That is a good question. I do not need to tell the hon. Gentleman that this subject has been party political for too long. I am a former journalist. I believe in independent journalism and want to see more jobs in journalism and want Scottish news to prosper. I have always found a certain irony here because people often say in Scottish political debate that there is not enough scrutiny of the Scottish Government. I do not know whether I agree or disagree with that, but that is what some say, particularly those in the Labour party. I am arguing for an hour-long programme in which the Scottish Government can be scrutinised for a full hour. That has to be a good thing. It would provide more opportunities for opposition politicians and more jobs. Crucially, I have talked to the journalists and it is also something that BBC Scotland wants.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Nicolson: I cannot wait to hear this.

Alberto Costa: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is that not an argument for the people of South Leicestershire and the other parts of the United Kingdom to hear about the Scottish Government’s failures? Is it not an argument for more Scots news on the UK’s main news, rather than for a separate news bulletin?

John Nicolson: I fear that that is cloud cuckoo land. While I would not presume for one moment to tell the network editors what they should put on the news, I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that if somebody stood up at a newsroom editorial meeting and said, “You know what? I think we should have a 10-minute report on Scottish politics for the viewers of South Leicestershire,” I suspect that they would not get very far.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): This is a matter of equality. Welsh speakers in Wales have news programmes specifically for them about Welsh and international matters, but 80% of non-Welsh speakers in Wales do not get the same thing through their screens. I am sure that the same issues arise in Scotland.

John Nicolson: The hon. Lady makes a good point. There is a bit of irony here, because I looked at the *Daily Mail* after the Select Committee came out in favour of a separate Scottish Six and it condemned the decentralisation of broadcasting on a front page that was itself devolved. The *Daily Mail* does not run the same front page in Scotland as in the rest of the UK because it knows that the news priorities are different.

Mr Watson: I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman's contribution. I have not been party political about the Scottish six o'clock news and have never thought about it in detail—I am the new kid—but I am trying to understand whether his position has changed. When I was doing my homework, I found a question from him to the Secretary of State in a recent debate in which he said:

“Does the Secretary of State agree that the matter of a separate ‘Scottish Six’ is entirely the responsibility of the BBC?”—[*Official Report*, 15 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 1060.]

The hon. Gentleman seems to contradict that in his speech this afternoon. Has his thinking changed?

John Nicolson: I am delighted to explain. In answer to my questions, both the former and current Secretaries of State said that, while agreeing that Scotland was under-served and accepting the BBC's analysis that it is not trusted in Scotland, the job of news was to bring the nation together. I do not believe that it is. The job of the BBC is to report without fear or favour and to provide the best possible news for its viewers, rather than acting as a cheerleader for one constitutional settlement or another. The BBC should devolve as much as possible. I believe in the concept of a separate Scottish Six. Politicians should stand back and allow the BBC to decide the form and content of that programme—[*Interruption.*] If the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) wants to ask me a question, he is free to, but if he mumbles, I cannot hear him.

Alberto Costa: I thank the hon. Gentleman once again for his generosity. Was it not SNP activists who bullied BBC Scotland during the Scottish independence referendum debate, alleging that the editorial content on its news programmes was biased?

John Nicolson: There was a vigorous debate in Scotland in which both sides accused each other—[*Interruption.*] I heard the hon. Gentleman; he does not have to repeat himself. Both sides accused each other of bullying. The BBC said that it should have learned lessons from the referendum campaign, and there is an important argument about exactly how the BBC should cover referendums. The coverage when there is a binary choice should be different from that during a multi-party election and I think the BBC accepts that it covered the referendum campaign like a general election rather than a binary choice. The BBC got itself into a bit of a fankle because it said—defending itself immediately as it tends to do—that there were no lessons to learn and that no

mistakes were made. Almost immediately after, however, it said that it must learn the lessons of the Scottish referendum campaign for the way in which it covered the European Union referendum campaign. That is intellectually incoherent; it cannot say, “Our coverage was perfect,” and at the same time say, “We will learn the lessons from the previous campaign.”

Ian Murray *rose*—

John Nicolson: I would like to move on to the next part of my speech, so I will not take the intervention.

The important thing for all of us is to remember that BBC Radio Scotland and BBC Alba have been doing exactly what is being proposed—for decades in the case of BBC Radio Scotland; they have a grown-up running order, where the UK's, Scotland's or the world's most important story that night leads the news. All of us therefore have to think about how we would feel if we opened a newspaper and it contained only Welsh stories, only English stories or only Scottish stories. Such a newspaper would be most peculiar, yet this is the position in which the BBC finds itself in Scotland.

I believe that our proposal would present new opportunities for the talented and skilled professionals in Scotland. It would create new jobs and open new horizons. It would bring investment and assist BBC Scotland in building its reputation as a high-quality broadcaster. Of course, it is also vital that we recognise that this is what the BBC staff want. The editor of “Reporting Scotland”, Andrew Browne, has said that they are “really keen” to see a separate Scottish Six and that he would love to take this programme forward. He said:

“It's got world news, it's got Scottish news, it's got UK news, it's something we can do. Any journalist would want to work on a programme like that.”

However, he added the following caveat:

“It's for people much higher up in the BBC to decide whether or not this is the right direction to go with for news.”

Meanwhile STV saw a gap in the market and, while the BBC anguished, probably worrying about what politicians thought in a way that it should not, it has outflanked the BBC by announcing a Scottish Seven, to be launched in 2017.

There lies a problem at the heart of BBC Scotland: without a fairer share of the licence fee, without greater control of its own budget and without the authority to make commissioning decisions, BBC Scotland too often relies on the decisions of executives in London—invariably—granting it permission over what it can and cannot do. Meaningful editorial and financial control must be transferred north of the border. The opportunity to invest in people and in our creative industries must be realised. Maximum devolution of broadcasting to Scotland is necessary to deliver the high-quality, well-resourced public service broadcasting sector that Scotland deserves.

Ian Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Nicolson: I will take one more for the road.

Ian Murray: I am very grateful, as the hon. Gentleman has been incredibly generous with his time. We want to support your motion, so will you give clarity about what it actually says? Are you saying that a Scottish Six,

in the BBC News Scotland context, is an editorial decision for the BBC in Scotland—I hope that is what the motion says—or that you are looking to make this a policy decision in the charter? The latter would not be desirable, and I think he is arguing the same.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. A lot of people are using the word “you” when they mean hon. Members. I gently remind people that when they say “you,” they are referring to the Chair.

John Nicolson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is important that there should not be political interference in the decision about whether or not there is a separate Scottish Six. I have made this point repeatedly. I am encouraging the BBC to continue fearlessly with its current proposals, to continue with the pilots and to provide jobs and investment in the way that it wants to do and that its staff want to do. The BBC is rich in talent and creativity. Its strength is its extraordinary workforce. We have, in the course of our charter deliberations, made clear our passionate support for public service broadcasting. Where we have offered criticism, we hope we have been constructive, and much of our criticism has been accepted by the BBC. We urge it now to translate its aspirations into delivery.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. For the avoidance of doubt, let me say that at the beginning of the hon. Gentleman’s speech he attempted to move the amendment, but he was speaking to the motion. He will be called to move the amendment formally at the end of the debate.

3.14 pm

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Much of today’s debate will doubtless focus on issues such as governance, compliance, regulation, independence, distinctiveness and financial stability, but I wish to use my time to raise again an issue that is far too often pushed to the margins: diversity and equal opportunities.

Last week, I attended the launch of the BBC’s “Black and British” season. It was at a hotel in Soho and it was well attended. The event gave us a glimpse of some bold, vibrant stories, intended to overturn various misconceptions and to challenge the orthodox. The aim was also to show what it really means to be black and British today. I must admit that when I arrived I was a little sceptical, but when I left I was a little emotional, because I had been taken on a journey back to the ’40s, ’50s, ’60s and ’70s, and then forward into the future, with a documentary speculating on whether we will ever have a black Prime Minister, by some brilliant, diverse writers, presenters, broadcasters, directors and producers. I think I witnessed the BBC operating at its very best, and I felt very proud of the institution and proud to be British. I felt excited about the future.

This desire and commitment to have even greater diversity at the BBC seems very genuine, and pretty well reflected in the draft charter and agreement, but there are three areas where clarification from the Secretary of State or the Minister for Digital and Culture, either in the wind-up or later in writing, would be helpful. I also wish to make one or two remarks about Ofcom.

First, although the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has published helpful information sheets on a large number of policy areas, no information sheet appears to have been produced on diversity and equal opportunities. I therefore ask the Secretary of State or her Minister to look into providing a comparable document as soon as possible.

Secondly, the draft charter states:

“The BBC must ensure it reflects the diverse communities of the whole of the United Kingdom in the content of its output, the means by which its output and services are delivered (including where its activities are carried out and by whom) and in the organisation and management of the BBC.”

Will the Secretary of State or her Minister please confirm that that diversity requirement applies to on-screen and off-screen employment from all suppliers, both internal and independent?

Thirdly, the agreement requires the BBC to promote equal opportunities in relation to disability, race and sex; to make people aware of its arrangements to achieve that; to review the arrangements; and to publish a report at least once a year on the “effectiveness of the arrangements”. On that latter requirement, I respectfully ask the Secretary of State and her Minister to pay special attention to the word “effectiveness”, because we need to know what works and what does not work. Too often in my life—in my experience both as a lawyer and a politician in this place—I have heard institutions boast good practice or best practice, but then found that good practice or best practice do not mean effective action, and we really do need effective action here.

Finally, Ofcom as a regulator is responsible for ensuring that the BBC’s diversity requirements are realised. I confess that in the past I have not been overly impressed by Ofcom’s response to statutory equality duties, but it now has a new chief executive officer who has promised a harder-edged approach to diversity. She has also mentioned quotas and, if necessary, ring-fenced funding. I hope that Sharon White’s words are reflected in action, and I shall watch very carefully.

Helen Goodman: The hon. Lady is making a characteristically powerful speech. Given the diversity of the population under the age of 18, does she agree that it is particularly important that we have a home-grown capacity for making children’s programmes so that the programmes that children watch reflect the communities in which they live?

Mrs Grant: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. I would be extremely interested to look into that sort of idea.

On the basis that transparency drives diversity, I also hope that Sharon White will require full publication of the BBC’s diversity data, with Ofcom providing commentary and the essential evaluation.

Many people listening to this debate today have worked so, so hard for years to advance diversity in the arts and creative industries. There is still much to do and still a way to go, but I do feel that we are on the brink of some real progress. I therefore take this opportunity to pay tribute to the former Culture Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), and to all those committed individuals both inside and outside Parliament such as Simon Albury of the Campaign for Broadcasting Equality who never seemed to give up.

3.22 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): May I begin by saying to colleagues around the Chamber that, since I stood down from the Front Bench in June, I have agreed to take on the secretaryship of the all-party parliamentary group on the BBC?

I welcome the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the Minister for Digital and Culture to their places. Both of them are new to the job but not to government. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) for his debut at the Dispatch Box in this role, and I wish him well.

Although the new Ministers have come late to the process of BBC charter renewal, it is now for them to finish off all the work that has been done so far. I am glad to see that some of the more lurid fantasies of the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), whom I am really pleased to see in his place, will be well and truly finished off by the time the new charter becomes operational.

I am sure that the Secretary of State and the Minister have realised already the incredibly high esteem in which the BBC is held by our constituents, who pay for and consume its services, and the concomitant interest and campaigning about the process of charter renewal. There is a wish around the country, the nations and the regions that the Government get this charter right.

Let me give the Government some credit—not something I often do. The end result looks like it will be better than many of us had feared. Let me also be clear that one or two concerns remain, and I will come on to mention them in my remarks.

When we consider the future of the BBC, we should always keep in mind both its great history at the centre of our national life—Members do that when they make contributions to this debate—and the fact that it is one of our most loved institutions. It is behind only the monarch, our armed forces and the national health service in the esteem in which it is held, so loved and valued it most certainly is.

The consultation on the Green Paper as part of the charter renewal process review simply reiterated the extent to which that is so. Those of us who knock on the doors of our constituents and try to get them to approve of what we do in our jobs can only look on in awe at an 81% approval rating—81% of the public believe that the BBC does a good job. We would all wish for such a high level of approval from those for whom we seek to work. That high approval rate is combined with the fact that a very high number of people in this country—some 97%—consume BBC services for an average of 18 hours a week. That is an impressive set of figures, which we should all bear in mind when we consider the future of the BBC.

The public have taken part in the charter review period, in so far as they have been able, by way of the consultation on the Green Paper. As the Secretary of State mentioned in her own remarks, some 192,000 people have replied. Three quarters of them believed that the BBC should remain independent, and two thirds that the BBC has a positive wider impact on the market and that BBC expansion is justified. The BBC is also a lynchpin of our creative industries, and our broader creative industries, in the whole of the UK. It allows us to punch well above our weight as a nation in exporting

creative output to the rest of the world, as well as being a key component in the soft power on which even our new Foreign Secretary has commented as he starts to get to grips with his new role. Both of those things are even more important after the referendum on 23 June than they were before when the former Secretary of State and I were both still in our places on the Front Bench. We all should be able to agree—I am sure we will—on how lucky we are as a nation to have the BBC. We should use the charter renewal process to make it fit for the future and enable it to continue doing the job that it is doing.

Andrew Bridgen *rose*—

Maria Eagle: Of course I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, who has just come back to his place.

Andrew Bridgen: The hon. Lady talks about how popular the BBC is, and she is completely right, but when 75% of UK adults rely on the BBC for a large amount of their news does she agree that it is very, very important that the BBC is, and is seen to be, impartial?

Maria Eagle: I do agree with that, but it is also important that the BBC is the judge of impartiality and is held to account for it. We should not be able to override it from this Chamber, because we—on both sides of the House—are not impartial.

A good charter must guarantee that the BBC's editorial independence is beyond doubt. It must guarantee that the BBC's financial independence will continue and it has to help it to fulfil its mission to educate, inform and entertain. That is the yardstick by which we should judge this charter.

The 11-year length of the charter is a good thing because that provides stability and takes the next review out of the political cycle into which Parliament's passage of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 had suddenly pitched it. I am, however, still a little concerned that the mid-term review—it will presumably take place after five and a half years—or health check, as Ministers have imaginatively dubbed it, might be deeply destabilising if there is a will in government to exploit that process.

We have been reassured that this will not be a mini-charter review, as is feared. The Minister in the other place, Lord Ashton of Hyde, said that it would consider only governance and regulation, not the scope and scale of the BBC. However, halfway through the charter, a change in governance and regulation from the current proposals could leave things looking very different from how they do at present. When the Minister replies to the debate, will he give us some reassurance about the kind of change that he envisages this mid-charter review—or health check or mid-term review—might seek to make?

The Minister in the other place said that Ofcom will “have to stand the test of time and prove itself”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 October 2016; Vol. 774, c. 1995.]

Might this mini-charter review lead to Ofcom being stripped of its regulatory function, if it does not stand up to some test that that Minister seemed to be setting for it? Precisely what kind of review does the Minister for Digital and Culture envisage? When he responds about Ofcom, can he give us the assurance that the Secretary of State did not quite give me in my intervention

on her about the resources that Ofcom will be given to carry out its considerably extended role? The right hon. Lady did not say that Ofcom would be given new resources or the resources of the existing trust. We need to know what resources Ofcom will have to do the important and completely new job that it is given under the charter.

Andrew Bridgen: The hon. Lady is extremely generous in giving way; I thank her for indulging me. We will have a new regulatory regime for the BBC. Ofcom will replace the BBC Trust, in which there was no trust. We talk about a health check. If I went to the doctor for a health check and he found that I had some horrible disease, I would expect him to take action. I would expect the Government to take action if, at the health check, the new regulatory regime was found not to be working.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman employs an extended metaphor. I do not quite understand how that would apply in respect of the mid-term review. I do not know why the mid-term review was not simply dropped. It seems to me that Ministers have been casting about to try to find some purpose for it because they did not want to accept that the mid-term review or the break clause had started out as something different from how it ended up. I am not sure what the role of the review is, so when the Minister winds up the debate, I hope that he will be able to give us a little more reassurance.

It was said in the other place that governance would form part of that mid-term review, so what kind of change to governance, if any, is it likely to make? To what extent might there be some change in the air? If the Government do not like how the arrangements that they set out in the charter are proceeding, will we see a wholesale change at mid-term to the governance of the BBC? What steps will the Government take to ensure that any such changes are as fully scrutinised as the arrangements for the new charter have been? There is not necessarily a parliamentary aspect of the mid-term review or health check.

We had an exchange about governance earlier. I welcome the fact there is to be a competition for the new chair of the BBC Board. I was critical that the chair of the BBC Trust had simply been appointed to what is a rather different role without any competition at all and at the behest, it seems, of the previous Prime Minister—though not, I suspect, at the behest of the former Secretary of State. I emphasise that I am not and was not commenting on the ability or otherwise of Rona Fairhead to do the job, but simply on the principle of the matter. In any event, she has decided not to put herself forward, so the BBC will have a new chair. Opposition Members are mindful of what the outgoing Commissioner for Public Appointments, Sir David Normington, said about the Government's increasing propensity to appoint Tory supporters to important public roles, so we will be watching this particularly sensitive appointment with extremely close interest.

I welcome the fact that the Government have abandoned the previous Secretary of State's attempt to enable the Government to appoint a majority of the unitary board, which I do not believe was a sensible proposal. The retreat that the Government have agreed to, following discussions with the BBC, is a good one, because they

could have led themselves into criticisms that they would rather not have. I think that the development is entirely positive.

I want to say a little about the thorny topic of distinctiveness. What on earth does "distinctiveness" now mean in the context of the charter? We know what the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) thought it meant. Indeed, today he reiterated in part his view of what it means—we got the distinct impression that anything popular, commercial or with good ratings would not be distinctive enough. He thought that the BBC should be prevented from engaging in any kind of competition with its commercial rivals in this respect, but what does that mean in the context of the new charter?

I think that the definition in the White Paper is fiendish, because "substantially different" can mean whatever anybody wants it to mean. We are assured by Ministers that it will not be applied to individual programming. To be fair to the right hon. Gentleman, I never heard him say that he meant it to apply to individual programming, except in some lurid newspaper stories that seemed to be coming from his Department at the time. The Government have simply left it to Ofcom, which is not used to doing this kind of thing, to work this all out later. In my view, there is still a significant prospect of this being used mendaciously, either by politicians—perish the thought—or by the BBC's commercial rivals, who might simply want to stop the BBC competing with them by making complaints about distinctiveness.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the meaning of "distinctiveness", but does she not agree that there is also an important point about the BBC, with the vast amount of money it acquires from the licence fee payer, having an unfair advantage over other commercial operators? There has to be a way of ensuring that that advantage is not abused to prevent commercial operators competing for good programmes.

Maria Eagle: The BBC ought to be held to account for how it spends its money, whether or not it meets its objectives and its requirements under the charter. I think that that is absolutely fair. We should not get into arguments about whether particular programmes are sufficiently distinctive or different. The definition is a lawyer's dream, and there are concerns about what it will end up meaning in practice.

We have heard tell of the £60 million contestable pot of licence fee payers' money. The survival of that pot is a retrograde step, no matter what use it is to be put to. I note that there is supposed to be some kind of pilot and that commissioning children's programmes is to be involved in whatever is done with the money from the underspend. The fact is that the Government are establishing the principle that licence fee payers' money should be handed over to the BBC's commercial rivals to make programmes. That is different from the BBC itself deciding that it might want to commission programming from independent producers, which it of course does a lot of as part of the way it does its business. The problem is that if the contestable pot simply takes money away from the BBC and gives it to its rivals to make their own programmes without any of the guarantees that the BBC would have for maintaining

[*Maria Eagle*]

ethos and quality, it is no more than a raid on the BBC's resources. That could be the thin end of what might end up being a very large wedge.

We saw newspaper reports before the White Paper was published about a contestable pot involving a lot more than £60 million. Although the pot is currently small and has been identified as a way of using underspends, the possibility that it will expand over time and that a principle will be established that licence fee payers' money is not to be used by the BBC to fulfil its mission could be significant. I therefore would like some assurances from the Government that the contestable pot will not be vastly expanded during the period of this charter review. I do not think that it should be proceeded with at all.

I want to say a little about salary transparency. We have heard the argument that publishing the salaries of the so-called talent in the BBC is an issue of transparency. I understand that argument, but I want to put an alternative viewpoint. Far from being about transparency, this is actually a tabloid editor's dream and a destructive bit of punishment for anybody who wants to work for the BBC rather than a commercial broadcaster. Why is it right to invade the privacy of those who work for the BBC but not those who work for any of its commercial rivals? The Minister in the other place said that this requirement—

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Eagle: No—[*Laughter.*] I was halfway through a sentence. I might give way to the hon. Gentleman when I have finished it.

The Minister in the other place said that this requirement would not be extended to BBC Studios. BBC Studios will still be using public money—licence fee payers' money—when it is commissioned to make programmes. Why is it right for parts of the BBC that are in the public bit of the BBC to have to meet this requirement when talent in other places commissioned by the BBC, using licence fee payers' money, does not? Is this really about transparency, or is it about giving a stick to tabloid editors to have a go at the BBC?

Karen Bradley: The point about BBC Studios is that it is a commercial operation that will compete with other commercial operations. When the BBC commissions an independent company to produce content for it, the people employed by the independent company are not paid directly from the licence fee, so their salary is not declared under these arrangements. We want the same arrangements for Studios as for independent companies to enable competition. However, clearly, we also need to know how much of the licence fee is paid to those independent companies that then go on to make programmes such as "Top Gear" that we enjoy on the BBC.

Maria Eagle: This could lead to unintended consequences. When I was a trade unionist, the idea of comparability and of trying to get a pay rise because somebody else was doing a similar job was grist to the mill. If the proposal simply leads to costs for the BBC's

front-of-camera talent increasing, that might be an unintended consequence. I do not think this has been thought through.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady must recognise that there is a big distinction between people who are paid from the public purse and people who operate commercially in the private sector. The salaries of all of us in the House are publicly known, and it is entirely legitimate for the public to see where some of their money is going as far as salaries are concerned.

Maria Eagle: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but if the ultimate bill is being paid by licence fee payers, why are they not entitled to transparency in respect of salaries just because an independent producer is involved? That is not consistent, and the proposal could have unintended consequences. This seems to be a populist measure, and it does not necessarily do the BBC any favours when it is trying to make sure it gets the talent that is available. It also gives commercial rivals a lot of inside information—published information—to allow them to see what it would take to poach talent. I do not see how that helps the BBC to fulfil its mission. I do not see the point of pursuing this vindictive little measure but, none the less, the Government have said they will implement it, so we will see how it goes.

It is good that we have got to a better place with the charter review than we might have done. From an early stage of the process, the Government seemed to be contemplating shrinking and diminishing the BBC. They denied that, but it was there in the background, and I think that if they could have got away with it, they would have done. However, a huge up-swell of support from our constituents and in both Houses of Parliament has stopped them. There are still pitfalls and problems that might end up being much bigger issues than they now appear to be, however, so we will keep an eye on how things go, especially leading up to the so-called mid-term review or health check. We will be watching to make sure that the Government do not go back to their original aims in the charter review of trying to do down the BBC. On behalf of our constituents who love and value the BBC as a great UK institution, we all hope that this charter does what the Secretary of State now says she wishes it to do, and we will make sure that it does.

3.45 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to this debate, although it is not her first as Secretary of State. I thank her for her consideration of the Select Committee's report and the recommendations during the finalisation of the charter process. I also thank her predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), for the consideration that he gave to the Committee and its work in preparing the royal charter while he was Secretary of State. I welcome the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) to his place. I know from our time together on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in the previous Parliament that he will bring all of his great passion and energy to his new role. I look forward to seeing and hearing his contributions in these debates over the coming months and years.

The speech by the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) reminded me of the programme, “Civilisation”. In 1969, the great art historian Kenneth Clark produced an epic series of 13 50-minute-long episodes—a gargantuan undertaking—all about the nature of civilisation. He started off that great series by asking the rhetorical question, “What is civilisation?”, to which he replied, “I don’t know, but I think I recognise it when I see it.” The same formula could be applied to the idea of distinctiveness at the BBC. It is incredibly difficult to define, but somehow we recognise it when we see it. We want a BBC that, in celebrating its great ingenuity and creativity, takes risks that no other broadcaster would take. I am sure that the hon. Member for West Bromwich East agrees that putting Ed Balls in sparkly clothing and making him dance at peak time on a Saturday is something that no other broadcaster in the world would do. The BBC does it well and makes a success of it, and we celebrate its uniqueness.

It is right that along with assessing the BBC’s value for money, the decisions of its executives and how much money they earn, we also continue to apply the threshold of asking, “Is the BBC being true to its creative values? Is it continuing to be distinctive enough and to deliver across the great breadth of its programming, because of the unique way in which it is funded, something that no other broadcaster could do?” The BBC is one of our great national institutions. It is loved by everyone in this country, but that is because it has adapted and changed with the times. It has applied its creativity and ingenuity to the great breakthroughs in broadcasting, be it television, the internet, or the great breadth of digital services that it offers now. It has moved with the times and stayed close and true to its values.

The process of royal charter renewal every decade or so, the next one being in 11 years’ time, is about looking at not just what is best about the BBC that we should conserve and preserve for the future, but how we want it to adapt and change in the future. At the heart of the process has been a desire for much greater transparency in the way that the BBC operates. That is why I was pleased that the Select Committee consistently recommended that the National Audit Office should become the BBC’s principal auditor so that it had a chance to go in there and apply its forensic skills to see the ways in which the BBC is using its resources. That is the right approach to take.

The creation of the new unitary board recognises something that most people had already concluded for themselves—that the BBC Trust was not fit for purpose and not fulfilling its role correctly, and that we could do better. In particular, the dismissal of George Entwistle—which is, in effect, what happened—showed us that in a moment of crisis the chairman of the trust becomes, in effect, the chairman of the BBC, and steps in and intervenes in the way that the chairman of a board would do. That demonstrates that the BBC Trust was too conflicted to be an external regulator of the BBC as well as its principal champion and the representative of the licence fee payer’s interests.

The creation of the new unitary board is the right way forward. It also answers a question that has been asked consistently at Select Committee sittings over the past year, namely: who does the director-general report to? It was not particularly clear who he reported to, but now it is clear that he has independence of operation

and his executive team to support him while he remains editor-in-chief, but that, post-transmission, he is answerable to a unitary board of the BBC. That is a much clearer management structure and it is welcome.

The other main proposal worth examining—the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood has mentioned this—is that relating to BBC Studios. The BBC clearly wants, and has got behind, that big initiative. I agree with the director-general’s analysis that making the studios more competitive and open will help make the BBC more creative and enable it to attract and hang on to some of the best creative talents who work not just on screen, but on taking ideas through to production and transmission. If the BBC recognises something that almost all other players in the TV market recognise, it is that the future of television for broadcasters lies not just in the growth of audiences and the transmission of content, but in owning and creating programmes and formats that can be exported around the world. The future of BBC revenues and its future creative success will very much be tied to the success of the BBC Studios proposals.

Alongside the BBC having that freedom to compete, independent production companies will also have more freedom to compete to produce programmes at the BBC. The former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon, was probably pivotal in pushing that forward; it certainly chimes with the things that he has said about the BBC in the past. The quotas for the BBC to commission out to independents remain, but much more of its commissioning work will now be liberalised, including that for repeat series. The BBC was not prepared to concede on that before, but it complements what it wants out of the studios proposals. I think that we may look back, not just during the review period, but during the next charter renewal, and say that the creative freedom and openness resulting from the studios proposal was one of the most significant reforms of the charter renewal process.

I want to pick up on one or two other points that have been made, particularly on the recommendations of the most recent Select Committee report. We support the decision to run a proper process for the appointment of the chairman of the new BBC unitary board. As other Members have said, it is a different and unique position, and there should have been a proper process to determine the best person. The Committee did not feel that Rona Fairhead should be excluded from that process. She has chosen to exclude herself, but nevertheless there should have been a proper process. The first chairman of the unitary board will hold a pivotal position and play a central role in appointing some of the independent directors, and it is vital that we have total confidence in the way in which they are appointed.

I also concur with the views of other Members—although there may be a difference of opinion on this—on the question of BBC salaries. The BBC had already conceded that executives who are paid more than the Prime Minister should declare their pay. It had also already accepted the principle of very highly paid on-screen performers and talent having their incomes declared, but it set the benchmark at the level of the director-general. Licence fee payers do not understand why on-screen talent is seen as being so different from off-screen talent, with one having to declare their salary and the

[*Damian Collins*]

other not. That layer of transparency was absolutely the right thing to do, and I am pleased to see it in the final draft of the charter.

Andrew Bridgen: On the need for transparency in appointments, what is my hon. Friend's view of the appointment of James Purnell as head of radio? That has happened at a time when the BBC is bringing in diversity quotas across all its employment, and yet Mr Purnell got that job with no competition whatsoever. Anyone would think that the job had been made for him.

Damian Collins: It is a new post and it was literally made for him. It was not advertised widely for other people to apply for it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon said in his speech—I said this in an intervention as well—that, regardless of people's views of the capabilities of James Purnell, or concerns that people may have about his past political involvement, the key thing is the process that was run to appoint one of the most senior directors at the BBC. Why was there no competition within—or, indeed, outside—the BBC involving people who may have had the requisite skills to apply for the job? If we are going to be critical of the way in which Rona Fairhead was appointed as interim chair of the BBC—as I have said, that should have been a clear and transparent process—that should also apply to other senior executives, including those on the BBC board. That certainly applies in the case of James Purnell; I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen).

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the transparency applied to those on top salaries should also be applied to those who are on contracts that enable them to avoid tax either by paying only corporation tax on money that is paid directly to them, or by participating in tax avoidance schemes, which the BBC now uses for hundreds of its well-paid employees?

Damian Collins: I completely understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. People must certainly pay the taxes that are due on the income that they receive, wherever it comes from. That applies to BBC executives as much as to anyone else. I note what the Secretary of State said in her intervention a few moments ago, and I believe that this is something that we must keep under close review. If BBC Talent is trying to use a loophole by channelling more of its income through independent production companies to avoid having to declare it—our concern, through the work of the National Audit Office, is that there has been an acceleration in that process and that people are trying to get around the rule in the new charter that those who earn more than £150,000 should declare what they earn—we should look again at the matter in the mid-point review.

I want to touch on the comments about the Scottish Six made by my friend on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson). As I was the acting Chair of the Committee and a member of the Committee when we discussed the matter, I was able to give my view on the significance of the Scottish Six. We felt—I certainly felt this, and I hope the hon. Gentleman agrees—that we were calling for the BBC in Scotland to be given editorial

independence over the six o'clock news, so that it could reflect the fact that devolution made certain news items less relevant to the Scottish audience than to the rest of the UK audience. We envisaged that the BBC in Scotland would have the editorial independence to make those decisions and the freedom to change the running order of the programme if it chose to do so. The Scottish Six would still be a national news programme, but it would be broadcast from Scotland, it would be produced and edited in Scotland and it would have a Scottish perspective on the national news. We considered the fact that the BBC was comfortable to make that decision with radio, so why should it not consider doing so for television?

That is, of course, an editorial decision for the BBC to make, but one of the things that the Committee hoped to do with this recommendation in the report was to give the BBC a shove and say, "You have been looking at this for quite a long time, you have tried various different formats and you have tried to make a decision. Here is our view, but it remains something for you to do." I agree with the comments made a few weeks ago by the Secretary of State. I think I am right in interpreting her as saying that, as others have discussed, the Government should not dictate to the BBC what it should do about this; it is a decision for the BBC to make.

Finally, I want to touch on the BBC iPlayer, which has been mentioned. It is important that we remove the loophole whereby people can get out of paying the licence fee by watching programmes—both catch-up and live—on the BBC iPlayer. This also takes us into important new territory that the BBC should explore. By far the most practical way to police such an arrangement would be to give each licence fee payer a PIN that they could put into a portable device to access the iPlayer, to prove that they had paid the licence fee. That is common in other digital services that people use all the time, and it would be the simplest and most logical way to proceed. It would certainly be a lot easier than having digital enforcement cameras—a modern-day version of the TV detector van—going around, trying to work out whether people were viewing the BBC online.

One of the reactions of people in the BBC to such a suggestion is that they do not like the idea of licence fee payers becoming subscribers, or of the BBC becoming a subscription service. I do not think that that would be the case at all. That suggestion is simply an acknowledgement of the fact that new technology allows people to access BBC services in a different way. Those services are still free to access and use for people who pay the licence fee. We would simply be using new technology to make them more readily available.

I believe that a sensible step forward would be to have complementary subscription services that gave people deeper access to the back catalogue and enabled them to stream other programmes that might not be available for broadcast. That would allow the BBC to grow its revenues from its back catalogue and to be innovative in its programme making. It would in no way represent a shift away from the licence fee-funded BBC; it would simply be a recognition of the fact that new technology, platforms and tools will allow the BBC to innovate in ways that simply were not possible in the past. Over this charter renewal process, I would like to see the BBC taking further steps in that direction.

3.58 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The renewal of the BBC charter is taking place at a seminal moment for the BBC and for the broadcasting industry in general. The dominant position of our public service broadcasters is being challenged by Netflix, Amazon Prime, and cable and satellite TV stations more broadly. As I said in the debate on diversity in the BBC, it is worrying that there has been a trend among ethnic minorities in this country and certainly among first-generation immigrants to return to broadcasters in their original languages and to turn away from the BBC.

Clearly, the BBC is in a unique position both as a national broadcaster and as one of our most cherished institutions, right at the heart of our social fabric and our shared national conversation. At a time in our country when, very sadly, there has been a rise in hate crime and there is a deep concern on both sides of the House and across all political parties about a divided Britain, it is very important that the BBC understands its responsibility—this cuts to the heart of its distinctiveness—to be at the centre of such a shared conversation and of the manner in which we can see reflections of ourselves. Even though I am very clearly on one side of the Brexit debate, I must say that I absolutely want to see reflections in the BBC of people in this country with an older age profile, those from working-class backgrounds or those who live in our seaside towns, as much as I want to see reflections of so many of my constituents, who speak over 200 languages.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I entirely endorse what the right hon. Gentleman has said. Does he agree that the BBC did a very good job during the referendum campaign in holding a fair balance of both sides of the argument? Irrespective of the fact that he is on one side and I am on the other, does he share my slight concern that the BBC has not held that balance quite so well since the referendum came and went?

Mr Lammy: I will not be tempted into talking about the BBC's coverage during that debate, but given the salaries paid to senior executives and talent, and much has been said about that today, the BBC's real understanding of the true fabric of this country beyond west and north London, where so many of the executives seem to live—I say this as a representative of a north London constituency—and the way in which it portrays things that are often quite difficult and reaches into places that are quite at odds with each other are genuinely important. The BBC does that not just in its news coverage, but in the sorts of documentaries and dramas it commissions and in the sorts of faces that become those that so many British people from different backgrounds allow into their front rooms during the day.

We debated diversity in the BBC for the first time on the Floor of the House back in April, and I welcome the new public purpose in the draft royal charter, published last month, which unambiguously commits the BBC to “reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions”.

I am quite sure that, right across the House, we are celebrating that move. May I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) on his work on diversity during his time as the Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy? I really enjoyed being a Culture

Minister in a previous Government, and it was my belief that there would never be a Minister as good as me, but it turns out that there was.

The draft BBC framework agreement states that the “BBC must make arrangements for promoting...equality of opportunity”, irrespective of gender, disability, race or sexual orientation. Crucially, the draft agreement also sets out that the BBC must publish an annual report on the effectiveness of its policies for promoting equality of opportunity. This is a really important point. In the 16 years since the BBC published its first diversity strategy, it has not published any evaluation of the effectiveness of its efforts. If we are to see real progress, we must first know what works and what does not work. Members who spoke in the debate in April will be well aware that since 1999 we have had 30 BBC initiatives and strategies aimed at improving the representation of black, Asian and ethnic minority communities, but between 2011 and 2015 the proportion of the BBC's workforce that was from a black, Asian or ethnic minority background has increased by only 0.9% to 13.1%, and only 7.1% of the BBC's senior leadership in TV are black, Asian or minority ethnic.

It worries me that the BBC is one of the organisations in which we routinely hear language such as, “This person or that person is going to be the next director-general,” “This person or that person will one day be head of drama,” or “This person or that person is at Sky or Channel 4 and we expect them to come across in a few years' time.” Given the profile of those people, I am likely to bump into them if I happen to go down Muswell Hill Broadway on Saturday afternoon. That is not good enough. We should not have that expectation. We should reach far beyond that. It is just a bit too cosy and we do not want that kind of cosy friends relationship—despite the nice things I said about James Purnell, who is a friend of mine—in at our national broadcaster.

John Nicolson: Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that one of the problems in encouraging more people to enter the BBC is that often work experience positions are advertised with no pay, or not advertised at all? People have to be fairly well off to go to work at the BBC for a couple of months without earning a penny piece.

Mr Lammy: It is clearly not possible for a young person, or even a slightly older person, who is not situated in London or does not have parents who can put them up and see them through, to take up those opportunities. It will exclude swathes of people, and the standard has to be higher.

In the previous debate, there was much reflection on other broadcasters, and some people asked me, “Why are you picking on the BBC?” Let me be clear: I will always consider myself a tremendous friend of the BBC. In my own television viewing and radio listening habits, I constantly switch on the BBC and I am really pleased with so much of its output. But because it is the national broadcaster, it has a higher standard. I pay tribute to my good friend Baroness King, who is leaving the UK to go to the United States but who has done a great job as head of diversity at Channel 4. She has led the way, and Channel 4 is being bold on targets, taking

[Mr Lammy]

a 360° approach and setting clear guidelines for its independent producers. It is leading the debate consistently, bringing people such as Idris Elba into this place to lead the public conversation. My challenge to the BBC is to say, “We expect you to occupy the same territory and to go further.” It should not be about this House leading the BBC in that direction: the BBC should, to some extent, lead us in the future. We expect a higher standard, and the public purpose should ensure that reflecting and representing the diversity of the UK is embedded into the BBC.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): In any large organisation, including this place, people are always being identified by their peers, with people saying, “That fellow or that lady is going to go to the top.” It seems a bit rich to say that the BBC should not do that when all organisations have that sort of culture. I do not think it means to have it.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is of course right, but more often than not, when we rely on those statements and they come to pass, we miss out on seeing and looking at people who do not fit the mould, most often—I say this with great respect—of the white, upper-middle-class men who have occupied that role in the past. It might have been said about the leadership of the hon. Gentleman’s party in the mid-1970s that “So-and-so is going to take that role,” and Margaret Thatcher did not fit the bill. Of course we get people occasionally breaking through, but I am saying that, really, our national broadcaster has to do a lot more. When we look at the top leadership team over consecutive years and decades, progress in this regard really has been quite slow.

The crucial point is that we need to see progress in terms of the BBC’s latest diversity strategy, which was announced in April and runs to 2020. Off-screen employment is just as important as on-screen employment, as the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) suggested in her excellent contribution, so a pledge to have a workforce at least as diverse as any other industry is welcome. The make-up of senior management and leadership positions is arguably more important than who is being hired as apprentices or runners, so targets of 50% women, 15% ethnic minorities, 8% people with a disability and 15% LGBT individuals in leadership roles is an ambitious goal, but it represents a huge step forward.

It is important that diversity requirements are embedded into contracts with suppliers and independent production companies commissioned to produce content. Yesterday, the BBC unveiled new commissioning guidelines that make it compulsory for independent production companies to “consider” diversity and state that there will be “a conversation” about diversity plans ahead of all commissioning decisions. One has to ask, what does that actually mean in practice? The new guidelines use the word “consider” 12 times, but do not set out any specific minimum requirements except to have a diversity and inclusion policy in place. In fact, the guidelines only use the word “must” once: people “must” tell the BBC if they cannot work with these guidelines.

The BBC has committed to opening up its budgets to independent production companies by removing all existing in-house guarantees except for news and news-related current affairs. By the end of the current charter period, 100% of drama, comedy, entertainment and factual hours will up for grabs, and in 2019 competition will also be introduced into children’s, sport and non-news current affairs programmes. In this new “era of the indies” this will become increasingly important. If the BBC is serious about reaching the ambitious targets it has set for itself, it needs to be clear about what is expected of independent production companies. I have to say that guidelines requiring only “consideration” or “a conversation” about diversity appears weak.

In contrast, Channel 4’s commissioning diversity guidelines state that at least one of the lead characters must be from an ethnic minority background, or have a disability, or be LGBT, that at least 15% of the production team must be from an ethnic minority or have a disability and that at least one of the senior directors, editors or producers must be from an ethnic minority or have a disability. That is much bolder. I was watching Channel 4’s “National Treasure” last week—a wonderful four-part drama touching on the terrible issue of sexual abuse in our society. Julie Walters was wonderful, as were her grandchildren. It struck me as I watched the programme with my wife, having put our own mixed-race children to bed, that the two lead white characters were well-known actors, but their grandchildren were mixed race. I thought, “Great! They have done it.” They had reflected gently what was needed—this episode was not central to the storyline—and there it was: a reflection of my family and my children that is rarely seen on television. That is how it can be done, which is why I am surprised that considering or thinking about a conversation is all we have had in the BBC context.

There has obviously been a debate raging for some time; it has been led by Sir Lenny Henry, to whom I pay tribute. We have seen a 400% increase in the number of programmes produced in the English regions and outside the M25 since 2003, which must be a good thing. We celebrate that fact that television is being made in parts of our country where it was not previously made. It brings us back to the business of embedding and hard-wiring diversity as a consequence of the decision. We do not want to lose out because of the attempt to make TV in Wales, Scotland and beyond. I recently met the BBC director of content, Charlotte Moore, and I gained a real sense of her commitment to the issue, which was one I really wanted to raise.

Let me raise again a point that others have made about the now very important position of Ofcom for the BBC. Ofcom’s chief executive, Sharon White, recently warned that the BBC is falling short on stories that reflect all the nations of the UK and their communities. Last year, Ofcom’s review of public service broadcasting found that over half of BAME viewers felt that they were under-represented in public service broadcasting. Ofcom is well aware of the issues, and it is now up to the new regulator to hold the BBC to account if it falls short on its promises. I hope that the Minister will be able to update us in his later remarks on how the Government plan to ensure that the provisions of the charter and agreement are acted on. It seems clear to me that the BBC must be required to publish full data

on all elements of its diversity and equal opportunities policy and that Ofcom must analyse and evaluate the data to come to a judgment on progress made each year.

Another important point is whether the BBC's targets, which are, after all, only an aspiration, should be combined with a minimum standard or benchmark. I hope that the Minister will confirm today that the Government will call on Ofcom to set the minimum standards for BBC diversity, in terms of both on-screen portrayal and off-screen employment.

We have made real progress on making this issue central in the charter, and I congratulate the Government on achieving that. Now is an important moment for our country, emphasised greatly by the social division that exists in Britain at this point in our history. We do not want to see ethnic minorities turning to first-language stations abroad. We need that national conversation, which must be complex and rich. Difficult though it sometimes is to achieve, a lot of people are paid quite a lot of money to get this right. Now is a time when we must get it right, so that I am not here in five years' time having the same debate about ring-fencing, targeting and the BBC taking diversity seriously.

4.19 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I am grateful for the chance to speak in this important debate, and I greatly welcome the publication of the draft charter. It is worth recalling that at various points during the run-up to the charter there was some debate about whether we would have to extend it in order to give us time to cover all the bases, as it were. It is great testament to the previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), whom I see in his place on the Back Benches, that since the election in May 2015 to today we have a draft charter before us. It is also great testament to him that, as we can see, he does not have two horns on his head and is not carrying a pitchfork. He is not here to consign the BBC to the depths of hell, nor did he intend to do so when he was Secretary of State.

I have absolutely no time for those who think that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon came to office with an agenda to bury the BBC, and that he was somehow seen off by the might of 38 Degrees and the effectiveness of Labour Front Benchers. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, my right hon. Friend is a great supporter of the BBC. He merely made the deeply obvious points that we were going through a charter review, and that the whole point of a charter review was to examine what the BBC does and whether it could be helped to do things better.

I used to joke that we could complete the charter review within 24 hours, but it took us slightly longer. However, as Members now know, the review does not shake the BBC to its core foundations, but makes some very welcome and long overdue changes. One of the biggest issues that we had to consider was whether the licence fee was sustainable, which was a perfectly rational issue to consider. I think it became pretty clear that the licence fee, like democracy, was the "least worst" of the options before us. Nevertheless, my right hon. Friend has given the BBC an opportunity to trial subscription services, and he was right to do so, because—as has already been mentioned—the BBC will face extraordinary

competition, not from its terrestrial broadcast rivals but from the likes of Netflix, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Google. It is appropriate that, in a digital age, the BBC should start to consider how best to raise its income, and, indeed, how best to distribute its content.

Not many Members have mentioned radio. We forget too easily, when we talk about the Poldarks or Ed Balls on "Strictly", that a major part of the BBC's output is on the radio. BBC local radio is extremely important, particularly to us in the House. All those people who huff and puff and say "I wouldn't pay my licence fee for this kind of nonsense" are only too happy to wake up to the "Today" programme and go to bed with the Radio 4 midnight news. The BBC does an outstanding job in radio, and it is important for it to continue to do so.

Let me say something about the subject of James Purnell. I do not have a problem with his being an old leftie; what I have a problem with is the fact that he does not seem to believe in digital radio. I am a passionate supporter of digital radio, but James thinks that everything must go on to the internet. My right-wing friends should really want him to be made director-general, because he would probably put the entire BBC online within 24 hours of being appointed. If James is watching the debate—online—I urge him to back digital radio, because I think that it will be the medium through which we listen to radio. It is at a tipping point, and we need the BBC as a very senior partner in it.

Let me also say, as part of the whole conspiracy theory debate, that I welcome my right hon. Friend's decision to provide for a mid-term review of the charter. As I have said, given the current rapid technological changes, it will be very useful to see whether a subsequent Government can make changes that will help the BBC.

I want to touch on four key aspects of the whole charter debate. First, there is the issue of Ofcom regulation. That was part of the reason for my quip about how we could complete the charter review in 24 hours. It seemed to me that the biggest fundamental change on which everyone was agreed was the replacement of the BBC Trust by Ofcom regulation, because the trust clearly did not work.

I have particular praise for the Minister for Digital and Culture and, in her absence, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—and, indeed, the Prime Minister—because I think they were right to decide, when they came to office, that the chairman of the new BBC Board should be appointed through an open process. If I may echo the words of the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), that is not a criticism of Rona Fairhead, but I think it was quite wrong that there was not an open process for the appointment of the chairman of an entirely new body, and I am pleased that there is to be such a process now. It is obvious that the BBC Board is completely independent. It always was independent even under the proposals made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon before the change of Government, but it is clearly even more independent now, for the benefit of the conspiracy theorists who think we are trying to take over the BBC.

I urge the Government to be as flexible as possible on the detail of how Ofcom goes about the task of regulating the BBC. I have no doubt at all that the chief executive of Ofcom, Sharon White, will do a superb job. Those of us who strongly believe in press freedom should watch out for a Trojan horse, however: if Ofcom is required to

[*Mr Edward Vaizey*]

regulate the BBC, we will need to look carefully at how it regulates the BBC's web content and print-like content. I do not want to see press regulation come in by the backdoor through Ofcom regulating what the BBC does online; I want Ofcom to regulate the BBC's broadcast content—television and radio.

To my intense pleasure, a great deal of this debate has focused on diversity. I thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for his very kind words about what I have done and return the favour, as I would to my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) if she were in the Chamber, about the work they have done on diversity, along with many others. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon will confirm, not a meeting on the BBC went by without my banging on about diversity, and I am very pleased that it is one of the six purposes and that it is very prominent. I praise all the other campaigners outside on the work they have done, in particular Simon Albury from the Campaign for Broadcasting Equality.

We have made progress. I was talking to the playwright and theatre director Kwame Kwei-Armah when he came over a few weeks ago. A play he has produced, "One Night in Miami", is now on in London. He said that, coming back after spending five years in Baltimore, he does see a change, but that is anecdotal and we must keep the pressure on to ensure we see greater diversity. We are not talking simply about black and minority ethnic diversity or gender equality; it is also very important to emphasise the greater diversity we need to see in the representation of people with disabilities, who are too often forgotten in this very important debate. We must make real progress on that.

We have reached a tipping-point, and the backlash has begun. We now see extraordinary newspaper headlines suggesting, for example, that the BBC is anti-white because it wants to promote diversity. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Even if there was not a moral case for diversity and equality, there should be an economic case for every broadcaster. As the right hon. Member for Tottenham indicated, broadcasters are losing audiences, catastrophically among the younger generation—those aged between 18 and 24, who are moving online. Those audiences will move to where the content appeals most to them. If they do not see people who look like themselves on the screen, or do not hear stories written and produced by people like themselves, they will turn off in their droves and go online to where that content exists. So there is an economic necessity, and we can make progress.

The right hon. Gentleman praised Channel 4. Considering the tone of so many of the debates we have about broadcasting, there is a great irony in the fact that it was actually Sky that was the pioneer. That great man Stuart Murphy—who has since left Sky, not under a cloud, I hasten to add, but because he wanted to write a novel—simply said, "These are the targets; we're going to meet them," and just got on with it. I am pleased to see the progress we have made on diversity but, as many Members have emphasised, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating.

I have given my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon notice that I am going to give the competitive content fund a good kicking. I hope the new Minister

will stamp his authority on the process of the charter review by ditching the fund. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon knows, I argued strongly against it behind closed doors and now, liberated on to the Back Benches, I can make my opposition to it public. It seemed to me neither fish nor fowl; it is too small to take on the BBC. It is perfectly valid to argue that having one public service gatekeeper is too few and we need two, but if that is the case we should take £500 million from the BBC—although I do not want to give the Minister any ideas—because £20 million is not enough; it is merely an irritant.

The competitive content fund would also in effect create what the critics of the BBC would see as a new bureaucracy producing content that nobody wanted to see. People have mentioned the importance of having diverse content and children's content, and I want to see the BBC and all our public service broadcasters making that kind of content. I do not want to listen to a BBC executive in two or three years' time saying that that is the job of the competitive content fund. I want that content to be on our main screens. We must not allow the fund to let broadcasters off the hook. I am a practical man, however, and if the Minister for Digital and Culture is intent on pursuing the competitive content fund I suggest he give it to the British Film Institute, which at least has experience in awarding public money for making brilliant British films and has a strong commitment to diversity.

I also want to comment on the movement of responsibility for the free licence fee for the over-75s to the BBC. The BBC has been raided on a number of occasions, and the arguments for those raids have varied in their strength. The raid by the last Labour Government to pay for the digital television switchover was potentially justified, because it was argued that the BBC should help to meet the cost of an infrastructure change that would benefit it.

Dr Julian Lewis: One of the more worrying raids, or trades, involving the BBC taking on funding in return for having the licence fee involved the decision that it should no longer receive direct Government funding for that prized open-source intelligence asset, BBC Monitoring at Caversham. May I appeal, through my right hon. Friend, to the Secretary of State in her absence that no decision is taken to implement the current recommendation to close Caversham Park and radically reduce the funding for BBC Monitoring until the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committees have taken the opportunity to visit Caversham Park, which we have been invited to do by the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Mr Wilson)? This is a matter of the greatest concern. The reduction in funding was entirely to be anticipated, but it should not have occurred.

Mr Vaizey: I have just been indulgent to my right hon. Friend because quite a few of my constituents work at Caversham and have been in touch with me to express their concerns. I thank him for his very welcome intervention and I echo his call. I hope that the Minister will pass on to his colleagues in the Foreign Office the need to note the sagacious views of my right hon. Friend and his colleagues on the Select Committee on the future of monitoring at Caversham and how it should be funded and analysed.

Returning to the other raids on the BBC, the digital infrastructure raid was perhaps appropriate. We then took the underspend and spent it on broadband. If the Minister is clever enough, as I know he is, not to proceed with the competitive content fund, we could put more of that money into broadband. I know that he has made incredibly rapid progress on the roll-out of broadband since he took up his present ministerial position, and I know that he will want to reach the new target of 100% by the end of next year. I thought I would just throw that in, because everyone said I was so useless at the job—[HON. MEMBERS: “Aah!”] Thank you. This is turning into a pantomime, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Dr Lewis: Oh no it isn't!

Mr Vaizey: I was about to say that I was going to get things back on track.

The second raid was undertaken by the then new Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), and me when we froze the licence fee in 2010. That moved the cost of the World Service on to the BBC's books. Again, that was mildly justified in the sense that some operational savings could be made as a result. The Government have now started to fund the World Service separately.

The third raid related to TV licences for the over-75s, which we mitigated by taking some other costs off the BBC. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon, the man who was supposedly going to bury the BBC, actually secured from the Government an inflation-linked increase in the licence fee to counter the effect of that change.

The fundamental point is that they were raids. It is ironic that successive Governments, and indeed the BBC, have resisted a statutory basis for the BBC because that would undermine its independence. Without a statutory underpinning, however, how much money Ministers might take out of the licence fee is effectively down to their whim and how far they are prepared to bully the BBC. Over the past decade or so, too many Ministers, myself included, have seen the licence fee as a pot into which they can occasionally dip.

I do not propose a solution here, but as someone now liberated from collective responsibility I simply wanted to raise the matter and urge not necessarily the Government but the House to think hard over the coming years about how we protect the BBC. As so many Members have said in this debate, the BBC is a great treasure. It should be funded to get on with the job independently and should have light-touch regulation in order to adapt to the rapidly changing technologies that now dominate our lives.

The draft BBC charter gets pretty much everything right. I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon, the former Secretary of State, and apologise for giving one or two of his pet projects a kicking. He did an absolutely superb job overall, particularly given the timetable. I must also praise his officials, mainly because they are glaring at me from the Box, and those who are not here, who also did an outstanding job in securing this draft charter. I commend the Minister for Digital and Culture and the new Secretary of State for the able way in which they have taken the draft charter forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): There is plenty of time for the debate this afternoon, but the House will be aware that a great many people have indicated to the Chair that they would like to take part. If by self-denying ordinance every hon. Member behaves honourably and speaks for approximately 10 minutes, they will all have an equal chance of participating. If that does not work, I will have to impose a time limit.

4.37 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I begin by saying that I chair the National Union of Journalists' parliamentary group, the secretariat of which is included in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), who was an extremely able and successful Minister at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, holding the post of arts Minister for a record six years. He demonstrated again this afternoon that with wit and charm he is able to defend some really poor policies.

The BBC is a first-class institution, but it is now at risk. As everybody knows, Lord Reith's vision was to educate, inform and entertain free from political interference and commercial pressure. We now have a much weaker commitment to reflect the UK and its culture and values to the world. A large part of the draft agreement, which I thought was a strange document when I read it, between the Secretary of State and the BBC relates to the limitations that will be placed on the BBC's independence and how it will fulfil its role in a competitive environment. We seem to be moving rapidly away from Lord Reith's vision.

An early section of the draft agreement deals with the role of the BBC as a UK public service and the public interest test. The agreement states that the BBC must consider public value relative to

“any adverse impact on fair and effective competition”.

In other words, when the BBC makes changes to its delivery of the public services set out in the document, its first thought is the impact not on listeners, viewers or citizens, but on its competitors. That undermines the distinctive role of the BBC. When the Secretary of State was appointed, I thought that that was really positive and that we would have somebody in this role who had not spent years in the media milieu and would therefore bring a fresh approach. I was therefore extremely disappointed to discover that she had appointed as her special adviser the former chief political correspondent of *The Sun*. The obsession with the BBC's impact on other broadcasters seems to suggest that the hand of Murdoch is evident in the document.

Let us look at some of the specifics in the agreement. Paragraph 67 is headed “Defence and Emergency Arrangements”, but it covers far more than just those things. Its provisions set out no limit to the Government's power of censorship, and it is possible that the Government could interfere with editorial judgments and broadcasting content. Now let us look at the section on competition. Obviously, the BBC, supported by public money in the form of the licence fee, is in a special position and there are risks of it abusing that position. There was a long-standing argument about whether *The Listener* was competing unfairly with the *New Statesman*, *The Economist*

[Helen Goodman]

and other weekly and monthly magazines, and now the argument is about whether the BBC's web content is competing unfairly. What is strange about this charter, and this is where it goes wrong, is that there has been a move from the margins—from a small problem that was acknowledged and needed to be dealt with—to place the position of the competitor right at the centre of BBC decision making about what public services it needs to provide. The BBC will have to consider the positive and negative market impact of its activities, and Ofcom must keep that in mind when reviewing new and changed services. There must be concern that commercial broadcasters will be able to launch anti-competitive challenges against the BBC, including to existing programmes and scheduling.

The right hon. Member for Wantage talked about radio, and there is a particular concern about what is proposed for BBC radio. At the moment, the BBC contracts out to the private sector the production of 20% of radio programmes, but it is proposed that by 2022, at least 60% of BBC radio programmes will be contracted out. That is a massive change in how radio programmes are made, and I am concerned about it from two points of view. First, and most importantly, in what sense will we have BBC radio, with its characteristic and distinctive quality, if more than half of it is produced by the private sector? Secondly, there is the question of the practical feasibility of doing this. When more than half the radio programmes are made by external producers, the BBC's in-house capacity will be limited. Members who are concerned about that matter might like to sign early-day motion 551.

The performance of the last BBC Trust seems to have been absolutely abysmal. I am sorry to say that that was due not to structures, but to the people who were in positions on the trust. It was completely irresponsible of them to take on responsibility for free licences for people over 75. I am pleased that the Prime Minister has insisted on an open appointment for the head of the new structure, but I do not think that the new unitary board, which includes five Government appointees, can truly be said to be independent.

The right hon. Member for Wantage pointed out that there had been a lot of top slicing. Since 2010, if we take account of the freeze on the licence fee and of the constant slicing away of money for different purposes, the BBC has experienced a real-terms cut of 25%, which is extremely significant.

I am pleased that the National Audit Office will be involved in looking at whether the BBC is properly managed, as it seems that its major problems are related to management, not editorial matters. I very much hope that that the growth in contracting out will not simply be a mechanism for people to evade scrutiny regarding high pay.

The Secretary of State began her speech by saying that the BBC is a trusted, valued and much-loved institution not just here in Britain, but across the world. I regret to say that those fine words do not seem to be supported with an approach on the charter that would preserve the BBC free from commercial pressure and political interference.

4.46 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Many Members have expressed the view that the BBC is indeed one of our most beloved cultural institutions. Each of us will have fond memories of the TV shows that made us laugh and cry, and those that educated and inspired us. To this very day, some of the world's most famous TV programmes call the BBC their home, or can at least trace their roots back to it. The BBC also has a proud record of supporting and cultivating some of Britain's most treasured personalities and actors. With the BBC's global reach, all this goes a significant way towards promoting our place in the world. It is perhaps the largest exporter of our cultural values, and it is viewed by hundreds of millions of people. Some might even say it is our best soft power asset. However, domestic and global habits continue to change, and for the BBC's importance to be maintained, it needs to change with them.

Our BBC is not perfect, and it has long needed action to address governance issues and changing viewing habits. I was pleased that those issues were highlighted by all parties at the start of the 2015 negotiations. Now is the time to see them addressed and for solutions to be approved. Like many hon. Members, I have received a tremendous number of representations from constituents who are concerned about the BBC's future. Given that our constituents pay a licence fee, our communities have a rightful stake in this institution. I am pleased that the new royal charter has been taken seriously and dealt with positively by the Government.

Under the draft agreement, I see a BBC that suits the modern broadcasting and digital environment that we know today. Much has been said about the new governance structure for the BBC. Since the publication of the White Paper, real progress has been made on the subject of appointments to the BBC board through discussion and consultation with the BBC. The fact that the BBC will appoint a large majority of its board members for the first time is indeed a positive measure that clearly maintains its independence.

It is right that all the nations that make up the United Kingdom are represented on the BBC board and that these individuals are subject to the public appointments process. It is also right that those appointments should not be subject to undue political influence. However, it is right, too, that the Government retain a role in appointing non-executive directors to the board of a body that spends £3.7 billion of public money each year. We are talking about huge sums that have to be justified. We cannot allow waste or a lack of openness when it is the public who have such a sizeable stake, yet with the expanded role of the National Audit Office and Ofcom as overseers of the BBC's financial and content scrutiny arrangements, I am certain that we will maintain the credibility expected of our public service broadcaster.

The BBC is a huge part of our past, our present and our future. The new charter and agreement will enable improvements that will ultimately address the important issues of governance and modernisation while ensuring the BBC's independence and enhancing the distinctiveness of its content. I am therefore pleased to support the motion and agreement, which will guarantee the BBC's important place in our society for many years to come.

4.51 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is indeed a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst). I recently bumped into her predecessor at the Welsh Assembly, of which he is a Member. I did not know that he had such strong links to Wales before becoming a Member of that institution, and neither I assume did the hon. Lady.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), who was one of the longest serving arts Ministers in this place. I was surprised that with his wealth of experience, he did not open the debate today. But if it does not work out for James Purnell at the BBC, Lord Hall might be on the phone to him very soon.

We heard two great campaign speeches from the hon. Members for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) and for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), both of whom are standing for Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I would not be cruel enough to make the analogy of Trump and Clinton, but I will say that whoever wins that race, the House will be well served.

John Nicolson: Who's who?

Chris Evans: Exactly.

Like the NHS, the welfare state and any other well-loved institution, the BBC is sometimes used by left and right as a political football. An observer might get the feeling that some politicians are just waiting for the BBC to slip up so that they can use it as a stick with which to beat it. Like any organisation in the public sector or the private sector, there are bound to be areas where the BBC will get it wrong. However, it is surely wrong in a free society that holds up the concept of freedom of the press that journalists such as Laura Keunssberg, who are simply doing their job of holding our political leaders to account, are booed and jeered at press conferences and subjected to vile abuse on social media. Equally, when some on the right say that the BBC has some sort of lefty bias, I like to remind them of the recent Ofcom report which threw out 71 complaints against the leader of the Labour party.

My message for those who may be new to the political scene, motivated by certain individuals, is that they have to learn the lesson that politics is a rough old trade and journalists who ask tough questions are simply doing their job. Besides, as my wife, Julia, who was once the head of public affairs at the BBC, has told me often enough, she believed that when both sides were screaming "Bias!" at one another, the BBC must surely be doing something right.

When we look around the world and see some of the state media, we should be particularly proud that the BBC is the home of impartiality. To me it is vital that the BBC retains its independence from Government, not purely from the perspective of freedom of the press, but from a cultural perspective. We are fortunate that in this country we do not have Fox News or some of the shock jocks that we find on the other side of the pond. It is important that we do not have a British version of Howard Stern or Sean Hannity, whose vile right-wing views are seen as legitimate political comment. We should take it as a compliment that that purveyor of press freedom, Rupert Murdoch, has called his own Sky News "BBC lite".

Around the world, the BBC's impartiality is looked on with envy. The BBC World Service has provided a window on the world for political prisoners such as Aung San Suu Kyi and Nelson Mandela. That is why the BBC should be encouraged and supported. For me, the central plank of any future charter and framework should be the protection of the BBC's independence and impartiality. Equally, any agreement should ensure that the BBC is fighting fit, and not only for today's world, but for the challenges of the future, because, as the decade since the last review has shown, emerging technologies and changing viewing habits can significantly alter the way the BBC is used and what services it provides.

We live in a world of rapid technological change. No one knows how we will view our entertainment in the coming years. It is therefore vital that the Government give the BBC the best possible chance to provide exceptional service. One area that has seen rapid technological change is radio. Far from the days of wireless, radio is now delivered on various platforms, from satellite to digital and internet. The market for radio is now beyond the old debate of FM or AM. The BBC is still the No. 1 go-to organisation for radio. Of the 48.7 million people who listen to radio every week, 35 million listen to Radio 1, Radio 2 or Radio 4.

The BBC also has a web of 40 local and eight regional stations, which combined attract 8.3 million listeners. BBC Radio Wales produces 7,000 hours of original output and more than 2,000 hours of news and current affairs programming. At a time when print media are in decline, it is still BBC Radio Wales that the nation tunes into for its news. My hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) said in an intervention that more of his constituents listen to Radio Stoke than to Radio Wales because the transmitter is closer. When we talk about Wales, we must realise that there is a divide between the north, the south and the west. I would like to see more localisation in Radio Wales's output.

I share the BBC's concerns about the proposal that it must have competitive tendering for at least 60% of total relevant broadcasting time for radio by 31 December 2022, according to the framework agreement. In its response to the White Paper, the BBC Trust expressed concern about the significant additional costs of implementing competition. I do not believe that is simply a concern about competition. Lord Hall made it clear in 2014 that the BBC is committed to commissioning the best programmes, regardless of who makes them. The issue here is the rapid way in which that could be imposed under the draft agreement.

According to the National Union of Journalists, there is virtually no market in radio production. Already more than 95% of the total income of broadcast output of all independent radio production companies in the UK comes from the BBC. It is extremely difficult to see how the BBC could increase competitive tendering to 60% by 2022, given the apparent lack of companies to produce the content. Furthermore, the BBC is a world leader in radio production, with a clear focus on providing good public service. A rapid increase in competitive tendering, such as that set out in the draft agreement, could put that in jeopardy. It would be a real loss if the high quality of BBC in-house production was to suffer as a result.

[Chris Evans]

Another dimension to consider is that BBC budgets are constrained. The process and time required to complete commissioning agreements under the draft charter would mean additional costs, meaning less money for content and, above all, talent.

In the light of all those concerns, the question that should be asked is this: why have the Government included that commitment in the draft agreement? Surely it would be in everyone's interests if competitive tendering took place over a longer period of time, working with the BBC to come up with a timetable solution that works for everyone. There is simply no need for the Government to rush this.

In conclusion, the BBC is the crown jewel of broadcasting. It should be celebrated for its vital role in promoting Britain around the world. Britain's international reputation for fairness, impartiality and justice is founded on the values that the BBC exports. The BBC has a huge appeal nationally and locally. The very idea of it not thriving is alien to the British people. Yet it should always bring good value for licence fee payers and it should be given a place to compete in a rapidly changing world. It should also be a place where programme makers can thrive. Done right, the draft charter and framework can ensure that the BBC continues to entertain and educate for years to come.

4.59 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your indulgence in calling me to speak. I had to step out of the Chamber for a time this afternoon to take part in a debate elsewhere about my constituency. There was no discourtesy meant to the House, so thank you for calling me.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans). Like the hon. Gentleman's wife, I was of the view when I was broadcasting on the BBC that if my manager received equal amounts of complaints about my broadcasting from both sides of politics, that was probably okay, and I was probably being about fair and equal. That was my personal experience.

I worked for the BBC in radio—for which I have the perfect face—for 20 years. For most of that time, I was in local radio, and I will come on to make some remarks specifically about local radio. As some Members have said, it is a vital part of what the BBC does, but we perhaps sometimes swamp it out of these debates.

I seek to be a critical friend of the BBC, if I can put it like that. I am in no doubt whatever that the BBC is the best broadcaster in the world, and I believe that having worked for the corporation for many years and being an ardent audience member for all the BBC's output.

As an opening summary, I would say this: there is far more agreement between the Government and the BBC than some have perhaps sought to imply here. On the issue of the BBC paying for free licences for over-75s, the corporation has said that that is a good deal—it is one that it supports. On appointments to the new unitary board, the Government have listened. There is unanimity now between the Government and the corporation, and significant changes have been made

following representations from the BBC. Overall, the BBC characterises the charter renewal and the licence agreement as follows:

“It will deliver the strong and creative BBC the public believes in.”

So there is significant agreement, and for that reason, let alone any others, we must support the motion and the charter renewal process.

My starting point when considering the BBC and the matters before us today has to be funding. I take a very clear line on this, and it is one that I have articulated in various debates. The corporation receives £3.7 billion of public money every year; that is a guaranteed and growing income. It is simply not credible to say that the BBC cannot afford to provide all the services it currently provides and to fund free TV licences for over-75s. Of course it can—especially given the additional £18 billion in income up to 2021 that this licence fee settlement, delivered by this Conservative Government, provides.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when considering the services the BBC can afford to deliver, it should look more often, for example, at some of the large sporting events, to which it often sends hundreds of reporters when a much smaller number would do?

Peter Heaton-Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I will come later to some of the ways the BBC should, and indeed should not, be saving money. It is an internal decision-making process for the BBC.

That £3.7 billion is a very large amount, by any measure. It is more than the budget of several Departments. Imagine the outcry if a Department decided it was not going to be open and transparent about the way it spends taxpayers' money. Quite rightly, that is something up with which we would not put. Yet, still, the BBC seeks to argue that it should not disclose how much public money it pays its top talent. Of course it should. In 2014, 91 BBC directors were paid more than the Prime Minister, and 39 on-air staff were paid more than a quarter of a million pounds a year.

I do not buy the argument that by revealing those individual salaries the BBC would somehow risk losing its stars to the competition. That does not stack up, because in many cases there are no other outlets that would require, want, or have the means to poach those stars. For instance, no other national radio station exists that would consider employing some of the highest-paid talent on Radio 1 or Radio 2. The BBC has to be more open and transparent about how it spends its money, because it is not the BBC's money—it is the licence fee payer's money. I therefore support the Government in seeking to build this into the charter.

Radio is the area of the BBC that I know best—specifically, local radio. I worked for the BBC for 20 years, for the majority of that time in local radio. BBC Radio Devon, serving my constituency, is a fine example of BBC local radio at its best. Local radio, in general, is an underfunded service within an underfunded directorate of the BBC—that of regional broadcasting. For about 6% of the licence fee, the English regions directorate produces about 52% of all BBC output. In other words, it is an incredibly efficient service. That includes daily regional TV news in 12 regions, including “Spotlight” in

the south-west, weekly current affairs and politics shows in 11 regions, 39 local radio stations and 42 local websites.

By any measure, that amount of output for that relatively small slice of the BBC's budget must represent value for money. Yet time and again regional services, and local radio in particular, are singled out by BBC managers for cuts. Perhaps we could understand why if we merely looked at figures on a spreadsheet. The BBC is fond of looking at a figure of cost per listener per hour. Seen purely in those terms, it does seem as though local radio is a relatively expensive service for the BBC to provide. There is a reason for that—it comprises 39 different stations, each a stand-alone operation with its own costs, buildings and overheads. It is entirely unfair, however, to look at it like that and think that the solution is therefore to reduce the hours of local broadcasting that a station provides, to combine stations or to replace truly local programmes with regional or even national shows.

A programme that I once presented has fallen victim to that and no longer exists as a stand-alone local breakfast programme. Members can decide for themselves whether that is to do with the fact that I once presented it, but it is not—it is to do with somebody looking at a line on a spreadsheet and saying, "We can save money by cutting this." The effect is to take away from our constituents what should be a good local service of news, current affairs and journalism. The BBC should not be doing this. The solution is not to combine stations and replace truly local programmes with regional or even national shows; it is to fund local radio fairly in the first place. The BBC has internally the power and the funding necessary to make that decision.

Local radio fits perfectly into the new requirement for distinctiveness built into the charter by the Government. No other organisation is providing local radio services anything like those provided by the BBC. Commercial radio stations provide nothing close to the news, current affairs and local journalism that BBC local radio provides. Before I entered the BBC, I worked for commercial radio—30 years ago, believe it or not. [*Interruption.*] I know—it is hard to believe, but true. I started very young. In those days, commercial radio had something approaching a proper newsroom in each of its local stations, but not any more. Now commercial radio has perhaps a regional newsroom with a very small number of journalists providing news and current affairs across a very wide area. No other organisation is doing what the BBC is doing in local radio. The director-general has said that he wants the BBC's feet held firmly to the fire on distinctiveness. The place to start is to look at local radio and to acknowledge the distinctive service of local journalism that it provides.

I have two brief points to make in conclusion; I am aware of your strictures on time, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Government have got it absolutely right in making Ofcom the BBC's external regulator. In my view, having worked for the BBC for all those years, it was always complete nonsense that one body—either the governors or, more recently, the trust—was responsible for both the regulation and the governance of the BBC. That was a classic case of being both poacher and gamekeeper—or both dancer and judge, to use the euphemism du jour—at the same time. The new arrangements are fairer and more transparent.

I end as I began by saying that I love the BBC. It is the best broadcasting organisation in the world, second to none. This Conservative Government also love the BBC. All the nonsense that we heard on certain awards nights and in certain letters to certain papers that this Government sought to in some way hang the BBC out to dry was, to be frank, fiction worthy of one of the drama programmes that the BBC is so good at producing. The BBC is an organisation of which we can be proud. The Government fully support it, as do I, both as a former employee and now as an avid listener and viewer. I commend the licence fee settlement and the charter renewal to the House.

5.11 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) and to put on the record that I have no professional connections whatsoever with the BBC.

The BBC enjoys a position of unique importance in Wales, with Welsh audiences consuming, for want of a better word, a greater proportion of BBC services than those in the other nations and regions of the UK. The "general impression" of the BBC among audiences—that is rather weak terminology, but it is a measure used by the BBC to gauge people's appreciation of it—is higher in Wales than in any other of the UK's three nations.

Between 2006 and 2015, BBC Cymru Wales's spend on English-language TV output was reduced from £24.6 million to £20.8 million—a reduction of about 30% in real terms. In the face of weak media plurality, the BBC has an important role to play in Wales. The situation as it stands is, according to Ofcom, "in stark contrast to Scotland and Northern Ireland".

The extreme reduction in funding has led to a situation where many stakeholders in Wales are concerned about the lack of a distinctly Welsh portrayal in BBC programming.

To counter the deficit of distinctly Welsh content, the Welsh Affairs Committee's inquiry into broadcasting in Wales concluded that the BBC should allocate

"investment from its current Budget for English language programming in Wales closer to the levels seen in 2006/07."

Green Bay Media's Dr John Geraint stated that English-language television in Wales has been

"eroded to such an extent that it no longer represents the rounded life of the nation".

The BBC's current failures to adequately reflect the political divergence in devolution across the United Kingdom have undoubtedly contributed to widespread misinformation about which Government and which Parliament is responsible for what. It is no wonder that fewer than half the Welsh population are aware that it is the Labour Welsh Government who run the Welsh NHS, not the Tories in Westminster, as revealed by a YouGov poll in 2014.

Welsh public life is, naturally, very different from that of the other UK countries, and as a public service broadcaster, the BBC must recognise, respect and reflect those differences in its output. The UK Government's new BBC charter provided an opportunity for the broadcaster to modernise and to adapt to adequately address the differences in need across the United Kingdom.

[Liz Saville Roberts]

I am pleased that the unitary board will include a permanent member from Wales, although it is somewhat worrying that they will be appointed by the Government, potentially introducing political influence to the BBC's board. I also welcome the BBC's greater answerability to the National Assembly for Wales, although Plaid Cymru will, of course, continue to call for the devolution of broadcasting.

It is important that the BBC is adequately held to account over its service to Welsh audiences. The Wales representative on the board should refer to a sub-committee in Wales; alternatively, the role of audience councils should be maintained. It is crucial that the broadcaster's external regulator, Ofcom, has permanent Welsh representation on its board to carry out this role. We warmly welcome the amendment calling for a distinctly Scottish news programme. The English-language equivalent is needed in Wales to allow devolution to flourish and to allow the public to make informed democratic decisions. News about both Wales and the world at large should be seen through a Welsh lens. As a nation, we deserve and need better than to be a five-minute postscript to the world according to England.

Despite the fact that Wales secured 7.8% of UK BBC network television spend in 2014—greater than its 4.9% share of the population—the Assembly's Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee inquiry noted that, although an increasing number of network productions are being made in Wales, the big commissioning decisions continue to be made in London. The result is that an implicit London-centric bias prevents BBC executives from commissioning network programmes that deal with and distinctly reflect Welsh issues. The Welsh Affairs Committee recommended that the charter make explicit the BBC's duty to reflect the whole UK in its services by having a non-news genre commissioning editor based in each UK nation.

Chris Evans: The hon. Lady is making an interesting speech. I want to focus on promoting the Welsh language. Does she agree that we have something to learn from our Scandinavian cousins, who have promoted their own language by selling programmes such as “The Killing” and “Wallander”? Does she think that there should be an emphasis on Welsh programmes being exported to the main channels with subtitles?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but we in the Chamber have no idea what he has said, because he is addressing the hon. Lady instead of addressing the Chair. I will give him another go at it.

Chris Evans: I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. Please forgive me. Does the hon. Lady agree that we in Wales could learn from our Scandinavian cousins in selling programmes like “Wallander” and “The Killing” to mainstream network channels?

Liz Saville Roberts: I would indeed agree. A Scandinavian-influenced genre noir, “Hinterland”—“Y Gwyll”—has been successfully sold. Another issue that I want to touch on in relation to minority language is the great significance of iPlayer in presenting Welsh-medium

and S4C productions to a wider audience. It is essential that minority languages, such as Welsh, have a strong digital presence as we move further into the 21st century.

To return to what I was saying, the Assembly's Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee felt that the BBC should decentralise its commissioning arrangements, so that more big decisions are made in Wales, and that was reiterated by the Welsh Affairs Committee. Another way to tackle the lack of distinctly Welsh content, as the BBC director-general has proposed, is to create separate service licences for each of the nations. The Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee stated that doing so

“would enable BBC Cymru Wales to better prioritise funding to meet its own priorities and obligations.”

That, too, was supported by the Welsh Affairs Committee, which concluded that a national service licence should be introduced for Wales to allow for greater flexibility and accountability for the BBC in Wales.

I welcome the review that is being undertaken by the UK Government into the governance and funding of S4C. The future of S4C's funding has been under threat in recent years with the reductions in its funding deemed to be “both severe and disproportionate”. It is regrettable that the review will not be published until next year. I would be extremely interested to hear how the UK Government intend to incorporate the recommendations of the S4C review into the renewed charter.

In the absence of media plurality in Wales, the BBC has a duty to inform our citizens. The final BBC charter must reflect the unique needs of Welsh citizens and respect its renewed promise to

“reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations”.

5.18 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I have very much enjoyed listening to today's debate. I rise to speak in opposition to amendment (a) and in support of the Government's position.

We have heard hon. Members on both sides of the House talk about the BBC being the premier broadcaster of the world, and indeed it is. I have experienced that myself, having lived in the United States, when the BBC and its news service were my umbilical cord to the United Kingdom. While I was subjected to the unpleasantness of Fox News and other very subjective news broadcasters, the BBC was the only objective broadcaster giving me the news as it was.

The amendment is false because its words seek to give hon. Members the impression that it is about furthering devolution. It is about nothing of the sort; it is about a party hell-bent on destroying the sovereign United Kingdom, using any tool as its means of doing so. Tonight's tool is amendment (a), which purports to speak for the people of Scotland, but all the SNP wants it to do is to drive a wedge between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) said that Scotland is frustrated. No, SNP Members are frustrated at the position. A YouGov poll earlier this year stated very clearly that 63% of Scots want the BBC's news output to continue as it is, with a main UK national evening broadcast, followed by a Scottish broadcast such as “Reporting Scotland”.

John Nicolson: Will the hon. Gentleman explain why the dangerous separatists on his Benches were all in agreement about the idea of a separate Scottish Six? Were they just bamboozled by my eloquence?

Alberto Costa: The Government Members who support the Scottish Six have never fought the SNP. I will be speaking to those hon. Members to explain very clearly its policy, because SNP Members will do anything to bring about the end of the United Kingdom. That is what the amendment is all about. It is just another example of chip-chipping away at a great British institution.

Hon. Members have said that there is great talent in Scotland, and indeed there is: there is great journalistic talent across the United Kingdom. In the BBC, some Scottish journalists make it on to the UK stage. Some great Scottish journalists are able to promote objective news programmes across our kingdom. Let me say very clearly that the Scots want to know exactly what is going on across the United Kingdom. Given that England is the larger partner in the United Kingdom, simply by sheer numbers, it is imperative that Scots are able to see the good work the Conservative Government are doing in other parts of the United Kingdom.

For the avoidance of doubt, let me compare and contrast that, because SNP Members cannot have it both ways. Since their election last year, they have changed their policy and they now talk about torpedoing policies brought in by the UK Government that affect England only or England and Wales only. May I give an example? The SNP education spokeswomen, the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), whom I emailed earlier today, was reported to have said by the *Evening Standard* just a few days ago:

“If schools across England set pay scales lower than the agreed national scales, that would mean an education budget across the piste would be lower, and there are Barnett consequentials for us.”

They keep talking about poking their noses into England-only matters because of Barnett consequentials, but, on their own logic, it is imperative that the people of Scotland see exactly what is going on in England so that they can hold their SNP representatives to account.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman seems to be labouring under the apprehension or impression that the Scottish Six will no longer include news from the rest of the UK. I can inform him that that is incorrect. It is a total news programme, so it has local, national and international news within the same programme. His fears can therefore be laid to rest.

Alberto Costa: The arrogance of SNP Members knows no end. They say that there is editorial independence, but now they are telling us exactly what this Scottish Six will contain. It is a farce of tragic proportions. The truth is that the people of England, including my constituents, should know about the SNP's terrible record. As I said earlier, perhaps we should encourage—not compel—more news to come out of Scotland so that UK citizens, including the constituents of Members on both sides of the House, can hear about the terrible record of the SNP Government. For example, on higher education, fewer disadvantaged students go on to higher education in Scotland than in England. I think my constituents would like to know that.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): I remind the hon. Gentleman that we have free tuition fees in Scotland, so the constituents he is talking about will be lumbered with tens of thousands of pounds of debt, whereas they would not be in Scotland. We are comfortable with that position.

Alberto Costa: The hon. Gentleman may be comfortable, but the higher education institutes of Scotland are not comfortable, and it is imperative that we hear that across the United Kingdom. Why are there fewer disadvantaged students going on to higher education in Scotland than in England? It is because of the SNP's appalling track record.

Let us take the NHS too—it is important that the BBC broadcasts this in England. The SNP has NHS targets in Scotland that are constantly not met. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire talked about BBC Scotland failing to meet targets: I suggest he look at the SNP Government and their failure to meet targets. That is important news that is worthy of being broadcast across the United Kingdom.

The amendment is yet another attempt by separatist MPs—virtually every separatist Member from Scotland has signed it—to chip away at a great British institution. Some of my hon. Friends may, perhaps unwittingly, have fallen foul of the SNP's propaganda that pretends that the amendment would somehow further devolution, but it would only bring about the hopes and dreams of the separatist party for an end to the United Kingdom. Given that we have a Conservative and Unionist Government, I would hope that all hon. Members want assiduously to defend and protect the Union. While I fully support the Government and their successful agreement with the BBC, I strongly encourage all hon. Members thoroughly to reject the separatist amendment, which does nothing but attempt to destroy the British Broadcasting Corporation.

5.27 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), if only for the comedy value.

During the somewhat meandering and enervating discussion that passed for a debate on the future of the BBC over the past few months, I became more and more convinced that very few people actually care about the principles involved, and it has become another venue for an argument rather than a consideration of the future of public service broadcasting. At times, the Government and the loyal Opposition seem more interested in striking positions to reflect what they think people are thinking on the Clapham omnibus or in the Biddulph Conservative club.

A funding deal was done behind closed doors and the Opposition hardly blinked at the time. I suppose they thought that it might be their turn to do the deal one day. I am delighted that they have finally found their voice on this issue.

These things should all be out in public, as maybe then we would not have had the stramash about how huge a BBC salary has to be before the BBC makes it public. Maybe then the BBC and the Government could have had the discussions with Equity about the

[*Deidre Brock*]

data protection implications of that decision. It would also have been good to have had a public discussion about whether a public service broadcaster should be privatising, in effect, 60% of its radio output, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman).

The SNP is in favour of high-quality public broadcasting serving the people, and I had hoped that I would find kindred spirits and attitudes on the Benches here. But the BBC, the Government and the loyal Opposition occupy the same space in the heart of the establishment, and their self-referencing conversations are equally self-reinforcing and therefore damaging to the political discourse that should be informed by the BBC's work.

There is a fond suspension of disbelief in the UK that allows the public to imagine that the BBC is impartial and in service to all of us. It is a comfortable fiction, but it masks a fatal flaw in the set-up of our state broadcaster. I find the BBC's attitude overpoweringly London-centric, begging towards cooing into the establishment rather than serving the whole of its audience. It reminds me of a fantastic piece by the novelist James Robertson called, "The News Where You Are". The hon. Member for South Leicestershire might enjoy it. In 365 words, he scores and underscores the perception many of us have in Scotland of the way the BBC views us: the important news is what we tell you it is from our studios in London, and when the important news is all over you can have the news where you are, which is less important, unless we say it is important, in which case we will report it. Mr Robertson does a fantastic reading on YouTube and I urge everyone to listen to it. I am sure the sentiments have echoes elsewhere. There will be similar feelings in Cornwall, Yorkshire, Cumbria and Wales.

The BBC has to modernise not its broadcasting platforms, not the media it uses and not its founding ideals but the attitude to those it is supposed to serve outwith the M25. A little less of the patronising would be good: stop thinking it knows best and start learning to serve. The parallel complaint can be levelled against BBC Scotland: stop kowtowing to London as if Broadcasting House holds the great sages of the modern era. Get up and make decent programmes, including a properly resourced Scottish Six, and shout out loud if you are being underfunded.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am somewhat troubled by the hon. Lady's position. On the one hand, she says that the BBC thinks it knows best. On the other hand, she is making the point that Scottish National party Members know best. Surely the BBC is in a better place to decide objectively on where to focus, rather than individual Members in this place who, when it comes down to it, are all very parochial?

Deidre Brock: I suggest that we are all here as critical friends of the BBC and I make those comments in that spirit.

BBC Scotland should shout out loud if it is being underfunded. We know that the entire budget for all of BBC Scotland radio and television is outstripped by the budget for Radio 4 alone. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson)

mentioned, BBC Scotland gaining control of the money raised in Scotland from the licence fee could see an additional £100 million a year invested in Scotland's creative sector, supporting 1,500 full-time equivalent jobs and boosting the economy. The more important aspect is that Scottish programming should be Scottish, not only reflecting Scotland but reporting the world through a Scottish vision.

Alberto Costa: In my speech, I mentioned a YouGov poll in which 63% of Scots said they were happy with the news output as is. Why is the hon. Lady not listening to the people of Scotland?

Deidre Brock: I think that that was based on the suggestion of a pilot along the lines of the current "Reporting Scotland" news programme, and audiences have not yet seen the pilots going on at the moment.

Nigel Huddleston: I have some sympathy with the hon. Lady's argument about the BBC being extraordinarily London-centric. In the midlands, probably one of the worst-served areas, the BBC licence fee spend is £12.40 per head versus £757 in London.

Deidre Brock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that information. I was not aware of that, but the midlands should make its views known to London. I look forward to his contribution later on in the debate. I am sure that that will be mentioned.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire mentioned MG Alba. Under the previous Chancellor, MG Alba had its central funding cut. Obviously, saving that £1 million was what was needed to turn the deficit around, rather than the billions spent on Trident. It is time that MG Alba was placed on the same footing and the same funding as S4C. Give the Gaels their Government funding and a fair share of the licence fees, too. In short, it is time to hand over the cash. So raise up your voices, BBC Scotland, and shout out any inequality, injustice or bad deal. The Scottish Six has to be an outstanding success, free of London control and the dead hand of Broadcasting House. The BBC has to do that, and do it well, to start restoring its credibility in Scotland. This will be only the beginning.

It is good to see that there has been some movement towards including the devolved Administrations in decisions about the future of the BBC, but it has to go further, and more of the BBC has to be devolved so that the good programmes that are being made can be built upon. Scottish programming has to reflect Scotland back to itself—not just have programmes made in Scotland that could just as easily be made anywhere else. No more "Waterloo Road" farces! Scottish programme makers have shown themselves time and again capable of making high-quality content. They do not need London rejects to bulk it up.

More than implementing governance changes, BBC Scotland has to clear out the dead wood from its own backyard: away with the tired and safe presenting styles on radio and television; away with the centralised styles of the BBC's news reporting; and away with those executives who have outlived their imaginative years. BBC Scotland should have editorial and financial independence, and exercise it ruthlessly. No more lift and shift, and no more forelock tugging: shed the

self-effacement and timidity, and start to create a broadcasting corporation that does not engage the people just in phone-ins or vox pops, but engages them in interest, intellect and thought. It should raise those ideals as concepts to which people can cleave.

This charter renewal means nothing more than previous renewals, and future renewals will mean nothing more than this one so long as there is little imagination and no new thought in the continuous plod of the BBC. It seems that we have come to this point with no forethought from Government or broadcaster about what it is they actually want the BBC to do. The cut in Foreign Office grant affected the World Service in the early days of the first Cameron Government, cutting into that soft diplomacy mission—the famous nation speaking peace unto nation. As the licence fees costs for people over 75 fall on to the BBC's shoulders, we will see more pressure to cut, cut and cut again.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my concern at the tendency of the Foreign Office to start classifying some of the money it spends on the World Service as “overseas development assistance”, which is diverting the money from what it should be spent on—poverty reduction?

Deidre Brock: I absolutely do, and I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution about an alarming development.

In the midst of this austerity-inspired orgy of cuts, no one appears to be saying that there is a plan for the BBC that does not involve using it as a political football—and, unfortunately, no one at the BBC is speaking up.

Alberto Costa: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Deidre Brock: Talking of political footballs.

The charter can be renewed as often as is convenient; the management structures of the BBC can be tinkered into powerlessness; the output can be eternally criticised, praised, held up as world-leading, condemned as not fit for purpose, mocked, exalted or switched off. Nothing is beyond the imagination of politicians looking for something to say. Until there is a serious engagement about what the corporation should be doing, however, it will continue to drift on a current whose direction was set nearly a century ago in a broadcasting landscape bearing no resemblance to today's landscape.

Alberto Costa: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) is a very excitable denizen of the House, and he is a very keen and assiduous parliamentarian, but he does not enrich his case for intervention by repeating it. He should not seek to harangue people. A polite inquiry—with his insistent air, of course—is legitimate.

Deidre Brock: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I had just one sentence to complete my speech.

It has been buffeted by winds and blown about a bit over those 100 years, but whose hand is on the tiller, and who guides or seeks to guide the BBC's long-term direction?

5.39 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am not sure that I can compete with that exciting exchange, but it is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock).

I start by congratulating the dozens of bodies and institutions, and the 190,000-plus members of the British public, who participated in the consultation that has led to a very successful outcome in the form of the draft charter. The scale of that involvement clearly shows how close the BBC is to the hearts of many people in the United Kingdom. Let me also give credit where it is due—to the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), for all the work and effort that he and his team put into drafting the charter; and to the current team for pursuing the process and ensuring that it reached this very successful point.

It is true that the BBC itself supports the vast majority of the charter and is now quibbling over relatively small points, including about the revelation of on-screen talent pay, which I shall come to in a moment. The most important change, in my view, involves governance and independence. The BBC Trust was clearly not fit for purpose, and the new unitary board will be a far more effective oversight body, alongside Ofcom. For the first time in its history, the BBC will itself appoint the majority of members to its board, and the Government will therefore not be able to outvote the BBC. That is a fundamental point.

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee, of which I have the honour of being a member, will have a role in the appointment of the chair of the unitary board, and there will, of course, be consultation with the Governments of the nations on the other public appointments. There will be a thorough public appointments process; the idea that there will be Government stooges in those roles is completely false and fabricated, and simply does not stack up with the facts.

Ofcom will play a significantly enhanced role. I am a member of the Public Bill Committee that is considering the Digital Economy Bill, and I was pleased when a representative of Ofcom came along last week and reassured us that it had the necessary skills and experience to take on that additional role. Where Ofcom needs to hire, it is currently in the process of hiring, so I am confident that it will be able to fulfil its role with great skill. I also applaud the expanded role of the National Audit Office. Notwithstanding comments to the contrary, the NAO has skills and experience in the handling of commercial elements of contracts, and it is more than capable of auditing the operations of BBC Worldwide.

The issue of talent salaries has received a fair amount of attention, but I do not think that many of my constituents are losing sleep over it. It is proposed that the BBC should reveal talent salaries of more than £150,000 a year, which is roughly what the Prime Minister is paid. That threshold for revealing salaries is standard practice in the rest of the public sector, and, indeed, in the BBC itself. BBC management salaries of more than £150,000 are already revealed, and, of course, management is also talent, although it is not on-air talent. It seems logical to extend the process to on-air talent. The argument that the BBC would be damaged if salaries were revealed

[Nigel Huddleston]

does not hold water; if that were the case, it would already be vigorously losing talent on the management side.

As the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) has observed on many occasions, this is a rather gossipy industry. Most people in the industry—the agents and so on—already know who is paid what. About the only people who do not know what the “top talent” are paid are those who are doing the paying: us, the licence fee payers. It is about time that we corrected that. If the talent really are worth as much as they are being paid, they should have nothing to hide from or fear.

We need only look at what our top pop stars, film stars and sporting stars are being paid to realise that the British public are quite tolerant of what many would consider to be exorbitant salaries, as long as the people concerned give pleasure to millions and are talented, and are therefore perceived as being worth it. The BBC need not worry about revealing talent salaries if they are seen to be in keeping with market rates. Indeed, Claudia Winkleman has already declared that she considers herself to be working for the public and does not mind that her salary will be revealed. I hope that, when salaries are revealed by the BBC, a gender pay gap is not revealed at the same time. I hope that the very revelation of salaries may deal with existing pay scales that are rather unnecessary and abhorrent.

Let me end by mentioning the Scottish Six—to the upset, I fear, of my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa). As a member of the Select Committee, and following multiple conversations, I am sympathetic to the arguments in favour of a Scottish Six. If I were watching the news in England and the top three items were a Scottish health story, a Scottish education story and a Scottish legal system story, I might be a bit bored and turn it off. It is not that I am uninterested in such matters; it is just that I would not want them to be the top news items. However, although I do indeed have great sympathy with the arguments for a Scottish Six, I disagree with my friends on the SNP Benches, because they are asking the Government to interfere. This is a dangerous area. There are areas in which the BBC does itself have to make editorial and operational decisions, and this is one of them. It is up to us to make sure that we put pressure on the BBC, make the arguments and monitor its behaviour on this—and, indeed, on other areas of spend, such as the regions and the midlands versus London. I do not, however, believe it is right for Parliament to get into such detail and force these decisions, although I am keen to continue to monitor the situation and argue the case for a Scottish Six along with my friends on the SNP Benches.

5.45 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): This has been an interesting debate. We have heard a wide range of speeches praising the BBC, and I also come here to add my pennyworth of praise: I think that the BBC is an excellent institution. I have been in the privileged position of presenting a programme on the BBC, and I have rarely met a bunch of more professional, accommodating and friendly people than those who worked on the programme I had the honour of presenting.

I repeat a point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), the former Secretary of State, made about the future of the BBC and technology. It is obvious to most people in this country that we will live through a vast range of changes. There will be a vast acceleration in the ability of technology to provide programmes and changes to how people access programmes. The only thing I would say about the charter in relation to this is that it covers quite a long period. Other Members have claimed that a health check after five and a half years will be deleterious to the functioning of the BBC—that it is some sort of plot to try to change the nature of the BBC. However, if the charter lasts for 11 years, surely it makes sense to have some form of break clause or health check after five and a half years, because none of us have any idea of where we will be in terms of technology and how we access material on screen in five and a half years' time.

My right hon. Friend said the licence fee would be looked at. I think the licence fee is little more than a poll tax. It is fairly controversial in this day and age—this is a matter for legitimate debate—to expect David Beckham to pay exactly the same as someone in much more limited circumstances just for the privilege of accessing the BBC. It is interesting that the charter will extend the licence fee, but at the end of this period, it might well be looked at and reformed. In some instances, subscription services clearly represent a more attractive approach.

We recently debated diversity on the Floor of the House and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) has spoken eloquently about it. Pious words are very easy and cheap. Progress has been made, but it is difficult to measure it. Other speakers have said they think the BBC's feet should be held to the fire on diversity. I am not just talking about ethnic or gender diversity, because we must look at regional diversity, as has been mentioned, and the balance in representation on screen between able-bodied and disabled people. There is a long way to go on this, and the BBC itself is perhaps not the best judge of how it is performing. The right hon. Gentleman said there had been about 30 diversity initiatives in the last 17 years, yet nobody says that there has been any inquiry into what has actually been achieved; there is just a general notion that the BBC has improved. I do not dispute the fact that improvements have been made, but there does not seem to be any way of measuring them, so that is something that Ministers, the BBC and others should consider.

I also want to touch briefly on the question of value for money. The BBC has £3.7 billion a year. That is a lot of money—it is a big organisation—and it is perfectly legitimate for Members on both sides of the House to look at its expenditure and rigorously question whether the public are getting value for money. When I hear Scottish National party Members complaining about an “orgy of cuts”, I tend to get slightly irritated. The BBC has not suffered an “orgy of cuts”. In fact, when we look at Government spending over the past six years, I and others see the BBC as something of a pampered child. It has been exempt from some of the difficult choices that we have made.

Alberto Costa: Does my hon. Friend agree that the language being used is just another example of the separatists trying to drive a wedge between the Scots and the English—or, in this case, the London media?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I appreciate my hon. Friend's concern about separatist language, although I do not really see it in those terms. I have heard this Father Christmas approach to public spending many times. I have always argued against it; it is not a mature approach to the difficult choices that we have to make. Complaining about an "orgy of cuts" is not a helpful or accurate way of talking about the Government's approach to the BBC. It is perfectly legitimate for Members of Parliament to look rigorously at public expenditure and at an organisation that enjoys lavish expenditure and receives large sums from the taxpayer. It is legitimate for us to examine that expenditure and to expect a degree of savings.

In my six years in the House, I have always argued against a Father Christmas approach that involves constant public spending and protesting about orgies of cuts or austerity, which, in this instance, is not even happening at the BBC. Indeed, given where we were during the previous Parliament, I think the Government have been rather generous in their treatment of the BBC, as well they might be. It is a cherished and well-respected national organisation, and there is nothing in the charter to suggest that the Government's approach will be any more rigorous or challenging towards the BBC's expenditure than was the case in the previous Parliament.

The BBC is well protected, and the charter is to be commended for some of the reforms that it introduces, including new roles for the National Audit Office and Ofcom. Those represent improvements in the governance of the BBC. In the round, the charter has most things right, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) said. It has the potential to be successful, and I am very happy to lend it and the Government's approach to the BBC my support.

5.53 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng). He is rarely off the TV, and he is a fine contributor to the BBC. Whenever I turn on the TV, he seems to be there making his contribution. I hope that, notwithstanding some of the criticism, his chair on "Newsnight" will not be replaced by the one that Graham Norton uses when he ejects an unfortunate audience member.

I should like to declare an interest, in that I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the BBC. I am very proud to hold that position. I welcome the new BBC charter and the compromises made by the Government and the BBC to ensure its delivery. I particularly welcome the charter's 11-year duration, which should, provided that fixed Parliaments survive, take the next renewal out of the election cycle. I have long found it unfortunate that the BBC gets accused of bias from all sides during elections or referendums. While pressure coming from both sides must demonstrate that the BBC is balanced, calmer mid-term waters will be a better starting point for the next charter renewal. I find politicians' accusations of bias tiresome and that is followed in my list of moans by demands that the BBC find its own voice, with the proviso that the lyrics and music are written by interested Members of this House—I ask the SNP to take note.

I am pleased that the licence fee is guaranteed for the next 11 years, rising in line with inflation each year, that the Government have legislated to close the iPlayer

loophole and that they will phase out the ring-fencing of £150 million a year for broadband roll-out.

The BBC took a big hit when it was determined that it should be responsible for free TV licences for the over-75s. The BBC is much loved and cherished by the nation, but its reputation is only as good as the output that it can deliver. The licence fee and the BBC's commercial enterprises provide the BBC with 25% of the UK's TV revenues, but it accounts for 45% of investment into original British programmes. I hope that the Government's additional funding commitments will help the BBC to deliver more excellence to its viewers and listeners.

I have three particular issues on which I hope the Government will focus their efforts following publication of the charter. The first relates to listed sporting events. By closing the iPlayer loophole, which previously allowed viewers to watch content without having to buy a TV licence, the Government have demonstrated that existing legislation has to change in order to capture the original intention in a fast-moving digital age. I ask the Government to consider making the same change to preserve the status of listed sporting events.

The BBC currently interprets a listed sporting event as one that is available only to a broadcaster that will air free of charge and that can be delivered via TV to 95% of the population. With more consumers opting to watch programmes on tablets and other devices, soon no terrestrial broadcaster will be able to reach that figure. I believe that the intention is merely that the output should be free and that the nation can access it. As I understand it, the Government have no plans to change the sporting listed status regime, but I have invited the Secretary of State to meet me to discuss how the legislation can be updated to account for the technology of our age. I was incredibly grateful to have shared a few words with the Secretary of State this afternoon and it appears that her view is that the rules do not restrict the BBC in the way that it thinks they do. Equally, the Department's view is that if it turns out that the drafting does restrict the BBC, it is open to considering a change. I am grateful to the ministerial team for being so open—I am sure the BBC will think the same.

My second point relates to the National Audit Office. Paragraph 55 of the draft agreement provides that the Comptroller and Auditor General can scrutinise the BBC. I welcome that, but there are two minor areas that may need further consideration. The first relates to which aspects of the BBC can be examined by the NAO. Paragraph 55(1) states that the BBC is to be examined. However, paragraph 55(2) specifies that the BBC's subsidiaries must also engage with the NAO to that end. I assume that means that the NAO will be examining the BBC's commercial activities. The NAO is supposed to scrutinise whether bodies have used public money efficiently, but the BBC's commercial subsidiaries do not, and legally cannot under the charter, use licence fee revenue. It therefore seems unusual to extend the NAO's remit and I would be grateful for an explanation as to why that may be the case.

My second point on the NAO relates to its questioning as to the merits of any editorial or creative judgment. The charter makes it clear that the NAO cannot stray into this area, but it also specifies that it is for the Comptroller and Auditor General to determine whether such activity is within the confines of that which it is not permitted to determine. Although the NAO must

[*Huw Merriman*]

“consult” the BBC when making this determination, I agree with the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) that there is no dispute mechanism in place should the BBC wish to contest the NAO’s determination. Again, I ask the Government to seek to rectify that should disagreements occur between the two bodies.

The third area on which I hope the Government will focus relates to distinctive output, which is now written into the charter, with the requirement for Ofcom to hold the BBC to account for its delivery on distinctiveness. My concern is that there appears to be the utilisation of quotas from the outset. Lord Grade has said that

“quotas and prescription are the enemies of innovation and distinctiveness. The BBC must be...free to experiment and to take the risks and meet the challenges that free-to-air private sector broadcasters cannot afford to.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 October 2016; Vol. 774, c. 1986.]

May I ask that Ofcom be given the discretion to determine whether quotas are the best way for the BBC to deliver distinctive output? A broadcaster that bravely decides to put ballroom dancing and baking competitions on prime-time TV is doing pretty well in this space already, so I do not believe the Government have or should have concerns as to the distinctiveness of the BBC.

During the debate about this charter renewal, those supporting the BBC wanted to ensure that the licence fee would be preserved and would rise by inflation; that the next licence fee renewal would be taken out of the electoral cycle; and that the Government appointments to the new board would not outweigh the BBC appointments. The Government have listened to these concerns, in addition to many others, and have given the BBC even more independence and support than existed previously. I am grateful to the Government for continuing to support this amazing and unique institution, which is the envy of the world. It is true that if we were inventing the BBC for the first time in 2016, it would not be organised or funded as it now is. At a cost of only 40p per day, thank goodness we have it, and long may it remain.

6.2 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a great privilege to close the debate this afternoon. As most hon. Members have acknowledged, the BBC is a great British achievement. It is truly a national treasure: a hugely precious communal possession. We all own the BBC, so it is natural that so many of us have such strong views about changing it. As an organisation with such reach and power, it is entirely right that the BBC’s new royal charter is the cause of intense debate, so I welcome the interesting and important points made here today from all parts of the House.

It has been particularly heartening to see such agreement across the House on the need for the BBC to improve its diversity commitments. The former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), a former Minister, the SNP Front Benchers, the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) all spoke passionately about the need for the BBC to do better. The hon. Member for Maidstone

and The Weald made the important point that there is no Ofcom information sheet on diversity and equal opportunities, and that full transparency is necessary to drive diversity. She looks forward, as we do, to tougher action from the new Ofcom chief executive, Sharon White, and a stronger challenge to the BBC, particularly on the publication of data.

The hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins)—I would not want to be accused of partiality in the reporting of what was said by the two Members who are in competition to be Chair of the Select Committee—equally championed transparency as being vital to the charter. He rightly praised the BBC for taking risks that no other broadcaster would. However, as was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham, who is not yet back in his place, the BBC has never published an evaluation of its diversity policy, despite more than 30 initiatives. He is an assiduous campaigner and he will not let the Front Benchers on either side of the House take their foot off the pedal on diversity progress in the BBC.

Criticism has come from several Members who have substantial experience in this policy area, no one less than the former Minister, the right hon. Member for Wantage. We are sorry that he has been taken off the Front Bench, but pleased that he has been liberated on the Back Benches, and completely support his comments that the contestable fund is too small and risks creating additional bureaucracy. That money should go back to the BBC with a condition that it is spent on specific diverse content, such as children’s broadcasting.

The former shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), gave a passionate defence of the BBC. We are incredibly grateful to her for her tireless work on scrutinising the Government’s reforms to the BBC charter. She sought reassurance from the Government on three key areas: the specific definition of distinctiveness from Ofcom; what additional resource will be provided to Ofcom in its new role; and what changes the mini charter review will be empowered to make.

Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), another former shadow Minister, raised concerns about the potential for interference in editorial content and decision making and about opening up the BBC to anti-competition challenges. We look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments on those matters.

I particularly enjoyed the speech from the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) and what amounted to little more than SNP baiting across the Chamber. I would not like to get in between the two—I certainly would not fancy my chances. The hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) made the important but quite fundamental point about the BBC being our greatest and proudest export. The hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) gave an excellent speech, which was appreciated by Members on both sides of the House. He made the important point that the Select Committee will have a role in overseeing the appointment of the chair of the new board, which is a welcome improvement on the appointment of the chair of the trust, which provoked criticism all round.

The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) made the case for us to hold the BBC’s feet to the fire on diversity, and not simply rely on a vague impression

that we have improved. Last but not least, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) listed sporting events and the 95% threshold. I can assure him that we will consider that matter in the Digital Economy Bill Committee when it reaches scrutiny of part 4 next week. I hope that the Minister has been listening and that he will seek to amend that piece of legislation himself. If he does not, we have an amendment that is ready to go in the line by line scrutiny next week.

I welcome the opportunity to add my own contribution to that of my hon. Friends. The charter renewal process is a chance to strengthen and adapt the BBC's position as it heads into each new decade, so that it remains a crucial part of our national conversation. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) has said, we on these Benches broadly approve of this new version. Of course we have our concerns about the role of the NAO and the distinctiveness requirement and the interpretation of that by Ofcom. On the whole, this charter is a welcome confirmation of the BBC's scope and the principle of universality. It is a confirmation that the BBC should continue doing what it does so well, which is providing something for everyone from "Gardeners World" to "Doctor Who", "The One Show" to "The Life Scientific" and "Woman's Hour" to "Charlie and Lola". It is a welcome removal of the BBC from the political cycle, which can only help safeguard its independence—the independence that we know that the public value so highly. It is also a welcome redoubling of the BBC's diversity obligations.

The BBC must go into its second century with a much better representation—on screen and off—of race, sex, age and ability. It is only right that all licence fee payers should see themselves in the programmes for which they are paying, so the BBC's commitment to diversity must get even broader. It must learn to seek out talent across all the social classes. There is a stereotype of the sort of person who makes the telly: the white posh kid with a good education and the right contacts. The BBC needs to blast that stereotype apart and make it as old-fashioned a concept as continuity announcers wearing dinner jackets. It should be seen as a funny piece of outdated nonsense that has nothing to do with the modern BBC. I look forward to seeing that happen and working constructively with the Government on how we monitor and enforce genuine diversity in all its forms across the BBC.

I also join hon Members in applauding the emphasis placed in the charter on accurately reporting and portraying the lives of all people in all the regions of the UK. Let me make the point again that we all pay for the BBC, so it is only right that the BBC should repay that investment by commissioning and making programmes in and for all the nations of this country.

In truth, there is much to approve of in this new charter. The positives almost make up for the underhand, aggressive, bully-boy way this Government negotiated the last licence-fee settlement. The BBC should not have been given the responsibility for funding a Tory party manifesto pledge and nor should it have been given responsibility for delivering the Government's social policy on free TV licences for the over-75s. It should have felt able to reject even the suggestion that it take on the cost of those free TV licences. That it did not—that it ended up in essence agreeing to become an arm of the Department for Work and Pensions—says a

lot about the cavalier, overbearing, menacing way that this Government treated an organisation that they should cherish. It is the equivalent of outsourcing children's services to Virgin Care and asking Richard Branson to administer child benefit and who should get it. Virgin would not accept such a proposal, seeing it as a threat to its reputation, and the BBC should not have to do so either.

The Labour party will not support Government cowardice in outsourcing welfare policy to an unaccountable organisation. If the Conservatives wanted to cut TV licence fees for over-75s, they should have had the guts to put that in their manifesto and they should have campaigned on it, but they did not. So although we support the charter, we will return to the matter in the Committee stage of the Digital Economy Bill. Despite public outcry, this Government have still not ruled out further such stick-ups. They have refused to establish a transparent process to set the licence fees of the future. Without such a reassurance, we do not consider the matter a done deal.

We shall consider the issue again as the Digital Economy Bill goes through Committee because we on the Labour Benches are committed to the cause of a strong, independent, well funded national broadcaster. It is nothing less than the British public deserve and we shall not let this Government hollow out, purely for petty political gain, an institution that the British people prize so highly.

6.11 pm

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock):

It is a pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government to this long and high-quality debate on the BBC's future. The debate is a fitting conclusion to the process of charter review, during which we have had some hotly contested debates and some discussions that have brought cross-party approval. We have debated some of the crucial issues surrounding what everybody agrees is one of the most loved public institutions in this country. It is good to be able to think about so many of those issues today—almost all the key issues that have been debated over the past year have once again been discussed in this debate. That reflects well on the BBC and the House.

We have reached a positive outcome. That seems to be the overwhelming sentiment in the debates in this House, in the other place and in the three devolved Assemblies, which, over the past few weeks, have all debated the settlement, the charter and the agreement. Crucially, the BBC broadly agrees with the approach that we are taking, and I am hugely heartened because this broad consensus of support for the way in which the BBC will go forward over the next 11 years is an asset to the nation. It shows that we have done the right thing for the BBC, for the UK's unique creative sector and for the audiences whom we serve all around the United Kingdom.

I pay tribute to those who have done most of the work. I am proud to have played a small part, but the real heavy lifting was done by my right hon. Friends the Members for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) and for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), who are both in their places, rightly blushing, as they should have done all the way through the debate. It was very entertaining to see their private disagreements being aired in public. The fact that we have such capable, wise and thoughtful former Ministers contributing from

[*Matt Hancock*]

the Back Benches is a great asset. My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) said that everyone loves the BBC, and I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) will put him right shortly.

I thank all Members who contributed and fed into the charter review and all the 192,000 members of the public and organisations who have been involved. I shall go through as many of the detailed issues as I can. On diversity, we drew on a strong well of cross-party support across the House from all the parties whose Members spoke. It is critical that the BBC should reflect the nation that it serves. It has acknowledged that it needs to do more, but more it must do. I am sure that it will, but we will undoubtedly hold its feet to the fire, and Ofcom will ensure that the commitments in the charter are upheld. Of course, it is for the BBC board, in the first instance, to set, monitor and fulfil its policies, but Ofcom will assess that performance periodically. Sharon White, the chief executive of Ofcom, has already remarked upon the BBC's diversity record and said that it needs to do better, so clearly progress needs to be made.

The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) all made powerful speeches on the importance of diversity. In answer to a specific point, an information sheet on diversity policy will be produced pronto. On screen and off screen matter; it matters not only who is reflecting the country on our TV screens, but who is making the decisions and who is working at all levels of the organisation. I think that is true across most organisations. The case was put most strongly when the point was made that this is not only a social but an economic imperative, because we need to draw on all the talents of our nation.

Several Members talked about the importance of radio, including the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage, the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones). Support for the BBC delivering diverse radio content is incredibly important, and I am sure that the BBC has heard the message loud and clear.

I want to address the point about distinctiveness. Including distinctiveness in the BBC charter was an important part of the renewal process. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon spoke about that eloquently. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the Government see distinctiveness in exactly the way he set out. In answer to a question that was asked, the draft agreement makes it clear that BBC services and output need to be taken as a whole when it comes to distinctiveness. Ofcom has the experience and guidance to treat complaints relating to distinctiveness properly and appropriately. It will set broad metrics, but this must not become a tick-box exercise. It needs to take into account all BBC output. Again, those will be high-level requirements. Ofcom can then develop an evidence-based approach to think about the BBC's distinctiveness.

Let me turn to appointments and governance, which was a point of contention for some Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) spoke powerfully about the need to ensure

that we have strong governance to support an excellent BBC. There was strong support for the unitary board and for external regulation by Ofcom. We have been working closely with the BBC to set out the processes by which the new board will be established. Some Members suggested that the processes undermined the BBC's independence. They could not be more wrong. The new processes for appointment to the BBC board are unprecedented, in terms of the number of appointments that will fall to the BBC itself. Of course, Government appointments, following the proper OCPA—Office of Commissioner for Public Appointments—processes, are often for independent positions. Once appointed, all appointees will be independent board members of the BBC, responsible for the BBC in its entirety. The board, as was clearly pointed out, will not have editorial control; it will be non-executive. I thought that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) made the argument very well when he explained this quite passionately and set out Ofcom's oversight role.

Let me turn to the over-75s deal, which I am told we will return to in the Digital Economy Bill. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and Opposition Front Benchers set out concerns about this. The agreement on the concession for free TV licences is important. The licence fee is classed as a tax, and as such the Government retain ultimate control over it. That is the system we have successfully relied upon for decades. The track record is unbroken by last summer's deal. Far from using some of the terms that were used in the debate, I will leave the House with this comment by the BBC's director-general:

"The government's decision to put the cost of the over-75s on us has been more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC."

That is the reality of the settlement that was agreed, and it is why it is reasonable for everybody to support it. The deal was reached in negotiation with the BBC, and there were concessions in return—for instance, closing the iPlayer loophole and making sure that all those who watch BBC content will pay for the BBC in the future. The closure of the iPlayer loophole is one of the important long-term considerations that will support the BBC sustainably into the very distant future.

As part of the deal, we said that we will transfer the policy of the over-75s concessions to the BBC in the Digital Economy Bill, and some people were concerned about that, but the BBC itself requested that change. The BBC has a long history of dealing delicately with matters on the licence fee, which, while it remains the most supported method of funding the BBC, is not universally popular, but I am sure the BBC will be able to handle that appropriately.

We had a series of discussions about the contestable fund. In fact, this was one of the moments of extraordinary distance between my right hon. Friends the Members for Maldon and for Wantage. There they are sitting next to each other right now, but the gap was apparent in their speeches earlier. The licence fee is a fee paid by the general public to watch or record TV programmes; it is not necessarily just a payment for BBC services. That was true in the last Parliament and the last settlement, when we used some of that money for broadband, which was very exciting. It is reasonable that a small proportion of the licence fee can be made available to organisations other than the BBC to help deliver publicly funded content.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): My right hon. Friend understandably draws attention to the apparently contested views on the contestable fund of my right hon. Friends the Members for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) and for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), but the truth is that those views—like BBC1 and BBC2, or like Radio 6 Music and Radio 1—are in fact complementary. Yes, there is a slight difference between them, but they reinforce the overall thrust and wisdom of the reforms that, together, my right hon. Friends introduced and that, I think, are applauded across the House.

Matt Hancock: I would love to say I agree with my right hon. Friend, but he obviously missed those exchanges, because there really was quite a lot of distance between my two right hon. Friends. In fact, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage repudiated the position he had supported when he was bound by collective responsibility. However, the troika of my right hon. Friends will no doubt be able to discuss the issue at length as we debate what the contestable fund should be used on. Given that this is a pilot, we are going to look at, and work on, how the contestable fund should operate. At the end of the pilot, we will then assess the impact of the scheme. Questions were raised over the permanence of the funding. There is £60 million of funding over two to three years. Then we can assess the effectiveness of having a contestable fund.

Many right hon. and hon. Members discussed the mid-term review. Most were supportive, and it is entirely reasonable that we look at how Ofcom discharges its duties, for instance. It will not look at the mission of the BBC, the public purposes of the BBC or the licence fee funding model over the period of the charter. However, there were a couple of dissident voices. The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) was grateful that the process was taken out of the political cycle, and she supported separate processes for funding and review in future, but she was concerned about mission creep in the mid-term review. I want to assure her that this is not envisaged as another charter review, but it is right that we can have a look at how things are working halfway through the next 11 years.

Several Members discussed the importance of the National Audit Office. I can confirm that it will assess value for money, and it will cover publicly funded areas and subsidiaries. The same rules that the Comptroller and Auditor General uses for what is in scope will apply for the BBC, and I do not see why that should be any different.

On listed events, I understand the concern raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). We have looked in detail at this, and we disagree on the matter. We do not think that the BBC's concerns are valid, but we will of course keep it under review.

There was a big discussion about salary transparency. I strongly believe in transparency of salaries for publicly funded posts. As the Secretary of State set out, BBC studios are commercial—as they must be under the charter—and it is therefore reasonable for them not to be covered, but the BBC itself is public. This is public money, so transparency is reasonable, as in other parts of the public sector.

I turn to the SNP amendment and the devolved legislatures. Broadcasting is a reserved matter, because broadcasting is a national issue, and the BBC is the nation's broadcaster. Of course, the BBC needs better

to reflect the diversity of the whole UK, and we have worked hard to ensure that that is in the charter and the agreement. I remind the House that the new charter includes the implementation of recommendations from the Smith commission, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) outlined so powerfully, did not recommend that broadcasting or the affairs of the BBC be devolved. On the specific issue of the Scottish six o'clock news, which has drawn so much speculation, it is vital that the BBC is editorially independent, so that politicians cannot interfere with editorial matters. A vote for the amendment is a vote for political control of the BBC. The SNP may want political control of the BBC, but we say no. What is more, as the charter says, the BBC, as the nation's broadcaster,

“should bring people together for shared experiences and help contribute to the social cohesion and wellbeing of the United Kingdom”.

I hope that the House will resist the amendment, support the charter and all the work that has gone into it over the past year, and, with that, wish the BBC a strong, vital and healthy future.

Amendment proposed: (a), at end insert—

“and, recognising the special identities of the nations of the UK, calls upon the Government and the British Broadcasting Corporation to deliver maximum devolution of broadcasting and, specifically for Scotland, the six o'clock news option recommended by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in its Third Report, BBC White Paper and related issues (HC 150), published in August 2016”.—(*John Nicolson.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 53, Noes 270.

Division No. 68]

[6.27 pm

AYES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Arkless, Richard	McCaig, Callum
Black, Mhairi	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Blackford, Ian	McDonald, Stuart C.
Blackman, Kirsty	McLaughlin, Anne
Boswell, Philip	Monaghan, Dr Paul
Brock, Deidre	Mullin, Roger
Brown, Alan	Newlands, Gavin
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Nicolson, John
Chapman, Douglas	O'Hara, Brendan
Cherry, Joanna	Oswald, Kirsten
Cowan, Ronnie	Paterson, Steven
Crawley, Angela	Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Day, Martyn	Salmond, rh Alex
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Saville Roberts, Liz
Durkan, Mark	Sheppard, Tommy
Edwards, Jonathan	Skinner, Mr Dennis
Ferrier, Margaret	Stephens, Chris
Gibson, Patricia	Thewliss, Alison
Godsiff, Mr Roger	Weir, Mike
Grady, Patrick	Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Grant, Peter	Whitford, Dr Philippa
Gray, Neil	Williams, Hywel
Hendry, Drew	Wilson, Corri
Hoey, Kate	
Hosie, Stewart	
Kerevan, George	
Kerr, Calum	
Law, Chris	

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Marion Fellows and
Owen Thompson**

NOES

Adams, Nigel	Aldous, Peter
Afriyie, Adam	Allan, Lucy

Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barwell, Gavin
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Bingham, Andrew
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Borwick, Victoria
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Sir Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carmichael, Neil
 Cartlidge, James
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishtii, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Colvile, Oliver
 Costa, Alberto
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Davies, Byron
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Dinéage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Elliott, Tom
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Evans, Graham
 Evennett, rh David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Fernandes, Suella

Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, Mr James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Gummer, rh Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howlett, Ben
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kirby, Simon
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Pauline
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David

Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Nokes, Caroline
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul

Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swaney, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wilson, Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William

Tellers for the Noes:
 Steve Brine and
 Andrew Griffiths

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House approves the draft Agreement (Cm 9332), between the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation, which was laid before this House on 15 September 2016.

Business without Debate

DIGITAL ECONOMY BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

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

That the Order of 13 September (Digital Economy (Programme)) be varied as follows:

In paragraph 2 of the Order (conclusion of proceedings in Public Bill Committee), for “Thursday 27 October” substitute “Tuesday 1 November”.—(*Mr Stride.*)

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING

That the draft Self-build and Custom Housebuilding (Time for Compliance and Fees) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 14 July, be approved.—(*Mr Lidington.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

6.41 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to present this petition, calling for fair transitional arrangements for women born in the 1950s who are affected by the changes to the state pension age. Hon. Members will remember that the last time the House debated the Pensions Act 2011, Ministers promised that there would be fair transitional arrangements. These have failed to materialise, harshly affecting women in Edinburgh East and, indeed, in many other areas. I thank all those who have contributed to the petition, and the many others throughout the country who have similarly contributed to petitions lodged by other hon. Members.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Edinburgh East,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001932]

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I rise to present this petition, signed by over 500 of the residents of Hove and Portslade, on behalf of the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign. The women who have signed the petition and those who would be beneficiaries of the petition have discovered the heartbreaking news that their plans, hopes and anticipation for retirement have been shattered. These women have acted with such good grace, dignity and unstoppable determination. They are a credit to our community, and I hope that the Government take heed of this petition.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

The petition of residents of Hove.

[P001950]

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Telford, relating to the implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts.

My petition is identical to those already presented, so I will not read it out, and in any event I do not have my glasses.

The Petition of residents of Telford.

[P001949]

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I rise to present a petition from 26 residents of the Bury North constituency, collected by my constituent Mrs Christine Wootton, relating to the implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts. This petition is in the same terms as others presented today and on several recent days. It concludes:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

The Petition of residents of Bury North.

[P001951]

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of several hundred residents of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, relating to the implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts. The petition is identical to the one presented by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), who has already referred to its content so I will not read out the full text. I wish to pay tribute to Wilma Grey, the Northern Ireland co-ordinator of this petition and the lobby group, who is also from Fermanagh and South Tyrone. It concludes:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

The Petition of residents of Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

[P001952]

Yemen

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Steve Brine.*)

6.47 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I am grateful to the House for allowing this vitally important debate. I was surprised that a Minister from the Department for International Development and not the Foreign Office is representing the Government, as this debate is primarily on foreign affairs matters. Observers have always feared that the FCO would like to take control of DFID: perhaps tonight we are seeing a reverse takeover. The Minister's knowledge of this area, however, is not in doubt and I am pleased to see him in his place.

This debate occurs at one of the most critical moments in Yemen's long history. In August, UN-backed peace talks in Kuwait between the Houthi rebels and the Yemeni Government broke down, leading to intense fighting and a restarting of the airstrikes. Thousands have died in the following months. Only last week, 140 people were killed and 500 injured in an airstrike on a funeral in Sana'a. The Saudi Government have now apologised for that incident, blaming the bombing on bad intelligence. What a terrible reason to die.

This morning, a 72-hour ceasefire was announced by UN Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed. It will begin at midnight tomorrow. All our eyes may be on Syria and Iraq, but tonight we in the British Parliament invite the world to focus on Yemen's forgotten crisis. Our message to the Government is quite simple: either we stop the fighting permanently or Yemen will bleed to death.

I have been privileged to serve as chair of the all-party group on Yemen since joining Parliament. I am very proud that there are so many Members who are interested in Yemen and so many Members present today. Several Members of this House were born in Yemen, including myself, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) and the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond). She is an officer of the all-party group, along with the hon. Members for Charnwood (Edward Argar) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). Other Members have served the armed forces in Yemen, including the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). Those who represent constituencies with large Yemeni communities have worked hard on behalf of their constituents, including my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Eelman) and for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). This includes the late Harry Harpham, who served as the group's secretary. I am delighted that his successor, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), is equally dedicated. Tomorrow, the group will meet representatives of all of the major charities to hear from the former Foreign Minister of Yemen, Dr Abu-Baker Al-Kirby.

These parliamentary ties further demonstrate the unique relationship our country has had with Yemen over the past 150 years. When Yemen was last in crisis, during the Arab Spring of 2011, it was the British Government, in particular the current Minister of State at the Foreign Office, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), who was later the Prime Minister's

envoy to Yemen, who worked with the Yemeni Government. We supported Yemen through that crisis, which, other than Tunisia, was the only peaceful democratic revolution in the middle east. We continue to be one of the largest bilateral aid donors, and the International Development Secretary has just raised our contribution to a total of £100 million. In turn, Yemenis have a great love of Britain. When the Yemeni Foreign Minister Riad Yassin visited Parliament last year, he brought with him a video. It was not a video of the ongoing conflict, which we were aware of, but of our Queen's last visit to Aden, where the local hospital I was born in was named after her.

This positive history therefore makes the current situation all the more tragic. Through a sluggish, confused and weak approach to the crisis, the international community as a whole should be measured against a scorecard of shame: over 10,000 people have been killed in the past 18 months; at least 1,200 children have been killed, with another 1,700 injured; 3 million people are now suffering from acute malnutrition; 21.2 million people, four-fifths of the entire population, require urgent humanitarian assistance, 9.9 million of whom are children; 3.2 million people are internally displaced; 19.3 million people are in need of health care and protection services; and 14.1 million people, equivalent to the combined populations of London, Birmingham and Glasgow, are at risk of hunger.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The impact on the most vulnerable in society in Yemen is simply immeasurable. It is our job in this House to stand up against what is wrong. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we are instead enabling that?

Keith Vaz: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Lady. I commend her party and its Members for the way in which they have raised Yemen on so many occasions. I am grateful, and the House is very grateful, for that. She is right that we need to do much more. Organisations such as Save the Children, UNICEF, Islamic Relief, Médecins sans Frontières and the Red Cross are performing wonders on the ground, but they are struggling to get the funding needed for emergency programmes.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be interested to know that I recently travelled to the World Bank with RESULTS UK to put forward the argument that the first 1,000 days of a child's life are vital for their development. This means that even when the conflict ends, the effects will not stop. They will not cease. Millions of children will be left stunted with delayed cognitive development and may still die, despite the conflict ending. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to be doing more to find a peaceful solution?

Keith Vaz: I do, and I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I agree wholeheartedly.

When faced with a crisis of these proportions, one would have expected, as my hon. Friend has said, that the international community, led by the UK, would be urgently bringing the conflict to an end, and putting this at the very top of the agenda at the United Nations. Instead, when faced by this reality, the world has failed Yemen. We failed to stop the escalation of violence in

March last year, and we failed to stop the fighting over the last 18 months. We have had two clear opportunities for a sustainable end to the fighting: a brief ceasefire for negotiations in April this year ended in failure; and the UN-sponsored round of talks in Kuwait ended in failure in August. Will the Minister confirm whether or not the UK Government were invited to these negotiations? Were we actually in the room?

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman's knowledge of, and care for, the country of Yemen is well known. Does he agree that what would make the greatest difference to the humanitarian situation in Yemen would be a stable ceasefire followed by a long-term sustainable peace settlement, and that while that settlement must originate from among the Yemeni peoples themselves and not be imposed from outside, the unique historical relationship that the UK has with Yemen, to which the right hon. Gentleman was alluding, makes us well placed to help facilitate the delivery of that settlement, building on the work of the Minister for Europe and the Americas, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan)?

Keith Vaz: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, who is vice-chairman of the all-party group. He is right to highlight, as I have done, the role of the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton. There is a vacancy for a special envoy for Yemen, and if I could persuade the Prime Minister to send him there, among all his other duties, the right hon. Gentleman would make a very good contribution.

Amid this lack of diplomatic progress, the intervention by the Saudi-led coalition has become central to the crisis. This coalition intervened at the request of the legitimate Government of Yemen. However, 18 months on, the airstrikes, which are heavily impacting on the civilian population, have become counter-productive—so counter-productive that it has become the eye of a storm of intense criticism, which overshadows every other element of the crisis. These airstrikes, which Save the Children believes to be responsible for 60% of all civilian deaths in the conflict, are breeding hostility inside and outside Yemen.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making a strong speech. He will be aware of the reports of the International Development Committee and the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee on this very matter, but is he aware that yesterday a number of us, along with UK Government Ministers, met the Saudi Foreign Minister? While we had a frank and candid discussion about the terrible attack on the funeral hall, the Saudi Foreign Minister refused to give any clarity about when and to what level investigations would take place into the hundreds of other incidents reported by leading non-governmental organisations. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is imperative that the Saudis are clear about what has happened in those incidents and allow an independent investigation?

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I commend him for the work he has done. I know he has a large Yemeni community in Cardiff South and Penarth. It is right to bring this to the attention of the Saudis—a theme I hope to develop later in my speech.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): We all recognise and welcome moves for a ceasefire. However, two Select Committees have endorsed the view that UK arms exports to Saudi Arabia should cease. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Government should respect the findings of those Committees and stop arms sales until a proper investigation into the atrocities in Yemen takes place, or indeed a permanent ceasefire is put in place?

Keith Vaz: I agree. When I come on to look at the implications of the ceasefire, I shall certainly make that one of my asks to the Minister.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is the issue of the extra petrol that we are pouring on the flames that is key. I have raised on a number of occasions the bombing of Médecins Sans Frontières hospitals, particularly in Sana'a last autumn. We are always told that "Saudi Arabia will investigate", but that is not good enough. We should not be selling arms in this situation.

Keith Vaz: I agree with the hon. Lady wholeheartedly. That is something on which we must press the Government if we are to achieve a peaceful solution.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con) *rose*—

Keith Vaz: I give way to the Chair of the Committees on Arms Export Controls.

Chris White: I know that a couple of questions have been asked by Members who have served on the Committees—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Steve Brine.)

Chris White: I did not know that I had that effect on the House—[*Laughter.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): It is known as the 7 o'clock effect.

Chris White: I am aware that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) is familiar with a report in which the Business, Innovation and Skills and International Development Committees called for an independent United Nations-led investigation and a pause in the sale of arms exports until that had taken place. Does he agree that that could only assist in alleviating the humanitarian crisis?

Keith Vaz: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I commend him for the work that he and his Committees are doing. We look forward to seeing the report when it is finally published, but I think that the Government will note his comments very carefully.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the United States Congress recently passed the Justice Against Sponsors

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

of Terrorism Act, which is aimed at the Saudis? Does he think that that is why the Saudis are starting to scale back some of their attacks?

Keith Vaz: My fellow Yemeni—by birth—is right. I think that the pressure in the United States Congress, to which I shall allude later, is making a difference, especially given recent events. I think that it takes more than the United Kingdom to do this and that Congress has a very important role.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is being extremely generous in giving way to all of us. He is probably aware of the use of cluster munitions in Yemen and the problems that they have caused for civilians by lying unexploded, thus creating de facto minefields which can kill or maim. Will he join me in calling on the Government to review the support that they are giving to the organisations involved in clearing those munitions?

Keith Vaz: Yes, I will. We do need to support those organisations. I think that I am able to give way so often thanks to the BBC debate running a little short. Whether we like or hate the BBC, we should thank it for allowing us this extra time.

A generation of Yemenis now risk learning how to hate Saudi Arabia and the west. At a recent meeting organised by the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding, journalists Nawal al-Maghafi and Peter Osborne, who had recently returned from Yemen, said that the long history of goodwill towards Britain was almost eroded. The strength of that criticism means that when we are critical of Russia's actions in Syria, it is now pointing at Yemen and claiming moral equivalency. That is not sustainable. Yemen is now the Achilles heel of western diplomacy. Quite simply, it is in everyone's best interests, including Saudi Arabia's, for the airstrikes to end permanently.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on initiating the debate. Does he agree that if the United Kingdom Government's review of its arms sales uncovers breaches of international law by the kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Yemen, there should be not only an end to the sales of arms to Saudi Arabia, but a root-and-branch review of our relationship with the kingdom?

Keith Vaz: That is a very important point. The Chair of the Committees on Arms Export Controls will have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. I think that this is one of the issues that the Committees, and other Committees of the House, will have to examine—indeed, they are doing so as we speak.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Keith Vaz: I will.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. No, you cannot.

Emily Thornberry: Am I not allowed to intervene?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No.

Keith Vaz: I have never been able to shut my hon. Friend up.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have succeeded where the right hon. Gentleman could not.

Keith Vaz: I will put that in my diary, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Let me return to the serious issue of Yemen. The issues of the investigations of the bombings, which have been mentioned by several Members, and the UK's sale of arms to Saudi Arabia have been raised here tonight, and also outside Parliament. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as Oxfam, Amnesty International and others, have identified, as have hon. Members this evening, the human rights violations committed by all sides. The latter of those organisations argues that DFID's good work is being undermined by £3.3 billion of aircraft and bombs sales to Saudi Arabia in the 12 months from March 2015.

The Saudi Arabian Government have investigated incidents, but these investigations have been criticised for not being independent. They must understand that continuing the bombing campaign will lead only to more incidents and criticism, and calls for further investigations.

We are joined by the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), and I am grateful to him for reinforcing the Government's position tonight. Only one of the Ministers present will be able to speak in this debate, but I would like them both to clarify a number of points. What support is the UK providing Saudi Arabia with regards to both preventing and investigating human rights violations, including through providing personnel? What is the UK's policy on an independent investigation into possible human rights violations by all sides in the conflict? What is the current status of UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia, and will this be subject to review?

Just as it is darkest before the dawn, the international community is finally moving in the right direction. After the Houthis fired on the USS Mason last week, the Americans fired back, into Yemen, for the first time in this conflict. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump talked about Syria at length in their last debate; it is hoped that they will be asked about Yemen tomorrow. Let us not forget that Secretary Clinton was the first Secretary of State in history to visit Yemen.

On Sunday, in London, US Secretary of State John Kerry and the Foreign Secretary met Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir and the UN special envoy to discuss this conflict. At the meeting, they made a very clear call for a ceasefire "within hours". An hour is clearly a long time in diplomacy, but at last today a 72-hour ceasefire has been announced. This is most welcome, but it is not the end. Seventy-two hours is not enough for the Yemeni people. It is vital that our Government ensure that the ceasefire becomes permanent.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I have been listening with interest to the right hon. Gentleman's speech. He made reference to the Houthis firing on a US naval ship. Does he agree that one of the things that is so worrying about the conflict is the possibility of threatening some of the key shipping routes that pass through Aden, which might destabilise the whole region?

Keith Vaz: That is absolutely right. As I will say towards the end of my speech, that has an effect on the humanitarian aid getting into Yemen.

I spoke last night with the UK's permanent representative to the United Nations, the excellent Matthew Rycroft, who made it clear that the UK leads on this issue at the Security Council. He also confirmed that the UK had already drafted a Security Council resolution. It will call for an end to hostilities, investigations into human rights violations and a restart of the negotiations. It is in response to this that Saudi Arabia and the other gulf states have put together their own pre-emptive ceasefire. That is clearly welcome, but will the Minister confirm that if the coalition's ceasefire breaks in 72 hours' time and violence resumes, the UK will immediately demand that the draft resolution is tabled? Will he also confirm that when Yemen is discussed by the Security Council in New York on 31 October, the United Kingdom will demand a joint statement calling for a permanent diplomatic solution?

Now that the ceasefire is in place, we must take a central role in the peace talks. Will the Minister confirm who will be in the room for these talks? Will the talks include the United Kingdom, the United States, the Saudi Government, the Houthis, former President Saleh and the Yemeni Government? It needs to be made clear at the talks that concluding without an agreement is not an option. As her predecessors have done, will the Prime Minister herself call on both King Salman of Saudi Arabia and President Hadi to press for peace?

Despite the criticism that the United Kingdom has faced in recent months, we can still be the honest broker, and that means putting pressure on all sides, including those who receive British support. Is the United Kingdom prepared to sanction the Yemeni and Saudi Governments by withdrawing support, suspending arms sales or in other ways if they allow the next round of negotiations to fail? We also need to give the UN special envoy all the tools that he needs to do his job. Will the Minister tell the House what support, including staff and finances, we have provided to the special envoy?

Another step that we need to take relates to humanitarian access. This is vital not only to address the humanitarian crisis, but to show that the United Kingdom wishes to act for the Yemeni people. In the scorecard of shame that I mentioned, I have set out the reality in Yemen, which is an extraordinarily dangerous place for aid agencies to work. Some parts of the country, particularly in the north, are practically unreachable. Following the closure of Sana'a airport, the cutting off of major roads and bridges and the withdrawal of safety assurances, UNICEF has informed me that many aid agencies have withdrawn from Saada and Hajjah. The increase in aid is welcome, but what are we doing to ensure that it gets through? We must do more, and this must be included in the UN resolution.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman has once again brought this subject to the House for debate. It is important that these issues are raised. He talks about access for aid agencies, which is absolutely crucial. Médecins sans Frontières is finding it very difficult to maintain hospitals in the country and reports that, even where there are hospitals, the situation is so unsafe and people are so frightened to leave their homes that by the time they

reach the hospital, they are often seriously ill, with some of them sadly dying. Will he impress on the Government that we need to act in support of those medical facilities as well?

Keith Vaz: The hon. Lady has just done that very eloquently. The worst part of the bombing of the funeral was that there were two bombs. The first killed the people at the funeral and the second was intended to deal with the first attenders. To say that such incidents are the result of bad information is a terrible excuse and that must never happen again.

I would like to end by telling the House that my interest in Yemen is not just political, but deeply personal. Yemen was once known as Arabia Felix, or "happy Arabia", and that is how I remember the country. The first nine years of my life were among my happiest. Every night when I go home from this place, I think of Aden, and I light frankincense just to remind me of it. Yemen is an easy country to fall in love with. It has incredible beauty, enormous history and wonderful people. Its geography and its architecture are among the most stunning in the world. It is renowned as the home of the legendary Queen of Sheba. It breaks my heart that incredible cultural heritage sites are being reduced to rubble by the fighting and that we will never be able to recreate them. We are part of this conflict; we cannot walk by on the other side. This is a crisis crying out for leadership. Saudi Arabia, the Yemeni Government, the Houthis and the Yemeni people all need a way out of this conflict. We are in a unique position to show them the way, and to take them there.

It has been said to me that we hold all the pens on Yemen. We need to use every ounce of our considerable influence. Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm. To allow millions of people to die from hunger in the 21st century would consign Yemen to being one of history's great tragedies. Let us seize the momentum of the past few days and prevent a humanitarian crisis from becoming a humanitarian catastrophe. I beg the Minister to act now.

7.14 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): I begin by paying huge tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). For as long as I have been in the House and long before I entered the House, he has been a great champion of the interests of Yemen. He understands Yemen, as he pointed out, from his early childhood and brings to the issue a level of knowledge and passion that is important in the House. Everyone on both sides of House has emphasised that the situation is a horrible tragedy—nearly 80% of the population currently face a humanitarian crisis. More than 1 million children face food shortages and almost 400,000 literally struggle to know where the next meal will come from.

I will take a couple of moments to talk about the causes and origins of the conflict, because it is important to consider them when addressing it. When I last visited Yemen in the spring of 2014, despite all the underlying fragility—the considerable south-north divides, the sectarian splits between the Houthis and other members of Yemeni society, and the extreme poverty—we were looking at a situation in which the national dialogue seemed to be working. There was a remarkable period of relative

[Rory Stewart]

stability between 2011 and 2014. I pay tribute to Benomar, who was the UN special envoy at the time, and to the extraordinary work of the ambassadors from the Gulf Co-operation Council, the EU ambassador, who had served in Afghanistan and spoke fluent Arabic, the US ambassador, who was a fluent Arabist, and the French ambassador, who also spoke fluent Arabic. Unfortunately, however, despite all the work done in 2014, the situation deteriorated rapidly so that by the beginning of 2015 we found ourselves facing the horror that we see today. There are certain lessons that we need to draw from that to understand how we went wrong and to solve future conflicts.

The first and central thing is to apportion blame. We cannot shy away from the fact that the actions of ex-President Saleh and the Houthis are at the core of the conflict. They attacked the legitimate Government in Sana'a and propagated this conflict. There is also a broader context that the international community must recognise and take responsibility for. The national dialogue that I saw in 2014 did not do what it was supposed to do. In retrospect, it focused too much on an elite in Sana'a and did not reach out enough to the rural populations. It was not genuinely inclusive and left a situation in which the Houthis in particular felt that the federal deal offered to them was unfair and that the area that they had been allocated was too small and without access to the sea.

Partly through pressure on President Hadi to reduce fuel subsidies, international development actors helped to create a situation in which instability was encouraged by the cutting of those fuel subsidies—although much of the responsibility must lie with President Hadi and how he implemented the cuts. Corruption in Sana'a and Yemen was also a huge mobiliser of popular resentment against the Government and that was not adequately addressed.

Keith Vaz: I thank the Minister for his kind comments. He is giving an impressive exposition of what went wrong. We, like the Americans, are great supporters of Yemen, so should we have done more at the time to monitor the situation and to move the dialogue in the right direction? Did we withdraw far too early?

Rory Stewart: I pay tribute to Jane Marriott, our ambassador at the time, to the work done by her predecessor, John Wilkes, and to the DFID work that took place behind the scenes. Such things are difficult and I am not in the business of second guessing officials, but the lesson we should draw from all these conflicts is the one that I pointed to earlier: the international community must be cautious not to become over-optimistic and to be aware of the ways in which talking to an elite in the capital and engaging with the civil society in Sana'a misled us about the real resentment that existed in the countryside.

How do we address the situation now? Central to that is understanding that decades of ex-President Saleh's policies lie underneath the problems we face today. He deliberately exacerbated those tribal divisions, and deliberately created that culture of corruption and impunity, which he is now so expertly exploiting in order to maintain instability in that country. But we cannot be

naive here: simply removing ex-President Saleh is not going to solve this problem on its own. The problems in Yemen go much deeper than that and need to be addressed systematically, from politics through to the humanitarian dimension.

Let me touch on those two things. As the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, politics is at the centre of this—politics, politics, politics. Characteristically, he asked 10 questions, which I have to deal with in less than 10 minutes, but I will try to deal with them quickly before moving on. Hon. Members will notice that his 10 questions have largely focused on what I would call the high politics and diplomacy, and I will try to address them one by one and then take this into the bigger issue of the solution to the Yemeni conflict. First, he asked what the UK's position is in relation to the Kuwait talks. The answer is that those talks were held between the parties in the conflict—the regional players and the Yemenis themselves. The UK ambassador to Yemen was present and was in the room, but in a diplomatic capacity and not as a party to the conflict.

Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman asked what support we are providing to Saudi Arabia. The current operations are, of course, Saudi-led, and the United Kingdom is not embedded in the Saudi military operations. As the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) pointed out in his statement today, we are very clear that the investigation needs to be led, in the first instance, by the Saudi Government, just as similar investigations of the United States or the United Kingdom Governments for actions taking place in Afghanistan and Iraq were led first and foremost by those Governments. He has said, however, that if that investigation is not adequate, he will look at this again.

Stephen Doughty: The Saudi Foreign Minister told us yesterday that the UK had provided both technical and personnel support to investigations for the past six to eight months, and that advice had been provided on targeting. As one of the guardians of the humanitarian principle, will the Minister be clear about what support has been provided by the Department for International Development specifically in relation to investigating violations of humanitarian law?

Rory Stewart: I am happy to provide more detail, but, in essence, we currently provide two forms of support and I will elaborate on this in a written answer. We provide training and capacity support, which includes statements about international humanitarian law, but that is not about this military operation—that is in general for the royal Saudi air force. Secondly, my Department and the Foreign Office have worked together through the UN process on international humanitarian law, particularly in a meeting in Geneva last month—this is partly in response to the question raised by the right hon. Member for Leicester East—where we are pushing for more staffing for the independent UN investigation on human rights through the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and, in particular, its Yemen office.

The right hon. Gentleman asked a question about arms sales. We take those sales very seriously. As Members from both sides of the House are aware, the report by the Committees on Arms Export Controls was divided,

but we continue to monitor carefully all actions of international humanitarian law, although this is not a prime responsibility of my Department. He asked whether we would be in the room for peace talks, and we absolutely will. Our current ambassador, Edmund Fitton-Brown, is very close to the UN representative, and so long as these are not talks taking place between the parties to the conflict, the UK is present in a diplomatic capacity.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether the Prime Minister would be prepared to call King Salman of Saudi Arabia and President Hadi. Of course, as the right hon. Gentleman is aware, on Sunday the Foreign Secretary met the Saudi Foreign Minister, but more than that the Saudi Foreign Minister came to this House of Commons yesterday to be directly accountable to this Parliament. Indeed, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East spoke to President Hadi in a visit to Saudi Arabia last week. The right hon. Gentleman asked about sanctions. Of course we will continue to put pressure on all parties to this conflict to support the current peace. He asked whether we are providing support for the special envoy, and the answer is that the UK Government are providing more than £1 million of direct support for the staff of Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the UN special envoy to Yemen.

In the remaining minutes, I hope to talk about the broader context, in addition to all the good 10 points the right hon. Gentleman raised. We need to look at politics at local and regional level.

Keith Vaz: This must be a first—a Minister is given a set of questions and he replies to every one of them. I do not think that I have ever come across that in my 29 years in this House—well done. Will the hon. Gentleman address the issue of the ceasefire? We know that we have 72 hours. Can we please try to ensure that it is longer, because 72 hours is not enough? I know that there are many other things to talk about, but that ceasefire is critical.

Rory Stewart: We absolutely agree that the ceasefire is critical and that 72 hours in and of itself is not enough, but as the right hon. Gentleman is so aware the only way in which we can do any kind of peace or conflict resolution all the way from sub-Saharan Africa right the way through to Cambodia is to start with small steps. It is vital to begin with those 72-hour moves. That is why the UN special envoy has done it and why we and the United States are strongly supportive of it. We will of course do all we can to extend that ceasefire, because we do need longer. Indeed, what we want is a permanent political settlement in place, which brings me to the broader question of politics. There are two dimensions to that: we need to acknowledge that this is taking place in a broader peninsula context, and that lasting peace will come only if we address the local-level conflicts taking place on the ground in Yemen. Our humanitarian response—this is a debate about the humanitarian crisis—needs to take that into account.

I wish to make some brief observations on the nature of DFID's humanitarian response. First, we need to approach this with some degree of humility. The right hon. Gentleman has quite rightly pointed to the important role that the United Kingdom plays. We do indeed hold the pen at the Security Council. We have put £100 million into this, and it is true that we play an important role in the Quad, but we are not the only people here and we cannot act as though we are. We have to make sure that we acknowledge the role of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other states such as Oman, but above all we must acknowledge the role of the Yemeni people themselves. The only real solution here will come from the Yemeni people. We need to acknowledge again that, although the United Kingdom has put in £100 million, the current UN appeal is only 47% met. We were very pleased at the UN General Assembly to raise another £50 million from other partners, but we still need to do much more.

We cannot at the moment, as an international community, adequately address all the 21 million people who are currently at risk, so we need to prioritise. We need to make sure that we focus on the most vulnerable people. First, we need to protect civilians; secondly, we need to make absolutely sure that we focus on food security—it is an absolute tragedy that we are seeing extremes of malnutrition and we must make sure that that does not turn into a famine; and thirdly, we need to make it absolutely certain that, whenever we are dealing with anyone in Yemen, we look at preventable disease. It is a tragedy that cholera is now breaking out in Sana'a.

Commerce and shipping will be absolutely central. We need to get the markets working, get the ships into Yemen, and understand that this is not just a development and a humanitarian response.

I will finish by paying tribute to the right hon. Gentleman, to the very strong work both of the UK Government and of the UN special envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, and to the extraordinary work of the humanitarian organisations, which work in very difficult circumstances. I am talking about the suffering that has been experienced by Mercy Corps, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières. Above all, it is the Yemenis—not just internationals—who are bearing the burden of this, who are out in those field offices, and who are delivering aid in some of the most testing conditions on earth. If we can plan now for the medium to long term, think hard about the stabilisation and the politics that are at the root of this, and ensure that we get the economic framework in place so that if we are lucky enough to have a ceasefire, we are really able to move to a situation in which we have a sustainable economy in Yemen for the future. If we can sometimes do less than we pretend, we can do much more than we fear.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 18 October 2016

[MR DAVID NUTTALL *in the Chair*]

Concentrix: Tax Credit Claimants

9.30 am

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the performance of Concentrix in dealing with tax credit claimants.

This is the first time that I have spoken in a debate in this Chamber that you have chaired, Mr Nuttall, and I look forward to it.

Just hours after I successfully persuaded the House of Commons Backbench Business Committee to table this debate, Concentrix's contract was ended. I called for this debate because the company has bullied people who depend on tax credits and targeted single mothers, many of whom have had their tax credits stopped without fair notice. Concentrix is paid by results, which means that it has a financial incentive to stop payments. Its decisions are frequently made on the basis of wrong information, and people who depend on tax credits to make ends meet have been left without funds for weeks while errors have been corrected, causing hardship for them and their children.

I thought that this debate would focus on those shocking failures, and that I would use the time to share how the lives of my constituents, and the constituents of many Members here, have been made miserable by the cavalier way in which Concentrix has used the flimsiest of excuses to end tax credit claims, and by its shocking customer service, which has left claimants hanging on to telephone calls for hours without resolution. However, since then, there have been many parliamentary opportunities to highlight such stories. I am glad that the pressure from me and other MPs has led the tax authorities to end Concentrix's contract. I am particularly glad that the National Audit Office is to look into its operation. As a former member of the Public Accounts Committee, I am confident that the NAO will get to the bottom of whether Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs or Concentrix is responsible. I think it possible that we have sometimes blamed the company when we ought to have blamed the Government.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Concentrix took the approach of stopping payments without warning. Many single mothers in my constituency have told me that they discovered that their payments had stopped only by checking their bank accounts. Does she agree that HMRC should not have given Concentrix the authority to stop payments, and that the process must stop?

Fiona Mactaggart: I think that the best thing that we can do with this debate is ensure that lessons are learned from this failure, and that the whole Government act on

them. It is time to get answers from the Treasury about the extent to which it, rather than Concentrix, is responsible for the failure.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has done a great service in securing this debate. I had a problem, to say the least, over Christmas with a family who had no income for about eight weeks. We spent most of the Christmas period trying to get that family some money. Does she not agree that these matters should not be farmed out to private companies? They are far too sensitive. The Government should have another look at this, and the responsibility should be taken in-house. It should also be noted that HMRC has taken on another 30 staff; that is one heck of a cost as well. Another company that should be investigated is Capita, which is doing exactly the same thing because it has been set targets.

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend is right that we need to work out what Government should do. I will deal with that point later, but it is clear that part of the problem with Concentrix is that if people were notified, they often did not believe what they were told, because the Treasury insisted that Concentrix use its own branding on the letters, so people got letters from some company asking for extensive data. I would have treated that as phishing and thought, "This is someone trying to scam me."

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. She is absolutely right that we need to learn the lessons from this mess. Many of my constituents have been left in utter financial disarray by having been left for a time with no income. Does she share my belief that we need reassurances from the Minister that the Government will take every step necessary to sort out this shambles and help those who have been left in a mess?

Fiona Mactaggart: Indeed. Not only that, but the Government ought to ensure that it does not happen again. There is a risk that it could, not just in the Treasury but in other Departments. The reason why I persisted with this debate after the Treasury abandoned the contract is that I believe that this is an opportunity to learn lessons that should be spread throughout Government.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is right to point out that this is not just a failure of practice by Concentrix but a policy failure by Government. The deliberate intention of the contract was clearly to target single parents, on the basis of assumptions that they were living with a partner and not reporting it. That is an acute, intimate and sensitive issue, and it is important in such cases that practice is handled with great care. There is absolutely no evidence of such care. This is returning to the attitude that single women bringing up children must not be respectable and need to be investigated. Surely that is something that the Government need to rethink and re-learn.

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It was a gendered contract, and the Government did not stop to think—or maybe they did think about it,

[*Fiona Mactaggart*]

and thought that women in such circumstances should be blamed. All Members here will know that their constituents feel harassed, scared and pinned up as targets as a result of how things have been done. It is not acceptable in a civilised society to treat mothers in that manner, and it is mothers who have been treated badly.

Catherine McKinnell: I agree that the majority of my constituents who have been in touch are single mothers, but single fathers have also been affected. One constituent who came to me looks after two children and works 16 hours a week, and he received no money for six weeks. Ultimately, it is the children in those households who suffer. The Government must ensure that this does not happen again.

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One consequence for a number of children is that they have lost their entitlement to free school meals, so they have suffered doubly as a result of what has happened to them.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The right hon. Lady is being extremely generous in giving way, and we are all grateful to her. I had a case in which a single mother was accused of living with a former tenant who had moved out in 2014. Does the right hon. Lady not agree that although issues must be investigated, to do so on the basis of allegation, without evidence, and to stop payment, is not really a satisfactory way for Concentrix or anyone else to operate?

Fiona Mactaggart: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I will try to make some progress, so that he can see what I want to say about that kind of issue. Decisions were certainly made on the basis of inadequate evidence, in a way that I believe was actually illegal under the Tax Credits Act 2002, and should not have been permitted.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Fiona Mactaggart: I am trying to make progress, but I will give way once more.

Ms Eagle: My right hon. Friend is being extraordinarily generous. I have had many cases in which precisely that has happened. Single mothers in Wallasey have been accused of living with a previous tenant in a house that they happened to rent at a particular time—allegations so absurd that they had not even thought of them. Their benefits have often been stopped for weeks and weeks, and they have had no access at all to funding, which has forced many of them to go to food banks. What kind of Government allows that to happen?

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend is right that we need to focus on the responsibility of the Government, because that is what we Members of Parliament can most influence. The first lesson for the Government is that payment-by-results contracts should be avoided. Concentrix staff were under pressure to perform—we

are told that they were expected to open 40 to 50 new investigations a day—so they regularly proceeded on totally flimsy evidence.

I spoke to Concentrix about the source of the evidence it received, because I could not really believe that a company would proceed on the basis of such information—“Somebody else once rented this flat”, “The electoral register has this person on it”, “Someone has had their post sent to this address,” and so on. The director of Concentrix told me:

“HMRC provide Concentrix with the claimant cases that they believe qualify for review.”

So the source of the evidence is HMRC. He continued:

“These cases are selected by HMRC based on its own internal system which flags where there may be the potential for fraud or error. There were 1,497,000 cases provided from the Authority based on their initial assessment of risk or error and fraud.

Concentrix subsequently runs a further series of checks to substantiate the potential risk of fraud and error and to refine the list of cases that are then checked. In the latest campaign, Concentrix deselected 80% of the cases originally provided to us by HMRC. This means we contacted 324,000 and the remaining 1,173,000 were not worked by Concentrix.”

According to him, HMRC even pressed Concentrix to investigate cases in which it could not name the alleged co-resident.

We have been blaming Concentrix for using flimsy evidence when I think that the source of that flimsy evidence is actually HMRC. My first question to the Minister is: where is the so-called evidence sourced from? Is it the Post Office, credit agencies or out-of-date electoral registers? Is it true that the Treasury pressed Concentrix to pursue cases with so little data that the alleged co-resident’s name was not even known? When tax credit claimants were written to about the investigation of their case, the alleged co-resident was not named in that letter. Many of my constituents have said, “How can I prove a negative?”. Of course, if they had got through on the telephone, they would have been told the alleged co-resident’s name, but getting through on the telephone was not straightforward, as we all know.

I remind the Minister that section 16 of the Tax Credits Act 2002 gives the power to amend or terminate an award where there are reasonable grounds for believing that an award is wrong or that there is no entitlement. It also gives the power to request information or evidence where there are grounds for believing that the award might be wrong. That law is clear. It was confirmed in an Upper Tribunal judgment by Judge Wikeley that the burden of proof for stopping a tax credit award lies with HMRC, but that was reversed in these cases: the authorities proceeded to close claims without reasonable grounds that they could evidence. They demanded excessive evidence from applicants who sought to disprove allegations that they had claimed the wrong amount for childcare or were living with an unnamed partner.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I raised the important question of Concentrix back in February. One of my vulnerable constituents, a single mother of three, was put on trial and lost her tax credits for six weeks over Christmas, only to be informed that she had no case to answer. I ask the right hon. Lady to join me not only in condemning the practices of Concentrix, which she is doing more than capably, but in calling on the Government to renounce this terrible, abhorrent practice entirely.

Fiona Mactaggart: The point is that if we do not manage to get answers from the Minister, we will end this contract but will be walking into the risk of future contracts making the same kind of mistakes, including targeting single mums in a way most of us find completely unacceptable, and breaching the law that provides the power to end benefits and so on. This situation really is not tolerable, and it is up to us to ensure that it never happens again in any aspect of Government administration.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for raising this important issue. I, too, have constituency cases with which I could regale this Chamber. Does she agree that there is a fundamental danger in a model that has a private organisation, which is accountable to its owners and has a duty to make profits for them, providing a public service, where the accountability must be to the public and the first duty must be to provide the public with a full and proper service?

Fiona Mactaggart: The hon. Gentleman is right. Civil servants are trained to conform with the law. How can Ministers ensure, in this contract or in any future contracts, that there is not a parallel reinterpretation of the law by a private company? When the Minister was informed about the Wikeley judgment, as I hope he was, what did he do to ensure that all future decisions would conform to the law? Civil servants are generally trained in a culture where the law is the guide to how they work; I am concerned that Concentrix staff were not operating within such a culture. There is a real risk of letting out similar contracts in future that do not operate within such a culture.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Does the right hon. Lady agree that the problem is not just with this contract but with all results-based contracts in which there is essentially a commission? Atos was under a similar contract and we all know the terrible damage it did to sick and disabled people. Although it is welcome that we are ending the Concentrix contract in May 2017, the UK Government now need to stop all such contracts and fundamentally review the entire process.

Fiona Mactaggart: The hon. Gentleman is right that we should stop such contracts, but we also need to find out the extent to which there has been a failure of policy underlying the Concentrix contract. I agree that the very nature of the contract—having a private company asking for those details—was inappropriate. So was the payment-by-results aspect, for example, and the fact that when the company was under pressure there was no way of bringing in civil servants to help by answering the telephone and so on. Such problems are inherent in that kind of contract, but some of the difficulties must have been created by the way the Treasury and HMRC operated. They provided the company with totally flimsy evidence and suggested it should be investigated. In effect, they ran a campaign against parents who were doing the terribly difficult job of bringing children up on their own. We should be ashamed of ourselves for targeting that group of people, who are resilient but in some ways vulnerable. The job of broader society is to help them in their task of bringing up the next generation.

Many claimants received a letter requiring council tax records, a year's worth of bank statements, pay slips, childcare costs, divorce papers and household

bills. Many people, as I would have done, treated such requests from a private company as probably a phishing exercise by a fraudster. Those people discovered within 30 days that their conclusion was an expensive mistake: their tax credits were stopped. All my constituents who had their tax credits stopped eventually had them restored. I stress that it happened eventually. It was often after hours on the telephone and the intervention of my staff. Those hours on mobile phones cost an enormous amount for some of these people, who at the time had no money to speak of apart from the meagre wages they earned from their part-time jobs.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for securing this important debate. My constituent's tax credits were stopped erroneously. She was down to her last £5 and was told to send in documents by recorded delivery. She had to decide whether to feed her children or send the documents. The Government really must rethink their policy and respond to such people, so that we know it will never happen again.

Fiona Mactaggart: The problem is that the Minister and his civil servants cannot imagine what it is like for someone to have to choose between feeding their son or daughter and posting an important letter that will get next month's money in. They cannot imagine a parent having so little money that that is the choice they face. When people's tax credits were stopped, they were eventually restored. Although they can get additional bank charges and so on paid back—I have managed that on behalf of constituents—they often cannot redeem their credit history, which makes the rest of their life more expensive, so there are serious long-term consequences.

Kate Green: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government should reconsider the situation wherein, in the face of error by Concentrix, my constituents were asked to apply for a mandatory reconsideration of the decision? That is disgraceful. The fault was not theirs.

Fiona Mactaggart: Indeed, and if we look at the figures for mandatory reconsideration we can see that it is overwhelmingly decided that our constituents were in the right and the decision makers in the wrong.

It is striking that the process was also expensive for those who complied. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) pointed out, sending precious documents by registered post costs money, as do printing inks. People also have to pay fees to have documents reissued. Yet in every case HMRC had initially decided that the application was justified. We are not talking about initial applications for tax credits; we are speaking on behalf of people who are trying to continue to receive them. The burden of proof has to be on HMRC.

Catherine McKinnell: My right hon. Friend is making a vital point. Several of my constituents were asked by HMRC to prove a negative—something that was not, in fact, the case—and had no way of doing so. Some of the people they were accused of living with were not alive.

Fiona Mactaggart: Indeed. There is an important principle in the UK's administrative law that public authorities act on the basis of evidence and law, and that if they dispute someone's claim, they should have a

[*Fiona Mactaggart*]

good reason. The HMRC charter says that people have a right to be treated as honest. Well, the lone parents who were targeted did not feel that they had that right. Nearly a third of claimants applied for a mandatory reassessment, and they were overwhelmingly successful. Will the Minister guarantee that in future the Government will put acting legally before getting money out of citizens who do not have any? That is the question at the heart of this debate: illegal action has screwed money—excuse my language—out of citizens and damaged their ability to do their main job, which is to look after their families.

HMRC implies that the reason for dropping the contract is a sudden decline in the level of customer service, in particular the backlog of 200,000 incomplete cases and the terrible performance of Concentrix's telephone service. Concentrix responded by saying that the case numbers were far above predicted rates. In August this year, they were nearly five times the forecast rates, which were developed by HMRC. One contributor to the backlog was HMRC's automatically terminating 45,000 cases—guess when? In the week beginning 8 August. Where do mums and dads go in that week? They go on holiday, because it is the only time they can take their children on holiday, because otherwise they are at school. The Government have form when it comes to sending out such letters and starting consultations at the beginning of August. If the Minister can say that one of the things he is going to do is ensure that this nastiness in August will end, I think we would all be pleased to hear it.

Why were the predictions of the number of cases so brutally wrong? Why was the letter sent out on 8 August to terminate all those cases on the grounds that they had not fulfilled their information returns? In management terms, it would be more sensible to spread such a policy across the year, so that when someone does not respond to an information return they get a notice at the time. I do not believe that all the cases were started in August. I do not believe that thousands and thousands of people made their first tax credit application in the week beginning 8 August, yet so many of their cases were terminated in that week, causing extreme chaos in a situation that was already brutally chaotic.

It seems to me that the discovery of a service failure just after I sought this debate and just after the Department was called before the Work and Pensions Committee does not bear looking at. A cursory look at Mumsnet web chats, at the Child Poverty Action Group's advice logs or at all the letters that the Minister and civil servants have received from MPs would have made it clear that the company's performance has been unacceptable for a long time. Will the Minister ensure that any new contracts with private companies will permit a swift end if performance is substandard and ensure that the Government get information about the standards that are achieved in a timely fashion?

The current contract states that if Concentrix delivers less than 97% accuracy, its commission will be reduced, but I have discovered that in this case accuracy does not mean making the right payments to the right people; it means jumping through the hoops devised by HMRC. Let us have a real definition of accuracy, which is that the right payments should go to the right people and

should not go to the wrong people. We all accept that people should not be paid tax credits wrongly, but accuracy must be judged on the real results, not on some process that is extremely burdensome.

I am concerned about the fact that, as my hon. Friends have said, the burden has particularly hit women and mums. What equality impact assessment was done at the start of the contract? We know that David Cameron called such assessments “bureaucratic nonsense”, but it seems to me that this issue is crying out for one, because someone should have thought about the fact that mums would be targeted. Of course, some dads were drawn into the net, and I am not denigrating their experience in any way, but it is not acceptable for Government policy to lay a particular burden on mothers in such circumstances.

Angela Crawley: Does the right hon. Lady agree that the UK Government have prioritised austerity measures? More than 80% of women have been adversely affected by this austerity-driven Government's welfare reforms and cuts.

Fiona Mactaggart: Not only are more women affected than men, but they are affected by more costs than men. Four fifths of the savings that the Government have made through their so-called austerity programme have been contributed by women. One thing for which I was really proud of the previous Labour Government was that they increased the amount of resource that went into women's purses compared with men's wallets. Through measures such as child tax credits, they dealt with maternal poverty pretty effectively. The current Government are doing their jolly best to reverse that progress.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. However, this is not just about mums, important as they are; it is about the impact on their children. My constituent Sinead is a single parent. She went from receiving £122 child tax credit to absolute zero. She is paying off a crisis loan and that is impacting on her relationship and her ability to be a great parent to her five-month-old child. There is also Caroline, whose two children are in nursery. She is thinking of quitting her job because she cannot now pay the nursery fees. This issue is having an impact on children as well as mothers.

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, for most of the victims of this situation, there has also been a significant effect on their self-confidence and on their reputation. Some get these letters at very stressful times in their lives—following a difficult divorce, while they are trying hard to separate themselves from a violent partner or after childbirth. The behaviour of Concentrix just added to their stress.

Christina Rees: My right hon. Friend has been very generous in giving way. She talked about the burden of proof. One woman claimant in my Neath constituency came in to see me because her payments had been stopped, as she had not replied to a letter that she had not received and there were no follow-up letters. Where does the burden of proof lie there?

Fiona Mactaggart: The law is clear that the burden of proof lies with the Government and they need to have a proper reason to believe these things. As we know,

however, many of the reasons why investigations were initiated were not what any court would describe as proper. That is a fundamental problem.

The Government announcement of the termination of the contract sought to reassure

“customers who have had their tax credits stopped that we will prioritise their cases, and make sure that they are processed as quickly as possible.”

That was a nice thought, was it not? However, Concentrix has informed me that, just on mandatory reconsideration cases, which were returned to HMRC on 19 September, nothing at all was done until 3 October. So not only is Concentrix operating on the basis of really flimsy information; it is also telling lies to Parliament and to the Government, because I do not consider that to be prioritising cases and making sure they are processed “as quickly as possible.”

I hope the Minister will answer the specific points that I have raised. This contract has been something that, frankly, we should all be ashamed of. The way that we have treated the mums and dads on low pay who are bringing up the next generation has been shameful. And actually, although I asked for this debate about the performance of Concentrix, the responsibility for this situation fundamentally lies with the Treasury and HMRC. The process is clear. Again, I quote Concentrix:

“Whilst the initial decision to halt an individual’s tax credit claim may, at the end of the process, prove to have been unnecessary”—it did not feel “unnecessary” to the victims—

“the process is set by HMRC. Whether it is Concentrix managing this process or HMRC directly, the same hurdles and challenges are experienced because of the information held by HMRC at the outset.”

It seems to me that this goes to the heart of the Government’s use of information about citizens. The Government have a responsibility to assist citizens in giving them the information they require in order to assess their entitlement to something such as tax credits. The Government did that at the beginning of a tax credit claim, but their process for doing that as a tax credit claim continues is fundamentally flawed, and those flaws were made worse by the way that Concentrix operated.

I come to the conclusion that there are certain tasks that the Government simply should not delegate to a private company or to anyone else, and the collection of taxes and the issuing of tax credits is one of them. I hope that this will be the last experiment in that vein. I want to pay my taxes to the Government; I do not want to pay taxes to some company that I do not understand. Equally, I want to receive tax credits therefrom.

In future, no policy that has a disproportionate impact on women, especially those struggling to bring up a family, should be tolerated by the Government. I hope that the Minister will say that when things like this are contemplated in the future, Ministers will consider which groups in society will be disproportionately affected by their policies, in order to ensure that they do not continue to target women in the way that, frankly, this Government have throughout their existence.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Order. As hon. Members can see, this is a very well subscribed debate. I intend to start the wind-ups shortly after 10.30 am, which means that from the outset I will impose a two-minute limit on all speeches.

10.6 am

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Mr Nuttall, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

Over the last few months, I have heard innumerable distressing accounts from people living in my constituency of Dundee about how the failures of this US multinational contractor are driving families immediately into poverty, driving them to food banks, driving them—in some cases—into losing their homes, and driving individuals from my constituency to make calls saying they feel suicidal because they feel they have nothing left to live for.

Unsurprisingly, this is not the first time that Government outsourcing has failed to meet expectations. In the past, we have seen that results-based contracts do not improve the quality of public services. I am sure that everyone in Westminster Hall today remembers Atos, whose shambolic and cruel tests were designed to strip away benefits from sick and disabled people. Under its contract, Concentrix is paid on a payment-by-results model when tax credit claims are cut; in other words, the more tax credit payments Concentrix puts a stop to, the more commission it pockets.

In July, the Social Security Advisory Committee recommended that

“appropriate safeguards are needed to preserve justice for the claimant.”

So far, and as my constituents’ cases prove, that is clearly not being achieved. To add to that, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is continuing to cut jobs right across the UK, while at the same time privatising and outsourcing contracts. HMRC departments that are already understaffed have been left to pick up the pieces; they have spent months dealing with backlogs of claims and errors.

The contract with Concentrix has not been renewed, which is a step in the right direction. However, this Government need to go further. They should not only put an end to the Concentrix contract immediately but call time on awarding any public contracts on a payment-by-results basis. We all need to remember that those of us who have the privilege to be Members of this House are here to serve the public. In that spirit, we need to ensure that organisations that are allowed to act on our behalf demonstrate a similar commitment to service, dignity and respect, rather than to profit. Payment-by-results contracts should have no place in the delivery of such important services—

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Order. I call Mike Wood.

10.8 am

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Like many colleagues, I have seen a substantial spike in the number of tax credit inquiries following the letters from Concentrix. Our constituents expect action to be taken to ensure that benefits and tax credits are paid to the right people, and not to people who should not qualify for them. They also expect that process to be fair and sensitive. It is clear, however, that that has not been the case with Concentrix. So I am relieved—indeed, delighted—that the contract with Concentrix will not be renewed. However, we need to consider a number of questions, many of which were raised by the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), about whatever contract or system replaces the current Concentrix contract.

[Mike Wood]

The first question is about the letters coming from Concentrix, including the form and style of those letters. In addition to letters that a number of my constituents have shown me, I have seen one of the letters that a member of my family received. Frankly, I would not have assumed that that letter came on behalf of the Government. It was of very poor quality; the letterhead looked as if it had been scanned in or computer-generated; and to all extents and purposes it looked like a scam, and I would have been very reluctant to respond officially to it.

We have spoken about the burden of proof and where it should lie. We also must consider the standard of proof. Concentrix has been treating the standard as beyond the realm of possibilities instead of on the balance of probabilities, and that is entirely inappropriate, particularly given what it calls the evidence. Data from credit searches and the like may be useful intelligence for starting further investigations, but they are not, in themselves, evidence. I am pleased that the contract is not being renewed, and I hope that the Minister will be able to give us some reassurance.

10.10 am

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall.

Since 6 September—just six weeks ago—I have had 11 constituents bring their complaints to me. In one case, Concentrix did not believe a young woman because it saw money from someone with the same surname going into her account. It refused to believe that it was because she handled her mother's bills. Just because she was helping out her ageing mother, that lady had to pawn her late father's jewellery so that she could put food on the table for her family. Another constituent's tax credits stopped after the Concentrix system incorrectly calculated that she had worked under the threshold; it even ignored a letter that she provided from her employer. As of today, she has been without payment for nearly four months.

It is degrading to not be believed and trusted, to be considered to be cheating the system, especially when evidence and sound reason to the contrary are given. When someone is working hard to make ends meet, it is deeply insulting and demoralising to have the floor unjustly ripped out from under them.

Fortunately, the message seems to be getting through, because Concentrix has, indeed, been given the boot, but the Government's new approach, which has ended up with their having to hire hundreds of staff into the Revenue, will end up costing millions—talk about a false economy. That is the problem of a Government who know the cost of everything and the value of nothing; the presumption is of guilt, not innocence; the currency is suspicion, not trust, and those who need and are entitled to help are made to feel like cheats.

Theresa May claims that she wants to build a country that works for everyone, yet her Government consistently undermine some of the basic binds that are supposed to hold our country together. There is no excuse or reason for that. Let us hope that lessons are learned and that, from now on, systems are built to reduce insecurity in people's lives rather than leaving them on the edge of survival.

10.12 am

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on bringing the debate to the House. Like many right hon. and hon. Members, I have been inundated with desperate calls from constituents who have had their tax credits cut. Although blame has been apportioned to Concentrix, the company was being forced to meet targets because the contract involved payment by results. I have seen constituents reduced to tears after being accused of misdemeanours in a very humiliating and degrading way in relation to their applications. On investigation, it was found that they were not at fault at all, so all their anxiety was unfair and totally unwarranted.

Let us be clear that the fault lies with HMRC, which set the targets and placed the policy and operational failure at the door of Concentrix. The failure lies with HMRC because over the years it has been peddling a cost-cutting exercise and closing offices. We have seen that in Northern Ireland. We have seen competent staff forced to centralise in other locations. HMRC has not been doing its job properly. It has been targeting the wrong individuals—the poor and the vulnerable. Will the Minister specify what will happen to the contract? Will it be outsourced again? Frankly, I believe that HMRC needs to row back and have a much more friendly, sympathetic and humanitarian attitude towards claimants, particularly those who have been reliant, in a very unnecessary way, on food banks.

10.14 am

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. Right hon. and hon. Members have already highlighted numerous ways in which our constituents have been badly affected and I want to highlight just one more. Constituents are suffering ongoing problems, even when mistakes by Concentrix are acknowledged and credits are reinstated. Having built up big debts to friends or family members, or even to childcare providers who agreed to keep working on the expectation that debts would be settled on the resolution of the tax credit problems, my constituents are now being told that they will get their back payments over the course of a year. That does not really help, because the major debts are due now. Will the Minister explain why HMRC cannot make the back payments now? It is not fair on our constituents and it is not fair on those who have had to help out when the Government have failed in their duty.

I agree that this was a rotten contract from the outset, with a commercial organisation making decisions about a claimant's past eligibility and getting payment by results. The contract even specified how many cases—2 million, I think—were expected to be modified, even before a single piece of evidence was considered.

Back in July 2016, the independent Social Security Advisory Committee said that the payment model would: “potentially create a conflict of interest”.

The only bit I can quibble with there is “potentially”. It was a clear conflict of interest. It becomes hard to square information from our constituents with what we are told about the performance of the contract. I read somewhere that only 120 cases had breached the contract

terms, yet I think we have had almost 120 examples of awful cases in the debate so far, so either the systems for monitoring contract performance are not up to scratch, perhaps because they rely too much on the company the performance of which is being measured, or they are monitoring the wrong things entirely.

I hope that the Government will explain what more they will do to resolve the mess, because they are not doing enough yet. Once cases are brought back in-house, they should stay there. We should not repeat the same mistakes again.

10.16 am

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on the excellent case she has put. Like many right hon. and hon. Members, in the past few months my office has dealt with dozens of cases every week of people who have found themselves in increasingly desperate situations as a result of Concentrix investigations, and I would like to make it clear that I welcome the decision not to renew the contract. I hope that it leads to the work coming back in-house.

Some of my constituents are victims of domestic abuse and have gone to refuges and then been rehoused. Although their support workers have told Concentrix of the change in their circumstances, it has not been logged. One constituent's brother was accused of being her partner, and another constituent was accused of co-habiting with a former tenant. Many have been drawn to the discretionary assistance fund administered by the Welsh Government and to food banks. Yes, in the medium term we need scrutiny of how that has happened, of why it has not been monitored and of the payment by results model.

HMRC staff have been drafted in to help, but there are clearly not enough of them. All credit to them, but they have suffered huge cuts over the past few years. It clearly will not take 21 days to deal with some of the cases—I have heard that it will take up to six weeks. We need to clear the backlog now, because there is much distress out there and people have suffered. We need the Minister to give a clear steer about which cases are the priority. Yes, we urgently need to learn the lessons, but we also crucially need help now for those affected, with more staff to turn cases around.

10.18 am

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): We must acknowledge the number of people who have been hurt as a result of this debacle, but it is important to point out two things. First, the history of tax credits and the way in which people have been dealt with extends well beyond the current contract. During much of my political career, before the work was ever contracted out, I have had people come to me about their difficulties with tax credits and with HMRC. So it is not a new problem; this is a complicated benefit and the issues go back some time. The contract was made by HMRC. The referrals were given to Concentrix by HMRC. The guidance was given by HMRC and the company acted on it. If there is any fault to be attributed, it has to be shared with the people who issued the contract in the first place.

The second thing is that HMRC has treated the workers in Concentrix diabolically. They found out in the news that they were losing the contract and therefore their jobs. That is no way to treat workers, many of whom were dedicated and simply acting on the information and the guidelines given to them. They were trying to do their job to the best of their ability.

Whether this matter is contracted out or kept in-house—I have no difficulty with contracting out some services—problems will persist so long as the attitude, the wrong information and guidance and the bureaucratic rules of HMRC continue.

10.20 am

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on securing this debate. Like many other hon. Members, I have been appalled by the nature of the complaints that my office has received from worried constituents faced with extreme hardship following action by Concentrix to suspend their tax credits. I accept that some providers may want to conduct checks to ensure that money is being paid to the right people, but it is wholly unacceptable to stop money being paid to parents without evidence while checks are carried out. The action taken by Concentrix has caused extreme hardship for many of my constituents and people across the country. They use the money to provide food and essentials for their children and families, and to be without for a long period of time is unacceptable and has resulted in many families resorting to food banks and in some cases going without. That is utterly shameful.

Of the many cases brought to my office, one relates to a constituent who had her tax credits stopped because Concentrix believed she had an undeclared partner. Following much stress and my constituent providing extensive evidence that she did not have an undeclared partner, it transpired that the basis of the action by Concentrix was an out-of-date record of a previous tenant at her address.

While Concentrix has to bear its share of the responsibility for the hardship faced by many people in recent months, HMRC also has to bear its share for allowing things to get into this mess. Does the Minister accept responsibility for HMRC's lack of scrutiny? What lessons will be learned before anyone else is engaged to do the work? I am particularly interested to know whether HMRC is considering retaining this work in-house rather than using the targeted payment-by-results model that has caused so much hardship and stress to so many in my constituency and across the country.

10.22 am

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): We have all had cases of people who have been vindicated after their lives have been turned upside down. They may have had their payments reinstated and even sometimes their bank charges refunded, but what about the high-interest payments they have had to make to payday lenders? What about the jobs they have lost because their childcare provider cancelled due to lack of payment? Where is the justice in those situations?

[*Owen Thompson*]

In one case, a working mother of four in Midlothian lost her job because her childcare provider cancelled on her. She put out an appeal on social media to ask complete strangers to send her five-year-old son birthday cards so that he could have something of a birthday. She was so ashamed at not being able to provide her children with anything other than a basic ration pack from a food bank. How can that situation be justifiable? Members from all parties in the House have highlighted similar cases across the country featuring single parents. Those situations are not coincidental and they were preventable. The strategy has been utterly shameful.

One thing that is clear from the Concentrix experience is that it achieved nothing and created a mess that has damaged people financially and emotionally—a mess that has been and continues to be expensive to correct. Additional resource is being appointed within HMRC and the civil service and the suggested cost of the Concentrix contract is reputed to have been £75 million so it seems fair to end my contribution by asking how much of that money will be clawed back to directly compensate those affected most.

10.23 am

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): As constituency MPs, we are all aware of the hardship and suffering caused by Concentrix. By definition, people receiving tax credits are on low incomes and are not able to cope with a sudden drop in that income. Concentrix’s “Shoot first, ask questions later” approach, in which recipients have been accused of living with people they have never heard of, it takes more than an hour for their calls to be answered, and it is suggested that they get by on payday loans while Concentrix sorts out its mistakes, caused anxiety, distress and extreme hardship. In many cases, we have had to make personal referrals to food banks, so that people can feed themselves and their children. We all have examples from our postbags and inboxes of shocking cases in which families have been left struggling to make ends meet.

By way of example, I want to put on record some of the highlights—perhaps I should say lowlights—of the many cases I have had to deal with in recent weeks, and show the pattern of incompetence that has been exposed. More than three quarters of the cases I have dealt with have been of people accused of living with the previous tenant at their address. In one case, a constituent found after asking their neighbours that the person they were suspected of living with was in prison.

It is worth pointing out that with a handful of exceptions, all the cases that have come to my attention have been raised by women, and two thirds are from single mothers. In nearly two thirds of the cases, constituents found their tax credits stopped without any prior warning. When they contacted Concentrix, they were told that letters had been sent to them weeks previously but not replied to, hence the stopped payments. The occasional letter going astray in the post is one thing, but Concentrix is apparently sending letters into some black hole, never to be seen again. Advice given over the phone has been inconsistent and often contradictory. My constituents have reported that, as have my staff.

10.26 am

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I share Members’ frustrations about dealing with Concentrix in the constituency cases that come to us, but our frustration is nothing compared to the distress and desperation caused to many constituents. Let us be clear: as the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) indicated, we need to look closer to Parliament when asking some of our questions. The fact is that the contract was conceived by HMRC in a spirit of suspicion and hostility towards its customers. It said that it wanted to handle the high-risk renewal cases in this way, and it intimidated to Concentrix that it was disappointed that Concentrix had screened out 80% of the cases referred to it as likely to be high risk and did not pursue them further. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why HMRC is taking the contract back. It perhaps feels that it could make a hotter and heavier pursuit than even Concentrix could.

The right hon. Lady also touched on the significant spike in August, when even more calls to Concentrix were waiting and even more call queues could not be dealt with. That came from HMRC’s direct move to remove 45,000 people from tax credits. Some of those people were supposedly under investigation by Concentrix as high-risk renewals, but HMRC moved against them because of the annual declaration process. We have two separate processes going on, and the one thing in common is the victim: the claimant. Did Ministers know that HMRC was striking off people when they were going through the high-risk renewal claim?

The other issue I want the Minister to address is the law. The right hon. Lady raised the question of the burden of proof, but Concentrix insists that HMRC is saying that the 30-day cut-off on non-compliance is absolute and in statute. Do we need to change that law?

10.28 am

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): For too long, Concentrix left families in vulnerable situations, wondering where their next meal would come from or how they would make their next rent payment. I have heard from multiple Tooting residents—all of whom are single mothers—of the stress that Concentrix caused them by stopping their tax credits via false claims that they had a partner living in their property. My constituents found those claims so difficult to disprove, and subsequently struggled to make ends meet for many months on end.

One constituent came to me in early August. She is a single mother of a 14-year-old girl, and her tax credits were stopped by Concentrix due to her supposedly having a partner living with her—a partner who did not exist. She was left with £4 in her bank account to last her 16 days. As if that was not bad enough, two days later she was informed by the council that her housing benefit was being stopped due to her supposed change of circumstances. That left her unable to afford her rent and reliant on food banks. As if that was not bad enough, HMRC then demanded almost £4,000 in back payments for this change of situation. Some may say she was lucky: it took only one month for HMRC to overturn the termination of her tax credit and housing benefit. As we have heard, many others across the UK have had to spend many more months waiting for that result. However, I would say she is not lucky. No mother,

father or carer should ever be left with £4 in their bank account and no knowledge of when they may be able to put food on the table again.

People deserve not only answers from Concentrix, but to know from our Government that such situations will not happen again. We have a duty; we need to reassure those who put their trust in us that we will not allow this to happen to any other family. We have a duty to protect our citizens, and that protection comes in many forms. With respect to Concentrix, we have failed in our commitment. Will the Minister today reassure us that this will not happen again?

10.30 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Like other Members in the Chamber, I am all too aware of the significant number of people caused great hardship by the withdrawal of tax credit payments. Many of them are in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran. Some of my constituents have had payments stopped because the claimant has been incorrectly accused of sharing a home with a non-existent partner. Tax credits have been suddenly and unexpectedly withdrawn, with the claimant even having difficulty in securing any kind of explanation, however misguided and mistaken that explanation turns out to be. Claimants are on the phone for hours over weeks and weeks, and are caught up in a grotesque bureaucratic nightmare. The system seems to mock their hardship, leaving them to rely on food banks.

There can be no doubt that the system is a mess. Concentrix's indiscriminate and groundless accusations of fraud directed at low and middle-income families is completely unacceptable, and cause huge emotional distress, financial hardship and utter despair. Now we know from reports that Concentrix's misconduct could be in breach of the Data Protection Act, since claimants' details have been known to have been sent to the wrong address. The allegations are extremely serious and must be fully investigated by both Concentrix and HMRC. Outstanding cases must be dealt with urgently. Only then will the hardship caused end. I urge the Minister to indicate how and by when that will happen. Concentrix's contract expires in May 2017, but the suffering continues right now. Urgent action is needed to protect claimants from this appalling situation.

10.31 am

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I, too, have been inundated with calls from desperate constituents who have had their tax credits stopped owing to accusations that they are living with another person. So far, every single one of the cases investigated has been proved false. The undue stress and pressure placed on parents is beyond belief, and the Government must take responsibility. I thank the few Government Members who have turned up to listen to the debate.

One woman had food in her freezer to feed her child, but the money on her electricity meter ran out, and the food defrosted and had to be thrown away. Another said that she was not bothered about feeding herself, but it broke her heart to see her children go hungry. People have been seriously let down by the failings of Concentrix, a company appointed by and acting under

the watch of this Government. All the people affected deserve answers as to how and why such a situation was allowed to happen.

We are starting to see a slow trickle of reinstated payments, but in some cases the back pay has not been paid, the bills that were building up are turning into court summonses, and debts are growing. Unfortunately, people are having to turn to payday loans and loan sharks. The dilemma my constituents face is whether they ask for another mandatory reconsideration to investigate the missing back pay and risk having their payments stopped again. I simply cannot express my feelings of anger towards those responsible for this monumental failure and for the damage done to thousands of needy families across the country. It is not good enough simply to say that the contract will not be renewed. We need an urgent investigation into how this happened in the first place. Furthermore, we need to know that all the cases still open will be resolved urgently, and we need complete assurance that this will never be allowed to happen again.

10.33 am

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Julie Molyneux, a constituent of mine, was accused of working for only 15 hours, when she had worked 16.5. She phoned HMRC and was told to phone Concentrix. She phoned Concentrix and was told to phone HMRC. She went round and round in circles. Her tax credits were stopped for eight weeks and she was forced to live on £63 a week, with two children to look after, one of whom is disabled. It was acknowledged that a mistake was made, but it has still not been put right.

Hayley Jones was accused of living with a previous tenant. She tried to get through to the system for a week without any luck. She finally got through, but was put on hold for an hour and a half. When she told them she had sent in all the relevant documents, they denied receiving them. She was left without money for eight weeks. She had no money at all and four children to support.

Paula Bee was informed—this was new to her—that she was living with an ex-partner, when he was living somewhere else. She had to try to track him down so she could supply a copy of his rent agreement. What did not get paid as a result of that? People have been unable to get through to the telephone helpline. When constituents do get through, they are placed on hold for more than an hour, in the worst case. Operators are rude to them when they are trying to resolve problems. Single women are told that they are living with other people, and it always turns out to be previous tenants. Concentrix says it has not received forms. It says people should ring HMRC, and HMRC says they should ring Concentrix. Nobody responds to letters for a very long time.

This situation has to stop. It has to be put right. My constituents who have been affected must have it put right now.

10.35 am

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on securing this debate, and I congratulate all the Members here who have

[*Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh*]

demonstrated real compassion and understanding on this matter. The Minister might not have been on the other side of phone calls from constituents, but it is worth making the point that people who phone our constituency offices are at desperation point—at their wits' end. Indeed, our constituency office staff are finding it extremely difficult to deal with people in dire need of help. I hope the Minister will take that into account when considering my further points.

We have all faced a number of these cases. On 14 September, I asked the Financial Secretary to the Treasury what the turnaround time would be for dealing with cases, and I was told four working days. On 29 September, in a phone conversation with HMRC, we were told it would be two to three weeks before cases were looked at. On 4 October, I was told the four-day period had been dispensed with. That is not good enough. I have a constituent who set up a food bank, but who is now a customer of that food bank. I know of a mother who cannot afford childcare and had to resign from her job, a mother who cannot afford lunch money to send her children to school with, and a mother who had to sign herself out of hospital after a suspected heart attack to deal with the issue. These are really serious matters, so I have a list of suggestions that the Minister might take on board so that these people can achieve justice immediately.

HMRC should provide a free phone line for people to use. It is ridiculous that people spend between 8p and 10p a minute to speak to HMRC and hold on for hours. On hardship payments, I understand that HMRC will call people, but they get two call-back chances. If HMRC does not get someone in those two phone calls, they will not get the hardship payment. When people have a small sum of money, and have to decide whether to feed the children, or top up or reconnect the phone, what do people do? They do what we expect them to do: they feed their children. Such situations must come to an end.

The call-back service that is provided should be there for people to use. People could leave a voicemail or press a button in order to get a guaranteed call back from HMRC. Our constituents should not be chasing HMRC for money that is rightfully theirs. It is not their error.

On the posting of documents, HMRC should distribute postage-paid envelopes to our constituents, so that they bear no cost when sending documents back to HMRC to have cases processed. On the contract that has been cancelled, of course that is welcome, but I want to look further into that contract. Did it reach its natural conclusion? Did the Government simply decide not to renew? What compensation is available to our constituents for the situation in which they find themselves as a result of a contract that has not served the Government well?

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): My understanding is that the maximum compensation is £100, which is a paltry amount when people have been plunged into debt and uncertainty.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I agree. On the £100 payment, there is a lot of haziness around it. Some of my constituents have not taken up the payment because there is no

clarity around whether it is repayable or not. Again, that has to be dealt with. As I have said, if someone does not receive the phone call offering them £100, they do not get it, so if someone does not have a phone because they choose food over contact with HMRC, they do not get anything.

We do not have much time and I want to give time to the Minister to answer these important questions. Apart from the suggestions that I made on what HMRC should immediately do, these are my key questions for the Treasury: what is the latest guidance given by HMRC bosses to call handlers on how long a person can wait for the tax credit payments to be restarted? How many cases have been resolved, and how many are outstanding? On the impact on victims, what estimate have the Government made of the average cost to each customer in lost payments? What assistance is there to help claimants meet the costs of requesting a mandatory reconsideration?

What are the criteria for offering emergency interim payments? Are all victims eligible, or only those whose cases have been highlighted through the MP hotline? Why has the existence of those payments not been publicised? It is not in the wider public domain. How many victims satisfy the criteria, and how many have been offered the payment?

Why did the contract between HMRC and Concentrix incentivise the company to cancel tax credit payments? What a disgrace! Of course that is a conflict of interest, as suggested by the independent Social Security Advisory Committee in July. Why was the contract so badly managed? Will the work be brought back in-house following the end of the contract, or will a new external contractor be sought? Please will a Minister do the right thing by our constituents and give them the money that they need, and rightfully deserve?

10.40 am

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Nuttall. I start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) for enabling Members to consider this matter, as well as hon. Members from across the House who have attended and spoken. I counted 24 interventions or speeches, and there was a theme in the words that were used time and again—words such as “shameful”, “shocking”, “distressing”, “desperation”, “anger” and “despair”.

Like other hon. Members, I have received many letters and phone calls from constituents who, to their shock and bewilderment, have found their child tax credits stopped, with little explanation and with few avenues of recourse. Under the Government's contract with Concentrix, thousands of innocent mothers—the vast majority are working mothers—were in effect branded fraudsters and cheats. At the drop of a hat, they saw money that they desperately needed for their children taken away, notwithstanding their entitlement to it. Yet the company is not solely at fault—the Government are, too. Despite the protestations that the Minister will no doubt make today, the Government gave Concentrix a contract that was a licence to harass and was open to abuse. It does not take Sherlock Holmes to work out that if a company is paid commission to find tax credit error and fraud, it will start with the easy targets so as to turn an even easier profit.

What is more shocking is that the victims, which is what they are, did not have the means of fighting back. They were disfranchised. Hon. Members have spoken of their need to intervene personally in many cases to get movement. The whole process was deeply flawed and, as has been suggested, operated on the presumption that people were guilty until proven innocent—a concept completely alien and contradictory to our values, and our sense of justice, fairness and decency.

Under the system, the occupant of a household was sent a letter by Concentrix accusing them of not meeting the standards for child tax credit. The letter demanded that they get in touch to present evidence of their living arrangements. Having received the letter, some constituents attempted to call Concentrix, only to find the number busy, a point that has also been made. When Concentrix did not hear back from the person, who may not have received the letter in the first place, another letter was summarily sent, stopping tax credit payments. As far as I am aware, at no point was a Government Minister consulted or asked to sign off the process—can the Minister tell us otherwise? Instead, a private foreign company, whose sole interest was profit, was allowed to withdraw tax credits on behalf of the British Government. That is what makes the contract so unique: the vast power Concentrix had to act on putative information.

Jon Thompson, the chief executive of HMRC, confirms that in this novel approach, it was the first time such checks had been carried out by an external provider. Even Atos did not have the power to withdraw benefits. Concentrix had *carte blanche*. The Government were in fact planning to renew the contract for a job well done. They did not care to ask why Concentrix had so many savings on its books, or to listen to the complaints of many of our constituents. It was the Labour party that originally called the National Audit Office to investigate and the Labour party that has pushed for oversight and demanded action for the thousands of families who have still not received repayments from Concentrix.

We see the austerity cuts hitting women hardest, and the Government changing women's pension age. Now we see the Government contracting private companies to take away money from single working mothers. We cannot help but ask what this Government have against women. What do they have against hard-working single mothers? It comes down to a lack of care. In essence, the Government are happy to outsource important processes affecting people's lives to private corporations to make a profit. So be it, but not without the proper checks and balances being in place.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): The hon. Gentleman has focused on the failures of Concentrix. Although many of us will accept some of his points, does he also accept that the main focus of the difficulties is HMRC and how it managed the contract?

Peter Dowd: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point that needs to be looked at.

When all is said and done, this is a question of the performance management of a Government contractor, and a clear lack of oversight by the Government. On behalf of the many people affected by the debacle, I would like to performance-manage the Minister by asking the following questions. First, who was overseeing Concentrix's contract? Secondly, how was the oversight

conducted? Thirdly, how often was it reviewed? Fourthly, what were the penalties for mismanagement of the contract? Fifthly, when did the penalties kick in? Sixthly, what penalties are left on the contract? Seventhly, will Concentrix be paying back any money to the Government? Eighthly, how many people have been affected? Ninthly, what actions have the Government taken proactively to compensate those people? Tenthly, have the Government sent out formal apologies to those affected? And finally, when will the last person who has had their child tax credit withdrawn receive repayment? Those key questions need to be answered and acted on. We do not want any shilly-shallying from the Government.

Melanie Onn: Would my hon. Friend add two further questions: whether Concentrix has applied for any more contracts in the last month, and whether it will be prevented from bidding for any future contracts with this Government?

Peter Dowd: Those are important questions, which I am sure the Minister will pick up on in his response. I fear that unless the Government get to grips with their commissioning processes, we will be back here in six or 12 months' time, looking at another company that has abused a Government contract for profit and, in so doing, deprived some of the most vulnerable people of much-needed financial support. The situation needs to be sorted; otherwise, I fear the fiasco will be repeated and the Minister will be doing an encore in due course.

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Order. I ask the Minister to leave, if possible, a couple of minutes at the end of his speech so that the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) has time to wind up the debate.

10.47 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Nuttall, in my first debate in Westminster Hall. I give the Financial Secretary's apologies: she is on a Bill Committee and cannot be in two places at once. I have listened carefully to what has been a very interesting debate and will do my best to answer all the questions.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on securing the debate and take this opportunity to thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their efforts, not just in the debate but during the past few weeks, supporting constituents and bringing to our attention the difficulties that constituents are experiencing with their claims for tax credits. I reassure hon. Members that we are making every effort possible to resolve those difficulties as soon as possible and to make sure that the support provided through tax credits reaches those who really need it. There is no doubt that last month we were falling short in the level of customer service that we were providing to claimants, and I am very sorry about that.

In our efforts to tackle error and fraud in tax credits, we had engaged Concentrix to investigate claims and it did help us to drive down error and fraud to almost the lowest level since tax credits began. However, faced with a high volume of calls, Concentrix struggled to provide the kind of service that people had a right to expect—indeed, the kind of service stipulated in its contract.

[*Simon Kirby*]

That led to a stressful time for a lot of people, including some of the most vulnerable, as they struggled to reach Concentrix to resolve any queries about their entitlement to tax credits. Let me be clear that that was not good enough, which is why we stepped in to get things back on track.

Ms Angela Eagle: Where did the information, particularly on cohabitation, come from? So many of our constituents have been accused of cohabiting with the previous tenant of their usually rented property. Were the data HMRC-matched or did Concentrix do it all on its own?

Simon Kirby: I am going to reach that point later. Very briefly, HMRC provided third-party data to Concentrix, which then chose who to pursue from those data.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): We have heard today of constituents who have lost employment, college courses and access to childcare, and have been forced to go to food banks and take out payday loans, which inflicts stress and trauma not only on the parents but on the children. Having admitted that it was the responsibility of HMRC as well as Concentrix, will the Minister commit to expanding the compensation available to reflect the hardship and trauma inflicted on those people?

Simon Kirby: I will make some progress, and if the hon. Gentleman listens carefully, he may well hear some things that are helpful to that question. Before I turn to those points, let me outline what we are doing.

First, as my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary announced in the House last month, HMRC is not passing any new cases to Concentrix. We have been very clear that the contract will not be renewed beyond the end date of May 2017. Secondly, staff at HMRC are, as we speak, making every effort to resolve all open cases to ensure people get the payments they need and deserve. HMRC took back 181,000 outstanding cases from Concentrix and it has already dealt with more than 149,000—82%—of them. I would like to reassure everyone whose case remains open that we are making every effort to complete those cases within the next couple of weeks. It really is a priority.

Angela Crawley: Will the Minister give way?

Simon Kirby: I will not give way.

Thirdly, anyone who does not agree with Concentrix's decision has a right to ask for a review called a mandatory reconsideration. HMRC has allocated its own staff to carry out such reviews within 21 days of the request. It is a large organisation with flexible staffing, so it is able to deal with peaks and troughs of demand. The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) mentioned the issue of extra costs, but I am confident that there will not be any.

Patricia Gibson: Given the extra work being created for HMRC to clean up the mess created by Concentrix, does the Minister have any view on the fact that one third of HMRC staff will be cut by 2021?

Simon Kirby: As I said, HMRC has a large number of staff, who are flexible and deal with the peaks and troughs of demand. If HMRC, after receiving the relevant information and reviewing the case, finds that the claimant is entitled to tax credits, they can expect to see that money in their bank accounts within four working days.

Lastly, we are working with hon. Members to help their constituents who are struggling to resolve any issues. We have extended opening hours and have put extra advisers on the tax credits hotline for MPs, which is now handling about 200 calls a day. I am pleased to inform hon. Members that my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary, following last month's drop-in session, will be holding another session tomorrow in the House of Commons Library.

Angela Crawley: The news that HMRC will not renew the contract with Concentrix is welcome. Those responsible for these reprehensible practices should be held to account. When these services are brought back in-house, we must ensure that the blanket, baseless accusations and sanctions that have been applied will stop and that compensation will be made for the Government's mistake. Will the Minister take the opportunity to apologise to my constituents and the women and men up and down the country who have experienced the Government's failure?

Simon Kirby: None of us in this Chamber wants anyone not to receive money that they are entitled to, especially if they are parents with young, vulnerable children. It is up to all of us to help our constituents and ensure we once again provide a fast and efficient service to everyone.

Let me turn to some of the issues that were raised. I do not have a lot of time, so hon. Members will have to bear with me. I acknowledge the points made by many hon. Members about the contract. HMRC will be undertaking a lessons-learned exercise, and it will share those lessons across the Government. It is clear that they will help to inform other contracts in the future.

Mark Durkan: In that lessons-learned exercise, will HMRC look at the question of the so-called high-risk renewal scheme, which is at the very heart of all the troubles that our constituents have suffered?

Simon Kirby: There will be a number of reviews, and all lessons learned will be looked at in an open-minded manner. We will consider all elements of what has gone wrong and try to ensure that the mistakes, which have clearly happened, are not repeated.

I have talked about how the data are given to Concentrix. It is up to Concentrix to choose who to contact from those data. The £100 hardship payment is important. It is available to everyone, not just through the MPs' hotline. It is not necessarily a one-off payment; future payments can be made if there is a delay in the decision. I encourage people in hardship to apply for it, because it is there to help people while we sort out this mess.

The hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) talked about the 30-day cut-off period. I can tell him that most customers have been able to provide the information required within 30 days. There was a question about money being clawed back from Concentrix. Concentrix is not paid for wrong decisions, and payment is reduced

where it fails to meet performance standards. That is still happening. At the end of the day, it is paid to do a job, and if it does not do the job, it is not paid for it. I have noted the comments about letters being lost.

In conclusion, I thank everyone here. This has been a short debate, and it would have been nice to have more time for contributions. I am here to listen, and I have listened very carefully.

10.58 am

Fiona Mactaggart: I thank the Minister for that response. This is probably my first experience of leading a debate in which everybody apart from the Minister has agreed with one another. I thank all hon. Members who contributed.

I am particularly concerned about the Minister's account—I know he is not the Minister responsible, but I hope he will pass this on to the Financial Secretary—which implies that this is just a recent phenomenon, because it is not. It has existed for a long time; it is not just a recent failure. I also do not accept that Concentrix should be wholly blamed. I note that the Minister said it is up to Concentrix to choose which information to use. I would like him to write to me after this debate to tell me whether it is true that HMRC pressed Concentrix to use data on cases in which it was not even able to name the claimed partner. That shows that HMRC is responsible for this oppression of women. The Minister did not note in his response the concern expressed by many Members that this is a gendered policy—

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Earlier Cancer Diagnosis: NHS Finances

11 am

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered earlier cancer diagnosis and NHS finances.

I thank Mr Speaker for allowing this debate and you, Mr Nuttall, for presiding over it. I also take this opportunity to welcome the Minister to his new post. He has been in it a while now, but this might be his first Westminster Hall debate. We look forward to working with him—he comes highly recommended—and I thank him for accepting the invitation, on behalf of the Secretary of State for Health, who was unable to make the appointment, to speak at our Britain Against Cancer conference in December.

Early diagnosis has been a key theme of the all-party group on cancer for some time. We call it the “magic key” to cancer. If we can drive forward on our rates of early diagnosis, the stage at which we first detect cancer, we can improve survival rates significantly.

I should perhaps briefly explain to the Minister that there is a little history to this involvement. Back in 2009, the all-party group published the report of an inquiry it had conducted into cancer inequalities. We found that patients in the NHS at the one-year point since their cancers were detected stand as much chance of surviving to the five-year point as they would in any other healthcare system. Where we let ourselves down, however, is getting patients to the one-year point. That suggests that the NHS is as good as any other healthcare provider in treating cancers once detected, but poor at detecting them in the first place.

In this country, our survival rates have been ticking up, with the rate of improvement broadly similar to that in other countries, but our survival rates still stand well below those of many other countries. For example, in this country the overall one-year survival rate is about 70% or 71%, but in Sweden it is 82%. That might not sound like a big difference, but overlay that differential with regard to the population of the UK as a whole and it tells us that tens of thousands of lives a year are needlessly being lost because we are diagnosing too late.

We need to focus on early diagnosis, and the Minister is in a unique position to be able to make a real difference to a large number of people if we can get it right. Yes, cancer survival rates are improving, but they are improving around the world and we are still well behind international averages. We welcome the improvements, but we have still not yet seen that kick-up that will allow us to catch up with those international averages.

Our 2009 report came up with, in essence, one recommendation. Reports can always come up with myriad recommendations, but we believe in short reports and, having consulted with the wider cancer community, the good and the great of the cancer world, the charities, patients and so forth, we came up with one recommendation: to ensure that we focus the local NHS, the clinical commissioning groups—primary care trusts then, CCGs now—on their one-year survival rates.

[Mr John Baron]

The logic is simple: the earlier we diagnose, the better our one-year survival rates. They are therefore a good measure of how successful we are in diagnosing early. Late diagnosis makes for poor one-year figures, so we get the CCGs to focus on the one-year figure and, if there is a line of accountability there, they will be encouraged to focus on how to improve earlier diagnosis and introduce initiatives promoting earlier diagnosis.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Has my hon. Friend seen the results of the Barts Health NHS Foundation Trust's 2013 study at Whipps Cross hospital? It showed the effectiveness of complementary therapies in improving symptom control following diagnosis. The three-year study revealed that 90% of people noticed that side-effects of chemotherapy and radiotherapy decreased following such treatment, and patients said that their pain, sleep and emotional health improved. Should we make greater use of those supportive therapies as part of the scheme of things?

Mr Baron: We certainly have to be inclusive with regards to how we look at treatment generally. As my hon. Friend knows, the all-party group and, indeed, the wider cancer community are looking at such things. He comes to our meetings, and we listen carefully. Questions certainly need to be answered on that front, so he is pushing at an open door. We have an open mind, and we are listening.

Together with the wider cancer community—at the end of the day it has been a team approach—we have been successful in ensuring that CCGs are now held accountable. The one-year survival rates have been included in the delivery dashboard of the assurance framework, and that is very good news. Figures have only been published for the past one or two years, so we are still seeing what is happening with regards to improvements and how CCGs are performing, but at least we have made a start and there is an element of accountability.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I must of course declare that I am a dentist and so have considerable professional interest in the subject, although it is rare that I am in the surgery. I am also chair of the all-party group on skin, and one might think that diagnosing skin cancer is fairly obvious, in particular given that skin problems are a major concern of GPs. However, one of the things we soon discovered was that undergraduate tuition time on skin conditions is extremely short—often a week or two weeks, which are frequently used by undergraduates, as I understand it, as an opportunity to go away, rather than to attend. If the education of GPs and doctors was better and reinforced by continuing professional development, we might get better results on skin cancer.

Mr Baron: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

We have been successful in getting the one-year figures into the DNA of the NHS, but there is no point having the tools in the toolkit if we do not use them, and one thing we are looking carefully at is the lines of accountability. We acknowledge that we are pushing at an open door—the Government have kindly accepted the need for the one-year figures—but there is still a very long way to

travel. The latest Ofsted-style ratings have maintained the focus on survival rates, and yet those ratings still found that eight out of 10 CCGs must improve. That shows the scale of the challenge and the extent to which we need to raise our game.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): If I could cast the hon. Gentleman's mind back to the previous intervention, the Be Clear on Cancer campaign identified about 700 more patients with lung cancer, which led to about 300 more patients receiving life-saving surgery. That shows that publicity campaigns work. Does he agree that the Government need to encourage the NHS to have more publicity campaigns to identify the issues and save more lives?

Mr Baron: I agree completely. Briefly, the initiatives that could be introduced to promote earlier diagnosis are greater awareness campaigns, better diagnostics at primary care level, better uptake of screening in screening programmes, and better GP awareness—although this is not only about GPs. A whole host of initiatives could be introduced at the primary care level to improve survival rates and awareness generally. So yes, I completely and utterly agree.

Given the limited time available, I will make a little progress on the central point of this debate. We are pushing at an open door, which is fine; we are keeping a watching brief as a cancer community; and, as I have said, the Ofsted-style ratings have shown, among other things, that a big improvement is required. The all-party group on cancer will hold its annual parliamentary reception next summer—the Minister no doubt will be invited to that—at which we will focus on those CCGs that have most improved their one-year survival rates. The Britain Against Cancer conference, which we believe is the largest gathering of the cancer community in this country, will take place at the end of this year and will also focus on that issue.

We are therefore not walking away from the issue of survival rates, but we are saying as part of our watching brief that we wish to bring to the Government's attention the fact that when it comes to cancer treatment, earlier diagnosis can not only help patients—diagnosing cancers earlier makes for better survival rates—but save a lot of money. The later cancer is diagnosed, the more aggressive the treatments and the higher the cost. That cost is quite significant, and the cost savings from earlier diagnosis could be ploughed back into treatment for patients. At a time when the NHS is under financial pressure, we suggest that too little attention is being paid to those potential cost savings. Too little work has been done by the NHS and too few health economists are looking at how reducing costs to such an extent would benefit both the taxpayer and, most importantly, patients.

Given the NHS's lack of focus on that area, we have had to go to outside sources to give us some sort of measure of the potential cost savings. A September 2014 report by Incisive Health and Cancer Research UK showed quite a disparity between the cost of treating patients with early stage, or stage 1, cancer and those with late stage, or stages 3 and 4, cancer. For example, the cost per patient per year of treating colon cancer is £3,300 at stage 1 and £12,500 at stage 4—a near fourfold increase. Treating stage 1 rectal cancer costs £4,400; that goes up to nearly £12,000 if it is treated at a late stage.

Treating ovarian cancer costs just over £5,000 per patient per year at an early stage, but £15,000 at a late stage. That report focused on four cancers: colon, rectal, lung and ovarian. They amount to only around a fifth of all cancers diagnosed, but if such cost savings were replicated across all cancers, we could be talking about savings of hundreds of millions of pounds, and that is before we even consider the number of patients who would benefit from earlier diagnosis, which Incisive Health cites as something like 52,000.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Baron: I ask for a bit of patience. Let me make a little progress, and if there is time, I will take further interventions.

That report also showed variation between the highest and lowest-performing CCGs in the proportion of patients diagnosed early. That is also important. In colorectal cancer the variation was threefold, in lung cancer it was fourfold and in ovarian cancer it was fivefold. It is clear that if we could ensure that all CCGs achieved the best rate of early diagnosis—the rate achieved by the top performing CCG—significant cost savings could be made.

Those are interesting figures. Many believe them to be conservative—with a small “c”—in the sense that we often forget the costs of treatment later on down the care pathway beyond diagnosis, but we are certainly talking about hundreds of millions of pounds. One could argue that that is a drop in the ocean when we are looking at the NHS budget, but patients—cancer patients in particular—could certainly benefit from a couple of hundred million pounds. In an age when it is all too easy for politicians to talk about spending more money, we are trying to focus on potential cost savings from encouraging earlier diagnosis. As prevalence rises—Macmillan Cancer Support believes there may be another half a million cancer patients in the next five years, in addition to the around 2.5 million we have at the moment—so will costs, so the need for such savings will grow in importance.

The most recent report of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer followed an oral evidence session with the then cancer Minister and key decision makers in NHS England, as well as written evidence from more than 30 cancer-related organisations. That report concluded that where the new initiatives outlined in the cancer strategy could save costs, those initiatives required more focus and attention. It is our opinion that there needs to be greater appreciation in NHS England and the Department of Health of the savings that earlier diagnosis offers. As I have said, there are too few health economists working in the NHS, and even fewer looking at this area.

As the Minister is well aware, when I raised that issue at Health questions last week, he correctly referred to some ongoing studies, including the three-year research project being undertaken by Macmillan Cancer Support in a related area. He also mentioned Public Health England, which is looking at cost-effective initiatives for colorectal cancers. Those studies are welcome, but I maintain that the approach is piecemeal. We need a root and branch approach to look more specifically at this area. We need to promote earlier diagnosis at CCG and

health and wellbeing board level. We have the one-year figures. We must not allow this to become a tick-box exercise; the issue is far too important for that. There needs to be greater focus on how underperforming CCGs will be held to account for their rate of improvement.

The all-party parliamentary group on cancer will play its full part in that work. We are looking at other areas. We have achieved our goal of getting the one-year figures into the DNA of the NHS, and we certainly will not walk away. We are focused on several areas, including patient experience and rarer cancers. There cannot be a meaningful improvement in the one-year figures if rarer cancers are not included, as those account for more than half the cancers that are diagnosed. We will play our full part, which includes the annual reception and the Britain Against Cancer conference, but I would be interested to hear the Minister's responses to the questions I have raised. What more does he believe the NHS can do to promote and focus on cost savings from earlier diagnosis? On behalf of the wider cancer community, and certainly the all-party parliamentary groups, including the cancer-specific groups represented by several hon. Members in the Chamber, may I request a meeting with the Minister to discuss this and other related cancer issues?

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall, in my second Westminster Hall debate since I became a Minister. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) on securing this debate and raising the valid points that he did and on his stewardship of the APPG on cancer, which is highly effective and has provided a large part of the briefings that I have received since becoming a Minister. I very much hope that he will carry on that work, and I am sure that he will.

My hon. Friend mentioned several times the phrase “pushing at an open door,” and I reassure him that the door is open. We have discussed this issue twice in fairly formal circumstances, and I am keen to take him up on his offer of meeting him and colleagues to discuss it further and make progress over and above what we can do in Westminster Hall debates and oral questions. I also look forward to speaking at the event in December.

I will talk, as Ministers do, about the progress that we are making in this area across England, but my hon. Friend reminded us that we are not best in class or among the best in Europe, and he is absolutely right. He gave us the statistics for Sweden, where the one-year survival rate is 82% versus our 71%. That is a target; it is where we need to get to. As we have made progress, we have got to where the best in Europe were several years ago. We need to keep progressing in that respect.

My hon. Friend rightly talked about CCG accountability, and I will talk a little about that. I want to emphasise the power of what was done last month, when we published the four indicators for every CCG in the country. That is a massive commitment to transparency. We were quite open that many CCGs needed to improve. My hon. Friend mentioned the figure of, I think, 80%, which we agree with. It is worth analysing the data and spending a bit of time looking at that, because small

[David Mowat]

differences in percentages against the indicators, one of which is one-year survival, make a big difference to how a CCG is perceived. Accountability comes from transparency, and we have made big steps in that regard, last month in particular.

I want to thank the Members who intervened in the debate. As ever, my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) reminded us of the role that complementary remedies can play as part of an overall solution. There is no impediment to that in the NHS—CCGs can commission what they wish to commission. He mentioned the Barts study. My view is that it needs to be clear that commissioning is science driven, repeatable and all that goes with that, but there is no impediment if CCGs wish to commission complementary therapies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), in his capacity as chair of the all-party group on skin, told us how weak some of the training in that area may be at undergraduate level. I was not aware of that, so I will take it up and come back to him. It does not sound acceptable if the skin cancer diagnosis part of the syllabus is the bit that people leave.

Sir Paul Beresford: If I could emphasise that a little more, we have a distinct shortage of consultant dermatologists. They are backed up by GPs with a special interest, but a large number of referrals to dermatologists are made due to fear on the part of both the patient and the doctor that they will miss a melanoma or a squamous cell carcinoma when the doctor should be able to diagnose them. Many are dealt with in the early stage with cryosurgery, which is a very effective, quick treatment that I know, having been on the wrong end of it quite often, can be undertaken by a GP who has had the right education.

David Mowat: I thank my hon. Friend for that and for reminding us that at the core of the debate is a point we all agree on: early diagnosis is the key, whether it is for cost-saving purposes—I will come on to some of the points my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay made on that—or to be cost-effective. There is no question that early diagnosis saves lives and that it is the right thing to do. Whether we argue a bit about precisely how much money is saved is in a way a secondary issue; it saves lives and it is the right thing to do.

I also want to acknowledge the intervention of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who reminded us about the need for public health and GP awareness. In England we have had a significant increase in the number of referrals and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence—latterly in England—has changed its guidelines for referral, which, together with the awareness issue, has increased significantly the number of people diagnosed in stages 1 and 2. We need to continue to make progress on that.

Mark Durkan: I commend the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) for leading the debate and for the leadership he has provided on one-year survival rates through the APPG. Does the Minister accept the basic premise that value of life and value

for money are not in competition? They are perfectly compatible. We can have better use of money with better outcomes because of better-timed treatments, and that also means there is better evaluation and research, which will feed into better education in a virtuous circle, to meet the point made by the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford).

David Mowat: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and completely agree with the point he made. In this instance, there is no competition between saving money, saving lives and doing the right thing. In a sense, there is a secondary question as to just how much cost is saved, and the balance of cost saving versus doing more diagnostically, because in order to save lives, which is a highly cost-effective thing to do and the right thing to do, we need to do more on early diagnosis.

I have not yet got to the start of my remarks and I have a lot of pages to get through, so I will not be giving too much detail. It is worth acknowledging that cancer survival rates are increasing in the UK. In terms of improvement, between 2011 and 2015 we think something like 12,000 lives a year were saved. That exceeds the goals we set out in the cancer outcomes strategy in 2011.

Last year we saw a 91% increase in urgent GP referrals of patients with suspected cancer—that is another 822,000 patients. That shows a massive increase in NHS resources and all that goes with that, and we are beginning to see those early referrals, and the different guidelines GPs are using to refer, start to come through in the one-year survival statistics. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay reminded us, that does not mean that we are the best in Europe. We need to continue the drive to improve.

The cancer strategy produced by the cancer taskforce is the backbone of what we are trying to achieve. The—I think it is fair to say—acclaimed strategy it produced, “Achieving World-Class Cancer Outcomes”, was published last year. It had 96 recommendations in it, and the Government accepted all 96. We are now putting in place an implementation taskforce. We believe that if we are able to make the progress we expect by 2020, a further 30,000 lives a year can be saved.

Recommendation 96 is the one we are talking about today. It essentially says that we need to do a lot more on early diagnosis because of the cost savings that will potentially arise from that. There are differing views in the Department of Health as to whether for all cancer types in all instances earlier diagnosis does save costs because of the increase in cost and effort associated with the diagnosis—the early screening and all that goes with that. That was not addressed overtly in Cancer Research UK’s “Saving lives, averting costs” report, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend. He quoted numbers of several millions of pounds, and there is no doubt that stage 4 cancer costs massively more to treat than stage 1 cancer, but whether or not there are clear cost savings in all instances and even if we dispute the detail of some of those numbers, we go back to the point made by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) that early diagnosis is the right thing to do. My hon. Friend also mentioned that there are not enough health economists in the NHS; the truth is there are not enough of lots of things in the NHS. Early diagnosis is

certainly cost-effective in terms of lives saved, even if there may be some dispute as to whether it saves costs in all instances.

My hon. Friend mentioned the work being done by Macmillan, which I acknowledge. It is a three-year study, which we are looking forward to.

Mr Baron: I am conscious that I am eating into the few minutes the Minister has left, but the point about cost savings links to the point made earlier about initiatives and processes for earlier diagnosis. I urge him to think carefully about this, as I know he is doing. There has been no shortage of process targets in the NHS, but the one-year survival figures focus on outcomes, and that is the true measure of whether the processes are having an effect. By using outcome measures, we are leaving a large element of discretion to CCGs to introduce the initiatives they think best fit their local populations. That does not necessarily mean big cost increases to introduce such initiatives. Better awareness campaigns and better screening uptake figures do not necessarily cost a lot of money at a local level; they just take a bit of thought.

David Mowat: I agree completely with my hon. Friend that it is right that we use outcome measures. I come back to the point that the Government did a big thing in publishing the statistics for every CCG in the country. That allowed headlines to be out there in the press—we all saw them—that 80% of CCGs need to improve. We used a pretty rigorous test to assess the CCGs. If we reach those levels, we will be close to being the best in Europe as we make progress.

I am coming towards the end of my time. I want to finish by re-emphasising the Government's commitment to early diagnosis. I have not had a chance to talk about our public health measures and all that goes with them, but I thank my hon. Friend again for getting us this debate. I emphasise my commitment to work with him and the APPG to make progress in this area.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Healthcare (Devon)

[MRS ANNE MAIN *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered healthcare provision in Devon.

It is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, which I am sure will be fair and impartial; if only that were the case elsewhere in the House. It is a particular pleasure to welcome the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne); I fear he has had quite a few outings already this week, and will have more. I make no apology for summoning him here, on behalf of my colleagues from Devon, to address an issue that will not go away any time soon. I suspect that this will be one of many occasions on which we will seek to ask pertinent questions on behalf of our constituents across the county.

Healthcare is one of the biggest issues in Devon, largely for two reasons. The first is the demographics of the county: 17.7% of the UK population are aged 65 and over; that rises to 21.1% in the south-west and, in my part of the south-west—East Devon—to 27.7%, which is 10% more than the national average. Secondly, reforms are coming down the line, involving bed closures and so forth, that are sometimes seen as controversial. They are a result of the perilous state of Devon's NHS, which is there for us all to see. Before we start our long list of asks and demands, it is worth remembering that the Northern, Eastern and Western Devon clinical commissioning group's financial deficit is due to hit £490 million by 2019, which is clearly unsustainable.

Before I launch into my pleas and points, I point out the absence of some colleagues from Devon from across the political spectrum who I know feel passionately about this. The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) and my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) are both detained in the Select Committee on Health. I believe that they have either just interviewed, or are interviewing as we speak, the Secretary of State for Health and the chief executive of NHS England. Of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) is unable to take part in the debate on account of his particular office. He has an excellent relationship with the GPs in his constituency, and he is supportive of wellbeing hubs, provided they serve the local community appropriately.

On the whole, we welcome the Government's intervention in Devon's NHS in the form of the success regime. If followed properly, it will help to solve some of the underlying problems that beset Devon's national health service. As part of its work, the success regime, along with the CCG, has recently published proposals to close 72 hospital beds in Exeter and East Devon. The Minister will quite properly respond that that is under consultation, but I think this is the only way that we can raise these points in a public forum to make sure that everybody knows what we are thinking.

I understand that recently, the success regime, although it has a preferred option, which includes the rather expensive Labour deal on Tiverton hospital, has now introduced a "none of the above" option. If that is now

[*Sir Hugo Swire*]

an option, it creates a whole new range of possibilities. If that is not an option, I argue—my colleagues will argue for other things—that option B, which sees the beds retained in Tiverton, and also in Sidmouth and Exmouth, is the option worthy of support. Sidmouth has an extremely high proportion of over-85s, with people increasingly living longer, and of people with dementia. Exmouth is the biggest town in Devon with more than 35,000 people.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Thank you, Mrs Main, for allowing me to serve under your chairmanship. Plymouth has around a quarter of a million people, and is the largest urban conurbation in the whole of Devon.

Sir Hugo Swire: As my hon. Friend knows, Plymouth is a unitary authority; Exmouth is the biggest town in Devon. Local people—my constituents—are hugely supportive of our community hospitals. We have beds in Exmouth and Sidmouth; in Ottery St Mary we have 16 stroke beds, although they are eventually to be replaced by a health hub; and Budleigh Salterton hospital, which I will talk about in due course, will, we hope, be turned into a health and wellbeing hub.

Over the years, many local residents have donated significant sums to the hospitals. In Sidmouth alone, the Sidmouth Victoria hospital comforts fund has raised over £5 million. Local people are prepared to invest in ensuring first-class local health services. I pray in aid the position of Sid valley Admiral nurse—the Admiral nurse helps people with dementia—which was hugely supported locally. I am pleased to say that I was able to play my part in obtaining additional funding for that position from the Big Lottery Fund. If there is an identifiable health issue locally, people are prepared to back care with their own money.

If the Minister will allow me, I will talk about the consultation process and the lack of documentation. As I understand it, the consultation process has been overwhelmingly carried out online; there are very few paper copies of the consultation. Elderly people, who may have no access to the internet and who are disproportionately likely to be affected by the changes, are therefore disadvantaged. The consultation period ends on Friday 6 January. I ask the Minister to do everything he can to look at the issue, and to work out how we can get more people involved in what is, after all, an extraordinarily important process.

The potential closure of hospital beds raises the issue of 21st century healthcare, which obviously includes preventive as well as curative care. My constituents—like many across the country, we are told—prefer to be treated at home for as long as possible. They understand, on the whole, that community hospitals need to change and adapt in order to offer a service fit for the 21st century. In Budleigh Salterton, we have been working very hard to try to ensure that the community hospital is transformed into a health and wellbeing hub, which will involve bringing together the health, social care and voluntary sectors. I think that is a good template that can possibly be used across the country. In fact, if it works, there will be far greater footfall through the community hospital than there has been while it has been just a hospital. I remain very supportive of that.

There is, of course, a negative side to keeping people in hospital beds. According to Angela Pedder, the lead chief executive of the success regime, the cost of running a 16-bed community hospital ward is £75,000 a month. Home care could look after 82 people for the same money. However, we are in danger of putting the cart before the horse. Until we can absolutely ensure that we have got social care right, we should not look at unnecessarily closing community beds that some people will have to use. Equally, I am nervous that, just because we have well-supported community hospitals across East Devon, we are being targeted unfairly, so as to rebalance the books across other parts of the county.

If we are reducing the number of hospital beds, it is absolutely essential that the social care system is able to compensate for that loss. In the past five years, council budgets for social care have fallen behind demand by £5 billion, and 150,000 fewer people receive at-home help than five years ago. Social care can take the financial pressure off the NHS. For instance, the installation of a simple grab-rail in an elderly person's home can help to prevent the falls and broken bones that cost the NHS £2 billion a year. The option of making greater use of technology remains hugely under-exploited, in terms of how we ensure that people are getting a first-rate service at home.

I am sure my colleagues will want to raise the whole issue of rurality this afternoon. Government policies are meant to be rural-proofed. Frankly, social care is far easier to administer in a conurbation such as Plymouth than in other parts of the county, where people are spread over much greater distances.

Another issue that I am sure some of my colleagues will want to talk about is recruitment. We are told that social care will be one of the big growth industries in future. That is all to the good, and it is inevitable. However, currently, people find it very difficult to recruit. It is much easier, I am told, for the NHS to recruit people to work in social care than it is for the private sector. It is all very well transferring people back home, but only provided that there are the people to carry out the social care.

Stephen Dorrell, a former Health Secretary, has said:

“Fetishising the NHS budget and imagining it's the only public service that relates to health is fundamentally to miss the point... It is not true to say we are supporting the health service by asking it to do social care. We are using the health service as a very expensive social care service and then talking about efficiency. It's insane economics and very bad social policy.”

I would like to know if the Minister agrees, and what he feels can be done to ensure that we have first-class social care in place before we start to close community beds. Given the closure of residential homes, and the fact that local authorities are increasingly unwilling to pay the fees demanded by residential homes, we might end up in a situation where, although a person can no longer be cared for at home and needs some kind of hospital bed—we want to keep them away, of course, from the main hospitals—we have got rid of all our beds, or a disproportionate number, and so have created an unnecessary problem.

I want to say something about NHS Property Services. Since the NHS provider in Devon changed from Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust to Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust—at least in my part of the county—on 1 October, ownership of the community

hospitals has transferred to NHS Property Services. NHS Property Services, as we know, charges commercial rents, meaning that many hospitals will have to pay higher rent. Along with the planned bed closures, that has understandably made some of our constituents nervous. What happens if hospitals cannot pay the rent? Given that the Department of Health has committed to meeting any increased property costs for 2017 and 2018, the big question is what happens thereafter.

My general practitioners at the Blackmore health centre in Sidmouth increasingly feel that they have little influence over the redevelopment of the surgery, which I champion, as a result of the involvement of NHS Property Services. The practice wants to buy the building off NHS Property Services, either now or at some stage in future. It is proving extremely difficult to make that happen. It should be a simple move, as it is supported by local GPs and the local community.

There is some concern about Exmouth—Devon's biggest town—losing its out-of-hours GP services, which will be replaced with use of the 111 service, in line with the new integrated urgent care commissioning standards. Perhaps the Minister could write to me to reassure me that my constituents in Exmouth will receive exactly the same cover that they did under the previous arrangement.

One thing that affects all of us across Devon is the lack of provision of mental health facilities, which has exercised us for a long time. In my patch, I am concerned about St John's Court, which is the only mental health and recovery facility in Exmouth. Two years ago, Devon Partnership NHS Trust spent £300,000 on a move from Danby Terrace, which was not at the time fit for purpose, to St John's Court. On top of that, £140,000—this is all taxpayers' money—was spent on refurbishing St John's Court. Now the trust is pushing ahead with closing and selling St John's Court. It has assured us that Exmouth will not experience a reduction in healthcare provision, and that St John's Court will not be sold until an alternative venue can be found. We are talking about a growing town with a lot of mental health issues. I seek reassurance from the Minister that before anything is closed, something will be put in place to reassure the local community and my constituents that we have the same, if not a better, level of mental ill-health prevention and cure.

I wanted to speak for longer, but I am conscious that my colleagues will probably want to articulate their own slightly different visions for the future of healthcare in Devon. I say to the Minister in the friendliest manner possible that we are a pretty quiet bunch in our part of the world, and we do not seek trouble, but we do fight tenaciously to protect the livelihoods of our constituents. Too often, we feel that people forget about us in the south-west, and that money is diverted to all kinds of infrastructure projects in the huge urban conurbations, the northern powerhouse and so forth. This time, we will speak as one to ensure that whatever comes out of these consultations, and wherever we end up after them, we can argue these points in a mature way. It is simply no good saying, "It's a lack of money. It's Tory cuts." That is an immature conversation to have. We have to, between us, design a health and social care service that is fully integrated, makes use of technology, and cares for all of us as we get older and more dependent. We need to be brave, but political sloganising is not the answer.

2.46 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. May I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on securing this debate on a topic that is vital for all us, right across Devon?

It will not be a surprise to anyone that I intend to focus mercilessly on North Devon and to fight our corner very hard indeed against the threat to our acute services at the North Devon district hospital in Barnstaple. Before I go into that in any detail, I want to make a couple of points. First, I would like to thank the Minister, who has on a number of occasions met myself and other colleagues in Devon to address this issue. I know he understands the particular significance of the North Devon district hospital, because I have discussed it with him, as I have with a whole slew—I am not sure what the collective noun is—of managers in the Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust and other directors and managers within NHS England, who by now are well aware of the strength of feeling in North Devon. I want to put it on record that the Minister has been very proactive in arranging such meetings.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon talked about community hospital beds. I do not want the impression to be given that that is not a serious issue also in North Devon, although I will not be majoring on it. In North Devon, there is a bit of history. We did the heavy lifting with the loss of many of our community hospital beds about 18 months ago under a different process from the one now being undertaken in the rest of the county. I agree with what my right hon. Friend said about the need to look very carefully at the provision of social care before community hospital beds are removed.

I do not think NHS England has done this in the right order. Community hospital beds have been removed in North Devon, specifically from the Tyrrell hospital in Ilfracombe, and there is a great amount of concern among the local community about what is replacing that provision. Is there integrated and fully functioning health and social care provision in North Devon to replace those beds? My view is that the answer is no. That is also the view of the community in Ilfracombe. Last Friday I met the League of Friends of the Tyrrell Hospital, and that is strongly their view. That is not my major point today, but I want it on record that that remains a concern in North Devon, as it will become in other parts of the county.

My focus today is on acute services in North Devon. The community is extremely concerned. Many constituents have contacted me and shown their strength of feeling through protests on the street, campaign marches and letters to me, as the local MP, and to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox), whose constituents also use the North Devon district hospital in Barnstaple.

My point is absolutely clear and I will make it up front: there must be no cuts to acute services at North Devon district hospital in Barnstaple. I cannot see any clinical argument to justify even consideration of any such a reduction in services, let alone its implementation. Let me provide some background.

Healthcare in Devon is currently subject to not one but two separate review processes. We have the success regime, and the Northern, Eastern and Western Devon

[Peter Heaton-Jones]

clinical commissioning group area was given this special treatment with only two other areas in the country—one in Essex and one in Cumbria. Because of the need to ensure that we do not fall into a future funding black hole, the success regime was implemented. I fully support that because we need this special treatment.

On top of the success regime we have a sustainability and transformation plan, which, as hon. Members will know, is being implemented in all NHS regions in England. We have this two-tier process and my understanding from conversations with NHS England is that the success regime will probably be folded into the sustainability and transformation plan, so North Devon will find itself subject to a target that we are at least more easily able to identify. The difficulty is that the ideas that are starting to emerge from the two, soon to be one, reviews are simply unpalatable for North Devon.

I put it on the record that I am fully aware that these are not firm proposals or ideas and no public consultation has been launched. None the less, what has started to emerge has, reasonably and understandably, created serious concern in the North Devon community because, looking across the piece at the various documents that have emerged from both the success regime and the sustainability and transformation plan, we see a picture that puts under threat some of the services at North Devon district hospital, which my constituents rely on most keenly and have done for generations. They include vital services such as accident and emergency, stroke and one that I want to focus on now, maternity.

I have here one of the latest documents to emerge, which hon. Members may remember. Unfortunately, NHS England decided not to make this series of documents public. I say gently to the Minister that that has not been helpful. I know it was not his direction, but it has given rise to the belief that stuff is being done in private behind closed doors and that leads to suspicions, rightly, among my constituents and the public in general. That latest document, which is about five weeks old, starts by talking about

“a two-site option for maternity”

and states that the

“Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital would most probably be the second site”—

after Derriford in Plymouth—

“rather than North Devon District Hospital”.

That is a clear indication that consideration is being given to closing the maternity unit at North Devon district hospital. That is not acceptable to my constituents and we will fight any such proposals if they come forward. We will do that forcefully for a couple of reasons.

North Devon is a special case, not least because of our geography. I have said many times in this Chamber, in the House and elsewhere that Devon has been historically underfunded, and North Devon even more so. We are and have been for too long the poor relation in public funding. Let me be clear. This is not something that has happened in the last 18 months or the last six and a half years. It has been an issue under Governments of all colours for many years, if not decades. It is something up with which we will no longer put.

Part of the difficulty of singling out North Devon and Barnstaple as a place that can apparently sustain further reductions in services is that we start from a lower base of funding than in many other regions. That feeds perfectly into the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon raised about rurality. North Devon is a largely rural constituency, and for many years a series of funding formulae have dealt unfairly with North Devon because of its rurality. There seems to have been a belief that, because we are a rural area with a sparse population, we can somehow do with less funding. In fact, the opposite is true, and I am delighted that this Government are starting to recognise that. Across the piece of funding for local government, the police, education and health services, we are starting to right that wrong and equalise that funding gap, but the history is still there and that is why North Devon is the last place where we should be looking for further cuts.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene during his limited time in this debate, but I would like to respond specifically to his point about funding and allocations.

In the 2016-17 funding round, the allocation formulae have been looked at again and we have, for the first time in several years, introduced three differentials that are relevant to rural areas and that I think will affect my hon. Friends here. They include looking at the combination of rurality, remoteness and sparsity of population to improve the ambulance emergency cost adjustment, to reflect the greater distances travelled in rural areas; an adjustment to support continued provision by hospitals with 24/7 A&E services that are remote from the wider hospital network—my hon. Friend’s North Devon district hospital will be one of those—and an adjustment to remove from the formula supply-induced demand in urban areas where people live close to hospitals. Those three measures have led to a change and I gently suggest that my hon. Friend may care to look at the CCG allocations table which sets that out. For Northern, Eastern and Western Devon CCG, the per capita allocation for 2016-17 is £1,250, which is slightly above the average for England of £1,221 per head.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I thank the Minister for his intervention and I welcome it, but I say gently to him and NHS England, which I am sure is monitoring this, that all that good work will be entirely undone if we then lose our acute services at North Devon district hospital. This is not about figures on a spreadsheet; it is about the services and healthcare provision that my constituents will receive in Barnstaple.

I am aware of the time, Mrs Main, but I want to raise a second issue, which is important and recognisable to us in North Devon, but perhaps not to those beyond: our unique geography and the distances. An Australian historian once referred to the tyranny of distance, and I think we suffer from that in North Devon. If one looks at a map, it is all too easy to think that there is a decent road network between Barnstaple and Exeter. I can give several reasons why that would be a wrong assumption. First, vast numbers of people live in isolated regions far north of Barnstaple. Secondly, the road network is not all it is cracked up to be—although that is a subject for another day and one on which I am fighting heavily.

My main point is that what no map or distance table shows is that in North Devon we have pockets of serious deprivation. In Ilfracombe, I have two of the most deprived wards in the south-west and by some metrics the most deprived in south England. In those areas car ownership is less than 80%. Put another way, one in five households do not have access to their own private transport and, because of the demographics, some of those who do are elderly and perhaps have their own vehicle but simply would not feel comfortable or up to going long distances to Exeter or Plymouth. Those two reasons alone are sufficient to argue strongly that the last place where we should be looking to make cuts to acute services is at North Devon district hospital.

I am aware of the time, Mrs Main, so I will conclude. I welcome the fact that the Government are looking at the funding. I welcome the repeated assurances that local clinicians will make the final decisions. However, I want it to be in no doubt whatever—the community of North Devon are very clear about this—that North Devon is a special case and needs to be treated as such. In that regard, I make no apologies whatever for fighting for North Devon and for appealing for there to be common sense and no cuts at North Devon district hospital.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): We have approximately 35 minutes before the winding-up speeches and there are five speakers. I am sure we can do the maths.

3 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on securing the debate. I will be mindful of your comments about the time. I presume that a maximum of eight minutes will be appropriate.

Mr Geoffrey Cox (Torrige and West Devon) (Con): Seven minutes.

Kevin Foster: I am reminded that it is seven minutes. [*Interruption.*] The more heckling there is, the longer I might get.

For me, this debate is prompted by what is one of the greatest successes of the NHS: the fact that life expectancies are rising. In parts of my constituency, life expectancy has reached 90, and in one ward that I represent, Wellwood, 9% of the entire population are aged over 85. That brings challenges not only in health and social care, but in relation to the wider selection of services that those who have reached that age will need in order to have a whole life and not just have their healthcare needs taken into account.

Today, however, the focus is on the health service. Clearly, the proposals announced by South Devon and Torbay clinical commissioning group have created a lot of concern across Torquay, Paignton and the rest of the bay and south Devon. In fact, public concern was so great that the first three consultation meetings that it arranged in Paignton did not go particularly well. It arranged what were obviously going to be very large meetings in rather small venues, so when I attended the first one, at 9 am, I found myself, with about 40 residents, my predecessor, the former mayor and a number of councillors, plus trade union representatives, being told

that the room was full and we could not go in. Things got worse at the 4 o'clock meeting. I ended up addressing more people at an impromptu meeting on the steps of the venue than had actually got into the official meeting. Then finally, in the evening, although there was a reserved seat for me, that meant that another resident was turned away because I was there speaking. It was a shambolic start to a serious consultation, but thankfully I notice the trust has now arranged further meetings.

Local concern about Paignton hospital is so great because of the breadth and importance of the services that it provides, not least the beds that many people are discharged to from Torbay hospital. When the Public Accounts Committee did its recent report on delayed discharges, Torbay had one of the best records. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon would reflect that, sadly, the Royal Devon and Exeter did not. That is not so much about the hospital's own services as about its ability to discharge to a social care setting.

We have already seen the impact that the consultation has had in terms of beds. Qualified staff have decided to seek jobs elsewhere, seeing the numbers of beds already reduced. During the consultation, the fact that there are hundreds of beds in residential and nursing care homes in Paignton was cited. I took the time to ask the obvious question: how many of those are actually vacant at the moment? The answer that I got back—this was a snapshot taken two weeks ago—was that 12 of the beds are vacant, yet two are in places that are accepting no new placements at the moment and four are in a place that specialises in caring for children. That causes real concern that we will see more delayed discharges at our local hospital if the proposals for Paignton go ahead.

Many residents of Paignton are concerned about the wider clinical services provided there, not least the minor injuries unit. The suggestion made in the consultation is that if a minor injuries unit closes at Paignton, residents will travel to either Totnes or Newton Abbot. I am sure that we will hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) that the facility there is in excellent condition, but the reality is that that involves travelling past the acute hospital at Torbay, with its A&E department. I think it is far more likely that there will be more pressure as a result of people who would have been at the minor injuries unit in Paignton ending up at A&E in Torbay—the very place that we want to discourage people from going to unless they need to be there. There are also services such as X-rays and other clinics that many local residents find convenient and that support local GPs in delivering excellent healthcare.

My other concern about the consultation document is that although it is very detailed about what will be taken away from the south Devon area, it is not detailed at all about what will replace it. For example, there is talk of a clinical hub in Paignton, but no location. There is talk of doing more through GP surgeries, yet many of the practices are in buildings that predate 1948 and are in effect converted houses—not places that would be able to provide extended facilities for healthcare.

I find it very concerning when I speak with local people about what engagement there will genuinely be as part of the consultation, not least given the meetings arranged for small venues and the way that much of the questioning really produces only one logical answer.

[Kevin Foster]

No one is going to say, “Yes, I’d like to spend the night in hospital,” but we would spend the night in hospital if we felt that we needed to be there. This is about ensuring that people have genuinely been able to express their views. That is why I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will take a close look at the consultation being undertaken.

In closing, I emphasise the point that has been made about recruitment. The movement of qualified staff out of Paignton the moment the proposals to close the hospital were mooted speaks to a wider problem of recruitment across health and social care in south Devon. Although seeing the Torbay and South Devon trust receive Fair Train’s gold standard work experience accreditation last Friday was welcome, more still needs to be done to convince people that careers in health and social care are just that: careers. Many male jobseekers in particular see a job in that field as an entry-level job that they would not progress from, yet there are so many opportunities there. This is another concern for me, as it is for colleagues. We can put things down on paper, but if, in the social care market locally, there are not the providers, there is not the quality of provider and, bluntly, the vacancies that we already have for GPs are spreading across other health professions, then whatever position we come up with in the consultation will not be able to be implemented unless we address those long-term challenges in our economy.

Sir Hugo Swire: Does my hon. Friend share my concern about recruitment in social care and care homes: that a lot of staff are, of course, from the Philippines and other countries around the world? We must all hope that that is taken into account when the UK comes up with a new immigration policy.

Kevin Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. It is worth saying that the outcome of the EU referendum and Brexit is probably not going to affect those from the Philippines, given that the Philippines is not a member, but I fully accept the point that we have for too long relied on importing healthcare professionals—doctors and others. We have to have a debate about whether it is ethical for us basically to be depopulating parts of the third world of much-needed doctors, nurses and other trained medical professionals and to be relying on other countries’ training schemes to provide the numbers of healthcare professionals we need. The key point is that we want our own young people to be taking up those opportunities, as well as having the services provided.

I can see you indicating that my time is coming to an end, Mrs Main, or has come to an end. I will finish with one plea: I want to see Paignton hospital and Paignton people’s services continuing into the future.

3.8 pm

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on securing the debate. Over the next few moments, I want to concentrate on NHS England’s proposals to close three GP surgeries in my Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport constituency and how I hope we can take some pressure

off the principal acute hospital at Derriford in the constituency of my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer).

I am told that the reason why NHS England is considering the closures is the size of the GP practices. The Cumberland GP practice has 1,800 patients, Hyde Park 2,800 and St Barnabas 1,700. They are considered by NHS England to be unsustainable and too small. It also tells me that closing those practices is not down to saving money, but to deliver better value for money. However, before I speak about those issues, let me put my constituency in context.

Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport runs from the A38 down to the sea and from the River Plym to the River Tamar. It is the home of one of the largest universities in the country, with more than 27,000 students, thousands of whom live in the city centre, and it is a naval and Royal Marine Commando garrison city, as my hon. Friend the Minister, for whom I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary in a previous life, knows only too well.

The city’s population is growing. Although it has a global reputation for marine science and engineering and research, it is a low-wage and low-skills economy. It is an inner-city seat. I do not have a single piece of countryside in my constituency, unless we include the Ponderosa pony sanctuary, which is a rather muddy field. Between Compton and Peverell in the north-east of my constituency and Devonport in the south-west, there is an 11-year life expectancy difference. Compton and Peverell is where many of the university lecturers and hospital consultants live. In the run-up to the 2010 general election, when I won the seat on the third attempt, the Conservative party pledged to do something about healthcare in deprived inner cities.

We have started to make good our word. In 2014, our hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), one of the Minister’s ministerial predecessors, came to Devonport to open the Cumberland GP practice, which is now under threat. Other facilities on the Cumberland campus include a minor injuries unit, the new Devonport health centre and a pharmacy. The Cumberland GP practice was set up by Plymouth Community Healthcare—now Livewell Southwest—and the Peninsula medical school. There was and is a desperate need to provide a tailor-made alternative service to the existing GP practice—then the Marlborough Street practice; now the Devonport health centre—for this deprived Devonport community, and a need to look after drug users and the city’s homeless in hostels such as the neighbouring Salvation Army’s.

The practice also offers practical placements to students at the Plymouth medical school. Until earlier this year it was funded by Livewell Southwest, a social enterprise, which found it too expensive to maintain. Despite Devonport’s real deprivation, NHS England did not want to get involved in providing a contract to the Cumberland GP practice, which has consequently been operating without a formal contract and is managed by Access Health Care.

I understand that in the past the neighbouring Devonport health practice has not been interested in offering facilities to homeless people and drug users. Indeed, I understand that some of the Cumberland practice’s patients were not keen to transfer back to the Devonport centre, which is where they came from in the first place.

NHS England's reason for putting the Cumberland GP practice under threat is because it considers it to be too small and is operating in unsuitable, cramped premises. Unless we are very careful, we could potentially put more pressure on Derriford's acute emergency unit, which is under enormous pressure. I became aware of NHS England's proposals for the three GP practices in August, during the summer recess, when no doubt NHS England expected me and other MPs to be away on parliamentary trips or taking a holiday. I immediately put together a series of meetings with the city council's director of public health, the leader of the council and the cabinet member for adult social care, people from NHS England, the dean of the medical school and Dr Richard Ayres, who runs the Cumberland GP practice.

At the meeting I suggested that the Cumberland GP practice could share Devonport health centre's brand-new building, which has space and operates as a federation, sharing receptionists and back-room staff. This was supported by everyone present. Indeed, the city council's health and wellbeing board also supported it following an inquiry that recommended measures to allow the Cumberland GP practice to continue. However, I understand that Devonport healthcare might not be willing to do this, and it appears that the Devonport community may be deprived of a second GP practice and that patients will have no choice in which doctor they can go to.

I have also had representations from patients at both Hyde Park and St Barnabas surgeries. At Hyde Park, although Dr Stephen Warren is keen to continue as a GP following a heart attack, he has transferred the ownership of his practice to Access Health Care, as he no longer wishes to deal with the back-room tasks of administration, which is part of running a practice. He argues that his and his partner's growing 2,800 practice—the Cumberland is growing as well—has attracted outstanding reviews and he would not be able to inform his patients where he was going if he relocated to another practice. He also thinks that some patients like to have a relationship with an individual doctor who they can see speedily rather than having to wait weeks.

The St Barnabas surgery, which is also run by Access Health Care, was set up in a new development next to a residential care home for the elderly where patients do not have to walk far to get to it. In all three cases, NHS England, for supposedly technical reasons, gave patients only 24 hours' notice of their initial engagement. I must say I found the public consultation process utterly appalling. I wrote to NHS England asking it to give more time to engage with local communities, and I am grateful that it bothered to listen.

On Friday, at my weekly constituency surgery, I was asked to write to NHS England to ask whether it had engaged with other GP surgeries and with Derriford hospital and whether it had consulted them, because some GPs will have to accommodate more patients. That is a big issue.

There are wider issues in all this. At the moment, commissioners in north, east and west Devon spend a higher amount of money in east Devon than in the more deprived western locality. The Government's success regime is keen to correct that, so that resources are focused on deprived communities such as Devonport. Finally, we need to make much more use of pharmacies. As my hon. Friend the Minister knows, I am the

Government's pharmacy champion. What are we going to do to make sure we have pharmacy funding and how will that operate?

3.16 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Devon shares a challenge with many other rural parts of the country. We can safely say that the things we are asking and lobbying for have a general application. From the Minister's perspective, something that has a more general application will be much more acceptable.

We have an above average number of over-85s with complex co-morbidities, as do many other rural areas, because people like to retire to such places. We know that travel distances in Devon are particularly acute. We have been compared to Denmark in terms of the numbers of roads that we have.

It is absolutely right to raise the recruitment challenge, but it is not a simple question of not being able to get people; there simply are not enough people to get. Previous Governments have inadequately provided for training. In addition, we have the challenge of attracting people to work in a rural location. Rural locations are fine if someone is retiring there; young individuals want to live in cities; and that is the challenge. On top of that, the cost of living also makes a post in a rural area unattractive.

Perhaps the most difficult problem is the one-size-fits-all approach that previous Governments have focused on. The model for funding and for structures is built around an urban model where there are numbers and therefore productivity. The challenge we have is the lack of footfall, except in tourist times. We need to tick the box not only for the funding formula but for the new integrated models of care that look at integrating vertically and horizontally across primary and secondary care. The multi-specialty community provider and primary and acute care systems will simply not work where we are, which means that we cannot use the same solutions as other areas.

Devon is a prime example of all these problems. We have three different reviews going on. We have the success regime in north Devon; the consultation on primary care, which last year took place in south Devon and is now taking place in Northern, Eastern and Western Devon; and the sustainability and transformation plans, which have been relatively recently brought into play. As has already been mentioned, Angela Pedder, the leader of our STP, will look at combining all the reviews.

The real challenge that we face is the speed at which implementation of the changes is being considered. As other hon. Members have said, it makes it almost impossible to put in place the needed care in the community. Of more concern to me is the fact that nowhere have we really addressed the need for a proper strategy for rural healthcare. I have read the five-year plan, and the word "rural" appears three times. I have been frustrated, when I have written to the Minister's predecessors to ask about a rural strategy, because they have told me that there is one, when the truth is that there is not. There is an urgent need for a proper review of examples from around the world—Australia and New Zealand. There are plenty of examples. Even China has a proper strategy, and other countries think about such things in a very different way. That, to me, is crucial.

[Anne Marie Morris]

The other day I attended a workshop with the Nuffield Trust, the ambulance service and a number of hospital trusts, looking at what is happening and what we need to do. In rural areas things are at crisis point. Care homes are closing and are not being replaced with new ones—at least not in rural areas. They tend to be developed in city areas. The result will be a change in the population mix in rural areas, which will lead to economic deprivation and then social deprivation. We need to accept that rural communities are different. They need to be supported; otherwise, the consequences will not be as simple as whether we lose a hospital. The taxes raised in this country are generated predominantly in the city, but we accept that they should be spent across the country; equally, that is how we should deal with our rural communities.

We should review and amend the funding formula. I am pleased to hear of the changes in allocation which are coming shortly. However, the issue is more fundamental than the funding formula. One of our challenges is the fact that the needs are different in each rural area, but training regimes have become increasingly specialised. There are many individuals who specialise, in a number of different specialisms; the current regime structure requires a certain number of specialists, in each of those specialisms, to get a tick in the box to say that an area is safe. We need more generalists, not more specialists. Several royal colleges are already considering the generalising of training, but we need conversations to happen not just within those royal colleges but between them, and Government should sponsor and support that. We also need to get acceptance within the trusts that recruit the individuals. If they will not accept the new generalists, we shall have a problem.

We need more generalists and we need more geriatricians. We also need to think carefully about how to deliver urgent care. Urgent care and accident and emergency are not entirely the same. Some of the models used in other parts of the world, such as Australia, are very interesting. It is wrong to say that if there cannot be an A & E department the hospital must go. There are many different ways to provide what we need, and we must look at that. We must also review the regulatory criteria. Regulators say, "You need a person with this job description and this expertise and training." At the moment regulators will not allow an organisation to accept someone with the right skill mix but without the specific tick-the-box qualifications. That needs to change.

As to the care home sector, we clearly need hard measures, but we need soft measures too. The human side of social care is as important as the technical side. A challenge with respect to the agenda for integrating health and social care is to scrutinise the commissioning of social care in the same way as the commissioning of NHS care. At the moment that is not happening. I do not think I am wrong if I say that there is now a bit of a lottery, based on where people live, for how much money is allocated and therefore how good the care is.

My final plea is about the long-term plan. With increasing development and population—whatever happens about immigration—we need to ensure that we plan. At the moment, the NHS is not a statutory consultee in the planning process; and that needs to be rectified.

3.24 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is great to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) for obtaining this debate, which is very timely.

Consultation should be about consultation. The CCG has presented four options: in option A Tiverton has 32 beds, Seaton 24 and Exmouth 16; in option B Tiverton has 32, Sidmouth 24 and Exmouth 16; in option C Tiverton has 32, Seaton 24 and Exeter 16; and in option D Tiverton has 32, Sidmouth 24 and Exeter 16. There is no sign of Okehampton or Honiton hospitals on the consultation. Beds there are simply said to be closed. Is that consultation? In our original reforms of the health service we said that local people must be consulted. Angela Pedder did exactly the same in Axminster, two years ago, as is being done now; she just came and said the beds were to be closed. There were no alternatives or consultation—just "We have made the decision, we know best, and we will overrule anybody who says any different."

I tell the Minister that that is not consultation; we must make sure that consultation happens. Honiton is a great hospital. It currently has 18 beds and offers midwife-led births, a minor injuries unit, therapies, outpatients, X-ray and GP-allocated primary care services. It has an outstanding reputation and is often referred to locally as the Honiton Hilton, because it provides such great services. People in Honiton have supported it for generations, and that is what is so essential. We have an ageing population in Devon. My constituency starts in Uplyme. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) has Great Torrington in his constituency up in the north-west. Lifton is down in one corner of the county, and it goes right up to beyond Ilfracombe. The county is massive, and it is being suggested that community hospitals should be closed. The Royal Devon and Exeter hospital will be under great pressure to keep its acute beds free. Yet we are closing down community hospitals that could ease the pressure on acute hospitals. That seems to be taking things in totally the wrong direction.

I welcomed the Minister's intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) about the reallocation of funds. Are not the consultations therefore premature? Do they not exclude whole hospitals from being considered at all, and should not that be reviewed? Can the Minister ask for that? The independent health service review looked at the case of Torrington and said that it should not have been closed. As to Axminster, we still do not have a proper facility and we do not know how it will be engaged. Not only are the CCGs taking beds away from community hospitals; they are not putting anything in their place.

I make a plea to the Minister: what are we to do? We have an ageing population; the age profile of Axminster is probably what the whole country's will be in 2035. Our population is healthy but growing older. We want to help people in their own homes. I am pleased for that to happen, and I think it is right, but we also need community hospitals. Honiton has excellent communications so it is easy to bring people in and out of the hospital, and it is a quick journey from the Royal Devon and Exeter to Honiton hospital if people need to be brought back to relieve the pressure on beds. I cannot

see how it is possible to go forward with a consultation when a hospital is completely taken out. I am sure that the Minister will say that it is up to local people and organisations to decide; but there is a problem if, when local consultation comes along, a hospital is removed from the list. Also, when it comes to staffing, it does not help in getting staff for a local hospital if that hospital is threatened with closure.

I really feel that all our MPs across the whole of Devon need to unite, because over the last two years the number of beds in our community hospitals has been halved. I rather fear that we will be standing here in two years' time saying that they have been halved again. Rather than fighting between each other over which hospitals are kept open and which are closed, let us fight all the closures across Devon. Otherwise we are just being picked off one by one, Minister, and this is not the way to run a health service in Devon.

3.30 pm

Mr Geoffrey Cox (Torrige and West Devon) (Con): The problem with North Devon district hospital has for decades—certainly for as long as I have been in politics in Devon—been quite simple: it is a general hospital that is far out on a limb of sustainability, in terms of the range of services it offers. For decades, there has been a decision begging to be taken, but it has never had the proper, honest and frank discussion that it really needs.

A general hospital generally requires something around a third of a million people to sustain it. The population of northern Devon, including Torrige and the hospital's catchment area, is some 80,000 or 90,000 people short of the figure that generally sustains a general hospital. However, historically, it has been universally accepted that Barnstaple requires a general hospital. We cannot provide health services to the population of northern Devon unless we have an acute hospital in Barnstaple. We are therefore faced with a clear and stark choice: either make a special case for funding it in the way that a rural hospital that otherwise could not survive needs to be funded, and make it an exception to the principles that apply to general hospitals for which the population is sufficient; or see it slowly wither on the vine, dying by a thousand cuts, and by weasel words used by clever civil servants and others to justify one saving after another. Those savings really mean services reduced, and patients redirected over 40, 50, 60 or 80 miles away, with some expected to travel into the heart of Somerset for treatment that other residents enjoy on their doorstep.

I endorse what my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) said; there are red lines for Devon's Members of Parliament. Of course we accept that the current model of healthcare cannot be preserved in aspic. There must be change and transformation, but we cannot put accountants' methodology over the interests of patients and the citizens we represent.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that I know the green and pleasant lands of Shropshire well. What a fine county it is. It, too, has had its battles on this score; I know, because I have family who live there. Let him come to Devon and see the wide distances. I do not believe that in Shropshire there is a place over 70 miles from a main conurbation, as many communities in my constituency are. Travelling 70 miles to, say, have a child delivered puts at risk and prejudices the interests of those who are to be treated.

A decision must be taken on health services in north Devon. It is the same with hospitals in the far north of Scotland; they are highly rural, deeply isolated and not sustainable unless a special formula and a special approach are taken. Words such as "care closer to home" are all well and fine, but the difficulty is that communities see an historic legacy of underfunding that has left the health authorities in our area with an £80 million annual deficit. That deficit has built up over decades of accounting measures, and of conjuring with accounts. On the one hand, communities see this vast deficit, and on the other, they hear words such as "care closer to the community," or, "Cut your beds and we will provide you with a service that is just as good, and that better fulfils the needs of patients." Of course we can listen to the logic and rationality of that argument, but while it is all the time moved by the spectre of deficit, they will suspect that it is being made for one reason only: to reduce the budget.

My plea is for fairness. It is a plea to be heard, made on behalf of a neglected, extraordinarily rural area—possibly one of the most rural in England. It is a plea for a special look at this problem in northern, eastern and western Devon. The language coming from well-meaning and, I accept, wholly sincere health administrators has an Orwellian flavour to it while it is governed by this shadow of deficit that hangs over it.

I welcome the news from my hon. Friend the Minister that there has been allowance for rurality in the 2016-17 budget, but one or two minor tweaks do not reverse the legacy of decades. The truth is that the health services we represent—of the people we represent—are being seen to perpetrate a grave injustice. For example, public health spending alone—spending on the prevention of ill health—in the county of Devon is less than half the national average. On any analysis, the funding we receive in Devon is wholly inadequate to deal with its wide disparities and distances, its ageing population, and the other factors that affect Devon.

My simple plea to the Minister today is to hear the voice of those whom we represent, and to hear them pleading with him. Until the deficit is addressed and there is fair funding for rural health services, we will not believe the assurances from well-meaning administrators that our health services are safe. They are not safe. We need a major amendment to the rural health funding formula; we need to improve on what has been done this year; and we need to assuage the anxieties of our constituents by a proper, demonstrably fair health funding formula.

3.37 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) for tabling a debate on this important issue. It is heartening to see Members for Devon coming together with a unified voice on this subject. I, too, will mention Members who are not here today: the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), who has been mentioned, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). As we speak, they are questioning the Secretary of State for Health on finance for the NHS—a subject that cannot be totally separated from the issue at hand.

The healthcare challenges that Devon faces are immense, but I disagree with some of the points that hon. Members have made. I do not believe that the challenges are

[Julie Cooper]

limited to this region; I believe they are systemic. Demand for NHS services is increasing nationally faster than ever before, fuelled in part by an increase in social deprivation and an ageing population. The need to address the increased demand, together with the need to keep pace with new technologies, is placing hitherto unseen financial pressures on NHS providers.

There are 280,000 people in Devon living with one or more long-term conditions, such as asthma, diabetes, hypertension and cancer; 150,000 people have a mental illness; and there are 40,000 people with cancer who need rapid access to high-quality services. Alongside that increased demand, there have been cuts to adult social care, and to public health and prevention budgets. If we are just to stand still, funding needs to be increased by an extra 2.6% above inflation. I am interested to see whether the Minister's promised extra funding matches that; I doubt that it will. If no changes are made by 2020, the NHS in Devon will face a deficit in excess of £440 million.

In 2015, the Northern, Eastern and Western Devon success regime was introduced by Simon Stevens, the chief executive of NHS England, in an attempt to address the rising deficit and the failure to meet important health targets, including cancer waiting times. There is no doubt, as I am sure hon. Members agree, that there is a compelling case for change. Change is desirable; it would indeed be better for care to be more patient-centred, and of course it would be better to have more care needs met in the community. It is also true that the majority of patients receiving end-of-life care would prefer to die at home.

But, and it is a big "but", change on this scale—massive, transformational change—needs leadership, transparency, a whole system change and, above all, investment. Making changes of this order—closing community hospitals with no proven plan for care in place—is downright reckless. That is why so many GPs in Devon are opposing the proposals, and have stated that they have

"grave concerns over patient safety."

They say:

"we are concerned that the untried, untested closures of so many community hospital beds in this area could prove dangerous for a significant population of patients who might need to rely on community beds".

The well-respected Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes, has declared that she also cannot support the plans without an assurance that services will improve as a result of the changes.

People the length and breadth of Devon have expressed their concerns. The very active women's institute in Devon has raised objections, as have communities across Devon. As we have heard from Members today, the consultation process has been woefully inadequate; there have been undersized rooms, and an online consultation. Frankly, it is not good enough.

Everybody is right to be worried. Only last week, the Care Quality Commission published its report, entitled, "The state of health care and adult social care in England". The report states that

"the sustainability of adult social care is approaching a tipping point".

In addition to the financial pressures, the sector is also experiencing massive problems with recruitment and retention of staff. The people of Devon are being asked to place their trust in a system that is on already on the brink and, quite understandably, they are not going to—and nor should they.

Local GPs have described the proposals as a "hasty cost improvement process". This is the crux of the matter: the proposals as they stand, without adequate funding for alternative care, will save money, but they will not improve patient care, and may even compromise patient safety. I agree with the right hon. Member for East Devon that the cart is being put before the horse; that absolutely hits the nail on the head. Local NHS trusts in Devon are on their knees, desperately crying out for more funding to enable them to plan for the increased demand and changing needs of the population in the 21st century. This is not just about extra funding, but about making the kind of transformational change that is needed to deliver high-quality, excellent healthcare in the 21st century. It needs proper planning and proper systems in place, and that cannot be achieved on the cheap.

I am shocked that in this context, the Prime Minister is refusing to give the health and social care sectors more funding, which they desperately need. We have one of the lowest percentages of health and social care funding, as a proportion of our GDP, in the entire region of Europe. That cannot be right. I urge the Minister to use whatever influence he has with the Prime Minister to get her to revisit this issue, for the sake of the people of Devon, and for people across the country. This situation is not unique to Devon; we face many of the same problems in my region of Lancashire and, as I know from my work with the Health Committee, across the country.

I also ask that the consultation process be firmed up, and that people be offered a full, transparent and real consultation, rather than lip service being paid to having one. During Health questions the other day, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), promised to visit Devon and to listen at first hand to stakeholders. I urge this Minister to take that away with him, and to look at making sure that the Government listen properly to the voices of Devon and the very legitimate concerns being raised in this debate. No one is trying to say that change is not needed, but one system cannot be taken away until there is a fully proven plan in place.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): I call the Minister. If possible, could you leave a minute or two at the end for the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) to respond, Minister?

3.45 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I am grateful to you for taking the Chair this afternoon, Mrs Main, and for encouraging me to leave some time for my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) to respond, which I will endeavour to do. I congratulate him not only on securing this debate, which has been very well supported by his colleagues from across the county, but if I may—this is the first opportunity for me to do so publicly—on the recognition that he received of his time in Government from the previous Prime Minister.

I start by highlighting some of the excellent work carried out every day by all those who work in the NHS, not only in my right hon. Friend's constituency but in mine and those of all the others who have spoken today. I will attempt to address some of the specific points that have been raised, particularly by my right hon. Friend, but I shall first provide the House with a little context and background regarding health services in Devon.

Devon is a leader in many areas of the health service—perhaps to the surprise of some hon. Members who have spoken—relative to other parts of the country. Not least, the Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust was the first trust in England to join up hospital and community care with social care. A plea to do that was made by my right hon. Friend and it is already happening in South Devon. The trust operates as a single organisation, working with partners to improve the way it delivers safe, high-quality health and social care. The trust is showcasing exactly the kind of joined-up, patient-centred care that we want the NHS to provide to meet the needs of the ageing population.

I also pay tribute to the staff at the Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust, who last month celebrated their fifth anniversary since the last incident of hospital-acquired MRSA. That remarkable accomplishment comes as the result of continuous improvements at the trust over the last 10 years. The trust is now considered a national leader in infection control, being the only general hospital in the whole of England to have avoided any MRSA infections in the last five years.

However, I absolutely recognise that the region is facing difficulties. NHS staff across the region are working hard to provide good care to patients, but services are not keeping pace with the changing needs of local people. It is becoming increasingly difficult to make sure that local people have access to consistently high-quality care that is affordable and sustainable.

As my right hon. Friend said, in June 2015, NHS England announced that north, east and west Devon would be one of the three areas in the country to take part in a success regime. That is designed to improve health and care services for patients in local health and care systems that are struggling with financial or quality problems. Following intense diagnostic work, the north, east and west Devon success regime published, in February this year, the “Case for Change” report, which was referred to earlier. The report sets out the underlying challenges facing the area and the opportunities to improve access to services and ensure clinical and financial stability. The work concluded that if nothing was done, Northern, Eastern and Western Devon would have a system deficit of £398 million by 2020/21, as has been referenced by a couple of hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper).

As well as the financial challenge, the work identified significant health inequalities and some clinical services that will be unsustainable in their current form. There are good reasons for that. As we have heard from hon. Members, people in north, east and west Devon are living longer successfully, particularly in areas of the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon and in Torbay.

People are living with increasingly complex care needs and require more support from health and social care services. More than one in five people in north, east and west Devon are over the age of 65, and that figure will

be almost one in four by 2021. Some 40% of local people use almost 80% of health and social care services. There are 280,000 local people, including 13,000 children, living with one or more long-term conditions such as asthma, diabetes, hypertension, cancer and mental illness.

Although Devon is regarded from the outside as generally affluent, we are all aware—hon. Members have explained this—that there are areas of significant deprivation. There are big differences in health outcomes between some areas, particularly in Plymouth. There are also spending disparities between different parts of the county.

More than 10% less for each person is spent on healthcare in west Devon compared with north and east Devon, even when age and deprivation is taken into account, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) emphasised. Somebody living in Ilfracombe Central is statistically likely to die almost 15 years earlier than a person living a two-hour drive away in Newton Poppleford.

Inequalities need to be reduced, and the spread of health and social care across north, east and west Devon needs to be made more equal. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon agrees that his constituents should have access to the same high-quality healthcare services as those in the rest of Devon, let alone the rest of the country. He referred to the success regime consultation as being at fault. I gently remind him that it was only published on 7 October. I am sure that comments made today about the lack of available paper copies of the consultation will be taken into account by the organisers, and that we can respond to that.

Neil Parish: I want to press the Minister on the success regime's consultation. Is it right for a hospital to have its beds taken away as part of that consultation? Surely a consultation should be for people to have a say on a public decision.

Mr Dunne: I heard my hon. Friend mention the lack of reference to Okehampton and Honiton. I gently draw attention to the fact that the option to retain community beds in both those hospitals was considered as part of the 15 options in the document. The option was rejected as one of the four recommended for consultation, but that does not prevent him, his constituents or local representatives in those areas from putting those alternative options forward.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon asked whether there was a “none of the above” option. I think he may have been referring to page 42 of the consultation document, on which the organisers say that they

“welcome all views and will carefully consider all responses and analyse these against the decision making criteria. That will include options which are not currently in the consultation document”.

They are open for proposals to be made by others, but those need to be looked at in the context of the criteria.

Sir Hugo Swire: I am grateful for that clarification. Presumably, that does not alter the fact that Tiverton—that rather expensive private finance initiative that we have inherited—stays part of any outcome.

Mr Dunne: My right hon. Friend would not expect me to be drawn on any of the specific options. I would not want to be seen to be influencing the consultation prematurely or, indeed, at all until we see the recommendations that come out of it.

It has come out of the investigations leading up to the consultation that every day more than 500 people in north, east and west Devon are being cared for in a hospital bed who do not need to be there. That is at the heart of the challenge that we face not just in Devon but across the country, as the hon. Member for Burnley mentioned.

The system is keeping people in community beds or acute beds longer than they need to be because of discharge challenges. That gets back to the initial remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon about whether we are integrating the consultation properly with improvements to social care. It is important, when we come to look at the recommendations arising from the consultation, that we take into account the capacity that will need to be created in social care to provide alternative models of care if the number of beds is reduced.

The formal consultation concludes on 6 January. As I have said, I will not comment on specifics while that is under way, but I strongly encourage my right hon. Friend, all other hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, and those who were not able to because they are elsewhere in the House today to ensure that their views are taken into account. The next phase of the success regime will look at how services are provided in acute hospital settings, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon highlighted, as did my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) in his characteristically robust contribution. I am sure that they will make their views known in the consultation that we anticipate will follow next summer, and the clinicians involved with the acute services will be preparing their recommendations.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon is aware that the success regime plans are part of a broader sustainability and transformation plan that covers the whole of Devon. That creates the opportunity for health and local authorities—not just NHS bodies but local authorities with responsibility for social care—to work together to try to formulate plans that give care packages the kind of integration and coherence that hon. Members have sought for Devon. It will build on the work that has been done by north, east and west Devon's success regime and on the "Case for Change" published by

South Devon and Torbay CCG in September. The latest iteration of the plan is due to be submitted to NHS England this Friday.

Before I conclude, I can confirm that I will write to my right hon. Friend on the Exmouth out-of-hours service. I understand that he has a meeting with the Minister responsible for NHS property services later this month, so he will be able to take up his concerns then. On other challenges that were mentioned, we recognise that there is pressure on recruitment and retention of clinicians in rural areas. Hon. Members will be aware of the announcement made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to try to recruit 25% more doctors over the next few years; of our plans to recruit up to 10,000 more nurses over this Parliament; and of the announcement, last week, that we will be introducing a new category of nursing associate to provide more capability. We are acutely aware of those needs.

It is the responsibility of local NHS organisations to determine how local services are delivered. Hon. Members have made some important points, and I urge them to do so as part of the consultation. I hope that we will have another opportunity to discuss the forthcoming recommendations.

3.58 pm

Sir Hugo Swire: I am grateful for an interesting and mature debate. The Minister has an invidious job of trying to reconcile the competing demands across the country, to say nothing of the competing demands across God's own county of Devon. I can think of no better man to attempt to do that. If the consultation is a genuine opportunity, and is not an excuse to reduce levels of care, the Minister will find us supportive. He will find us supportive if, as I suspect, the consultation is an opportunity to deliver a fully integrated hospital, and a community care and social care system, that is fit for the 21st century.

I am pleased to remember a conversation I had with the Secretary of State, who repeated his commitment to community hospitals. I leave the Minister with one thought: as the previous Prime Minister freely admitted, it was the Conservative party in the south-west that delivered a victory at the last general election. The Minister has seen how formidable we can be when we come together, and come together we will to protect our vital services for our constituents across the county of Devon.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Environmental Protection

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered policies, strategies and funding for environmental protection.

Like many MPs, I have a constituency with a large number of local nature reserves, special areas of conservation and two national nature reserves, one of which, Kenfig, is also a special area of conservation under the EU habitats directive, the Bridgend biodiversity action plan and the UK biodiversity action plan. It is a site of local, Welsh and European nature conservation importance. I have secured this debate to ask questions on the future protection of these sites and others like them across the UK, which urgently needs addressing following the Brexit decision.

I begin by recognising the excellent work of members of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Environmental Audit Committee and by acknowledging their lead in this field. The EAC's report on UK and EU environmental policy should have been compulsory reading before voting in the Brexit referendum. We need answers to questions such as whether we have the technical, financial and legal expertise and capacity to respond to the environmental challenge of Brexit. The Wildlife Trusts, including my local Glamorgan wildlife trust, have said:

"The EU has the single largest body of environmental legislation in the world."

The EU has had an exceptionally positive impact on our efforts to produce policy, influence development and safeguard our wildlife.

One conclusion of the EAC's report is that

"the UK's membership of the EU has improved the UK's approach to environmental protection and ensured that the UK environment has been better protected."

Many witnesses implied that if the UK were free to set its own environmental standards, it would set them at a less stringent level than has been imposed by the European Union.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My constituency contains the Newport wetlands, the Gwent levels, the River Usk and more. We should acknowledge that the Welsh Government have taken a great lead on environmental legislation in the UK. However, they can only do so much. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as with the Brexit negotiations generally, it is crucial that the Government work closely with the Welsh Administration in Cardiff for the good of the environment in Wales?

Mrs Moon: I intend to address that later in my speech, but it is a central part of the way forward as we find our way through the tangle that is Brexit.

The UK imposing less stringent levels of environmental protection was a major concern for the people who approached me to initiate this debate. I was asked how confident we could be that nature conservation would be protected and a priority post-Brexit. Lest we forget,

in the biodiversity intactness index, which assesses how damaged nature is across the world, the UK is ranked 189th out of 218 countries—we are not exactly doing well at the moment. France and Germany are miles ahead of us because we have been less vigilant in implementing EU environmental legislation. It is clear that there was little thinking about what would happen if the UK voted to leave the EU and what the decision would mean for this policy area.

It is difficult to draw a clear conclusion until we know the terms of our exit, but it is vital that we have an assurance today that EU environmental legislation will be maintained in its entirety so that we have a semblance of stability and breathing space while we develop our own mechanisms and expertise. There are concerns that a full transfer post-Brexit may not be practical, that much of the transfer of directives might be done with little scrutiny through secondary legislation and that this may lead to the weakening of directives. I hope that the Minister, when she arrives, can tell me how she will ensure that that does not happen.

We need to know how we will update legislation and ensure progress. We need a commitment from the Minister that, as an absolute minimum, existing levels of protection for species, habitats and the wider environment will be maintained, and will not be weakened in the longer term through our inability to update legislation or through a lack of enforcement controls.

Richard Benwell of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust reminded me that:

"EU law is not some static monolith with commandments set in stone, it is an evolving regime brought to life by shared objectives and the rulings of the European courts. Without the trajectory provided by the Commission and the accountability provided by the courts, there is a risk that EU legislation becomes out-dated and unenforced, a kind of 'zombie legislation.'"

I hope that the Minister will be able to tell me how we are going to enforce legislation. The EU's mechanisms of oversight, accountability and enforcement ensure that robust implementation and monitoring take place. What will be the legal recourse for those concerned about the loss of important habitats and species? Judicial review is costly and out of the reach of most citizens and non-governmental organisations. Brexit means that we will lose two key accountability mechanisms: the European Court of Justice and the European Commission. What will we replace them with? What will fill that vacuum? We need a commitment that any future changes to this legislation will be subject to robust scrutiny and debate, with provisions for legal challenge to ensure that there is no attempt to roll back environmental protection.

How are we going to fulfil our international obligations? Brexit will not change our obligations such as those under the Bern, Rio and Ramsar conventions, yet once we leave the EU we will not have the support that membership offers in relation to those agreements. How will we meet them? How will we avoid fragmentation in the UK? What plans does the Minister have to quickly develop common values with the devolved Administrations, which my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) mentioned? Much of our environmental policy is entirely devolved. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds argues that transferring EU legislation will require changes to the Scotland Act 1998. We need to know whether the Minister is prepared for that.

[Mrs Moon]

Where will the needed capacity and technical and scientific skills come from? The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has noted:

“The Department’s...resource spend over the last Parliament includes cuts of £254 million... Defra’s main resource budget will reduce in 2015-16 by £135 million, or by 7%”.

The 2015 spending review announced that that budget will be reduced by a further 15% over the next few years. The Minister needs to tell us how we are going to replace the range of technical and scientific capacity and skills that will be lost when EU expertise is no longer accessible. Will any of the promised battle bus money come to DEFRA?

Local authorities are at the forefront of environmental protection, given their key role in deciding planning applications. Research commissioned in 2012 by DEFRA established that good outcomes for biodiversity are most likely to be obtained when expert ecological advice is available to the local planning authority.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): As the hon. Lady may be aware, I have joined a big campaign for the future of hedgehogs, numbers of which have unfortunately declined by about 50% over the last 15 years. It would be useful if local authorities had policies to ensure that they have hedgehog superhighways.

Mrs Moon: I will come to that eventually, if the hon. Gentleman gives me a little time.

I was discussing making expert ecological advice available to local planning authorities to enable them to develop sufficient ecological information and understand it when considering planning applications. Local authority ecologists currently play a vital part in the process, helping to guide developers towards sustainable solutions that enable development and protect our most valuable natural assets. In the post-Brexit environment, how well equipped will local authorities be to provide expert advice on the natural environment? Not terribly well, particularly given the dire situation that has developed over the past few years.

The Association of Local Government Ecologists, aptly called ALGE, found as far back as 2011 that only 35% of local authorities in England employed an ecologist; perhaps that is why we do not have hedgehog superhighways. ALGE’s conclusion was that

“local government’s capacity to assist in the delivery of a wide range of biodiversity initiatives”,

such as hedgehog superhighways,

“is already limited and is being further eroded”.

ALGE sounded a warning bell, pessimistically concluding that if the capacity of local authorities was in such a state in 2011, the unrelenting pressure on local government budgets would not give the situation any chance to improve.

Local environmental audits are essential if planners are to know how to manage favourable conservation status legislation, which was designed to protect at-risk species such as great crested newts and bats. Environmental audits are essential. If we do not understand the local populations of such species, it can result in overcompensation in planning decision making. Will environmental impact assessments become irrelevant if we do not adapt and update them, as would happen if we were in the EU?

Does the Minister know how many local planning authorities now have access to their own ecological expertise? Are the Government able to review whether capacity is currently adequate and consider what improvements within the system might be achieved if more LPAs had access to their own expertise? How much more effectively could the Government aims and objectives set out in the 2011 natural environment White Paper “The natural choice” be achieved with just a modest increase in ecological resources within local government? I hope that the Minister will assure us that DEFRA’s proposed new 25-year environmental plan will give true recognition and resources to support the important role that local authorities can play within this vital new initiative.

We need to know who will be responsible for dealing with legislation, regulations and concerns raised by industrial chemicals and pesticides. At present, we follow EU-wide regulations that protect human health and the environment from dangerous chemicals. The vast majority of our expertise in chemicals and pesticides is based in the EU. Can we replace it? Can we afford to? We are already facing a scientific brain drain thanks to Brexit. Does the Minister have a plan to recruit the skills, expertise and competencies that her Department needs?

In February 2013, the Government published the UK national action plan for pesticide use, to fulfil a requirement under the EU directive on the sustainable use of pesticides. It is another example of the UK’s half-hearted response to environmental legislation. Buglife stated:

“The plan lacks ambition and fails to set out a clear direction for achieving sustainable use of pesticides and preventing damage to pollinator populations.”

Who cares? We all do; we all must. Wild pollinators in the UK include 250 species of bumblebees and other bees, 2,600 species of butterflies and moths, and 7,010 species of flies and various other insects such as beetles, wasps and thrips. Some 84% of crops and 80% of wild flowers rely on pollinators; they are worth a minimum of £430 million a year to the UK economy. How will we influence EU pollination action plans? In the 2016 national pollinator strategy, the Government promised £691 million for agriculture to support the plan. When will the funding start, and how long will it last?

What will we do about invasive species? Currently, we deal with them at EU level. We often work with Ireland in adding new species to the list; how will we move that forward? How will we comply with ESTA, the European seed treatment assurance scheme? To quote the industry:

“Any serious incident in an individual member state could again lead to product withdrawal. In addition, there is a need to ensure free movement of treated seed across the Community unhampered by individual Member state legislation.”

After Brexit, it will not be possible for the UK to develop UK-only seeds. On fisheries, we might be able to set quotas, but we will not be able to influence EU quotas. Does the Minister know what British waters will consist of? Will it be 12 or 200 miles? How will we ensure that stocks are not put under pressure?

Non-governmental organisations and their volunteers already plug major gaps. An estimated 7.5 million hours are given to species monitoring each year. NGOs are reporting being approached by local government to take over responsibility for managing local nature reserves and even national nature reserves. NGOs currently employ

much of the UK's environmental and scientific expertise. Will the Minister pledge to work with those NGOs in agreeing a way forward?

Why is any of this important? The "State of Nature" report findings show that in the UK alone, 10% of species are at risk of extinction and nearly 60% have declined since 1970. We face increasing problems of air and water pollution. The focus in the Brexit debate to date has been on the economy. Whatever "Brexit means Brexit" means, it does not mean habitat and species loss, more air, chemical pesticide and water pollution or more invasive species. Does the Minister have a plan, and when will she share it with us?

Finally, I have been asked to make a personal plea from Mr Stanley Johnson, one of the authors of the EU habitats directive. He is especially keen on continued UK participation in the Natura 2000 network of protected areas. I agree totally, and I hope that the Minister will include that in whatever plans she outlines to us in her response.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I apologise to the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and to the House for my discourtesy in arriving late. Unfortunately, something happened en route. I will send my apologies personally.

Mrs Moon: I know the Minister well. There is no way that she would ever have been late unless there had been a personal or departmental crisis. We understand fully.

Dr Coffey: I thank the hon. Lady for those kind words. She has chosen an exceptionally important topic for discussion. I am grateful to her for sharing some of the themes of her speech in advance, so that we can give her as comprehensive an answer as possible. A lot of this is still in formulation, but I am conscious that the questions and issues that she raised will be absolutely central to some of the answers that we hope to find as we develop our route out of the European Union. I hope that she will continue to take an interest in this topic over the next few years. On our exit from the European Union, she asked how European legislation would be transferred into national legislation, and what the implications were for nature conservation. She also asked specific detailed questions.

I reiterate from the outset our absolute commitment to delivering on our manifesto promise to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we found it. Even before the EU referendum, work had started on developing our 25-year environment plan to deliver against that target, building on our 2011 natural environment White Paper.

I fully recognise the importance of devolved policy in this area, and as the hon. Lady represents a Welsh constituency, I cannot be entirely specific about the situation directly affecting her constituents. Instead, I will develop more broadly the argument about the UK Government's role in leading the work to exit the European Union; I will also refer to some of our plans in England. We have been able to increase spending in the past five or six years, and any decisions we make in the future to increase expenditure will result in changes that the Welsh Government will be able to take advantage of to continue to enhance the wonderful environment across our country.

Understandably, the decision to leave the European Union has raised questions about what might change, and what leaving might mean for the environment. The Government are well aware of the desire for certainty about what Brexit means for our environmental policy and legislative framework. The Prime Minister recently announced our plans for the great repeal Bill, which will not repeal all the protections given to the environment over many years—there are protections that predate our joining the EU, by the way—but will repeal the European Communities Act 1972. The Bill will be specifically about how we take European law into British law—whether that is Scots law, English and Welsh law, or the legislative framework for Northern Ireland—and will ensure that, the day after we leave, we still have an enforceable legislative framework, and that the environmental protections that we take for granted will continue.

Without prejudging our future relationship with the EU or future decisions of Parliament, I want to provide as much certainty as possible about the fact that we expect existing laws to be applicable. A smooth and orderly exit is in the interests of both the UK and our EU partners. There are decades of EU law to consider, and about a quarter of EU legislation affecting the United Kingdom affects the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We want to ensure that the statute book works on exit, and that we provide the maximum possible stability. We will engage widely, including with Parliament and the devolved Administrations, on the plan to ensure that when EU law ceases to apply, it is converted into domestic law. All Departments are reviewing the EU laws that apply in their policy areas and how withdrawal from the EU will affect their operation. Some elements of EU law are directives, which have to be transposed into UK law, and others are regulations. We need to ensure that no gaps are left.

I stress the considerable technical expertise to which all devolved Administrations have access. The Joint Nature Conservation Committee advises the UK on nature conservation, and the Health and Safety Executive advises on pesticides and chemicals; I see both organisations playing an important role, especially in regard to the hon. Lady's concern about keeping the integrity of the United Kingdom. While we may be leaving the European Union, we are keeping the United Kingdom, and we know that the environment does not stop at the border.

As the Prime Minister has signalled, we will no longer be subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. It will be the role of Parliament to hold the Government to account, along with mechanisms such as judicial review, though I recognise that that is costly, as the hon. Lady said. Understandably, people talk about the role of the European Commission and the ECJ, but their procedures still require people to initiate them. There are non-governmental organisations that are certainly not shy about taking the Government to court on certain matters, but at the moment, they can also use the avenue of the European Commission to do that.

The decision to leave the EU means that we have quite an exciting opportunity to design a set of environmental policies linked to the UK's needs in the context of the 25-year environment plan. The hon. Lady and I were both remain campaigners and voters, but leaving the European Union will allow us, in due course, to consider

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

whether the prescriptive nature of some of the current directives is the best way to achieve the outcomes we want. A phrase I often use nowadays is “cling to nurse for fear of worse”. Sometimes it felt as if that was the theme on which the remain campaign was based, but the phrase also sums up how people have clung to directives instead of thinking beyond them, saying, “We know that there are directives that are no longer fit for purpose, but there is no appetite to change them.” We want to ensure that any changes in the law are subject to appropriate scrutiny and debate.

The hon. Lady raised a number of detailed points about matters that are still being worked through. It would not be right for me to provide a running commentary, because there is no commentary; the options are still being worked through. She referred to the UK’s international commitments. A lot of European legislation is arrived at by multilateral agreements to which we have already signed up. We will certainly continue to honour our multilateral environmental agreements, which have been reached as a result of global action on environmental protection. We will continue to work closely with our European and international partners to improve the environment.

I stress that this area is a shared competence. Take plastic bags; the Welsh were the first to take action, and England eventually followed. That issue was being discussed just yesterday at the European Council in Luxembourg, and I was able to say, “The United Kingdom has already taken unilateral action on this, and other countries can do that if they wish—they do not need to wait for the EU to legislate on it.” Well done, Wales, for showing the way.

Marine conservation zones are another example. We have created our own designations, so we do not entirely need to rely on Natura 2000 and other elements. Some of those sites are already in place anyway because of international agreements, but we need to work through the designation framework for sites of special scientific interest and areas of outstanding national beauty. Our recently launched national parks plan is a good example of good practice: it continues to outline and enhance the protections we will have, as well as encouraging children to connect with nature.

We have all sorts of unilateral initiatives; I am sure the hon. Lady will welcome, and will contribute to, our consultation on banning the sale and manufacture of personal care and cosmetic products with microbeads.

We recognise her point about the “State of Nature” report, and we want to ensure that the environment will be at the heart of any future replacement we design for the common agricultural policy. As she says, there has been a decline in species; we are determined to restore them. We have certainly seen some changes over recent decades, and we need to address them now. As I say, the environment plan and the framework, which I really hope will be published soon, will be a good opportunity to contribute to how we deliver that. I recognise that the environment plan is for England, but I am sure that other nations of our United Kingdom may wish to consider it.

Mrs Moon: It is joined together.

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady asks whether it is joined. I am sure that we will not be violently misaligned, but as I said at the start, this is a devolved matter, so we cannot dictate our policy to Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, though I am sure that they will watch our plans with interest.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of invasive non-native species. The UK has long been the leading player on that issue within the European Union. The recent EU regulation was based heavily on our strategy for this country, which in turn is based on international principles acknowledged by the convention on biological diversity. We are committed to continuing that approach.

On funding via the national pollinator programme, the countryside stewardship agreements in the pipeline are now guaranteed. The Chancellor has also stated that new rural development programme projects signed after the statement will be funded, as long as they are good value for money. On local planning authorities, I take the hon. Lady’s point that only about a third of councils employed an ecologist. People can buy in the resource, and they do, but I recognise her point.

Oliver Colvile: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I do not have time, I am afraid.

The hon. Member for Bridgend will also want to know about trialling a more strategic approach to great crested newts in Woking, which should result in an overall net benefit to the population and to planning restrictions. I will write to her about the fisheries policy. In conclusion, I appreciate her patience, and assure her that we will continue to engage with the public and stakeholders.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Type 26 Frigates: Clyde

4.30 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Before we move on to the important topic of Type 22 frigates on the Clyde, will Members who do not wish to attend the debate please leave quickly and quietly?

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the timetable for building Type 26 frigates on the Clyde.

It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone, but for the record this debate is on Type 26 frigates.

Talk of defence platforms can often be a dry business, and it passes by most people in this House, never mind among the public. That is not true of the Type 26. The interest we see among Members today in the global combat ship reflects not only its strategic utility and world-class design; the farrago of delays and under-investment in the project and broken promises from the Ministry of Defence reveal the malaise at the heart of the United Kingdom's strategic thinking, which sees preserving the shop window as more important than its most basic of roles: defending this political state adequately.

I would like the Minister to address with utmost sincerity—something that her Department has been unable to do up to this point—two principal points on the Type 26 project. First, in delaying the start of the project, the Minister and her Department are doing enormous damage to the defence of Scotland and the United Kingdom, which, as I mentioned, is one of the Government's most solemn and fundamental tasks. Secondly, the failure to cut steel on the vessels, alongside an ongoing refusal to fulfil the promise of a frigate factory on the Clyde, is placing enormous pressure on the complex warship-building capacity that Government have unequivocally promised to protect, causing undeniable financial harm and insecurity to the thousands of skilled and dedicated workers from along the Clyde who are feeling increasingly let down.

In short, behind the broken promises and procrastination, the MOD has proven beyond doubt one maxim put forward by myself and Scottish National party colleagues time and again: every penny spent on the abomination that is Trident is a penny less spent on conventional defence.

In beginning to pick apart the sorry saga of the Type 26, one has to start somewhere, and I choose to start with the Royal Navy taskforce that sailed to recapture the Falkland Islands in 1982. That taskforce was composed of some 23 frigates and destroyers; today, the entire Royal Navy boasts only 19 frigates and destroyers, of which all are based between Her Majesty's Naval Base Portsmouth and Her Majesty's Naval Base Devonport. Paradoxically, that leaves the United Kingdom's southern coast as its most northerly complex warship base.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman not aware that the submarines are based up in Scotland? They are coming, in the main, away from Devonport, and we are still responsible for the refitting and refuelling of the nuclear submarines.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: The last time I looked we were discussing the construction of naval vessels, not the basing of weapons of mass destruction. Nevertheless, I am delighted that the Conservative party wants to engage in a strategic look at shipbuilding, because Conservative Members were recently in this very Chamber talking about rebuilding the royal yacht Britannia. While they are away and on into the distance with their pith helmets, the rest of us are left behind with the catastrophe that is Brexit, which I will pick up on later. They can go on to the distance in Britannia.

The capability gap is felt most keenly in Scotland. The northern third of this island, with a coastline longer than that of France and direct access to both the North sea and the Icelandic gap, is left dangerously under-defended at a time when Russian Federation incursions into our territorial waters are beginning to reach cold war levels. The perfect example came in January 2014, when the Russian carrier the Admiral Kuznetsov “took shelter” in the Moray firth. It took the United Kingdom's fleet ready escort 24 hours to reach the carrier group before it went on its way—although not before dumping its waste in the firth.

The House may have read the recent reports of the Kuznetsov's imminent return to the waters of the North sea. The carrier group left the port of Severomorsk on Sunday and is expected to make its way towards assisting Russia's continuing destruction of Aleppo via the North sea and English channel.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): A headline in the Norwegian press this week says: “Russia's biggest warships steam along coast of Norway towards Syria”, just as my hon. Friend has described. The related article says:

“Norway has a frigate, Coast Guard vessels and Orion surveillance aircrafts that have all followed the Russian navy group since it sailed out from the Kola Peninsula into the Barents Sea on Saturday.”

Does he agree that that is a substantial contribution from Norway, and one that the UK would struggle to match?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I certainly do agree with my hon. Friend. That small northern European nation seems far more capable of defending its territorial waters and meetings its obligations to NATO than the United Kingdom.

Amazingly, despite long-standing knowledge of the Kuznetsov's deployment, and it coming as NATO's largest annual exercise is taking place in Scotland, the Government have been able to rustle up only one Type 23 frigate and one Type 45 destroyer to escort the carrier group through the UK's exclusive economic zone, meaning that were the group to split, there would be no way of keeping tabs on the largest ships in the Russian navy. Quite simply, the ageing Type 23 fleet cannot keep pace with the growing number of tasks put forward for it. The understandable challenges of dealing with a 35-year-old platform have led to worrying gaps in the Royal Navy's most basic capabilities, whether that is the designated fleet ready escort being neither a frigate nor a destroyer, or the frequent and worrying absence of a UK vessel from the NATO standing maritime group in the north Atlantic.

The Government's contention that a smaller fleet can be justified by increasing versatility can be met only by proceeding with the Type 26 programme. These are highly

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

capable, versatile, multi-mission warships that would give the Royal Navy the capabilities it needs. Talk about the United Kingdom offering NATO a world-class anti-submarine warfare capability sounds hollow when we do not invest in the primary platform to undertake that, and when investment in other platforms—whether that is the carriers or the Poseidon P-8 maritime patrol aircraft—is called into question because a fundamental part of their support network has been put at risk.

When the Minister responds to the debate, I hope to hear a real commitment to a timetable for cutting steel on the ships, as well as their expected in-service dates.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the delay in giving such a guarantee is an utter betrayal of the workers on the Clyde? It really calls into question both the UK Government's commitment to conventional defence capability in Scotland and where their priorities truly lie.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I certainly cannot disagree with my hon. Friend.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: To the hon. and gallant Gentleman, I certainly will.

Bob Stewart: Is it the Scottish National party's policy to increase defence spending to something that in my view would be reasonable: 3% of gross national income? That way, we could provide more Type 26s, Type 23s and Type 45s.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I have great respect for the hon. and gallant Gentleman, but if we get rid of Trident we might actually be able to cover that.

In introducing this debate, I not only raise to a wider audience my own concerns about the continuing delays to the project, but echo the concerns of the Defence Committee and many prominent former senior Royal Navy officers. When the former First Sea Lord, Admiral Lord West, appeared before the Defence Committee at the start of June, the response to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) was that the Ministry of Defence had run out of money for these ships. We were never really given an acceptable answer from the Minister's Department. Indeed, Admiral Lord West pre-empted the MOD response by expressing the opinion that any contention by the MOD that the problems were principally with the design would be "economical with the actualité".

Today I will go even further than Lord West and ask the Minister specifically to address the concerns that have been put to me that the scandal of the lack of any timetable for construction of the Type 26 actually masks a wider problem of a continuing lack of investment in the Clyde yards, putting their long-term future at risk and jeopardising the jobs and skills of thousands of workers at Govan and Scotstoun.

In the lead-up to the announcement of the plans for the Type 26 programme, the workers at those two yards were offered a clear quid pro quo. There would be a

significant restructuring in the workforce, including job losses, but that would be offset by investments that would guarantee jobs for a generation. At the height of the referendum on Scottish independence, the Minister's Department explicitly tied that investment to the no vote. There would be 13 Type 26 frigates built on the Clyde, in a brand new "frigate factory", to protect the workers from the west of Scotland's rather inclement weather.

When we heard last November in the strategic defence and security review that the number of Type 26s being built would be reduced still further, trade unions told my Scottish National party colleagues—and others, I am sure—that that was not a huge concern, because the infrastructure investment for building the Type 26 would ensure that the new general-purpose frigate would also be built on the Clyde. So the Clyde waited—and waited, and waited—until the planned date for the cutting of steel came and went, until it emerged that there was a £750 million gap in infrastructure investment and until it became clear that the UK Government were rubber-earring our questions about the GPF being built on the Clyde.

This is a tale of underinvestment and neglect, and I can relate to it. Perhaps—just perhaps—this is a deliberate Tory strategy, and one that has form on the Clyde. The Minister may not remember the names of former Ministers; on these Benches, we will not forget one: that of Nicholas Ridley. When Jimmy Reid, the late patriot, presented the Ridley letters, which were written in 1969, to the Scottish Trade Union Congress, they proved that the Tory Government had outrageously planned the closure of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders. By their inaction, this Government are following a well-trodden path in this regard. The Tories are making a political decision, rather than a strategic one.

In the context of current naval investment, the delay in building these vessels could be seen as excusable if there was an understanding that the ministerial promises to the highly skilled and dedicated workforce of these yards would be upheld. The fact is that these workers and my colleagues are all listening with increasing concern to the Government's deafening silence on the subject of the GPF, and although we appreciate that there is a shipbuilding strategy to come in November, the MOD must at least give reassurances before then.

However, even as workers on the Clyde work outside in all weathers, the Government have not been slow in coming through with investment elsewhere. In Barrow, those workers who are working on the multi-billion pound Successor programme to Trident are being kept dry by the Government investment there, which includes an indoor assembly hall. There could be no better illustration of my contention that every penny spent on Trident is a penny less spent on conventional defence. Trident costs have not always been part of the MOD budget, but now that they are, the Government's intention to ring-fence the MOD budget and other budgets has led us to this inescapable conclusion.

It may not come as a surprise to hear that me say that, as I am a member of the Scottish National party, but I am echoing the assessment made by General Sir Richard Shirref in front of the Defence Committee last year, and the assessment of General Sir Richard Barrons, which was revealed in the *Financial Times* in September. Vital capabilities such as the Type 26 have been "withered by design", as a result of the MOD

priorities that place unusable weapons of mass destruction above the defence of the state. “Preserving the shop window” means workers on the Clyde worry about their job security as vital infrastructure investment is kept to a bare minimum.

I will end my opening speech by reiterating the two questions that I hope the Minister will address. First, how will the UK Government address the worrying gaps in national security caused by the ongoing failure of the MOD to build the Type 26 on time? Secondly, will the Minister give the workers of the Clyde a timetable for construction of the Type 26 and address their concerns about the total and complete lack of investment in infrastructure to support the GPF, which would guarantee their job security beyond the medium term? I await the Minister’s answer; they await the Minister’s answer.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The guideline for Front-Bench responses is five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Therefore, I will call the Front-Bench spokespersons no later than 5.07 pm. Mr Docherty-Hughes will have three minutes to sum up the debate at the very end. The time between now and 5.07 pm is for Back Benchers.

4.46 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Hollobone.

First, I thank the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) for setting the scene, and for expressing his concerns, needs and wishes regarding shipbuilding in his own constituency and across Scotland. These issues are very important for us all—each and every one of us. I declare an interest, as I am a Member of the Defence Committee, as indeed are a significant number of the Members who are here in Westminster Hall today.

It is a pleasure to speak on an issue that is of great interest. Indeed, the Defence Committee is holding an inquiry on naval procurement, including the procurement of the Type 26s, as it really is a matter of great importance.

The hon. Gentleman outlined the importance of the construction of the Type 26 for jobs first of all, but also for the security of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As I always say, and I say again now, we are better together. It is a real pleasure to speak on this issue and to put that marker down as well. I am very fond of my colleagues from the Scottish National party who surround me; I look upon them as friends and it is good to come along and contribute to a debate that interests them, interests me and interests this House.

There is a reason why we are world-renowned for our Navy—it is because we get the best. To get the best, we must put in the best, as well, and ensure that the Navy’s equipment is up to date and, more importantly, up to scratch. The Government plan to spend some £19 billion over the next decade on surface ships for the Royal Navy and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service. On page four of the Library briefing for this debate—I commend the background guys for the work that they have done; the information in the briefing is excellent—it says:

“The Strategy is intended to place UK warship shipbuilding on a sustainable longterm footing”.

That was said by a Defence Minister, Earl Howe, in September.

In November 2014, the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), who was the Minister responsible for defence procurement at the time—by the way, he was an excellent Minister and the meetings we had with him were always very positive and helpful—said that complex warships for the Royal Navy were only built in UK shipyards.

There is also a particular comment in the Library briefing that I love, namely, that we must maintain

“a ‘steady drum-beat’ of orders”,

which the Library briefing says

“is often mentioned by those following the Navy’s acquisition programme.”

Those are some of the comments that I have taken from the Library briefing.

A substantial portion of this planned work will be for the Navy’s new fleet of frigates. The remainder is divided between money that has already been committed to completing the new aircraft carriers, offshore patrol vessels and tanker ships, and maintenance and support for in-service equipment. Clearly, there is a commitment to the British fleet and to the Royal Navy, and we want to make sure that that continues. It is my desire, and it was the desire of the former Minister, the hon. Member for Ludlow, to see the new British fleet built in Britain. As we have said, we are marching to the steady drumbeat of orders, and that must be the way we move.

We are renowned in Northern Ireland for shipbuilding, through Harland and Wolff. Many Members will know that; I am not sure where those who do not know it have been living. I have heard many jokes about the Titanic, and all I have to say is this: it was fine when it left Belfast. Joking aside, we have the ability within the United Kingdom to build our own fleet, and that must be a priority. We must ensure that the Royal Navy’s replacement of the current 13-strong frigate fleet, which will begin to leave service in 2023, is manufactured on our shores. We need that commitment, and I believe that the Minister will give us it—I wait eagerly for her response and I thank her for being here.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): It has been nice to hear that shipbuilding is important not only to Scotland but to Northern Ireland, England and Wales. In my constituency, I have David Brown Gear Systems Ltd. The company used to make tractors and owned Aston Martin—the DB9—and it now makes the gears for propulsion systems. I thank the hon. Gentleman for saying that the matter covers all elements of our United Kingdom shipbuilding and, like him, I look forward to hearing from the Minister about the wonderful Type 26.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for clearly underlining the great experience and talent we have across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in building, creating and manufacturing things that can be to our benefit.

Oliver Colvile: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, although the Titanic may have left from his province, the passengers came back to Plymouth? We in Devonport are really looking forward to welcoming the Type 26s if, as we hope, they are base-ported down in Plymouth.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman has a passion for the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines. I know that from his interventions in discussions and from the comments he makes.

I am given to understand that there is a delay with the frigate fleet, but we must not and cannot cut the number of Type 26 frigates and opt for a new, cheaper, general purpose frigate. Will the Minister confirm that we will have the frigate we wish to have and not a cheaper one? I return to my original point—to be the best we must have the best. We have an industry that can and will make the ships to the highest of standards, to keep our Royal Navy in a position where it is effective and ready, and we have an industry that is crying out for the work. Those two needs can and should go hand in hand. As the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) said, we have a high quality of workmanship across the whole of the United Kingdom.

I would of course wish for Harland and Wolff to have its share of any work that can be carried out. That is natural, having grown up as I did, with men around me going to the shipyard for their day's work. I can remember as a boy—and that was not yesterday—many people from my constituency going to Harland and Wolff. The manufacturing base we had in Northern Ireland was certainly one of the best. However, what is most important for me is that the ships are built to meet the needs of the Royal Navy and that they are not pared back to suit cost analysing.

I have spoken out often—some may say loudly on occasion—against the paring back of any of our armed forces, and many in this Chamber do likewise. We should be under no illusion: the Royal Navy provides us with a security that is as necessary today as it ever has been. In the armed forces all-party group we go to dinners and hear speeches on behalf of the Royal Navy and we are always impressed by what we see and hear and by the efficient, modern, up-to-scratch Royal Navy that can combat any in the world. As a nation that might not be labelled as “at war” but is certainly instrumental in international peacekeeping, it is essential that we look to our future and ensure that we have a Navy that can defend as well in 20 years' time as it can now.

I again thank the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire for raising the issue. Although I understand—I may have got it wrong—that he is putting down the marker for where ships are made, I am putting down the marker to ensure that they are, in fact, made, and to the specifications that are needed. Although we want to keep shipbuilders busy, that is not why the order was placed. It was placed because we need the frigates—it as simple as that. That was determined in 2010 and, if anything, our need for an up-to-date and modern Navy has only intensified since then. Let us keep the shipbuilders in business by ensuring that everything is built on our shores but, more importantly, let us keep our shipbuilders and shores safe by giving the Royal Navy the tools that are needed to do that. The well-known saying, “You get what you pay for”, has merit; we need the best and it needs to be paid for. Let us ensure that the autumn statement reflects that need and the action that must be taken.

I look forward to the Minister's response, and I hope that she can convince us all and give us the confidence that the Type 26 frigates are the ones that will be here for the future. If that is the case, this will have been a good debate.

4.55 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. As the Member who has the privilege of representing the Govan shipyards, it is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) for securing it.

There remain a number of questions to be asked this afternoon, but possibly the simplest one can best be described as: does eight plus five equal 13? That is important, in understanding the history of where we are. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire highlighted, the history started before the independence referendum, with promises of 13 Type 26 frigates. Last November, at the strategic defence and security review, we were given the assurance: “It's okay. There won't be 13 Type 26 frigates; there'll be eight Type 26 frigates and five light, general purpose ones.” There is nothing to worry about, was the message given to the workforce on the Clyde. I ask that simple question because I know that the workforce on the Clyde and the trade unions are frustrated by and worried about the delays in the timetable for the Type 26. The original date for cutting steel was May 2016; it would be useful if the Minister could give reasons for the delay in the procurement. Despite 15 written questions, I have received no meaningful answers.

Bob Stewart: I do not think we need the Minister to answer that. The answer is that we had no money; that is why we had to cut down the number of Type 26 ships. [*Interruption.*] We did not have the money, and we have to cut our coat to suit our cloth.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman may say that, and I may come on to that point, but the Government have never confirmed that that is the reason for the delay, and it would be useful if they were to say that today. If he is correct that there was a lack of money, I am sure that there are Committees and hon. Members in the House who would want to ask what happened with the money.

Lord West suggested to the Defence Committee that the defence budget for shipbuilding was spent. In answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), he said:

“Shall I tell you what the problem is? Notwithstanding having said how much extra money there is for defence, in the near years there is not. There is almost no extra money available this year, and we are really strapped next year. The Government aren't coming clean about that. I think if they did, people would understand.”

In answer to further questions, he outlined that delays can be costly in the long run. In response to the Chair of the Committee, he said:

“Every delay costs you money. These delays all cost money. You need a steady drumbeat of orders to keep high-tech industries going. Our complex surface warship building industry, like the submarine one, needs a steady drumbeat of orders.”

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about the drumbeat and the starting point for the project. Is it not one of the key concerns that, even when the project starts, if the drumbeat is extended and

the length of time for the completion of each ship is extended, by the nature of that equation, fewer workers will be needed?

Chris Stephens: That concern is felt not only by my hon. Friends, but by me and, crucially, the trade unions and workforce on the Clyde. What economic impact assessment has been carried out on delaying the Type 26 frigates? We know from an excellent report by the Fraser of Allander Institute, which was commissioned by GMB Scotland, that the two BAE yards at Govan and Scotstoun directly employ a total of 2,723 people. More than 1,000 of them, men and women, are skilled tradespersons. I am delighted that there has been an increase in women apprentices and women workers highly involved in high-tech industry. The report estimates that the two yards in Glasgow support a total of 5,943 jobs and, through that, £162.7 million of wages across Scotland as a whole. Returning to my original “eight plus five” question, will the Minister confirm whether the general purpose frigates will also be built on the Clyde, as confirmed by the former Prime Minister in the strategic defence and security review in November 2015?

We know that a national shipbuilding strategy will be announced soon. I am looking forward to that, when it comes, but I reiterate that we should not underestimate the frustrations of the workforce. They want to build ships. They want a long-term future for the Clyde that will begin with cutting steel for Type 26 frigates. I look forward to the Minister’s response to my questions.

5.1 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on securing this important debate, and I echo his call for the UK Government to come clean on when work will start on the Type 26 programme. He put forward the compelling case that what we are witnessing has all the hallmarks of another sorry tale of under-investment, neglect and broken promises to workers on the Clyde.

The workers on the Clyde have no better champion than my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), and he was absolutely correct when he pointed out that in the run-up to the 2014 referendum on independence, we were promised that if we remained within the United Kingdom, there would be 13 new Type 26 frigates. That was unequivocal. That was the figure we were told. However, fast-forward barely a year, and in the 2015 SDSR, that figure was reduced to eight, alongside a vague, unwritten promise of five light frigates.

Steven Paterson: To back up my hon. Friend, I have a leaflet that was put around by the Labour party during the referendum campaign. It states, unequivocally:

“Within the UK Govan and Scotstoun will get the order for 13 Type-26 frigates from the Royal Navy.”

What does he make of that?

Brendan O’Hara: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. It is one of many broken promises that I am sure will not be forgotten.

Ian Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O’Hara: I will. I thought the hon. Gentleman might want to intervene on this point.

Ian Murray: I am sorry that the cross-party consensus on such an important issue has been so inelegantly broken, but will the hon. Gentleman tell the House how many frigates would have been built had people voted yes in 2014?

Brendan O’Hara: Had the hon. Gentleman been in his place at the start of the debate, he would have seen that there was cross-party consensus. We were being very consensual. The Scottish people and the Scottish workforce have been betrayed by the Government. The hon. Gentleman would do well to focus on the Government and their betrayal, rather than attacking people who are defending Scottish workers.

With the old Type 23 frigates being withdrawn from service in 2023, the Type 26 programme had to start in early 2015, but the manufacturing of the eight ships will now not begin until the summer of 2017 at the earliest, with at least one union convener saying that it will not begin until 2018. That is a delay of at least two years, and possibly three. As we have heard, the lesson from all defence procurement deals is that if there are delays, costs will always increase.

What is the reason for the delay? Is it that the Government think that we no longer need Type 26s? That is not the case. As Peter Roberts, a senior research fellow at the Royal United Service Institute, said, the Government are talking about

“a level of Russian submarine activity that we have not seen since the 1980s... That poses a significant threat for the UK”.

If the delay is not on the grounds of national security, and it is not a strategic decision, it can only be based on cost. Perhaps Lord West of Spithead, the former First Sea Lord, was absolutely right when he said that “there is not enough money in the MOD”

to start construction. He said that before Brexit, and he could say it with bells on now.

Despite the Minister’s protestations that the “national shipbuilding strategy... is not something that is affected by the outcome of the referendum”,

we all know that if prices are denominated in dollars, costs will soar.

When the Secretary of State for Defence came to the House on 27 June—the first day the House sat after the EU referendum—he said that he was

“not prepared to sign a contract with BAE Systems until I am absolutely persuaded that it is in the best interests of the taxpayer”.— [Official Report, 12 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 592.]

Are we to assume that that was mere coincidence? The hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) got it absolutely right when he said that the project has been delayed because the Government have run out of money. They have run out of money because they have committed far too much of their procurement budget to Trident. It would be an unforgivable betrayal of the Clyde workers if they were the ones who had to pay not only the price of Brexit, but the price of Trident, which has been ring-fenced within defence procurement. Once again, it appears that the Government are prepared to sacrifice our conventional defence capabilities to their obsession with Trident and nuclear weapons. I look forward to the Minister letting me know about that.

[Brendan O'Hara]

If there is not a lack of will and there is sufficient money, prove us wrong and give us a start date. The workers on the Clyde have had far too many broken promises. An important supply chain is at risk in the defence manufacturing sector. We need confirmation that the five general purpose frigates will also be built on the Clyde. I would appreciate it if the Minister addressed that point in her remarks. The work needs to start now. The workers on the Clyde have been betrayed too often. Will the Minister break that chain of betrayal and let-down? Give us a date for when work on the Type 26 programme will start.

5.8 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. It has been said that confusion and muddle have been the hallmark of the Government's approach towards naval shipbuilding in recent years. Nowhere is that lack of clarity more in evidence than when it comes to the construction of frigates.

The Navy has 13 Type 23 frigates. As we have heard, there was a strong suggestion in the 2010 strategic defence and security review that 13 Type 26 frigates should be constructed in place of those 13 Type 23 frigates. We were told that manufacturing of those new frigates would begin in 2015-16, but the 2015 SDSR cut the number from 13 to eight. At that time, the Government gave a weak commitment to building at least five new general purpose frigates, possibly more. They have yet to agree a manufacturing date with BAE Systems for the Type 26 frigates, and the demonstration phase on those frigates was extended in March 2016 by a further year. At the same time, BAE Systems has been building three offshore patrol vessels, and the Government plan to have two more of those. That general factual background leads to a number of key questions that have been touched on in the debate, and that I want to underline.

First, with regard to timescale, if the Government do not give the go-ahead and the date for the cutting of steel is not before summer next year, the production trades will have almost finished manufacturing work on those offshore patrol vessel programmes, and will have no work to carry on with. In other words, there will be a hiatus. The trade skills that are required for the construction of the offshore patrol vessels will be lost and will not be able to be deployed other than at significant cost, with more delays and more training. It is important that the Government come clean; they must have some idea of the start date, and I hope that the Minister will tell us when that will be.

The second question is again on the issue of skills and the dovetailing that will be necessary between the Type 26 programme and the programme for the general purpose frigates. The trade unions have pointed out that as the Type 26 programme design phase is decreasing, the ship designers will need another programme to work on, so we need specifics from the Government on the general purpose frigate programme as well. What is the Government's intention in that regard?

Thirdly, we have already seen delay—hopefully there will not be more—but what does that mean for the existing Type 23 frigates? The Government have said that there is to be no extension of their lifespan. Is that

still the case? I have been told that the Type 23 frigates have already exceeded their original design life. If they are kept in service, there are implications for the Navy, in terms of fulfilling the requirements that those frigates meet.

The final question is on cost, and clarity would be desirable here. As we have heard, there have been suggestions that because of the Government's continuing austerity programme and the hardening of cuts, it is becoming increasingly expensive for them to make real their previous commitments. Admiral Sir Philip Jones, the First Sea Lord and head of the Navy, suggested that when he told MPs on the Select Committee that one problem is the cost of designing quiet ships; the technology is far more expensive than was originally envisaged. That may or may not be the case, but what is very important, on that and on the other issues raised this afternoon, is that we have clarity and certainty from the Government.

Chris Stephens: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that delays have an economic impact, and not just on Govan, Scotstoun or Scotland? There is a wider economic impact. If there is a delay, that will mean a more expensive programme in the long run.

Wayne David: Broadly speaking, that is correct. There will certainly be excessive costs if the Type 23 frigates are required to stay in service beyond their natural design life. Also, with most programmes, and certainly with defence procurement programmes, the longer the programmes, the more the delay and the greater the costs. There is also an impact on the workforce, with greater uncertainty and greater job insecurity. On all these issues, what is required is, at the very least, clarity from the Government. I thank the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) very much for bringing forward this issue today.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): Let me start by saying what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on securing this debate and for providing me with the opportunity to update the House on this important subject.

The 2015 strategic defence and security review restated this Government's commitment to the Type 26 global combat ship programme. It was a positive strategic defence and security review for the Royal Navy, committing to an increase in the size of the service for the first time in a generation.

There has been a high level of interest in the programme since we announced our plans and I, along with ministerial colleagues, have consistently confirmed the Government's continuing commitment to it. Let me once again reiterate that commitment. The Type 26 global combat ships remain critical for the Royal Navy and nothing has changed since last year's strategic defence and security review. We are going ahead with eight anti-submarine warfare ships and all eight ships will be built at the BAE Systems shipyards on the Clyde.

We have backed up our commitment with significant investment as we continue to progress the Type 26 programme. We announced in March this year the award

of a contract with BAE Systems, valued at £472 million, to extend the Type 26 demonstration phase to June 2017, enabling us to continue work with industry to develop an optimised schedule for the programme to reflect the outcome of the strategic defence and security review; to mature further the detailed ship design ahead of the start of manufacture; to invest in shore testing facilities; and to extend our investment in the wider supply chain to cover almost all the equipment for the first three ships.

Wayne David: I welcome what the Minister has said, but it is worth pointing out that so far there is nothing new in it. Will she tell us when the manufacturing start date will be?

Harriett Baldwin: I did not say that in updating the House there would necessarily be anything new, but I do want to reiterate the commitments that I have previously made.

The work will benefit suppliers across the country, injecting an estimated £200 million into the UK supply chain and sustaining 1,600 high-quality jobs, an estimated 600 of which—more than a third—are in Scotland. From Loanhead in Midlothian, where the helicopter handling equipment will be built, to Fleet in Hampshire, where communications equipment will be developed; from Dunfermline in Fife, where the steering gear will be built, to Huddersfield in West Yorkshire, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney), where the gearboxes will be constructed—this investment is good news for UK industry. Furthermore, we announced in July the latest commitment of £183 million to buy the maritime indirect fires system—the five-inch gun—for the first three ships. That takes our total investment in the Type 26 programme so far to £1.8 billion, which is hard evidence not only of our commitment to the programme but of real progress in delivery.

Chris Stephens: Like the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), I am guessing that we are not going to get a date for cutting steel this afternoon. Is it the Ministry of Defence's intention to tell us the expected date for cutting steel on the Clyde before or after the autumn statement?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is going to get a lot of interesting stuff from me this afternoon, so he will have to sit on the edge of his seat as I speak. I will give the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire three minutes to sum up.

A key focus of this afternoon's questions has been the timetable for the programme and the building of the ships. The timing of the award of the build contract and the build schedule itself are key components of the ongoing commercial negotiations between the Government and BAE Systems. We are negotiating a deal that aims to optimise the Royal Navy's requirements, in terms of the capability that the ships will deliver; to achieve value for money for defence and the taxpayer; and to deliver a build schedule that drives performance by industry. Those negotiations are continuing, so I am not in a position to give a specific date for when an agreement will be reached. I am sure hon. Members will appreciate that, to protect the Ministry of Defence's commercial interests, disclosing any such detail would be inappropriate at this time.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): The Government have given assurances to Lockheed Martin and those working on the F-35s in Fort Worth in America right through to the end of 2030, but they are totally unable to do so to the workforce at BAE Systems in Scotstoun and Govan to the end of this decade. Surely there is a mismatch between their commitment to British workers and their commitment to those in America.

Harriett Baldwin: With the greatest respect, I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's statement. We have an incredibly ambitious shipbuilding programme in this country. In Scotland at the moment, we are building the two largest warships that the Royal Navy will ever take delivery of. The hon. Gentleman cannot complain in any way about the ambition of our shipbuilding programme in the Clyde; I do not accept that in any way, shape or form.

I want to touch on the national shipbuilding strategy, which was raised by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and others. I hope the assiduous Member for Strangford has had a chance to meet with Sir John Parker, who hails from Northern Ireland, as part of his review. He is a leading authority on naval shipbuilding and was appointed independent chair of the shipbuilding strategy. He will make his recommendations by the time of the autumn statement.

Jim Shannon: The Minister will be aware that Sir Mark Stanhope, the First Sea Lord of the Navy, attended the Defence Committee. He said that if we do not cut the steel soon, some very old frigates will be protecting brand new carriers and the strategic nuclear deterrent, and he warned that the Navy is in danger of not being able to fulfil all the requirements expected of it. The date is so important—can the Minister give it to us?

Harriett Baldwin: In answers to the House, we have disclosed the out-of-service dates for the existing Type 23 frigates. They are a matter of public record. Clearly, the acquisition of the Type 26 global combat ship will be crucial to the future of the UK's shipbuilding industry, and will form part of the national shipbuilding strategy. The Type 26 global combat ship will form a key component of the future maritime force, but last year's strategic defence and security review also considered more widely how it will replace our current in-service frigates.

Hon. Members will be aware that there are currently 13 Type 23 frigates in service with the Royal Navy. The eight Type 26 global combat ships will be built to replace the current eight anti-submarine warfare Type 23 frigates on a one-for-one basis. The capability currently provided by the five general-purpose Type 23 frigates will be met by a new class of light, general-purpose frigate that will, by the 2030s, enable us to increase the overall number of frigates. The programme to take that commitment forward is in its pre-concept phase and is a key part of the national shipbuilding strategy. I look forward to receiving Sir John Parker's recommendations on taking the programme forward soon.

Brendan O'Hara: If the Minister is unable to give a date for when the steel will be cut on the Type 26s, will she at least confirm that the five general-purpose frigates will be built on the Clyde?

Harriett Baldwin: I have given the hon. Gentleman a range of dates for some of the commitments we have already made and some of the contracts we have already placed as a result of this programme, which sustain jobs across the UK.

The need to ensure we have the skills required to deliver Type 26 also came up in the debate. That is an essential factor in the successful delivery of the programme and is crucial to our strategic aim of placing UK shipbuilding on a sustainable long-term footing.

In the interests of time, I will quickly skip through the issue of offshore patrol vessels. We are looking forward to the delivery of HMS Forth—a ship of that class—next year, and HMS Medway and HMS Trent remain on track.

It is important to put the Type 26 programme in its wider context. Overall, last year's SDSR achieved a positive and balanced outcome. We are growing the defence budget in real terms for the first time in six years and delivering on our commitment to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence. The SDSR enables us to invest £178 billion in new equipment for our armed forces over the next decade, an increase of £12 billion on previous plans. In the maritime sector, we have set the trajectory for expansion of the Royal Navy's frigate fleet as we spend about £8 billion on Royal Navy surface warships over the next decade.

As I have explained, we continue to progress the Type 26 global combat ship programme. Hon. Members with constituents who work at the shipyards on the Clyde rightly emphasised the importance of the Type 26 global combat ship programme to the workforce. In response to concerns expressed on their behalf, the Ministry of Defence has consistently restated its commitment to the programme and confirmed that all eight ships will be built on the Clyde. There should be no lingering doubt on that point or on the idea that Royal Navy vessels would be built on the Clyde had Scotland voted to leave the United Kingdom.

Chris Stephens: The Minister mentioned the national shipbuilding strategy, which has to report by the autumn statement. I am going to ask the question I asked earlier: does she expect an announcement on the procurement of Type 26 frigates by the autumn statement? That would be helpful for my constituents.

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is doing the right thing in representing the interests of his constituents. He is correct that the national shipbuilding strategy will report by the autumn statement.

Let me conclude, because I want to leave time for the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire. It is of crucial importance to the Royal Navy that the Type 26 programme delivers the capability it needs. Equally, for the taxpayer it is crucial to ensure the delivery of a programme that represents value for money for the scale of investment it represents.

5.27 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I thank all hon. Members who spoke in this debate, and I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their participation.

The Minister talked about good news, but this is good news with no timeframe. It is just talk—a footnote in *Hansard*. It is of no use to the communities of Govan and Scotstoun and those on the Clyde, whose families rely on the cutting of steel. The Minister talked about Scotland's place in the Union and said, critically, that no ships would have been built there if we had left the Union. At this rate, there will be no ships built anywhere in Britain, never mind in Scotland. We might just farm them out to South Korea—it would be a wee bit cheaper.

Yet again, there is grave concern across the Chamber. I accept the point of view of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). We may disagree on the constitution, but the history of shipbuilding in Belfast mirrors the history of shipbuilding on the Clyde. There is nothing about being better together, I am afraid. To those Members who look forward to HMNB Devonport housing the Type 26s, I say this: we need to get rid of the Type 45s first, and they are not working.

I again pressure the Minister, when the statement comes forward in November, to give us the date. Tell us when we are cutting steel. Let us get on with it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the timetable for building Type 26 frigates on the Clyde.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 18 October 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Cabinet Committees and Ministerial Responsibilities

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): Today the Government are publishing an updated list of Cabinet committees and implementation taskforces. It includes three new committees, chaired by the Prime Minister, to oversee this Government's strategic priorities and deliver our manifesto commitments.

The Economy and Industrial Strategy Committee will oversee the development of a new industrial strategy, ensuring that all parts of the country and all of our citizens see the benefits of economic growth; and will drive work to address the UK's longstanding productivity issues. The EU Exit and Trade Committee will oversee work to withdraw the UK from the European Union and develop a new relationship between the UK and the EU; and oversee our plans to promote the UK as a place to do business and trade with, drive inward investment, and, in time, negotiate trade agreements. The Social Reform Committee will oversee social policy reforms, and drive the Government's work to increase social mobility, deliver social justice, and make Britain a country that works for everyone, not just a privileged few.

These will sit alongside the National Security Council and the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee, which will continue to serve the same purpose as previously. The nine sub-committees announced today will support the process of collective agreement across Government. The list also includes details of seven implementation taskforces, which will monitor and drive delivery of important cross-cutting priorities.

An updated list of ministerial responsibilities has also been published today.

Copies of the associated documents will be placed in the Library of the House and published on: <http://www.gov.uk>. The list of ministerial responsibilities will also be sent to each hon. Member.

[HCWS196]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Supporting Troubled Families

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I am pleased to announce the publication of the "National Evaluation of the first Troubled Families Programme" which ran between 2012 and 2015.

The programme was set up in 2012 to work with a minimum of 116,000 families with multiple and complex problems who had previously been failed by services.

This evaluation reveals the true scale of families' problems, finding that families each had an average of seven serious social problems including issues of: drug and alcohol abuse; mental and physical health problems; domestic violence; debt; truancy; antisocial behaviour and unemployment.

Our own data show that more than 116,000 families on the programme saw their lives improve—more children attending school, youth crime and antisocial behaviour significantly cut and, in more than 18,000 cases, an adult holding down a job for three months or more.

The evaluation reports provide additional detail on how the programme benefited families. For example, in-depth interviews with the families found that they reported increased confidence as a result of the programme's intensive "whole family" help, which they rated as better than the services which had tried to intervene before.

The evaluation also finds that the programme helped improve and join up local services for families by encouraging a single key worker approach to work with the whole family on all of its problems.

There are also important lessons in the reports that are being taken on board for the new troubled families programme which will work with up to 400,000 more families by 2020.

A copy of the report will be placed in the Library of the House and also made available on the gov.uk website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-evaluation-of-the-first-troubled-families-programme>

[HCWS202]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species: 17th Conference

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The 17th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) took place in Johannesburg between 24 September and 5 October 2016. CITES is a vital international mechanism for protecting some of our most precious yet vulnerable global wildlife.

Having attended the conference, I can report it was a great success, delivering strong agreements to protect some of the world's most iconic species. I am pleased that much of this action was driven by the UK.

For example, the UK led negotiations on African lions which saw the trade in wild lion bones banned and the establishment of a new CITES taskforce.

We also chaired discussions on rhinos, resulting in investigative action into failures to halt rhino horn trafficking in key destinations. A proposal to allow trade in rhino horn was also rejected.

Perhaps most significantly, and in recognition of the peril facing many elephant populations, the conference voted against a resumption of trading in modern day ivory, in line with recent domestic UK action. There was also a clear direction to close national ivory markets where these fuel poaching and illegal trade and decisive action to strengthen national ivory action plans which help combat ivory trafficking in key markets.

In addition, global rules on hunting trophies were enhanced, with export permits now mandated for almost all species listed as endangered.

The many victories for global wildlife are too numerous to detail, with action also delivered for pangolins, as the world's most trafficked mammal, the African Grey Parrot and species of sharks amongst others.

Vitally, while CITES deals with the legal trade in species, illegal wildlife trade was also a strong focus, with agreements reached on increased global co-operation, and intelligence sharing to boost efforts to reduce demand for wildlife products and tackle corruption. This agreement is crucial as we look towards the Hanoi conference on the illegal wildlife trade which will bring together global leaders in November to push further action. Following on from the ground-breaking London Conference, the UK is providing funding and advice to Vietnam in hosting this latest conference, assuring the illegal wildlife trade's place at the top of the global political agenda and delivering on our manifesto pledge to continue to lead the world on this issue. The Secretary of State Andrea Leadsom will lead HMG's delegation to the conference, which will also be attended by HRH the Duke of Cambridge. Their presence at this vital time will show that the UK continues to be at the forefront of global action, pushing for an end to this brutal trade.

UK leadership in this area is clear. At home, we are tackling wildlife crime through our National Wildlife Crime Unit, which will receive £1.2 million of funding over the next four years. Abroad, the British military is delivering anti-poaching training to rangers in Gabon, home of Africa's largest population of forest elephants. We are also investing £13 million in projects around the world to support communities and boost law enforcement through our illegal wildlife trade challenge fund, including specialised interception tracking courses to protect rhino and elephant populations across sub-Saharan Africa.

Decisions made in recent weeks will have a real impact in safeguarding some of the world's most vulnerable species. The UK has been at the forefront of driving this and we will remain committed to protecting global wildlife for generations to come.

[HCWS198]

Hydrofluorocarbon Greenhouse Gases

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

I would like to update the House on the outcome of the recent United Nations Montreal protocol negotiations in Rwanda.

I am very pleased to report that a deal was agreed among the 197 parties to the protocol to phase down hydrofluorocarbon greenhouse gases (HFCs) over the next three decades.

The Montreal protocol, agreed in 1987, is already seen as one of the most successful environmental treaties ever agreed, having phased out 98% of the ozone depleting substances that would have caused major damage to human health, agriculture and the wider environment. That included chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) which were used in products such as refrigeration, air condition and aerosols. As a result, the ozone layer is showing the first signs of recovery.

The replacements for CFCs and HCFCs—hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs)—while not damaging the ozone layer, do still have a global warming potential thousands of times greater than carbon dioxide. The

growth of refrigeration and air conditioning in developing countries means HFC use could have amounted to as much as 11 % of global greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

HFC alternatives are increasingly available and the UK had, before this weekend's agreement, already taken the lead in committing to cut usage by 80% by 2030—amongst the most ambitious phase downs in the world. The deal in Rwanda means the rest of the world is now following suit, bringing major benefits for the climate and levelling the playing field for UK businesses.

It is estimated that this deal will reduce cumulative emissions by the equivalent of between 60 and 70 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2050, which equates to the output of around 600 coal fired power stations operating between now and 2050. In turn that is likely to avoid close to 0.5 degrees Celsius of global warming by the end of this century, making it possibly the single biggest step the world could have taken in achieving the Paris climate agreement goal of keeping temperatures well below 2 degrees.

The UK negotiating team played a central role in the discussions, influencing the strategy of like-minded countries to achieve an ambitious outcome and chairing the legal drafting group, which worked ceaselessly to turn the political agreement into legal text, then clarified and defended it through the final night of negotiations.

The key elements of the deal are as follows.

Developed countries will meet the following phase down commitment:

By 2019, production and consumption of HFCs will be reduced by 10% relative to the amount of HFCs produced or consumed in the years 2011 to 2013, plus an additional allowance of 15% of the baseline used for their phase out of HCFCs.

By 2024, the amount will be reduced by 40% and then by 70% by 2029, 80% by 2034 and finally 85% by 2036.

All developing countries, except India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, The United Arab Emirates, Iran and Iraq will meet the following phase down commitment:

By 2024, production and consumption of HFCs will be limited to 100% of the average amount of HFCs produced or consumed in the years 2020 to 2022, plus an additional allowance of 65% of the baseline used for their phase out of HCFCs.

By 2029, this amount will be reduced by 10% and then by 30% in 2035, 50% in 2040 and finally 80% by 2045.

Production and consumption established before 2020 will be eligible for financial support from developed countries to help with the transition to low global warming alternatives.

India Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, The United Arab Emirates, Iran and Iraq, will meet the following phase down commitment:

By 2028, production and consumption of HFCs will be limited to 100% of the average amount of HFCs produced or consumed in the years 2024 to 2026, plus an additional allowance of 65% of the baseline used for their phase out of HCFCs.

By 2032, this amount will be reduced by 10% and then by 20% in 2037, 30% in 2042 and finally 85% by 2047.

Production and consumption established before 2024 will be eligible for financial support from developed countries to help with the transition to low global warming alternatives.

Certain Gulf countries and others with high average temperatures will be able to exempt large scale air-conditioning from the phase down requirements if they believe suitable alternatives are not available for their climates.

There will be a review of the availability of technologies which use alternatives to HFCs in 2022 and every five years thereafter to inform any necessary adjustments to the phase down schedule. There will also be a review four to five years before 2028 specifically to consider whether those countries which have to cap HFC production and use by 2028 need a compliance deferral of two years due to faster HFC growth than anticipated.

[HCWS197]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

1980 Hague Convention on Child Abduction

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Government have decided to opt in to the European Commission's proposals for the acceptance by the member states, in the interests of the EU, of the accession of Kazakhstan, Peru and the Republic of Korea to the 1980 Hague Convention on the civil aspects of international child abduction.

All EU member states are party to the 1980 Hague Convention, the primary civil law international instrument which provides a mechanism to seek the prompt return of wrongfully removed or retained children to their country of habitual residence.

When a country wishes to accede to the convention, it is necessary for an existing contracting state to accept that country's accession before the convention can apply between them. It is the European Commission's view that there is exclusive competence on the EU for all matters relating to the 1980 Convention and that therefore member states must be authorised by the EU to accept accessions by third countries and must do so collectively through Council decisions.

Although not anticipated in the proposals, the Government believe that the UK opt-in under the protocol to Title V of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union applies and they have therefore asserted their right to choose whether to opt-in and have decided that it is in the UK's best interests to do so.

The Government have taken this decision notwithstanding the fact that they dispute the Commission's claim to exclusive competence.

The Government believe that the wider significance of these proposals for external competence mean that it is in the UK's interests to participate fully in these negotiations, including having the ability to vote. These proposals must be agreed by unanimity within the EU Council.

[HCWS201]

OSCE Informal Ministerial Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) attended an informal meeting of Foreign Ministers of participating states of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), held in Potsdam, Germany on 1 September 2016 at the invitation of German Foreign Minister and OSCE chair-in-office, Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Nearly all 57 OSCE states were represented, around 40 of these by their Foreign Ministers.

Foreign Minister Steinmeier called the meeting to discuss both current security challenges in the region and the OSCE's future role and agenda. A number of common themes emerged over the course of the meeting. Many Foreign Ministers, like the Foreign Secretary, highlighted resolution of the crisis in Ukraine, and restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty as the most pressing priority for the OSCE. Strong support for the work of the OSCE's special monitoring mission (SMM) was evident, with the chair-in-office leading many speakers in condemning the obstruction of SMM operations and intimidation of monitors.

As well as conflict prevention and resolution, other themes that emerged as high priorities for many OSCE participating states were protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and reducing the risk of military accidents and incidents. A strong desire was evident on the part of most states to restore respect for OSCE principles and commitments, many referring to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and military intervention in the Donbas in this context.

On the eve of the Potsdam meeting, Foreign Minister Steinmeier published proposals relating to conventional arms control in Europe. Updating existing confidence and security building measures in this field is a UK priority and, we believe, is needed urgently to reduce the risk of military accidents and incidents. We will continue to work closely with Germany and other partners to push for such modernisation as well as for respect for the spirit and letter of these instruments. Implementation of all commitments is a prerequisite for building trust and restoring confidence between the participating states of the OSCE.

In the margins of the Potsdam meeting the Foreign Secretary had many bilateral meetings and conversations. These included exchanges with his Ukrainian and Polish counterparts, and with OSCE secretary-general, Lamberto Zannier. He expressed strong UK support for the work of the OSCE's autonomous institutions when he met Michael Link, director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and Dunja Mijatovic, the representative on freedom of the media. In his various meetings the Foreign Secretary commended the Baroness Falkner of Margravine, the UK candidate to head the OSCE's third autonomous institution, the High Commission on National Minorities.

In this first encounter as Foreign Secretary with the OSCE, the Foreign Secretary noted the potential, as yet not fully tapped, of the organisation's uniquely comprehensive approach to security and a participation that reaches from Canada to central Asia. The discussions in Potsdam helped clarify priorities for the coming weeks, months and years. We now need to focus our efforts on tackling them together with robust determination.

[HCWS200]

Relations between the UK and Argentina

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I would like to update the House on the current state of relations between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Argentina following my recent visit to Buenos Aires.

After more than a decade of difficult relations under Argentina's previous Government, the election of President Macri in November 2015 paved the way for an improvement

in our relationship. It is in the UK's interests to strengthen ties with Argentina. Argentina is the world's 25th largest economy and has considerable natural resources. A more constructive relationship will enhance the UK's prosperity.

Since December the Government have taken positive steps towards resetting our relationship by focusing on areas where both states can benefit. The Prime Minister has committed to move our relationship with Argentina into a more productive phase.

During my visit to Buenos Aires—the first by a Foreign Office Minister since 2009—I agreed an historic UK-Argentina joint statement establishing closer co-operation across our bilateral relationship. This includes ambitions to: increase trade links; identify new investment opportunities; strengthen cultural ties; co-operate in the fight against corruption and organised crime; and increase links in the fields of science and technology.

Our position on the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands remains unchanged. The UK will always support the right of the Falkland Islanders to determine their own future.

The joint statement secured important benefits for the Falkland Islanders. We committed to work together on areas of mutual interest in the South Atlantic. Argentina agreed to take appropriate measures to remove any obstacles limiting the economic growth and sustainable development of the Falkland Islands, including in trade, fishing, shipping and oil and gas. We also agreed that Falkland Islanders are free to set up further flight connections with other countries in the region, with a monthly stopover in Argentina. Both sides expressed support for the recently confirmed project to use DNA examination to identify the remains of unknown Argentine soldiers buried in the Falkland Islands.

The Government will explore ways to build on these positive first steps and consider how the UK can best maximise the opportunities offered by an improved relationship with Argentina.

[HCWS199]

Petition

Tuesday 18 October 2016

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor
Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of Rothwell and Elmet,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of

women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Alec Shelbrooke.]*

[P001954]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 18 October 2016

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE	651	FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE—	
Aleppo Bombings	659	<i>continued</i>	
EU Referendum	655	Syria.....	658
Iraq	662	Syria.....	664
Italian Passports	665	Topical Questions	668
Kashmir	651	Trade with Africa	661
Russian Federation	653	Yemen	666
Somalia	659		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 18 October 2016

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	27WS	ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—	
Cabinet Committees and Ministerial Responsibilities	27WS	<i>continued</i>	
COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ..	27WS	Hydrofluorocarbon Greenhouse Gases.....	29WS
Supporting Troubled Families.....	27WS		
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	28WS	FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE	31WS
Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species: 17th Conference.....	28WS	1980 Hague Convention on Child Abduction	31WS
		OSCE Informal Ministerial Council	31WS
		Relations between the UK and Argentina	32WS

PETITION

Tuesday 18 October 2016

	<i>Col. No.</i>
PRESENTED PETITION	9P
Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts	9P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned, and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Tuesday 25 October 2016**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Tuesday 18 October 2016

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 651] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

Liberation of Mosul [Col. 675]
Answer to urgent question—(Sir Michael Fallon)

National Health Service Staff (Reporting and Registration) [Col. 691]
*Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Bill Wiggin)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time*

Broadcasting [Col. 694]
*Motion—(Karen Bradley)
Amendment—(John Nicolson)—on a Division, negatived
Motion agreed to*

Petitions [Col. 771]

Yemen [Col. 773]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Concentrix: Tax Credit Claimants [Col. 239WH]
Earlier Cancer Diagnosis: NHS Finances [Col. 264WH]
Healthcare (Devon) [Col. 272WH]
Environmental Protection [Col. 295WH]
Type 26 Frigates: Clyde [Col. 303WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 27WS]

Petition [Col. 9P]
Presented Petition

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
