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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 30 November 2016**

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# House of Commons

*Wednesday 30 November 2016*

*The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### WALES

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Leaving the EU

1. **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the Welsh economy.

[907479]

8. **Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his Cabinet colleagues on the potential effect on the Welsh economy of the UK leaving the EU.

[907486]

**The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns):** The Welsh economy approaches EU exit from a very strong position. Since the vote to leave the EU we have seen economic inactivity continue to fall in Wales while employment has risen to a record high. Businesses continue to show confidence in the economy, with new investment across the UK fundamental to prosperity in Wales.

**Margaret Ferrier:** Wealth inequality in the British state hits Wales hard, with Welsh gross value added just scraping 71.4% of the UK average. EU structural funds have been key to combating this home-grown unfairness. Will the Minister guarantee today continued future UK funding to replace in full the lost EU regional money?

**Alun Cairns:** The hon. Lady raises an important issue, and I would say that Wales has been the fastest growing part of the UK outside London since 2010. She makes an important point in relation to the future of structural funds. She will also appreciate that they are meant to be a short-term boost to the economy, but after 16 years and £4 billion has been spent, west Wales and the valleys have 64% of UK GVA. I am sure we need to use this opportunity to be positive and do something better with similar structural support.

**Wayne David:** Does the Secretary of State's answer to that last question imply the Government intend to change the agreed priorities for the spending of the structural funds?

**Alun Cairns:** The hon. Gentleman will appreciate both that his constituency has experienced some significant falls in unemployment since 2010 and that after all that money has been spent those areas voted in the strongest numbers to leave the EU. The point I am making is that

the current programme has not worked and has not fitted those communities. Exiting the EU presents an ideal opportunity to revisit this and look to see what we can do better for the hon. Gentleman's constituency and other communities in Wales in need.

**David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the people of Wales voted clearly for Brexit and they do not need to be represented by the SNP or the Welsh Assembly Government who are ignoring their views, but will be pleased to have a Conservative Government and an excellent Secretary of State for Wales who will carry out their wishes?

**Alun Cairns:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind comments, but of course we have a close and constructive working relationship with the Welsh Government and all devolved Administrations because it is in our interests to get the strongest deal for the whole of the UK. After all, as my hon. Friend will recognise, the most important market for Welsh business is the UK market and getting the best deal for the whole of the UK is in all our interests.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The automotive and aerospace sectors are of enormous strategic importance for the Welsh economy. Given that Brexit probably will not mean retaining full membership of the single market, will my right hon. Friend nevertheless commit to do everything he can to retain full single market-style benefits for those critically important sectors in the Welsh economy?

**Alun Cairns:** My right hon. Friend raises an important point. He recognises the strength of the automotive and aerospace sectors, and I would point to some significant major investments the UK has landed. We are all familiar with Nissan investment in Sunderland, but it is equally important to the Welsh economy—Calsonic Kansei in Llanelli is a supplier to Nissan in Sunderland. We want to maintain the most open market arrangements, and the confidence shown by Nissan demonstrates it understands the priority we are placing on that.

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): This week Hybu Cig Cymru, the Farmers' Union of Wales and NFU Cymru have all made the overwhelming case in favour of tariff-free access to the EU for our world-class Welsh red meat. What is the Minister doing to ensure the voice of agriculture is heard in government?

**Alun Cairns:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point and the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), was at the winter fair in Bwlth Wells yesterday in Llanellwedd where he met the FUW and the NFU. We are in close dialogue with the farming unions in Wales and across the whole of the UK. Clearly Welsh agriculture is an important part of the Welsh economy and of our export market, and we want to maintain the most open trading relationship possible in its interest.

**Hywel Williams:** Welsh agriculture is spectacularly successful in EU markets; 93% of our excellent Welsh beef and lamb exports go to EU countries. What steps

is the Secretary of State taking to ensure French, Italian, Spanish and German people continue to eat Welsh meat in the future?

**Alun Cairns:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I too want to ensure that those across the European Union and elsewhere have the opportunity to benefit from the excellent produce that comes from Wales, including Welsh beef and Welsh lamb. We want to be global leaders in free trade. We also want the most open trading relationship with Europe that we can possibly get, and that is our determination and focus in our negotiations.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): I ran a manufacturing business in south Wales for 13 years, and it is a great place to do business. We manufactured and sold all over the world. Does the Secretary of State agree that the fall in the pound as a result of the Brexit vote makes it much easier for Welsh exporters to increase their sales?

**Alun Cairns:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, because it gives me the opportunity to highlight the fact that Wales now has 37,000 more manufacturing jobs than in 2010. That demonstrates the strength and vibrancy of the Welsh economy. Clearly we want to do all we can to support our manufacturers. The value of the pound will have positive results for some businesses and perhaps present challenges for others, but those exporters who want to grow are clearly in a stronger position.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State referred earlier to the importance of the automotive industry in Wales. Ford announced in September that it would guarantee around a third of the jobs in its 1,800-strong workforce at Bridgend. Those jobs are vital to the local community and to the supply chain in Wales, but we are still concerned about the lack of commitment post-2020. The lack of any plan from the Government for Brexit is exacerbating the uncertainty and causing doubts about the plant's future, so will the Secretary of State today commit his Government to giving Ford the same deal that they gave to Nissan in order to secure the future of the Bridgend plant and Ford's presence in the UK post-Brexit?

**Alun Cairns:** The hon. Lady has raised an important point. My understanding of the situation is that Ford is continuing with more than £100 million-worth of new investment in the plant. That demonstrates the confidence that Ford has, not only in the Bridgend plant but in the UK economy. This builds on the strength of the automotive sector, which is extremely important to the Welsh economy and to the UK economy as a whole.

3. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on foreign investment in Wales.  
[907481]

**The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns):** The Welsh economy remains fundamentally strong, highly competitive and open for business. We are part of a strong United Kingdom, and leaving the EU offers Wales an unprecedented opportunity to forge a new

role for ourselves in the world, to negotiate our own trade agreements and to reap the benefits of foreign investment.

**Alex Cunningham:** What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the First Minister about the potential loss of links and connections that have been built up through organisations such as the European Committee of the Regions, and how will he seek to maintain those connections after Brexit?

**Alun Cairns:** The Welsh Government and I have a warm working relationship. Only last week, two Secretaries of State and two other Ministers met at the British-Irish Council that took place in my own constituency of the Vale of Glamorgan. Of course we have strong bilateral relationships, and it is right that we use the Joint Ministerial Council to form the basis of the negotiations as we exit the European Union. I want to maintain the warmest and most constructive relationship possible with the Welsh Government, with all the devolved Administrations and with the Crown dependencies.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): But does my right hon. Friend accept that this is not just about manufacturing, and that it is not only the exporters of Welsh Black beef who are important? One of the biggest exports for Wales is tourism. People tell me that, with the lower value of the pound, there are more foreign visitors in Snowdonia than ever before and that overseas companies are making more inward investment in Welsh hotels and marketing.

**Alun Cairns:** My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. Wales has a fantastic record of attracting inward investment projects. He has focused on tourism, which gives me the opportunity to highlight the fact that north Wales has been named by Lonely Planet as the fourth top place in the world to visit in 2017. It is the only part of the United Kingdom to have been chosen, and that is something that we should celebrate and market to ensure that more people come not only to the UK but to north Wales.

**Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): Inward investment is a key driver of decisions to invest in particular areas, and the manufacturing powerhouse of north-east Wales needs inward investment not only from the private sector but from the Government. Will the Secretary of State put his money where his mouth is and commit the UK Government to matching Welsh Government investment in new infrastructure, including road and rail, in north-east Wales?

**Alun Cairns:** The hon. Gentleman shows a close interest in the Mersey Dee area and has shown particular interest in the north Wales growth deal, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor mentioned in the autumn statement. We are keen to progress it and are waiting for details of the bid. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will recognise the major success of that part of the world being chosen for the global F-35 repair centre, which will inject billions of pounds over decades into north-east Wales and MOD Sealand. We should recognise and celebrate that.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): More than £2 billion of capital investment has been made over the past decade across Wales in social housing, transport, energy,

water and education through the European Investment Bank. What plans has the Secretary of State put in place to mitigate the potentially disastrous consequences of leaving the EU on pre-existing EIB loans to organisations and public bodies in Wales? Crucially, what plans does he have to replace the funding that the EIB has been able to provide?

**Alun Cairns:** Our negotiations with the EIB will run in parallel with our negotiations with the European Commission. The hon. Lady has a responsibility to try to instil confidence in investment in Wales, not to undermine it. Only last week, the Chancellor announced a further capital injection of £436 million. I would hope that the hon. Lady would want to welcome that, not undermine investment, employment and jobs—it really does not become her.

### Inward Investment

4. **Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): What assessment he has made of recent trends in the level of inward investment in Wales. [907482]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb):** Wales is an attractive destination for overseas investment and the UK Government remain committed to providing certainty and stability for businesses in Wales. Our country has a tremendous opportunity to forge stronger relations with international partners. I am passionate about selling Wales to the world and continuing to increase global investment into Wales.

**Alberto Costa:** Does my hon. Friend agree that recent announcements of investment in Wales, such as the F-35 global repair and maintenance hub in north Wales, represent a vote of confidence in the UK's economy as a whole?

**Guto Bebb:** I could not agree more. Such investment is welcome, and I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for Defence for his part in ensuring that that investment came to north Wales. North-east Wales is an engineering powerhouse in the UK economy, and the investment in the F-35 project is welcome and further enhances engineering opportunities for young people in north-east Wales.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): At the beginning of this year, FieldMaster Tractors Ltd, a tractor assembly company in my constituency, signed a joint venture agreement with Longhua, a Chinese company, that would have created 40 jobs in my constituency with aims of expanding. Last week, the owner received notification from China that the deal was off due to uncertainty about our future trading relationship with the European Union. Does the Minister recognise that the UK Government's dithering over Wales's future relationship with the single market and the customs union is costing jobs now?

**Guto Bebb:** I am disappointed to hear that news and would be more than happy to discuss it with the hon. Gentleman—any loss of investment in Wales is to be regretted. He is wrong, however, to talk about dithering. The Government are clear that we want strong trade relations with the European Union and with the rest of

the world. Any Chinese investor looking at the UK knows that this country is friendly to investment from all parts of the globe.

13. [907491] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Will my hon. Friend update the House on the discussions that are taking place to bring inward investment to Wales and to create more jobs and opportunities for young and old alike, and to allow new firms to develop in Wales?

**Guto Bebb:** I agree with my hon. Friend. Investment in Wales is most welcome. We need to diversify the Welsh economy. Manufacturing jobs in Wales have increased and the engineering sector is second to none in the United Kingdom. That is based on attracting inward investment. On a recent visit to Deeside, I saw again how Airbus is acting as a catalyst for small business development in north-east Wales. We need a combination of inward investment and home-grown companies that are able to build on the expertise provided by companies such as Airbus.

**Christina Rees** (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Some businesses may not invest inwardly in Wales because they would have to pay two apprenticeship levies: the UK Government levy and the Construction Industry Training Board levy. Under the Barnett formula, that will not result in extra funding for Welsh apprenticeships. Will the Minister reassure potential investors that they will be able to claim all levies for training and will be able to use the money for workforce development with local further education providers?

**Guto Bebb:** I am surprised to hear that question from the hon. Lady; the apprenticeship levy is important, but the settlement between Her Majesty's Treasury and the Welsh Government has been welcomed by the latter as both fair and comprehensive. It is therefore essential that she and other Members call on the Welsh Government to make sure that the money allocated through the apprenticeship levy is spent where it is needed.

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Given that the UK Government and, in particular, senior Ministers are currently doing their best to offend the international community, it falls to Wales and the Welsh Government to promote inward investment. So will the Minister join me in congratulating the Welsh Government on the role they have played in promoting Wales and securing the highest level of inward investment on record? Furthermore, what support will he give to ensure that this success is sustained following the UK's exit from the European Union?

**Guto Bebb:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for the question. It is important to state that the relationship between the Welsh Government and the UK Government on this issue is very productive. I recently visited Wales with a Minister for International Trade, and the Secretary of State for International Trade will be in Wales on Friday. We work constructively with the Welsh Government to ensure that we sell Wales and the United Kingdom as a good place to do business. We have a strong relationship, which the hon. Gentleman should welcome.

### Prison Estate

5. **Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of recent changes in the number of prison officers on the prison estate in Wales. [907483]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb):** We are committed to transforming prisons into places of safety and reform. We recently announced a major overhaul of the prison system, and in the autumn statement we announced funding for 2,500 extra front-line officers across the UK.

**Mrs Moon:** The Minister will be aware that it is not just numbers of prison officers, but the skill base they bring with them that is important. Parc prison has a wonderful record with its “invisible walls” scheme in building links between prisoners and their families. More than 500 children a week visit their fathers, and 69% of inmates have contact with their families. Will he work with me to get the Treasury and the Ministry of Justice to provide funding so that the scheme carries on after 2017?

**Guto Bebb:** I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the work she does with Parc prison in Bridgend. The relationship she has with Parc prison is indicative of the way an MP should work with such a facility. I pay particular tribute to Parc as a prison that has highlighted the importance of ensuring that family ties are maintained while prisoners are serving a sentence. The good practice shown in Parc should be repeated across the prison estate, and I would be delighted to co-operate with her in pushing this issue forward.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): Over the past five years, the number of violent attacks on prison officers in Welsh prisons has risen by more than 138%. What discussions have Ministers had with the Justice Secretary about tackling violence in Welsh prisons?

**Guto Bebb:** My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has regular discussions with the Department in question on this issue. No member of staff working on behalf of the state should be threatened or subject to violence in their workplace, so it is essential that we support prison officers in that context and crack down hard on anybody who is responsible for violence within or outside the prison sector.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I speak as the co-chair of the cross-party justice unions parliamentary group. HMP Berwyn is due to open in less than three months' time. Given that the National Offender Management Service is committed to ensuring that it gives equal treatment to English and Welsh in Wales, will the Minister tell the House how he is monitoring the language skills of staff in Wrexham? The MOJ has told me that:

“Data on the number of bilingual Welsh and English speakers... is not collected centrally.”

**Guto Bebb:** First, I hope that the hon. Lady welcomes the fact that the prison in Wrexham is being built, as it is a significant investment in north-east Wales and a significant opportunity for the north Wales economy.

On the Welsh language issue, it is fair to say that the Department responsible has made it clear that the number of jobs being created at Wrexham will reflect the demographic realities in north Wales, and as a result there will be Welsh-speaking staff in the prison at Berwyn. That will be a great improvement on the current situation, where Welsh-speaking prisoners end up in the estate in England.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. A lot of very noisy private conversations are taking place. I must advise the House that we have many distinguished visitors here today, not only from across the country, but from Iraq and Egypt. We wish to show them that in our ancient democracy we can, when we try, conduct ourselves with due decorum, which will now be brilliantly exemplified by Mr Nigel Huddleston.

### Leaving the EU

6. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with key stakeholders on the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on Wales. [907484]

10. **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with key stakeholders on the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on Wales. [907488]

**The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns):** Since the referendum in June, I have had discussions with a wide range of stakeholders across Wales, from the Wales Council for Voluntary Action, to the farming unions, the CBI Wales and the Institute of Directors in Wales, to hear their views on how to secure the best deal for Wales and the UK as we leave the EU. Those conversations are informing my discussions with Cabinet colleagues, as well as with the Welsh Government.

**Nigel Huddleston:** Does the Secretary of State agree that we should not just focus on businesses as we leave the EU? We should also consider the implications for the third sector, charities, local authorities and universities in Wales.

**Alun Cairns:** My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. I have already talked about my warm relationship with the Welsh Government, but of course the UK Government should also have a warm relationship with universities, charity groups and environmental groups, as well as with businesses directly in Wales. The Welsh Government have an important part to play, but we also have a direct relationship with those key stakeholders.

**Karl McCartney:** Does my right hon. Friend recognise that there is more than one voice in Wales and not simply the voice of the Welsh Government, who still cannot accept that the majority of Welsh people voted to leave the European Union? We must therefore engage with all Welsh stakeholders and partners who are key to ensuring that Brexit will be a success for everyone in the UK.

**Alun Cairns:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. Of course we engage positively with the Welsh Government, and we will continue to do so. I have

already had scores of meetings with key stakeholders in Wales. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales was at the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society's winter fair yesterday doing that very thing—engaging with Welsh farmers and with Welsh farming unions.

**Mr David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): Given the uncertainty over the single market and the Prime Minister's failure to raise steel when she met the Indian Government recently, what steps will the Secretary of State take in the near future when he meets trade unions representing the steel industry to discuss the impact of the loss of the single market?

**Alun Cairns:** I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will do all he can to instil confidence in our ambitions to gain the most open trading relationship possible. He rightly raises steel. I am sure that he will recognise that we are in a much stronger position now than we were back in March. That is a result of reduced energy costs for the sector of £109 million. We have changed the procurement rules, offered flexibility in environmental packages and implemented strong pan-EU anti-dumping measures, which will reduce the threats of imports by more than 90% in a whole range of sectors.

**Mr Mark Williams** (Ceredigion) (LD): The success of the Welsh red meat sector has meant that £225 million has been ploughed back into some of the most fragile rural communities in Wales. In his meetings, has the Secretary of State heard that message, and will he push the case for access to the single market to protect those very communities?

**Alun Cairns:** Like the hon. Gentleman, I have a lot of confidence in the Welsh red meat sector. I am sure that our European nations do not want to go without our high-quality Welsh red meat. We are determined to support our farmers in gaining the most open trading relationship possible, so that European nations can continue to enjoy the quality of Welsh produce.

7. **Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK exiting the EU on businesses and employees in Wales. [907485]

**The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury (Guto Bebb):** I recognise that many businesses in Wales have an important relationship with the EU, but, as a whole, Welsh businesses export more to countries outside the European Union. In leaving the EU, we will seek new opportunities for businesses across the UK, including in Wales, as we build on our strengths as an open, dynamic trading nation.

**Susan Elan Jones:** The Minister will know full well that he has not really answered my question. Can he tell us whether his officials have made any estimate of how many jobs in Wales will be lost if the UK leaves the single market and what he and his Government are planning to do about it?

**Guto Bebb:** I am somewhat disturbed by the hon. Lady's comments. Time and again, I hear Opposition parties talking down the Welsh economy. I want to talk up the Welsh economy, as do the Welsh Government. As we start this process, we have fewer people out of

work in Wales now than since 2010, and our economy is growing faster than many parts of the UK. She should be talking up Wales, not talking it down.

**Mr Speaker:** I am happy to hear the voice of North East Hampshire on question 7. Mr Jayawardena, get in there.

9. [907487] **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): North Wales, which is home to the wings of the Airbus A380, has significant opportunities for trade with Europe and the rest of the world. Will my hon. Friend reassure the House that efforts will be dedicated to ensuring that north Wales and its northern powerhouse links will be trumpeted by this Government?

**Guto Bebb:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. North Wales has a huge contribution to make in terms of employment not just in North Wales but throughout the UK. The Government's emphasis on having a north Wales growth deal is dependent on linking north Wales to the northern powerhouse. To develop that link, I was pleased to visit north-east Wales and Chester recently with the Minister responsible for the northern powerhouse. There is an appetite in north-east Wales to work on a cross-border basis for the benefit of our local economies.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm the completion date of the rail electrification and all the work that needs to be done between Cardiff and Swansea, please?

**Guto Bebb:** My understanding is that the work is progressing well. Again, I highlight the contrast between the situation under this Government and the lack of investment in any railway infrastructure between 1997 and 2010.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): What is the Minister going to do with preposterous suggestion that the priorities for future support for farmers in Wales should be decided on the basis of the UK, where there are many millionaire and billionaire farmers, rather than on the basis of Wales, where there are small farmers? Will he stand up for Welsh priorities, made in Wales for Welsh small farmers?

**Guto Bebb:** I was at the winter fair yesterday in discussions with farming unions and other interested parties in relation to the Welsh agricultural sector. The agricultural sector in Wales wants a settlement that will be good for the sector in Wales and good for the UK. We know that we can produce the best food in all the world, and we need to ensure that we have opportunities to sell it not only to the rest of the European Union but on a global basis. We are confident we can do that with support from this Government.

## PRIME MINISTER

*The Prime Minister was asked—*

### Engagements

Q1. [907564] **Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 30 November.

**The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May):** I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing people across the United Kingdom and, indeed, the whole world a very happy St Andrew's day.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, and in addition to my duties in this House I shall have further such meetings later today.

**Caroline Lucas:** May I suggest to the Prime Minister that "having your cake and eating it" is not a serious strategy for Brexit and that Britain deserves better that having to rely on leaked documents to know the Government's plans? How on earth can she expect MPs to vote to trigger article 50 when she refuses to give any clarity on what kind of Brexit she is pursuing and whether it will involve us still being members of the single market? Is it arrogance, or is it incompetence?

**The Prime Minister:** I have answered this question many times in this House. The hon. Lady asks specifically about the single market and trading with the European Union, and I have been very clear that we are ambitious in getting the best possible deal for trading with and operating within the single European market.

Q2. [907565] **Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con):** I welcome last week's autumn statement announcement of £556 million for infrastructure in the north of England, but despite that and years of hard work, the M55 Lytham St Annes link road is still not assured. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister do everything she can to ensure that this vital local project for jobs and employment in my constituency is delivered without further delay?

**The Prime Minister:** I commend my hon. Friend on the hard work he has put in in relation to this project. I understand that there is to be a significant sum of funding from a developer and that my hon. Friend has been working with the developer and the county council on this issue. The local enterprise partnership has submitted a linked bid to Highways England that is being actively considered, and I understand that my hon. Friend is meeting my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Transport this afternoon to discuss this in more detail.

**Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab):** May I join the Prime Minister in wishing everyone a very happy St Andrew's day wherever they are celebrating it, all around the world?

Last week, the autumn statement revealed the abject failure of this Government's economic strategy. Economic growth was revised down; wage growth was revised down; business investment was revised down; and borrowing and debt were revised up, yet again. Surely, now the Prime Minister accepts that her predecessor's long-term economic plan was actually a failure.

**The Prime Minister:** I will give the right hon. Gentleman some facts. The IMF says that this will be the fastest-growing advanced economy in the world this year. Unemployment is down. We have record numbers of people in employment and we have companies such as Nissan, Jaguar Land Rover, Honda, ARM, Google, Facebook and Apple investing in the UK, securing jobs here in the United Kingdom. That is what a good economic plan does.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The Government did tell us that the deficit would be eradicated by 2015. That was then advanced to 2020, and now it has been advanced to whenever in the future. The right hon. Lady quotes the IFS, but she is being a little selective. It went on to say that the prospect for workers over the next six years was "dreadful", creating

"the worst decade for living standards certainly since the last war and probably since the 1920s".

Is it not fair to say that those who are just getting by are suffering all the pain for no gain?

**The Prime Minister:** Given that the right hon. Gentleman cannot differentiate between the IMF and the IFS, it is probably a good job that he is sitting there and I am standing here. Let me tell him what we are doing for those people, and let us think about those people who do find life difficult, who are struggling to get by, who have a job but worry about their job security, who have a home but worry about paying the mortgage, and who are worried about their children's education and whether their children will be able to buy a home. What measures have we taken? We have increased the national living wage. We introduced the national living wage. We are increasing personal tax allowance, taking more people out of paying tax altogether. We are increasing the number of affordable homes being built. But we can only do this if we have a strong economy, and it is our plan that delivers that strong economy.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Wages have stagnated; home ownership is falling; homelessness has doubled; and queues at food banks are rising every day. If the Prime Minister really believes the economy is doing well, why are her Government forcing through £2 billion of cuts to in-work support, cutting the incomes of working people and leaving many households over £2,000 a year worse off?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman starts his question by talking about home ownership. Let us be very clear what is happening in respect of housing. House building starts fell by 45% under Labour in 12 years. They have increased by over two thirds since the Conservatives were in government. Yes, we are making changes to the welfare system. He and I have a fundamental difference of opinion about the welfare system. I think what is important in the welfare system is that we remember those who are benefiting from it and we remember those who are paying for it. The universal credit system is there to ensure that work will always pay. I believe in a welfare system that does help people to get into work, that does encourage people into the workplace. He believes in a welfare system where people are able to live on benefits.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The last Labour Government took 800,000 children out of poverty. Under the right hon. Lady's Government, child poverty is rising and now covers 4 million children across this country. Our people are suffering because of the policies of her Government. People are paying the price for her failed economic experiment. The Government have even now abandoned the previous Chancellor's pledge that their so-called national living wage would be paying at least £9 per hour by 2020. What is the new pledge on living wage?

**The Prime Minister:** The pledge on living wage is set out in the autumn statement and is as it always has been. The right hon. Gentleman talks about poverty. Actually, we are seeing fewer families in absolute poverty and fewer families in relative poverty. I come back to the point I have been making in answer to his previous questions: it is only possible to do these things by having a strong economy. The one thing we know is that the policy that would not deliver a strong economy is Labour's policy to increase borrowing by £500 billion. He talks about the impact on people in work. Let me remind him what the former shadow Treasury Minister said: Labour's policy to increase borrowing would lead to double the income tax, double council tax, double VAT and double national insurance. That will not help anybody who is in the workplace and just about managing.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I am not entirely sure where the Government's credibility lies on borrowing, since they are borrowing even more, the deficit is increasing and people are suffering. When the Prime Minister talks about children in poverty in response to my question, I simply remind her 4 million children are living in poverty—children going hungry to school in this country because their parents do not have enough money to feed them properly. It is a disgrace and should be addressed.

In the autumn statement last week, the Chancellor spoke for over 50 minutes. During that time, he did not once mention the national health service or social care. Some 1.2 million people are lacking the care they need. Why was there not one single penny more for social care in the autumn statement?

**The Prime Minister:** There is absolutely no doubt that the social care system is under pressure; we recognise that. If we just look at the fact that there are 1 million more people aged over 65 today than there were in 2010, we see the sort of pressures on the social care system. That is why the Government have already acted to put more money into the social care system: more money through the better care fund—£3.5 billion extra through the better care fund—and more money through the social care precept. But it is also important that local authorities and the NHS work together to ensure, for example, that people have the social care they need, so they are not ending up blocking beds in hospital. There is some very good practice up and down the country, and sadly there is some not so good practice. What we need to do is make sure everybody is giving the best possible service to people who need it.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** There is a tragic parallel going on between an underfunded NHS and an underfunded social care system all over the country, and the Prime Minister knows it. Indeed, she might care to listen to the Tory leader of Warwickshire Council, Izzi Seccombe, who says that her council has been “cut to the bone”, and who says on social care:

“right now we have a £1.3 billion gap which is not being funded.” It is a real crisis in every social services department all over the country and, indeed, in almost every NHS hospital.

Next year, this Government are handing back £605 million in corporation tax cuts, rising to £1.6 billion the year after that and £7.5 billion over the next five years. So could the Prime Minister explain to the more

than 1 million elderly people not getting the care they need, to the 4 million people on NHS waiting lists and to the millions of pensioners worried about losing the protection of the triple lock why there is not one penny extra for the NHS or social care? Just what is this Government's real sense of priorities?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman talks about funding social care and funding the national health service: £3.8 billion extra is going into the national health service this year. Under Labour's plans, we would have seen £1.3 billion less going into the national health service. Social care funding is going up under this Government. At the last election, the shadow Chancellor—lately of “Strictly” fame—said local authorities would get not a penny more. Conservatives are putting money into the NHS and social care—Labour would deny it.

Q4. [907567] **Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): On a cross-party basis, Jo Cox and I were establishing the National Commission on Loneliness when she was brutally murdered. This work is now being continued by the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and me. Does my right hon. Friend agree that loneliness is an issue for all our communities, and will she urge her Ministers to engage with the commission as it carries out its work and reports next year?

**The Prime Minister:** First of all, may I just say that I am sure the whole House would want to join me in commending Jo's family for the very dignified way in which they dealt with matters as the court case was going through. It must have been very harrowing for them.

I am very pleased that my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) are taking forward the work of the commission on loneliness. Earlier this week I was able to support the “Good Morning Britain” 1 Million Minutes campaign, which is encouraging individuals to give 30 minutes of their time to help—to be with—somebody who is lonely. We have, over the years, I think, failed to understand the impact that loneliness has on people's psychological health but also their physical health. Ministers will look forward to receiving the results from the commission and to working with my hon. Friend and others.

**Angus Robertson** (Moray) (SNP): A very happy St Andrew's day to everybody celebrating in Scotland and throughout the world.

There is literally nothing to celebrate about the humanitarian catastrophe befalling the people of Syria at this time. The situation in the besieged city of Aleppo is described as so bad that it

“could be one of the biggest massacres of civilian population since World War II”.

What can the UK and the international community do to end the suffering of the people of Syria?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the appalling situation in Syria, and particularly the indiscriminate attacks that we see on civilians in Aleppo. The United Kingdom has been working with France to bring forward an emergency discussion on this issue at the UN Security Council; that will take place later today. We want to see a

cessation of hostilities. We want to see an opportunity for humanitarian aid to have access to Aleppo, and we will be pressing for that at the Security Council.

**Angus Robertson:** It is extremely welcome that the discussions are taking place in the United Nations, and we wish success to all those who are supporting a humanitarian solution to the crisis. However, things are so bad that the agencies are saying that in Aleppo the situation is a “descent into hell”. Time is absolutely of the essence. I know the Prime Minister is seized of this matter; we are in agreement. Can I please appeal to her: can absolutely everything be done now to alleviate the situation of the poor people of Aleppo and of Syria?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman is right about the horrific situation in Aleppo. I can assure him that the Government are pressing hard and we are doing everything that we can in relation to this. We have consistently looked at what the possible solutions might be, to see whether there are other avenues that we can press for. I think the Security Council debate is very important. There is an important message to send to Russia: that it use its influence with the Assad regime to stop these appalling atrocities in Aleppo and let humanitarian aid through.

Q5. [907568] **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): Comments this week by the equalities commissioners about not being worried about talking about Christmas at work were important, because many Christians are now worried, even fearful, about mentioning their faith in public. Will the Prime Minister therefore join me in welcoming the recent Lawyers’ Christian Fellowship publication “Speak Up!”, which confirms that in our country the legal rights of freedom of religion and freedom of speech to speak about one’s faith responsibly, respectfully and without fear are as strong today as ever?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend raises an important issue which matters both to her and me. I think the phrase that was used by the Lawyers’ Christian Fellowship was “the jealously guarded principle” of that ability to speak freely, as she says, respectfully and responsibly about one’s religion. I am happy to welcome the publication of this report and its findings. Of course, we are now into the season of Advent. We have a very strong tradition in this country of religious tolerance and freedom of speech, and our Christian heritage is something we can all be proud of. I am sure we would all want to ensure that people at work do feel able to speak about their faith, and also feel able to speak quite freely about Christmas.

Q3. [907566] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Thirty years ago, I conducted my first funeral as a young curate. It was for a young teenage boy who was an enormous fan of Paul Simon, so, as the crematorium curtains closed, we listened to “The Sound of Silence”, and many people cried. The average cost of a child’s funeral today is £3,675. Some councils do not charge anything, but some charge a lot, and the social fund is means-tested. I ask again: will the Prime Minister please listen to the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), sign up to her campaign and put an end to both the means-testing and the

postcode lottery, so that no parents who lose a child have to deal with the fear of hardship as well as their grief?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. I know that the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) spoke very movingly from personal experience in the debate that she called on this issue. I do not think that anybody who has not been through the death of a child can possibly understand the pain that that brings, not just immediately but thereafter, as parents see others grow up while their child will not.

I recognise the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised about the cost of children’s funerals. As he has said, there are measures in place for families who have particular hardship cases, where money can be given. It is open to local authorities to waive fees, and some local authorities do that. We have left this as a decision for local authorities, and some do, indeed, waive those fees.

Q6. [907569] **Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Grammar schools across the Medway towns have provided good education and opportunities for hard-working young people from a range of backgrounds, helping social mobility and intervening to improve recent Ofsted results in local primary schools, particularly in Rochester and Strood. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our current grammar schools’ contribution to education ought to be valued and given every support, as part of the educational mix up and down the country, to help children to achieve their full potential?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree with my hon. Friend. I believe that there are now nearly 11,000 more children in good and outstanding schools in my hon. Friend’s area than there were in 2010. We want to provide a good school place for every child. She references the good work being done by grammar schools in her area to improve the quality of education in primary schools, which is one of the issues that we are looking at in our consultation on education. We want to remove the legal ban on expanding or opening new grammar schools, but we also want to see grammar schools working to improve standards across the education system generally.

Q7. [907570] **Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): The sustainability and transformation plan for Cheshire and Merseyside aims to develop accountable care organisations. It is a model from America, where it is used to deliver private, insurance-based healthcare. Can the Prime Minister assure me that STPs will not be used as a means of introducing insurance-based private healthcare into the NHS?

**The Prime Minister:** The STPs are about local people determining the shape of health services in a local area, to deliver the best service for local people. Obviously, every area will be looking very closely at the plans that are being brought forward. It is important that we see, in those STPs, health services increasingly working with local authorities to ensure that they are providing the right, holistic level of care for people in their area.

Q8. [907571] **Claire Perry** (Devizes) (Con): As the Prime Minister leads us towards a smart and smooth Brexit—as I like to call it, a “smexit”—I am sure she shares my

view that the flexibility of Britain's labour market is one of this country's great strengths. However, she will be aware that the growth of new business models as part of the so-called gig economy is causing real concern that employment rights could be eroded. Indeed, the news that Uber is seeking a licence to operate in my constituency has left local people concerned about what their jobs could look like in the future. What reassurances can the Prime Minister give to me and my constituents that the Government are working to make sure that employment rights and employment regulations keep pace with this sort of innovation?

**The Prime Minister:** As I mentioned earlier, we have seen a significant rise in the number of people in employment in this country, and that is because we have got the strong economy that we have. However, I recognise that employment and types of employment are changing. Technology is the driver in many cases. That is why I have asked the chief executive of the RSA, Matthew Taylor, to conduct a review of and report on modern employment practices, so we can ensure that the legislative framework is absolutely the right one for the economy of the future and the jobs of the future. That shows that it is now the Conservative party that is the party of working people.

Q10. [907573] **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): The Conservative election manifesto promised to halve the disability employment gap by 2020. Ministers justified their plan to cut the benefit from next April by promising to recycle some of the savings into improving employment support for benefit claimants. It has now become apparent that funding for employment support is not being increased; it is being cut. The target for halving the gap—2020—has been completely abandoned. Surely the only honourable course now is for the Government to abandon the benefit cut as well.

**The Prime Minister:** I am very pleased to say that, over the past three years, nearly 600,000 more disabled people have got into the workplace. I think that is very important. Of course, we want to ensure that all those disabled people who are able to get into work are given the support needed to do that. That is why we have been ensuring not just that this is about benefits, but that this is about the support package in total that people are given. They do have individual support through the personal independence payment for the particular long-term costs that they have incurred because of their disability. It is also the support package that is provided to people in the work group in employment and support allowance that enables them to get into work. Nearly 600,000 more disabled people in work—that is something the right hon. Gentleman should be celebrating.

Q9. [907572] **Mr Peter Lilley** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's eagerness to give EU citizens living and working lawfully in this country the assurance that they will be able to remain here after Brexit and to obtain reassurances for British citizens living and working in the EU. Does she therefore share my disappointment that Mr Tusk, in response to a letter from 80 Members of this House about resolving this issue speedily, has intransigently put EU processes ahead of common humanity?

**The Prime Minister:** I can assure my right hon. Friend that, as I said earlier, I would hope this is an issue we can look at at an early stage in the negotiations, and of course there will be two years of negotiations. I think it is right that we want to give reassurance to British citizens living in the EU and to EU citizens living here in the UK, but I think the reaction that we have seen shows why it was absolutely right for us not to do what the Labour party wanted us to do, which was simply to give away the guarantee for rights of EU citizens here in the UK. As we have seen, that would have left UK citizens in Europe high and dry.

Q12. [907575] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): I know the Prime Minister is handed happy briefs to read out, but can I tell her that she has been wrong on the national health service for weeks now? If she came to South Tyneside hospital, she would see services closing, she would see patients worried and she would see staff demoralised, so when is she going to get a grip of those bean counters who are committing criminal damage on the people's cherished service in her name?

**The Prime Minister:** There are nearly 30 more doctors and over 950 more nurses in the South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust compared with 2010. This year, the South Tyneside clinical commissioning group will be getting increased funding. Health funding in the hon. Gentleman's area is going to be £2.7 billion this year, and that will be increasing by 2020-21. It is this Government that are putting more money into the national health service; it is the Labour party—a former shadow Health Secretary from the Labour party—who said that more money for the NHS was “irresponsible”.

Q11. [907574] **Chris White** (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): Warwick and Leamington contains many of the elements of a successful industrial strategy—great schools, a skilled workforce, strong infrastructure, manufacturing, creative industries and being surrounded by world-class research and development facilities, to name but a few. Will the Prime Minister outline the Government's progress in developing this policy, which is so important to our nation's prosperity?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right in what he says about his own constituency and the midlands engine in relation to the development of jobs and for the strong economy of the future. That is why we will be developing the industrial strategy for the whole of the United Kingdom, which is an important part of the Government's plan for the future. It is looking at issues such as infrastructure and skills, ensuring that we can build on the best and encourage the growth that we need for the economy of the future. The midlands engine and the part of the country that my hon. Friend represents will be an important part of that growth for the future.

Q14. [907577] **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Guests from the Hyderabad diocese have twice been refused visas to visit the Church of Scotland presbytery of Glasgow as part of a twinning initiative, the suggestion being that the visit was not genuine, despite the paperwork being correct and the Church bearing the costs. When I raised this with the Leader of the House, he spoke of the need for people to return home

after visits, and then the Immigration Minister told me in a patronising letter how to apply for a visa. Will the Prime Minister tell the Church why its visitors are not welcome and what messages she thinks it sends to our faith communities?

**The Prime Minister:** We have a very clear visa system, and decisions are taken according to its rules, but as the hon. Lady will have seen, the Home Secretary has heard her comments. I suggest that if she sends her the details, she will look at the case.

Q13. [907576] **Suella Fernandes** (Fareham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, once the will of the British people, including the residents of Fareham, is delivered and we break free from the shackles of the EU, Britain stands to benefit from the fantastic opportunity to forge new trade deals with countries such as India and the USA, and will she meet me and members of the Legatum Institute special trade commission, which has projected a 50% increase in global world product over 15 years as a result of Brexit, which will enable trade to boost jobs, growth and hope?

**The Prime Minister:** I am interested in the results of the Legatum Institute commission's report on this issue. I believe absolutely that free trade is the right way to go—it is through free trade that we increase growth and prosperity—which is why I have said I want this country to be a global leader in free trade and why we will not just look to forge new trade deals with other countries as we leave the EU but see how we can improve trade with other countries before we leave it, so that we will continue to strengthen our economy. I am sure that the Secretary of State for International Trade will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the results of the commission's report.

**Mr Speaker:** I warmly welcome the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell) back to his place.

**Mr Ronnie Campbell** (Blyth Valley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I'll be able to tell you more about it next week, when I meet my consultant.

What plans does the Prime Minister have to make super-economic zones? The Blyth estuary was given an economic zone by the last Tory Chancellor, as we have acres and acres of land around that river. I hope that that is in her mind.

**The Prime Minister:** I join you, Mr Speaker, and others in welcoming the hon. Gentleman to his place. It is good to see him back in his usual position, and I wish him all the very best.

As part of our industrial strategy, we are looking around the country at where there are opportunities for economic growth and how we can encourage them to be taken up. It is important that economic growth and prosperity be spread across the whole country to ensure an economy that works for everyone.

Q15. [907578] **Stuart Andrew** (Pudsey) (Con): The digital and creative industry is an important part of the UK economy, and Leeds is an important hub in the sector. In welcoming the £1 billion investment in better broadband in the autumn statement, may I urge my right hon.

Friend to ensure that Yorkshire gets its fair share, so that we can build on this success and make Leeds the capital of this industry?

**The Prime Minister:** I assure my hon. Friend that I recognise the role played by the creative and digital industries in our economy, the excellent example of Leeds and the vibrancy they bring to the economy there. I am pleased that we are able to invest a further £1 billion in gold standard broadband, which will bring better connections to 2 million more homes and businesses, and I am sure that Yorkshire will have a very central role to play in this.

**Mr David Lammy** (Tottenham) (Lab): Yesterday, the Prime Minister's Government published a Green Paper on corporate governance, emphasising the importance of gender and race diversity. I congratulate her on that, but why has her Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport blocked the appointment of a black woman to the Channel 4 board? Does she not think there is a woman or a black person in the country worthy of being on the board of Channel 4?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the welcome he has given to the corporate governance Green Paper that we have produced, which of course covers a great deal more than simply issues of gender and diversity in corporate governance and on corporate boards. I am not aware of the particular case that he mentioned. In looking at public appointments, however, I would say that a very careful process is undertaken to ensure that the people who are appointed have the skillset and the requirements needed to carry out the role. I will look into the issue he raised, but this is always a question of the right person for the job. Issues around the sort of question that he has raised do not come into it; it is about who is right for the job.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Mr Donald Tusk's response to my letter on reciprocal rights has already been mentioned. I congratulate the Prime Minister on her work with individual member states in this important matter, but does she share our disappointment and will she join me in calling for this important matter to be raised in two weeks' time at the next European Council meeting?

**The Prime Minister:** I recognise the concerns of my hon. Friend and other Members on the particular issue of the rights of EU citizens and UK citizens variously living here in the UK and in the other member states of the European Union. I hope it is something that we will be able to address at an early stage. We have not yet triggered article 50 and the negotiations will have up to two years to run, as set out in the Lisbon treaty. As I say, I hope we will be able to address this at an early stage to give people the reassurance they need.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): A year ago this week, my constituent Deborah Pearson lost her niece Julie, who is believed to have been unlawfully killed in Eilat, Israel. A year ago, the Prime Minister's predecessor was good enough to give me support, as was the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but after a year of writing letters, having meetings and putting pressure on the Israeli authorities, the family is no closer to having justice for Julie. Will the Prime Minister meet me and my constituent to understand what further pressure can

be brought to bear so that the family can get answers and understand who brought this terrible crime against their family member?

**The Prime Minister:** I understand the concern that the hon. Lady rightly shows for her constituent, and obviously her constituent's deep concern to find out

what happened in this terrible tragedy. I understand that the appropriate Minister in the Foreign Office is actively working on this question. I will ask him to respond to the hon. Lady and to meet her to discuss what more can be done and to set out exactly what the Foreign Office is doing on this issue.

**BILL PRESENTED**WITHDRAWAL FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION  
(ARTICLE 50) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Mr Peter Bone presented a Bill to require Her Majesty's Government to notify the European Council by 31 March 2017 of the United Kingdom's intention to withdraw from the European Union.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 December, and to be printed (Bill 104).*

**Football Supporters (Access)**

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

12.39 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require football clubs to provide tickets to matches at a discount for persons under a specified age; to require local authorities to consider the needs of match going supporters when approving kick off times; to require football clubs to set aside a proportion of transfer fees paid for the development of football facilities for local clubs and young people; and for connected purposes.

Football is our national sport. We invented the modern game and we have the most popular league in the world, viewed by millions around the globe. I grew up playing and watching the game, and loved every minute of doing so. Although I still play and watch when I can, I have less time to do so now, and when I play I do not move quite so quickly around the pitch, but I still enjoy it and score the odd goal. As a supporter, however, I find that the difference between the game I grew up watching and the game now is incredible. I remember being able to turn up just before kick-off and pay on the gate. If I did not manage to see the match in person, that usually meant that I would not see it at all, because at that time televised games were the exception rather than the rule.

While there were plenty of good players then, nowadays we have many of the best players from all over the world. There are fantastic modern stadiums, there is huge media coverage of every millisecond of every Premier League game, and of course there is more cash in the sport than it has ever seen before. Despite all that glamour and cash, however, there are things we could be doing better. Our teams, by and large, still flatter to deceive on the international stage, and the proportion of young home-grown talent breaking through each year appears to be less and less.

Not only are there fewer youngsters out on the pitch, but there appear to be fewer in the stands as well. During the 1980s, a much higher proportion of match-going fans were younger. Surveys undertaken at the time suggested that about 20% of match-day fans were in the 16-to-20 age group. I suspect it is no coincidence that the average age of a match-going supporter now is in the 40s: those same fans have grown up with the match-day experience being a part of their life that they have retained. However, the proportion of young people going to games now is much lower, and some surveys even suggest that it is considerably less than 10%. Cost plays a huge part in that, with ticket prices far outstripping inflation at most clubs. If we do not make more provision for younger supporters, we shall risk empty stadiums in 20 or 30 years' time, because the fans of the future will have been driven away by sky-high prices.

I believe that it is time to make provision for our younger fans. The first element of my Bill will require all football clubs to provide 10% of their tickets at discounted prices for young people under the age of 22. We have a lower minimum wage for people under 22, and many of them are in full-time education or apprenticeships. The price of a match-day ticket is beyond the reach of many young people, and when our prices are compared with others around Europe, we know that there is an awfully long way to go. That criticism is not levelled

solely at Premier League clubs; far too many Football League prices are too high as well. The match-going ritual was part of growing up for my generation, and I do not want to see the next generation miss out on that.

A second measure in the Bill would require local authorities to consider the needs of match-going supporters when approving kick-off times. They are currently required to take account of safety and police advice, but I believe that the needs of the supporter should be considered as well. A number of high-profile games have been moved to times that make it impossible for travelling supporters to attend via public transport. There are countless examples of matches being moved at short notice, in particular to accommodate the demands of television companies. The money that television coverage has brought into the game is of course welcome, but that should not mean that the interests of the match-going fan are entirely subservient to the needs of the TV scheduler.

One high-profile example was the occasion on which Everton and Manchester United played in the FA Cup semi-final in April this year. A late 5.15 pm start meant that fans risked being left with no train back home to the north-west from Wembley after the match, particularly if there was extra time or penalties. However, that does not just apply to the big games. At the other end of the scale, at the start of the season in the non-league, Eastleigh football club's game against Barrow was moved to a 12.30 pm kick-off to accommodate television broadcasting, which left fans with a 10-hour, 600-mile round trip. How could anyone seriously expect supporters to travel sensibly to and from that game on public transport?

The Bill requires councils to make an assessment of the availability of transport links before a final kick-off time can be approved, so that travelling fans have a realistic chance of being able to get to the game. That is particularly relevant as we approach the traditional Christmas fixture list, when public transport options are more limited. Games are currently scheduled to kick off at midday on Boxing Day and 5.30 pm on New Year's Eve. How can either of those times be remotely sensible on those days?

There are also the fans who have gone to considerable trouble and expense to make travel arrangements well in advance of the game, only for the time and, on some occasions, the day of the game to be changed at the last minute. What about the shift worker who has made arrangements with his employer, possibly swapping shifts with a colleague for time off, only to find that the game has been moved at a few days' notice? How many people have to make complicated arrangements to juggle their various commitments when the fixture list is released at the start of the season, only to find that the original fixture list becomes increasingly worthless as the season progresses?

The third part of the Bill would require football clubs to set aside a proportion of transfer fees for the development of football facilities for local clubs and young people. That would apply only to fees paid by Premier League clubs, which, during the last transfer window alone, spent £1.2 billion on players. A levy of just 0.1% could raise an extra £1.2 million for grassroots football. I know that money does go to support grassroots football, but it is not enough. Given the cash washing around the Premier League at the moment, I believe we could take further steps to ensure that a little of that unprecedented wealth helps to secure the future for our players and to improve facilities for all.

A study of the amount paid in agents' fees by Premier League clubs showed that £46.5 million was paid in agents' and intermediaries' fees in the four months from October 2015 to January 2016. That is money leaving the game. Much as I would like to, I am not suggesting we outlaw agents' fees all together; I am merely using these figures to demonstrate that huge sums are going through the game that are not benefiting players or clubs, and certainly not the fans.

We should be concerned about the declining number of home-grown players coming through the leagues. Last season, 35% of Premier League players were English—a huge decrease since the opening 1992-93 campaign of the Premier League, when 69% of the players were English. A survey last month showed that just four Premier League teams had given more than half their game time to home-country players, compared with 11 teams in Spain and 17 in France.

There are huge questions about how professional clubs operate and how our younger players can hope to get a chance against the imported superstars, but one thing we can do is improve the standard of facilities for younger players of all abilities, and indeed everyone involved in grassroots football. We know the pressure that local authorities are under to balance the books, and there is little left for discretionary spending on improving sporting facilities. Often pitches are in poor condition, with poor drainage—there are areas where there is more mud than grass—and many pitches have few or no changing facilities connected to them.

That really hit home with me recently, when I saw for myself a local pitch used for kids' football, where the goal at one end of the pitch was smaller than the other because of vandalism. We cannot expect the superstars of tomorrow to emerge if we do not invest in them, and we should not tolerate second-rate facilities for our national sport. There are plenty of distractions and reasons why kids might find something to do other than play football. We should do what we can and make sure that at least a little of the wealth flowing through the game trickles down to support the grassroots.

Football is more than just a game. It is certainly more than just a business. It is an integral part of our culture and it needs to be nurtured and protected. The fruits of this golden age in the sport should be used to help secure its future for everyone. I believe that this Bill will achieve that aim.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Justin Madders, Alan Brown, Carolyn Harris, Stephen Kinnock, Ian C. Lucas, Christian Matheson, Jason McCartney, Karl McCartney, Ian Mearns, Paula Sherriff and Jo Stevens present the Bill.

Justin Madders accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February 2017, and to be printed (Bill 103).*

**Mr Speaker:** Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February—

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Will it be televised?

**Mr Speaker:** We have no intelligence on the question whether it will be televised—well, actually we do, and it very likely will. [*Laughter.*]

# Opposition Day

[14TH ALLOTTED DAY]

## Chilcot Inquiry and Parliamentary Accountability

12.49 pm

**Alex Salmond** (Gordon) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House recognises that the Chilcot Inquiry provided substantial evidence of misleading information being presented by the then Prime Minister and others on the development of the then Government's policy towards the invasion of Iraq as shown most clearly in the contrast between private correspondence to the United States government and public statements to Parliament and to the people and also in the presentation of intelligence information; and calls on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, further to its current investigation into the lessons to be learned from the Chilcot Inquiry for the machinery of government, to conduct a further specific examination of this contrast in public and private policy and of the presentation of intelligence, and then to report to the House on what further action it considers necessary and appropriate to help prevent any repetition of this disastrous series of events.

I move the motion on behalf of myself, my hon. Friends and hon. Members representing seven political parties across this House—[*Interruption.*] I see Labour Members are already in an excitable state; I just said "Members of".

It is a great pleasure to move this motion on St Andrew's day—Scotland's national day. The leaders of the political parties complimented Scotland in their remarks at Prime Minister's questions. When the SNP parliamentary group discussed what motion should be tabled, there were many obvious candidates: Scotland in the world or the meaning of St Andrew's day—a broad debate given that this is a St Andrew's day motion. However, we thought it would be better to focus on issues of signal importance to the people. The second debate to be moved by my hon. Friends this afternoon will be on the injustice perpetrated on the WASPI women—the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—to see whether a debate can advance their cause. This debate is on the issue that has dominated the past two decades of politics, both here and internationally: the war in Iraq.

One hundred and seventy-nine Members are left in the House of Commons who were present when the debate on the war in Iraq took place in March 2003. I remember the figure exactly, because the same number of British soldiers died in the conflict. The deaths of thousands of American soldiers and 200,000 Iraqis, the birth of Daesh in the prison camps of Iraq and the conflagration in the middle east are all directly sourced to the disastrous decision of March 2003. The intention of today's debate is not to rerun the Chilcot debate of July—we have had that debate—but to try to identify from that debate how we can take matters forward in terms of parliamentary accountability.

I mentioned a few seconds ago that Members from seven political parties in the House put their names to the motion. We do not want to rerun the Chilcot debate, because the generally accepted view of both the press and the public was best summed up in the headline in *The Times* the day after Chilcot:

"Britain fought an unnecessary, disastrous and potentially illegal war in Iraq because of Tony Blair's misguided and personal commitment to George W Bush, the Chilcot report concluded yesterday."

That is a reasonable summary of the general tenor of the reaction to the Chilcot report. What was unstated and unsaid in the Chilcot report was what to do with both the amassing evidence, and what to do in terms of parliamentary accountability if, as we believe, this House and the public were grievously misled into that disastrous conflict.

The hon. Members representing seven political parties in this House commissioned a report from Dr Glen Rangwala of Trinity College, Cambridge. I put the report in the House of Commons Library this morning. All Members would do well to give it a good reading. The report considers, in exact terms, the statements made over a period to this House—not just in the March 2003 debate—and takes into account Chilcot's findings from the wider canvas of information now available, and contrasts and compares the two. It might help the House if I make a few remarks on Dr Rangwala's general findings.

In summary, from late 2001 to March 2003, Tony Blair repeatedly made three interrelated statements to the House of Commons: no decision had been taken to use military force against Iraq; military action could be avoided by Iraq's disarmament of its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons; and that regime change was not the goal of Government policy. The report of the Iraq inquiry, published on 6 July, demonstrates conclusively and authoritatively that each of those three statements was untrue, and that their falsity were known to Mr Blair. Mr Blair backed up his claims about the need for Iraqi disarmament by asserting there was conclusive evidence of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction and that these weapons were a threat to the UK's national security. On both points, those statements contradicted the intelligence assessments put to Mr Blair.

**Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that Hans Blix, the arms inspector carrying out an inquiry at the time of the vote in March 2003—I was present and voted against intervention—believed at that time that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction?

**Alex Salmond:** I am aware that Dr Hans Blix asked for more time to complete the process of inspection and was denied that by the then Prime Minister and President of the United States of America.

**Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Lab): It was not just Hans Blix who thought that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Even countries that thought we should not go to war—Russia, France and Germany—thought Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, too. In fact, the only way Saddam Hussein was able to enslave the people of Iraq was by leading them to believe he had weapons of mass destruction.

**Alex Salmond:** And those countries the hon. Gentleman mentions voted against the war in Iraq for very good reasons.

Rather than speculate on that, thanks to the Chilcot report we now know what evidence the Prime Minister had at his disposal from the Joint Intelligence Committee, which on 15 March 2002 stated:

"Intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction...and ballistic missile programmes is sporadic and patchy... We continue to judge that Iraq has an offensive chemical warfare (CW) programme, although there is very little intelligence relating to it. From the

evidence available to us, we believe Iraq retains some production equipment, and some small stocks of CW agent precursors, and may have hidden small quantities of agents and weapons... There is no intelligence on any BW agent production facilities.”

That highly qualified assessment from the Joint Intelligence Committee was presented to the House of Commons as a certainty that Iraq possessed weapons that were an immediate danger to the United Kingdom.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern that if we do nothing following the seven-year, £10 million inquiry and take no steps towards accountability for the clear evidence that the former Prime Minister was fixing the evidence around the policy to go to war, it will be almost impossible to begin to restore the faith that has been lost in our political system?

**Alex Salmond:** Yes. The loss of faith in the political system is another dramatic consequence of the disastrous events in Iraq.

**Mr David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Alex Salmond:** Let me finish this point, before I give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

This point was raised in the Liaison Committee, when Chilcot was asked about weapons of mass destruction. He was asked repeatedly whether a reasonable person could have come to the conclusion the Prime Minister had come to. The best exchanges were between the Chair of the Committee and Sir John Chilcot on the well understood test of a reasonable man. The Chair asked:

“Would a reasonable man—another human being—looking at the evidence come to that conclusion?”

Sir John Chilcot replied:

“If you are posing that question with regard to a statement of imminent threat to the United Kingdom”—

The Chair said: “I am.”

Sir John Chilcot went on:

“In that case, I have to say no, there was not sufficient evidence to sustain that belief objectively at the time.”

Given the length of time the Chilcot inquiry spent considering this exact point, it may be the opinion of many hon. Members that Sir John Chilcot’s expression of this carries rather more weight than that of hon. Members desperate to defend the indefensible.

**Mr Hanson:** Did not Sir John Chilcot, when asked this question in the Liaison Committee, say:

“I absolve him from...a decision to deceive Parliament or the public”.

We cannot have it both ways. We have had the Chilcot report and parliamentary accountability: Chilcot said that the former Prime Minister did not deceive this House or the public.

**Alex Salmond:** The trouble with that intervention is that the right hon. Gentleman does not go on to read the next sentence in that exchange, which I shall read for his erudition:

“However, he also exercised his very considerable powers of advocacy and persuasion, rather than laying the real issues, and the information to back the analysis of them, fairly and squarely in front of Parliament or the public. It was an exercise in advocacy, not an exercise in sharing a crucial judgment”.

**Mr Kenneth Clarke** (Rushcliffe) (Con): As the right hon. Gentleman is aware, I agree with his description regarding the catastrophic nature of the invasion of Iraq. I agree with him that the former Prime Minister has a lot to answer for. He will no doubt continue to do so, although he was cleared by Chilcot of deliberate misbehaviour. Does the right hon. Gentleman not accept that if we turn post-Chilcot debates into an attempt to pursue and hound Tony Blair, the whole thing turns into a party political argument, with Labour Members trying to defend the position of their Government?

Will the right hon. Gentleman going on to address—he is entitled to go on for a bit—the most important matter: how do we ensure that the system of Cabinet government, handling intelligence, and taking on board and properly communicating defence advice to all members of the Cabinet and to Parliament, cannot be repeated, so we do not have another catastrophic foreign policy decision? By personalising the issue we will, if we are not careful, lose the point, which is whether we are satisfied that everything possible is being done to ensure that cannot happen again.

**Alex Salmond:** As the Chilcot report concluded, this was very much a personal campaign by the Prime Minister in doing things unbeknown to both Cabinet and certainly Parliament. I am going to address the point the right hon. and learned Gentleman makes, but the question of parliamentary accountability is in my estimation central to this case. Committees of this House have been examining the conduct of the processes of government. If he reads the minutes of the meeting that the Committee to which we intend to refer the question of parliamentary accountability held with the Cabinet Secretary, I do not think he will find much reassurance that there has been a tremendous advance in the process of government. The overwhelming impression is that a headstrong Prime Minister could still create a situation where sofa government drove a country into an illegal war. I suggest that parliamentary accountability and an examination of statements made to Parliament and public against the facts as we now know them would be a valuable additional sanction and tool in restraining future Prime Ministers from any such course of events.

**Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I was here in 2003. I was a frequent visitor to Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurds believed prior to 2003 that chemical weapons were going to be used against them again. The Iraqis were in the Gallery; it is a pity we are not having this debate in front of them, because they could point out their concern at the time, and their pressure for this country to help them in their action to overthrow Saddam Hussein. It was not simply an idea that Tony Blair had in his head; we had a full debate in this Parliament in 2003 and I, among others, voted for the action.

**Alex Salmond:** The right hon. Lady’s position on that issue has been consistent through the years, but that was not the case presented to this Parliament. The case presented to this Parliament was that there was a real and present danger to the United Kingdom that required the abandonment of diplomacy internationally and the immediate process to war.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Alex Salmond:** I say this to Labour Members, and correct a point made by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke): it is not all Labour Members. Many Labour Members, throughout this whole sad story, have been prepared to vote with their conscience in condemning their own Government. Indeed, we are all well aware that the leader of the Labour party would, if he was free to do so, be joining us in the Lobby this afternoon.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Alex Salmond:** I say again to Labour Members that I am not really interested in the civil war in the Labour party; I am interested in the real war that took place and resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. Therefore, it is reasonable and important to consider whether parliamentary accountability can be a major weapon of this House in making sure such events do not happen again.

**Mr Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): I wish the right hon. Gentleman and Scots everywhere a very happy St Andrew's day. He mentioned seven parties; none of my party's MPs in this House has signed this motion. I do not for one minute doubt the sincerity of many Members who have signed the motion and their desire to get to the truth, but is he not, following on from the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), in real danger of turning a very important issue into a party political issue—the SNP trying to attack the Labour party—rather than making it an issue of real national concern, drawing the lessons that need to be learned? That is one of the reasons we did not sign up to his motion.

**Alex Salmond:** I would have been very pleased if the right hon. Gentleman had made it Members from eight political parties signing the motion, but the whole point of the cross-party group, which has been working on this issue for months, is to make it not a straight party political issue. On attacking the Labour party, I think it is more that Labour Members wish to attack me in this debate, but I do not mind that because I am driving on to make the points of parliamentary accountability and the information we had from the Chilcot report that makes it unsustainable to argue other than that this Parliament was grievously misled.

The report in the Library—

**Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab) *rose*—

**Alex Salmond:** If the right hon. Lady will forgive me, I will make some progress.

The report in the Library from Dr Glen Rangwala analyses this in enormous detail and I hope Members read it, although even that report is not exhaustive. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) in the Chilcot debate in July listed five, as he put it, clear instances of misrepresentation in a single speech from the Prime Minister—in the war speech, the greatest speech of his life, in March 2003. I want to look at just three of the key things that have arisen and that we now know about from the Chilcot report.

The first of those things is the question of prior commitment. Through the long debates on Iraq, many of us suspected that the Prime Minister had given

commitments to the American President which were unrevealed to this House and to the public. The Chilcot report outlined these in spades. The famous phrase

“I will be with you, whatever”

will go down in infamy in terms of giving a commitment. Chilcot says that after giving such a commitment it would be virtually impossible for the Prime Minister to withdraw from it.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): My constituent Mr Matt Walton, an ex-serviceman, contacted my office several months ago regarding the Chilcot report. Matt is clear that Mr Blair's actions ensured that many of his colleagues' tragic fates were already decided before they left the UK. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is an outright scandal that ex-members of the armed forces are even thinking this way, and that the then Prime Minister has utterly let down those who were allegedly sent out to protect us?

**Alex Salmond:** I very much support the view of my hon. Friend.

**Michael Gove** (Surrey Heath) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a fascinating case, but I do not think he does himself a favour when he refers to this communication with President Bush and says that it was a commitment to military action come what may. There were in fact specific areas where the Prime Minister said that progress would need to be made before he could commit to military action, and he also said that there was a need to commit to Iraq for the long term. I simply say that because, if we are going draw appropriate lessons from history, yes, absolutely, draw critical lessons, but please put them in context.

**Alex Salmond:** The right hon. Gentleman will understand that my point was that no evidence or information about these commitments was ever presented to this House or to the general public. Indeed, it was not, as we know from Chilcot, presented to the Cabinet. Only Downing Street officials saw that letter and advised the Prime Minister, apparently, not to send it, which he did anyway. The Foreign Secretary, Mr Straw, saw it after the event. It has been said by some that that phrase did not mean what it clearly seems to mean. I just point out that after the Foreign Secretary did see the letter to President Bush, he himself wrote in a memo to the Prime Minister on 11 March 2003, when things at the United Nations were not going well:

“We will obviously need to discuss all this, but I thought it best to put it in your mind as event[s] could move fast. And what I propose is a great deal better than the alternatives. When Bush graciously accepted your offer to be with him all the way, he wanted you alive not dead!”

The Foreign Secretary was referring to being politically dead, not really dead like the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. That point shows with absolute seriousness and clarity that there was no doubt in the mind of the then Foreign Secretary of the extent of the commitment that had been made, and there was no doubt in the mind of the Chilcot inquiry when it commented on the range of letters and correspondence to the President of the United States, which it said would have made it very difficult for the UK to pursue any independent policy after the commitment had been made. That is what the inquiry says on the question of prior commitment.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): It is a matter of regret that this is being turned into a party political debate. It is worth remembering that 139 Labour MPs voted, against a strong three-line Whip, against the war, including Members who are present now. The great majority of Conservative MPs did not, but with honourable exceptions—half a dozen of them. Three Select Committees of this House were gung-ho for the war, and what is on trial today is the reputation of Parliament. It is Parliament who voted for an unnecessary war that ended in the deaths of 179 British soldiers, as we have been reminded. The loved ones of the British soldiers need the truth and they need a debate, and a serious debate, not a party political row, which this is turning out to be.

**Alex Salmond:** I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman's intervention. As I have been trying to point out, that is why Members from seven parties in this House have put their names to this motion.

There is a real argument, which has been put forward by the hon. Gentleman, me and others who voted against the conflict, that if we suspected there was something grievously wrong with the Prime Minister's case, why did other people not come to the same conclusion as the late Robin Cook that in his estimation weapons of mass destruction did not exist in respect of a clear imminent threat being commonly expressed? Why did other people not see that? The hon. Gentleman and I have to understand that when the Prime Minister went to the Dispatch Box in March 2003 and told the House conclusively that a real and present danger to the United Kingdom existed, it was reasonable even for those with misgivings to think that he must be seeing something that they were not seeing and that he must know something that they did not know. Those Members were thereby misled into the Lobby to vote for the conflict.

**Joan Ryan:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Alex Salmond:** No, I am making progress.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) has been trying to intervene for ages.

**Alex Salmond:** No doubt, but I think I have been more generous in giving way to Labour Members than they have ever been to me in any Committee or debate that I can remember. I say this reasonably gently: when I first came to this House, the Scottish National party had three Members here and the Labour party in Scotland had 50. I was used to taking constant interventions, and that was entirely legitimate. It did not faze me at all when I was a young Member, and it certainly does not faze me now. So let us make some progress.

On the question of the imminent threat, Chilcot said after assessing all the evidence that the then Prime Minister was engaged in advocacy, not in presenting the facts. On the question of a prior commitment, the Chilcot report is full of expressions from the Prime Minister to the President of the United States of America that were not known to Members of this House or to the general public. That information gives a totally different view of the reasons for conflict that the Prime Minister was then presenting to this House. For example, back in December 2001, the then Prime Minister said in a letter to President Bush that

“at present international opinion would be reluctant, outside the US/UK”—

I do not know how he read opinion in that way—

“to support immediate military action though, for sure, people want to be rid of Saddam. So we need a strategy for regime change that builds over time.”

The Prime Minister said repeatedly and consistently in this House that regime change was not the objective of Government policy. He stated that the Government's objective was to stop a clear and present danger to the United Kingdom. I have yet to see a more clear example of misleading people.

Lastly, and I think most pertinently, Chilcot identified the damage done to the authority of the United Nations. These were among the clearest and most resounding points in his report. In this troubled world, we have never needed an effective United Nations more than we do at this moment. That undermining of the UN was clear in the actions of the Prime Minister and in his presentation of why the second resolution was not to pass. Such a resolution would apparently have gone down by 11 votes to four. The Prime Minister repeatedly told the public that the only circumstances in which there would be a war without a second resolution were if one country expressed an unreasonable veto or stood out against international opinion and was not prepared to sanction action in Iraq. We now know beyond question from Chilcot that that was not the case.

We know that the then Prime Minister was misrepresenting the views of the Government of France and of President Chirac, for example. Even on the day of the debate, he continued to misrepresent the French position. The damage to the authority of the United Nations Security Council and to the consistency of international relations is inestimable. In a radio programme last year, as I recall, Sir Stephen Wall was asked specifically whether the Government had lied about the intentions of the French and withheld information on that matter. His answer was yes. The damage to international relations and the question of the unreasonable veto, as the then Prime Minister put it, are at the heart of this misrepresentation.

In recent weeks we have heard a great deal about checks and balances in political systems, particularly as people across the world are crossing their fingers and hoping for the best in the White House. We have been hoping that the institutions of office have a restraining effect and that the mad tweeter will become a sensible President.

**James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is right to talk about prime ministerial accountability to this House, and he is making a powerful case, but is not the real lesson from Chilcot the need for a policy response from the Government to ensure that this kind of thing does not happen again? For example, the creation of the National Security Council was a policy response from the Government to ensure that we have better information sharing and that decision making in Government is improved. Is that not the critical point in this debate?

**Alex Salmond:** It is certainly an important point, and it is one that is being pursued by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and other Committees of this House. When the Cabinet Secretary was repeatedly challenged on whether the changes to the flow of information to the Intelligence and Security

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Committee would make a decisive difference to a Prime Minister who was hellbent on pursuing a particular course of action, answer came there none. It is not enough to say that we are going to change the institutions of government or that we are going to learn the lessons of post-conflict analysis, although we have been promised a paper on that in the near future. There has to be an essence of parliamentary accountability.

**Mr Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I was the Chair of the Committee when the Cabinet Secretary was asked that very question, and I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that my Committee does not necessarily take the advice of the Cabinet Secretary on our recommendations. We will be making recommendations that we are confident will prevent such events from happening again. Should this motion be carried, we will respect the view of the House and extend our inquiry in order to respect that view. I do not know, however, whether we can satisfy the rather less reasonable terms in which the right hon. Gentleman has presented his reasonable motion. That will be for the House to judge.

**Alex Salmond:** The motion speaks for me and for the other Members who have signed it. I welcome that intervention from the Chairman of the Select Committee. I looked at his robust questioning of the Cabinet Secretary and I am now filled with more confidence that significant recommendations will come forward.

What Iraq demonstrates is that there are currently no effective checks and balances in our system, that the Prime Minister had the ability to create the circumstances in which this House followed him into an illegal conflict and that all the memos from the higher echelons of the civil service will not mean a thing—rather like the Cabinet Secretary’s evidence to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. That should be of little surprise to us.

**Joan Ryan:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. According to my reading of Chilcot, the report states that there was

“no falsification or improper use of intelligence”,

there was “no deception of Cabinet” and there was

“no secret commitment to war whether at Crawford Texas in April 2002 or elsewhere”.

As we have been told, Chilcot made it clear to the Liaison Committee that Tony Blair had not deceived Parliament. Sadly, I think the only deception is in today’s motion. Its opportunistic nature does not serve this issue or this Parliament well.

**Alex Salmond:** In relation to the right hon. Lady’s intervention, I have already corrected one of her hon. Friends and suggested that they carry on to the next sentence after the ones they have cited from Chilcot. Also, the Liaison Committee’s questioning of Sir John Chilcot found explicitly that a reasonable person could not have drawn the conclusions that the then Prime Minister did, and that he presented those conclusions to the House as an advocate rather than as a conveyor of information. I ask the right hon. Lady to go back

and look at those points, because they concern every Member of this House regardless of their political party.

Chilcot shows that we have a system of non-accountability. We waited six years before establishing a proper inquiry and, as we found out in *The Observer* a week past Sunday, it was structured in such a way as to avoid blame. It was deprived of judicial expertise and could not even pronounce on the legality of the conflict. It was wrestled with over the release of the diplomatic correspondence with President Bush, which more than any other factor provides the Prime Minister’s motivations. It was seven years before it reported. After all this time, some people in the press and elsewhere say, “These things are in the past. Let the dead bury the dead.” Many dead people have been buried, the carnage continues, and the real issue, to quote the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), is how to stop it happening again.

Memories will fade. A whole generation has grown up and reached adulthood since the war in Iraq. Soon, less than a quarter of Members—perhaps none—will have lived through the experience of the vote on Iraq and that fateful decision in March 2003. The motion presents an opportunity to introduce another check and balance into a system that is clearly deficient. It would start a process to create a precedent so that any future Prime Minister will know that he or she will have to account for their actions not only to history, but to this House of Commons. A long time ago, I made a speech in this House in which I suggested to Mr Blair that he might answer to a higher power than this House. I understand that he found it offensive, but I absolutely believe it to be the case none the less. In the meantime, in the here and now—here on earth—is it not important for us to find a parliamentary process by which a Prime Minister who grievously misled this House and the people into an illegal war can finally be held to parliamentary account?

1.22 pm

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore):** Let me start by expressing my condolences and sympathy to those who lost loved ones in Iraq and to those who still bear the scars of the conflict. Whatever our views on the conflict, we can surely all agree on one thing: the bravery and courage of British servicemen and women in Iraq was exemplary. We owe it to all those who died or were wounded in Iraq—be they servicemen or civilians, British, Iraqi or any other nationality—to learn lessons from the conflict.

There can be little doubt that Sir John Chilcot’s report is detailed and forensic, and for that we should all be thankful to Sir John and the other members of the inquiry panel. At the inquiry’s outset, the Government of the day committed to provide the fullest range of information and to giving it unhindered access to Government documents. Sir John confirmed in his appearance before the Liaison Committee that the inquiry had total access to all UK Government material right from the start, including the most sensitive categories. The inquiry saw more than 150,000 Government documents and an unprecedented amount of previously classified Government information has been released. Some 7,000 documents were referenced in the inquiry’s report, and more than 1,500 documents were published alongside

it. The papers include records of key Cabinet discussions, notes from Mr Blair to the US President, records of conversations between the then Prime Minister and other Heads of Government, records of meetings between senior UK and US officials, and Joint Intelligence Committee assessments.

The inquiry concluded that mistakes and failings were made that could have been avoided at the time and for which hindsight is no defence. The inquiry's report is a salutary tale of what happens when not enough opportunity is given to challenge and debate a policy or approach. When asked by the Liaison Committee to sum up one key lesson of the report, Sir John Chilcot said:

"If you press me very hard, I will say it was a failure to exert and exercise sufficient collective responsibility for a very big decision, and then to scrutinise and supervise its conduct and implementation."

As the then Prime Minister, the former Member for Witney—it is good to see the present hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) in his seat about to make his maiden speech—said in his statement to the House on 6 July:

"On the issue of misleading Parliament, there is nothing in the Chilcot report that I can see that points to deliberate deceit, but there were clearly occasions when more information, or better information, could have been presented."—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2016; Vol. 612, c. 907.]

He also said:

"As for how people should account for themselves, it is for them to read the report and explain why they did what they did."—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2016; Vol. 612, c. 902.]

At his appearance before the Liaison Committee on 2 November, when considering whether Mr Blair had misled Parliament and the public Sir John said that he absolves Mr Blair

"from a personal and demonstrable decision to deceive Parliament or the public—to state falsehoods, knowing them to be false. That I think he should be absolved from."

He also made the following point about the legal basis for military action, saying:

"The way in which the legal advice about—the basis for it was highly unsatisfactory, but that is not the same as saying it was illegal, and therefore that something should follow or some effect should be procured. One can't say that."

He also reminded the Committee that before the invasion of Iraq

"the whole intelligence community, and not only in the United Kingdom, were strongly of the belief—and had, they thought, sufficient intelligence to support it—that Saddam did have weapons of mass destruction available for use."

The decision to go to war in Iraq has had a profound and lasting impact on politics in this country, on the families of those who lost loved ones in Iraq and on those who were injured. Clearly, it was a tragic and seismic episode in our nation's history. Lessons should be learned and that process is ongoing. The Government are considering the lessons identified by the Iraq inquiry, many of which had already been recognised with changes made before Sir John published his report. The Prime Minister's National Security Adviser is currently leading a process with our national security Departments to consider further improvements. We fully recognise that ensuring that lessons are properly learned and embedded will be a long-term process.

**Alex Salmond:** The Minister mentioned Sir John Chilcot's evidence to the Liaison Committee. The passage in which Sir John concludes that a reasonable man could not have come to the conclusion that Mr Blair did about weapons of mass destruction was followed by the Chair saying:

"So he misled the House, or set aside evidence in order to lead the House down a line of thought and belief with his 18 March speech".

Has the Minister read that passage in the evidence?

**Chris Skidmore:** The important thing to recognise is that the Chilcot report—in paragraph 537 of the executive summary—explicitly does not question Mr Blair's belief at the time that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction. Paragraph 533 states:

"There is no evidence that intelligence was improperly included in the"—

September 2002—

"dossier or that No.10 improperly influenced the text."

In paragraph 491, the report is explicit that

"Cabinet was not misled on 17 March"

2003.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): One of the lessons we can learn is that there was no plan for reconstruction. If we are to learn that lesson, we should bear that in mind when considering reconstruction in Syria or Iraq.

**Chris Skidmore:** The hon. Gentleman is right that there are lessons for modern-day conflicts. I hope that this debate will give Members the opportunity to put their views across on which lessons should be learned. We had three days of debate on the Chilcot report itself, and I hope that we can move forward by coming up with proactive, positive recommendations.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister mentioned the establishment of the National Security Council as one thing that followed from the situation in Iraq. I draw to his attention the recent report of the Foreign Affairs Committee on events in Libya in which we were critical of Prime Minister David Cameron's failure to use the NSC properly and of the lack of detailed input into the situation in Libya that was considered by the Government at that time.

**Chris Skidmore:** The hon. Gentleman has put his comments on the record. I understand that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will formally respond to the Committee's recommendations, so I will leave it at that.

The National Security Council is a dedicated, standing Cabinet Committee that meets regularly at both ministerial and senior official level and has the right range of information to take forward informed decisions and to hold collective responsibility at the highest level. It provides collective strategic leadership on national security and crisis situations, with a built-in challenge function, making clear recommendations to Cabinet on military interventions, and formally recording both decisions and operational actions. The Attorney General attended the NSC regularly until April 2016, when he became a full member, and formal written legal advice is now

[Chris Skidmore]

provided and discussed at relevant NSC meetings and presented to Cabinet before any decisions on military intervention are taken.

The Government have integrated their overarching strategic approach with pragmatic, costed delivery mechanisms, including for military equipment, in a national security strategy, and strategic defence and security review, which is refreshed and adjusted in the light of developments every parliamentary term. The SDSR and refreshment of the national security strategy in 2015 brought this work together in a single integrated document. Cross-Whitehall working continues to improve, with creative policy making designed and delivered collectively across national security Departments and agencies to ensure that we understand, as far as is possible in dynamic and evolving threatening situations, what we want to achieve, and the implications for and impacts on ourselves and others. In support of this work, we set up joint units and taskforces where issues cut across several departmental responsibilities.

The Government are committed to understanding and acting on the important lessons drawn by Sir John Chilcot and his colleagues, but we recognise the need to continue to improve, whether working across the national security community or the wider civil service, hence the importance being given by the collective senior leadership to civil service reform and learning.

**Mr Kenneth Clarke:** I am grateful for the Minister's remarks about the improvements being made, and the Cameron Government did make improvements by introducing the NSC, but—I say this with hindsight—we still invaded Libya after too cursory a discussion in Cabinet and somehow we did not look properly at what the consequences would be. We talked only about the imminent threat of a massacre in Benghazi, which took everybody in to the intervention.

The Minister says the Government are considering further improvements, so will he invite my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to consider setting out some principles: about the amount of notice the NSC has of such decisions, the length and fullness of discussions—that applies to Cabinet, too—and the right of individual members of the Cabinet to have access before a meeting to security advice and defence advice if they wish to prepare themselves for the discussion?

**Chris Skidmore:** I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his recommendations. I am sure the National Security Adviser will be listening closely to this debate, and the fact they have been put on the record means it will be important for him to have regard to them. I am sure my right hon. and learned Friend will understand that at the time he mentions we were facing a bloodbath in Benghazi, that intervention was vital and that we would not now row back on that intervention.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I do not wish to add to any difficulties in this respect, but one problem is insufficient military input to the NSC; it all comes in through the voice of one man, the Chief of the Defence Staff. The Defence Committee has suggested that one way to strengthen the NSC would be to constitute the Chiefs of Staff Committee as a sub-committee of

the NSC. In that way, a Prime Minister with a bee in his bonnet would not be able so easily to sweep away military concerns.

**Chris Skidmore:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his separate recommendation and note that the Minister for the Armed Forces is in his place and listening carefully. That is not a new recommendation, but we will consider closely all recommendations from this debate.

Although it is right to learn the lessons identified by the Chilcot report, we should ensure that we avoid learning the wrong lessons. As the then Prime Minister said on the day the report was published,

“it would be wrong to conclude that we should not stand with our American allies when our common...interests are threatened” and that

“it would be wrong to conclude that we cannot rely on the judgments of our brilliant and hard-working intelligence agencies”.

He said that it is “wrong” to question the capability of our military, who

“remain the envy of the world”.

Perhaps most crucially, he said that it is wrong to

“conclude that intervention is always wrong.”—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2016; Vol. 612, c. 888.]

This has been a long and exhaustive inquiry. Sir John and his colleagues have had access to thousands of official documents and reached their conclusions—

**Mr Jenkin:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Chris Skidmore:** No, not now.

Lessons are being learned and will continue to be learned from what happened in Iraq, and so the Government can see no merit in undertaking any further inquiries into the Iraq war.

1.34 pm

**Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): I am grateful for the contributions made so far, especially the Minister's. When we reflect on the matters we are debating this afternoon, it is very important that we first to pay tribute, as the Minister did, to the hundreds of British servicemen and women and civilian personnel who lost their lives during the conflict in Iraq and that we send our thoughts to all the thousands of others who are still living with the injuries they suffered when serving in our armed forces.

We must never forget the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians who died during the conflict, and subsequently as a result of the sectarian violence and terrorist outrages that have followed. They must all be uppermost in our minds when we talk about learning from the mistakes that were made in Iraq and ensuring that future Governments do not repeat those mistakes.

No matter whether we are one of those Members who voted against the war, as I did, or one of the many, on both sides of this House, who in good faith and good conscience voted in favour of the invasion, it is incumbent on us all to learn the lessons about what went wrong and, indeed, to apologise for what has been exposed by Sir John Chilcot as the collective failing of our institutions.

It is a little over four months since this House spent two full days debating the contents of the Chilcot report, and a week after that debate we spent several hours asking questions about it to the then Prime Minister, David Cameron. Much has changed since that debate, but in terms of the arguments we have heard about the evidence presented in the Chilcot report, I would say, with great respect, that we have, thus far, heard nothing new today.

The right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) has a long-standing contention—we have heard him set it out again just now—that, first, Parliament was deliberately misled by Tony Blair and his Government in the run-up to war; secondly, that intelligence allegedly known by Ministers to be false was deliberately presented to this House and to the public; thirdly, that this was all designed to deliver on a private pact that Tony Blair had made with George W. Bush to go to war with Iraq; and that the evidence for those contentions lies mainly in the six words written in a memo from the then Prime Minister to the then President.

Although I have listened very carefully again to the argument made by the right hon. Member for Gordon, we all know that those were exactly the contentions that Sir John Chilcot spent several years looking into, alongside all the evidence from memos and records of conversations, and from his many interviews with hundreds of witnesses. So let me say once again that Sir John deserves our thanks and our praise for conducting that vast but vital task with great care, diligence and objectivity.

The Chilcot report was the fifth, and hopefully the final, inquiry into the Iraq war. The first was published on 3 July 2003, before the tragic death of Dr David Kelly, before the capture of Saddam and while the search for weapons of mass destruction was still going on. That inquiry was undertaken by the Foreign Affairs Committee, on which I served at the time. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) is the only other member of that Committee still sitting in this House. On looking back at the conclusions of that report, I note that on chemical and biological weapons we said:

“we have no doubt that the threat posed to United Kingdom forces was genuinely perceived as a real and present danger and that the steps taken to protect them were justified by the information available at the time.”

We were critical of the prominence and emphasis given to the 45-minute claim in the September 2002 dossier, saying that greater uncertainty should have surrounded the presentation of that and other claims. However, we concluded that those claims were

“well founded on the basis of the intelligence then available”

and that

“allegations of politically inspired meddling cannot credibly be established”.

We were highly critical of the February 2003 dossier—the so-called dodgy dossier—and the fact that Tony Blair had inadvertently presented it as “further intelligence” on the Floor of the House without realising its true provenance. However, that was 13 years ago. Four inquiries later, with the benefit of millions of pages of documentary evidence and hundreds of key witnesses to which my colleagues and I did not have access at the time, the conclusions have remained fundamentally the same.

There are many serious lessons to learn from the Chilcot report, and I will address them in a moment. However, on learning those lessons, we will do ourselves and future Governments no favours if we spend even more time in this House and in the Committee Rooms examining contentions that the Chilcot report and four other inquiries—at exhaustive length—have already found to be incorrect, nor will any of us benefit if we continue to try to turn a collective institutional and international failure in Iraq into an attempt to pillory and scapegoat one individual. Let me be clear: I totally disagreed, as many other people did, with Tony Blair on the Iraq war. I voted against our Government because I thought that our then Prime Minister was simply wrong, but never for one second did I believe that he was acting in bad faith, and I do not do so now.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): I rise to support my hon. Friend. Like him, I voted against the war at the time. Nothing has happened since then to make me think that I was wrong to do so, but I did not for one minute think that Tony Blair lied to this House, or attempted to mislead me. I just came to a different judgment. The problem is that in the minds of those who believe that we were misled, there is no report that will ever convince them otherwise, but it is time to learn the lessons for future generations and to move on.

**Fabian Hamilton:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, because he captures the mood that was prevalent at the time. Many of us wanted to vote against that war and we did so with a clear conscience because we felt that it was the wrong approach to resolving the problems in Iraq. I will go on to say a bit more about what should be done now.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): I was a Member when that vote was taken. I suspect that, with hindsight, many people would look again at the way they voted. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, whether the commitments to the House were made in good faith or bad faith, the central point of being able to hold the Executive to account for the basis on which they go to war, for their actions afterwards and for the way in which they prepare our troops for battle is important? It provides an important role for this House, which is to scope out ways in which it can avoid mistakes in the future.

**Fabian Hamilton:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The important words he used were “in the future”. We must be held to account by the people who elected us—by the public of this country—and we must hold our Government to account for the decisions that they bring to this House for approval. It is very clear, as Sir John Chilcot said, that this was a collective and institutional failure.

**Caroline Lucas:** Does the hon. Gentleman recognise the results of the freedom of information requests a few weeks ago that demonstrated precisely that the Chilcot inquiry had been designed to “avoid blame”. Sir Gus O’Donnell has been quoted as saying that he recommended using the inquiry’s terms of reference to prevent it reaching

“any conclusion on questions of law or fact”

[*Caroline Lucas*]

or to attributing any blame. If we look at the Glen Rangwala report, which simply puts the evidence in front of us—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. May I make a plea to those who are looking to catch my eye later on to keep their interventions to the minimum, as there are a very large number of people wishing to contribute to this debate?

**Fabian Hamilton:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but no, I do not recognise those results, because I do not know the context in which those words were said. All too often speeches and phrases are taken out of context. I do not believe for one minute that Sir John Chilcot and his whole report and all the years and the time that he spent were there simply to mislead the public.

Let me try to make some progress. As I have said, I never for one second believed that the then Prime Minister was acting in bad faith, and I do not do so now. For those reasons, I will be urging my Labour colleagues to vote against today's motion. I will urge them to do so to enable the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to focus properly on the real job of its inquiry, which is to analyse the conclusions that Sir John has actually reached, based on the evidence that he gathered, and to look at the lessons that he says should be learned from his report.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** One factor that has not been fully explored in this debate is the Attorney General's role. Many of us who had doubts about this war were told that it was legal. Has my hon. Friend had a look at that, and is he satisfied that the Attorney General's decision was right?

**Fabian Hamilton:** At the time, the Foreign Affairs Committee did look into that matter. I have not examined it since then—in the past 13 years—but I believe that Sir John Chilcot does make reference to it in his report.

If there is one serious risk that we now face, it is to assume that all the lessons from Iraq have been learned and that the mistakes made there could never happen again. That is particularly important now, while we have in place a relatively new Prime Minister, who may in due course face her own decisions over peace and war, and who may herself need to come and make a case before this House.

Listening to the former Prime Minister's response to Chilcot back in July, I understood that, although he acknowledged that lessons needed to be learned, his clear implication was that that had already been done. He said that by establishing the National Security Council there could be more questions from Ministers about intelligence assessments and more questions from the military about shortcomings in planning, yet, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, has pointed out, there is insufficient input from military sources to make that credible.

The former Prime Minister said that creating the conflict and stability fund meant that we were better placed to prepare for the aftermath of conflicts and to prevent the kind of power vacuum that sectarian and

terrorist groups exploited after the Iraq war. Although we welcome the theory behind innovations such as the National Security Council and the conflict and stability fund, the reality of what has happened in Libya and elsewhere over the past five years—this is what my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) pointed out—does not give confidence that they are working in practice. It suggests even more clearly that the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has an important job to do over the coming months in ensuring that the real lessons of Chilcot—for Whitehall, for Ministers and for Parliament—are truly being learned.

Let us consider for a moment what Chilcot discovered in relation to civilian casualties as a result of coalition action. The Chief of the Defence Staff predicted that casualties would be in the "low hundreds". When the reality became clear, the then Foreign Secretary said:

"We need to find ways of countering the damaging perception that civilians are being killed needlessly, and in large numbers, by coalition forces."

When the truth became overwhelming, a private secretary to Tony Blair told him that casualty data must be suppressed because

"any overall assessment of civilian casualties will show that"—

the coalition is—

"responsible for significantly more than insurgents."

Chilcot concludes:

"The Government's consideration of the issue of Iraqi civilian casualties was driven by its concern to rebut accusations that coalition forces were responsible for the deaths of large numbers of civilians, and to sustain domestic support for operations".

When we hear Ministers say exactly the same from that Dispatch Box in relation to civilian casualties in Yemen, is it possible to argue that anything has changed or that any lessons have been learned? I do not believe that that is the case. The mistakes of Iraq are being made all over again. We need to ensure that the National Security Council and all the other measures adopted are working, because I do not believe that they are at the moment.

In conclusion, I believe that the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee needs to examine the Chilcot report, not for what it tells us about the past but for what we can learn from it for the present and the future. Whether in relation to Yemen, Libya, Syria or the ongoing battle to restore stability and end sectarian conflict in Iraq, we must look forward and learn the lessons that have practical consequences for us all today. With instability growing throughout the middle east, eastern Europe and beyond, we may face even bigger challenges tomorrow, and that is why I cannot support the motion. I understand why its proposers have tabled it, but they are fighting an old war and raising once again contentions that have already been dismissed by five—five—separate inquiries. How many more do we need? In doing so, they risk distracting the attention of this House and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee from what should be their true objective, which is to learn the real lessons from Chilcot and ensure that we never need such an inquiry again.

1.51 pm

**Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con):** From time to time, Members of this House of Commons have the burden of debating whether to send our finest young

men and women into harm's way, and sometimes to their deaths. I do not believe that any Member of this House, on either side, ever takes that decision lightly and we need always to take that decision based on the best possible information.

At the start of the second Iraq war, my young constituent, Lieutenant Marc Lawrence, serving on a Sea King helicopter, was killed. That in itself is possibly a matter for a further inquiry, but I know that that loss was devastating to Marc's parents and I believe that they have a right to know that their only son lost his life in a just cause and that his sacrifice was worth while.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I voted to send that young man to his death. On the eve of the vote, a significant number of Members then on the Opposition Benches, including myself, had grave disquiet about the cause on which we were due to embark. I and about a dozen colleagues met the then Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), and the shadow Foreign Minister, the then Member for Devizes, Michael Ancram. The Leader of the Opposition told us on Privy Council terms that he had been informed on Privy Council terms by Mr Blair that the Iraqis had weapons of mass destruction and that there was a 40-minute threat to UK interests and that therefore our support for the motion before the House the following day was vital.

I am afraid that I cannot concur with the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton). I sat on those Benches and listened to the tone of the debate as well as to the words that were said. I have to say that I believe that the House was deliberately misled. There were no weapons of mass destruction, as we now know, and there was no 40-minute threat. I think that it is plain—I am convinced that it is plain, sadly—that Mr Blair had made a pledge to President Bush that the UK would be delivered and that he was determined to deliver the UK in support of that war.

We cannot let this matter rest. We owe it to our armed forces to see this through. I support the call to ask the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to take further action. My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), the Chairman of the Committee, has indicated to me privately, as he has indicated on the Floor of the House today, that his inquiries are ongoing and that further recommendations will be made. I am grateful for that.

I resent the fact that this is described as an opportunist Scottish National party motion. Technically, yes, this is an Opposition day debate, but the motion has cross-party support and I am grateful that the Government have effectively recognised that this is a House of Commons matter and should never be a party political matter.

I am not interested in a witch hunt against a former and discredited Prime Minister. I concur entirely with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) when he says that we must seek to take every measure to try to ensure that these circumstances do not arise again. We cannot bring back the dead, but we can help to prevent further and unwarranted sacrifice of the men and women of our armed forces. I am not interested in the outcome of this vote. Whatever the outcome, I hope that my hon. Friend the Chairman of the Select Committee will help to ensure that the right measures are taken so that we never, ever face such circumstances again.

1.56 pm

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), because we went through the same experience of this House at that time. Although we like to feel that we take our decisions on an intellectual basis, I know that my feelings on this are motivated by strong emotion and what happened to my father in the war. He volunteered as a 15-year-old—he lied about his age—to go to the continent and stop the Huns bayoneting Belgian babies. He returned broken and badly wounded in 1919, extremely grateful to the Germans for having saved his life when he was dying in a foxhole. He could have bled to death.

My motivation—this should be our highest motivation—is the interests of our armed forces. They need an absolute assurance that any decision to put their lives at risk is taken in the most serious way after the most searching inquiries are carried out. We owe them that. I believe that another inquiry is necessary, and that is one on the decision to go into Helmand province in 2006 at a time when only six members of the armed services had been killed in the war. We went in in the hope that not a shot would be fired and 450 of our servicemen died as a result. That is what we must do now—that is what we should be taking on, not a tribal party row in this place. It is not appropriate; it is not right. We must look to the reputation of Parliament.

As has been said, we were misled. Whether it was deliberate or not—the expression “sincere deceivers” has been used in the United States about what happened in that war—we know that after that debate 139 of my comrades on the Labour Benches voted against the war, which was a very courageous thing to do as we were under great pressure, but 50 others had grave doubts about the war. They were, in my view, bribed, bullied or bamboozled into voting the wrong way and many—

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Bribed? You can't say bribed; that's outrageous.

**Paul Flynn:** They were induced—

**Ian Austin:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for a Member of this House to allege that other Members of this House were bribed—paid—to vote a particular way? Should he not produce evidence for it? What a disgrace.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) did not accuse a specific individual of taking a bribe. The hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) is perfectly entitled to ask him in an intervention whether he will withdraw what he has said, but this is not a matter for the Chair.

**Paul Flynn:** I am not suggesting that anyone took any money. There are such things as political bribes, with inducements and offers, of which we are well aware in this place. There was a very heavy operation here to convince Members to vote for war. We must look at the situation then.

One Back Bencher wrote to Tony Blair—I speak of Tony Blair with no animus against him. I campaigned for him to be Leader of the House. I have congratulated him again and again on the work that he has done for the Labour party, but it is not the case that there was

[Paul Flynn]

one failure. It was a failure of the three most important Select Committees in this House, who were all cheerleaders for the war. There were all those who went around saying, “If you knew what we know—we’ve got this secret information—you would certainly vote for war to go ahead.” I believe it was in that circumstance that the decision was taken.

One letter to Tony Blair warned in March:

“Our involvement in Bush’s war will increase the likelihood of terrorist attacks.”

It said that attacking a Muslim state without achieving a fair settlement in other conflicts in the world would be seen by Muslims from our local mosques to the far corners of the world as an act of injustice. I believe we paid a very heavy price in the world for seeming to divide the world between a powerful, western, Christian world which was taking advantage of the other side, who were Muslims.

I am certain that in his mind Tony Blair was sincere. He was proved to be right on Kosovo when many people criticised him, and on Sierra Leone he was right. He was convinced on that that the others were wrong and he was going to prove it. One of the pieces of information that he quoted was an interview with Hussein Kamel, who was the son-in-law of Saddam Hussein. It was quoted in the document as evidence of weapons of mass destruction. According to the interview, Saddam Hussein had chemical weapons, biological weapons, nuclear weapons, which he did say in the evidence. But in the same interview, which was conducted in 1995 and was already old news, Hussein Kamel said, “Of course, we got rid of them after the Gulf war.” What was in that dodgy dossier was half the story—evidence, yes, that Saddam had had such weapons, but also evidence that he no longer had them, and that was never published.

What Chilcot said in his report was not the absolution that people believe it to be. He said that the decision to invade was taken

“before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted” and that military action was

“not a last resort”.

According to the strictures of modern philosophy, that means it is not a just war. Chilcot said that Saddam posed no “imminent threat”. In effect, he declared the war needless.

Colin Powell has confessed that he was fooled and lied to, and that he regrets bitterly that he did not follow his natural instinct and avoid the war. Strangely enough, most of the people who were advising him at the time have said that they were wrong and the war was a terrible mistake.

I believe that this House must accept what Chilcot is saying and not take an aversion to it that pleases our political point of view. The issue is one that the loved ones of the 179 have been following. They have gone through years of torment asking themselves, “Did our loved ones die in vain?” Chilcot has reported, and his report was that the decision was taken not just by a Prime Minister but by all those who were gullible enough to believe that case. There were a million people who walked the streets of this country and demonstrated. It was not a clear decision.

We fall into the trap time and again of believing that our role in Britain is to punch above our weight militarily. Why should we do that? Every time we do, we die beyond our responsibilities.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): I obviously was not here in 2003, and as a student at the time, was part of that anti-war generation that my hon. Friend describes. I am troubled by his language in describing colleagues, some of whom are still here today, as “gullible” in voting for the Iraq war. I never agreed with it then and with hindsight I certainly do not agree with it, but I never doubted either the integrity or the intelligence of the people who took a different view then and continue to take a different view today.

**Paul Flynn:** I am not questioning their good faith in any way; I am sure that they voted that way.

**Wes Streeting:** You said earlier that they were bribed.

**Paul Flynn:** I will stick to the word “gullible”. Three Committees of people who are great experts—the Intelligence and Security Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Defence Committee—all took the same view. They were all told stories about the weapons of mass destruction. The evidence was, and the evidence is there now, that those did not exist, and there was a very selective choice of evidence—as in the quotations of the son-in-law of Saddam Hussein—that the Committee members believed and chose to believe.

If we do not recognise that as a problem for this House, we will make the same mistakes again. We are going to face such decisions in future. The House will have to decide whether we are going to order—that is our power—young men and women to put their lives on the line, on the basis of what? Faulty evidence, ineffective evidence. That was the conclusion of Chilcot.

I am on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and I look forward to taking part in the inquiry, but I do not welcome the kind of debate that we have got.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman makes a compelling case, to which I am very sympathetic, but I wonder, given the case that he is making, does he agree that it is a matter of some disappointment that a majority of his colleagues in the parliamentary Labour party have decided to set themselves against the motion before the House today, and that this will look like they are closing ranks to protect their former leader?

**Paul Flynn:** There is a great deal that I regret about things that are happening within the Labour party at this moment. In the brief cameo appearance that I had on the Front Bench, I called for this debate. I called for a debate to take place on these lines. Of course I want to see the debate. We cannot pretend that after all these years of investigation, the Chilcot inquiry is a trial without a verdict at the end. We must take that responsibility ourselves and we must reform this House to make sure that we can never again take such a calamitous decision, which led to the loss of 179 British lives and uncounted numbers of Iraqi lives. That was a terrible, terrible mistake and we must not repeat it.

2.7 pm

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): Mr Speaker, thank you. It is a great honour to catch your eye this afternoon and to follow so many distinguished speakers.

There is an important link between west Oxfordshire and the debate we are having this afternoon. As Colonial Secretary, Mr Winston Churchill was in great part involved in the setting up of modern Iraq. I think it is also right to say that Mr Churchill was responsible for the setting up of the Chilcot inquiry—or perhaps it just seems that way.

We are speaking this afternoon of past Prime Ministers. I wish to speak of a great Prime Minister. David Cameron represented Witney for 15 years. He was a great Prime Minister and a brilliant MP for west Oxfordshire. He found the Conservative party bleeding after three successive election defeats. He picked it up, restored its faith in itself, and returned it to government. I know at first hand the effect that his leadership had upon the party, the country and its fortunes, because I was there, on the streets, and I felt the turning of the tide. There is perhaps no greater tribute that I could pay David Cameron than to say that he made the Conservative party believe in itself again. He made it fresh, dynamic, and able to communicate with modern Britain. He created a new generation of Conservative politicians, and I am one of them. The record in this House speaks for itself—1,000 jobs a day created while he was Prime Minister and an economy rescued from the brink of ruin. The party and, if I may say so, the country, will forever be in his debt.

In west Oxfordshire, it did not matter who someone was, where they lived or how they voted; if there was a local issue, he was always happy to help them. It is, of course, always the case that we attend with alacrity to constituents' concerns, but when I see a letter from "D. Cameron, Outraged, of Dean" complaining about his dustbin collection or myriad other issues, it may be one letter that I do not leave until the end of the day.

It is a daunting task to sit in this House. Some weeks ago, I was in private practice at the Bar. I am now surrounded by great experts in law, the military, social justice, the economy and the constitution. The range of talent and experience in this House is awe-inspiring. But I do have ties to this House and an example that I can draw upon. In 1945, Albert Stubbs won the seat of Cambridgeshire for the Labour party. [*Laughter.*] He was a famous trade unionist, and he won his seat by a majority of 44 by getting out on his motorcycle, riding around the villages of Cambridgeshire and signing up the workers to the union. He was known for his hard work for the people of that area and his interest in rural issues.

That record is one that I aspire to when I look at the people of west Oxfordshire. Hon. Members need not worry: I am not about to execute the fastest defection in political history. I mention Mr Stubbs because he was my great-grandfather. I must watch my words carefully at this point, because his daughter—my grandmother—will be watching on the television, and if I put a foot out of line I am going to get a very strongly worded letter. I do therefore acknowledge at this stage that Mr Stubbs would be horrified by my politics, but I hope he would at least approve of my work ethic.

I have spoken to the House of my admiration for Winston Churchill, and I thought it would be a good idea if I went back to the records to see whether there was perhaps an exchange between my hero and my forebear. I went to *Hansard* and I searched for an exchange, and I expected the contrast of the famous parliamentary wit and the working-class warrior. I was thinking of a combination of Pitt the Younger and Charles James Fox, and I found in the "Thanks to Services" debate from 1945 just such an exchange. The great man—speaking from the Opposition Bench, of course—paused in his speech, took an intervention from Mr Stubbs, told him he was "ignorant" and went back to his speech. I do not know who was right or wrong in that exchange; I merely hope that I will manage to avoid such a rebuke in the course of my career.

West Oxfordshire is a landlocked constituency, but it is perhaps best toured by taking a look at its rivers. If we were charting the course of the Windrush downstream, we would start at the beautiful town of Burford—stonewalled, slate-roofed and a glowing gateway to the Cotswolds. The proclamation of Edward IV; the home of Speaker Lenthall, the most famous protector of this House; and the execution of the Levellers—it shines with history.

We could travel downstream to Witney, the famous market town. My predecessor, in his maiden speech, noted that there was only one blanket factory left in Witney and that most of the beer was brewed elsewhere. Sadly, there are now no blanket factories, although the Blanket Hall is well worth a visit. But the Wychwood brewery has an astonishingly high market share of real ale, and there are wonderful ales. It supplies many of the wonderful pubs in west Oxfordshire, where one can go to enjoy a pint or watch the world go by—I will just have to be careful I do not leave my children behind. [*Laughter.*]

Alongside the Evenlode, we see the beautiful town of Charlbury and, at Cornbury Park, a world-beating charity, SpecialEffect, using video games and technology to enhance the quality of life of people with disabilities. Alongside the Evenlode, the Dorn and the Thames, we see a wealth of wonderful wildlife—for example, at Chimney Meadows—that inhabits the stunning countryside of west Oxfordshire.

But it is the thriving market towns of Witney, Burford, Chipping Norton, Charlbury, Carterton and Eynsham, and the villages that connect them, that give west Oxfordshire its distinctive character. These are filled with clever, industrious, creative, hard-working people creating world-beating industries in IT, Formula 1, travel and clothes, and each year hosting thousands of visitors from across the world. If the rivers are the lifeblood of west Oxfordshire, the market towns are the beating heart.

I pause at this stage to fly, as it were, to proud, modern Carterton and nearby Brize Norton—home of the Royal Air Force's transport fleet and centre of transport operations. It is, of course, from there that so many flew to Iraq, and, sadly, many have flown back having given everything. Their sacrifice is remembered in the moving repatriation garden at Carterton.

My grandfather and my great-uncle were Bomber Command veterans, and the care of elderly veterans is a particular concern to the people of west Oxfordshire, and particularly those in Carterton, whose very lifeblood is tied up with the wellbeing of that thriving airbase and the people who have served in it. Such veterans are

[Robert Courts]

people who have asked for little but given everything; they are the people to whom we owe our freedom, and the care we give them now tells us much about not only our compassion but our sense of duty, and we must not let them down.

I also pause to pay tribute to the men and women of today's Royal Air Force. They are the heirs of those who fought in canvas and wood machines above the trenches of Flanders 100 years ago. They are the heirs of those who formed the few in 1940. They, together with the Army and Royal Navy, are the people whose strength and bravery make possible the civilised debate that we have in this House.

We must not forget that those who defend our freedom now are no less requiring of our care than their forebears. Sometimes the scars are visible, and I commend the charities that do so much to help those whose injuries are physical, but we should not forget that, so often, the wounds are not visible—that a person may leave the conflict, but the conflict will never leave the person.

I have met many people in my work at the Bar whose lives are blighted by psychiatric illness, and I urge all Members to remember all those who need a little more understanding, both in the armed forces and in the wider public. That underlines the importance to everyone of the health services that underpin this care: the surgeries in our towns and, in my constituency, the hospitals in Witney and Chipping Norton.

I have spoken of rivers that seem to surge with history, and it is perhaps the Glyme that has the most fame—flowing down through famous Woodstock, royalist-garrisoned in the civil war and now with the world heritage site of Blenheim Palace.

Lastly, at the close of our tour, I come to the quiet little village of Bladon, where I live. The sun climbs slowly to illuminate the village in the shallow valley, as it has for 1,000 years. The local red kite floats lazily over the church tower. The river flows through Blenheim Park, round past the yellow sandstone cottages. It is an attractive but typical small west Oxfordshire settlement, with one pub, an active pop-up shop and the thriving church community of St Martin's, which is where I was married and where my son, Henry, was baptised. But it is also the reason why this small Oxfordshire village is world-famous. I rise for the first time in this House on the birthday of Sir Winston Churchill. He now lies in Bladon churchyard. I walk past his grave every Sunday morning—my house is a stone's throw away—so his words resonate particularly with me.

Winston Spencer Churchill loved this House and, throughout his long career, defended its strengths and traditions. So, as we come to the end of our tour, following the Thames from the southern bank of my constituency to outside the door of this palace, I would like to pause to consider his words about what it is that we do here. He said:

“The object of Parliament is to substitute argument for fisticuffs”—[*Official Report*, 6 June 1951; Vol. 488, c. 1179.] and that the House of Commons

“is the citadel of British liberty; it is the foundation of our laws...I do not know how else this country can be governed other than by the House of Commons playing its part in all its broad freedom in British public life.”—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1943; Vol. 393, c. 405-06.]

If I may say so, we must all remember that. No matter how great the issues or how strong the passions, the very fact that we can have these debates is proof positive of why our system of representative democracy works.

I am acutely aware of the trust set in me by the people of west Oxfordshire. I will ensure that the voice of the Windrush is heard loudly on the banks of the Thames, and I will strive every day to deserve their trust. Every day that I set foot in this Chamber, I will remember that to sit on these Benches is to breathe fresh life into Churchill's words—an honour without measure. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

2.20 pm

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts). I congratulate him most warmly on an excellent maiden speech. He talked with great descriptive beauty about his constituency. He used humour and he was serious. He talked about his own family's political journey in having a Labour grandfather. My family has had a political journey in the opposite direction: of my two grandfathers, one was Liberal and one was Conservative. I noticed, however, that he did not talk about the political journey of his predecessor but one—an interesting journey that took place rather more recently than his grandfather's. I thought that what he said about his predecessor was absolutely right, at a time when a lot of people are saying not very nice things about the previous Prime Minister. I am really pleased that the hon. Gentleman said what he did and put it on the record. I thank him for that.

Before addressing the motion itself, I would like to consider what we might be debating today instead. We could be debating the crisis in the national health service and social care. We could be debating the devastating impact on living standards of the Government's autumn statement. We could be debating what the Scottish National party Government in Scotland might be doing with the powers they have, but resolutely refuse to use, to mitigate that. Or we could have used this precious debating time to put pressure on the Government to drop food and medicine to the people of Aleppo, who, as the French Government said today, are facing the worst massacre of civilians since the second world war.

But no, we are debating the motion before us—and why? SNP Members are furious, livid and incandescent with rage that Sir John Chilcot did not find that Tony Blair lied. After seven years and five independent inquiries, the lie that our former Prime Minister lied has finally been laid to rest, and SNP Members cannot stand it. The motion, of course, does not talk about lying. However, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who supports the motion, let the cat out of the bag when she told *The Observer* on Sunday

“The Chilcot report confirmed Tony Blair lied to the public, parliament and his own cabinet in order to drag us into the Iraq war.”

She has clearly not read the Chilcot report; it did no such thing.

Without going over the detail as we did in a very full debate on this back in the summer, let me remind the House briefly of what the Chilcot report did say. Volume 4, paragraph 876, says clearly that there was no falsification or improper use of intelligence. Volume 5, paragraph 953

says that there was no deception of Cabinet. Volume 1, paragraph 572 onwards, says that there was no secret commitment to war either at Crawford in April 2002 or anywhere else. Although outside the body of the report, as a number of hon. Members have pointed out, Sir John Chilcot himself, in his appearance before the Liaison Committee, said:

“I absolve him”—

Tony Blair—

“from a personal and demonstrable decision to deceive parliament or the public—to state falsehoods, knowing them to be false.”

Some people just cannot give up. Some people do not seem able to accept the possibility that reasonable people can come to different views on a difficult subject but do so in good faith. Some people cannot accept—

**Alex Salmond:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Bradshaw:** No, the right hon. Gentleman had half an hour and a lot of Members want to speak.

Some people cannot accept that however much one disagrees with a decision taken, it can still have been taken in good faith. So here we are debating a motion that seeks to distort and rewrite Chilcot and, in effect, put Tony Blair back in the dock. I am delighted that my own party is having none of this nonsense and that we will be voting against this mendacious opportunism in an hour and a half’s time.

I think there may be another reason why some people persist in trying to claim falsely that there was deliberate deceit in all this. They are more than a little nervous that as we look at what has happened in Syria, and is still happening in Syria today, where there was no intervention and we left a brutal dictator to continue to slaughter his own people, history will prove our former Prime Minister right.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. I am going to suggest an informal limit of six minutes and see how we get on. It may be necessary to put a formal limit on, but we will start with six minutes.

2.25 pm

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): It is a pleasure to begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on an outstanding maiden speech. I have a history of sometimes disagreeing with hon. Members from Witney, but on this occasion it was fantastic to be able to nod in agreement and pleasure at every remark he made. He has got off to a tremendous start in this House, and I am sure he can tell from the reactions of Members on both sides of the House the good wishes that flow to him today. Make the most of it!

I welcome the fact that Scottish National party Members and other parties’ Members have chosen to bring forward this subject for debate today. I speak as somebody who voted and spoke in favour of toppling Saddam Hussein in 2003 and who has come to believe that that was entirely the wrong decision to take. It is therefore with a degree of humility that I address the two reasons that

I voted and spoke in the way I did: first, because I believed what I was told about weapons of mass destruction; and, secondly, because I had a naive view that if Saddam Hussein were removed we might see something like the emergence of democracy in Iraq—and of course we saw nothing of the kind.

**Mike Gapes:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Dr Lewis:** I will, but I am conscious of the informal time limit we have been given.

**Mike Gapes:** I am extremely grateful. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that if Saddam Hussein had not been removed, it is very likely that his son Uday, or someone else of a similar nature, would have inherited, and that the problems we have seen writ large in Syria since 2011 would have been even worse in Iraq?

**Dr Lewis:** I accept the first part of what the hon. Gentleman says. It is highly probable that if Saddam Hussein had not been removed, things would have gone on in Iraq in the brutal, dictatorial way in which they had gone on previously. The problem is, as we have learned from what happened in Iraq and in Libya, that one can remove these brutal dictators, but instead of seeing democracy emerge one sees re-emerging a deadly conflict, going back more than 1,000 years, between different branches of the Islamic faith. The hon. Gentleman knows my view on this because, as I hope he remembers, in the arguments we had when the same proposition was put forward to deal with President Assad as we had dealt with Saddam Hussein, I made the same argument then as I make now—that in a choice between a brutal, repressive dictator and the alternative of a totalitarian Islamist state, I am afraid that the brutal dictator is the lesser of two evils. If we have not learned that from what happened in Iraq, then we truly have not learned any lessons from Iraq at all.

At the Liaison Committee meeting on 2 November, we had the opportunity to speak to Sir John Chilcot in person and to ask him directly to interpret the results of his own inquiries. I was particularly struck by the fact that of the two arguments I mentioned earlier—the one about the weapons of mass destruction and the one about the naive belief that democracy would emerge if we got rid of the brutal dictator—he was more censorious on the latter than on the former. He said that if the Prime Minister of the day had not exaggerated the certainty of his claims about weapons of mass destruction it would have been completely clear that he had not misled the House in any way. Sir John said:

“Exaggeration—placing more weight on the intelligence than it could possibly bear—is a conclusion that we reached on the Butler committee and reached again with even more evidence in the Iraq inquiry.”

He went on to say something rather curious. I put it to him that one argument that I had found convincing was when Mr Blair had said that there was a real danger of the weapons of mass destruction that were believed to exist in the hands of dictators getting into the hands of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. Sir John went on to say:

“On the other hand, I do not know that, in putting forward the fusion argument, Mr Blair related it very directly and specifically to Saddam passing weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups.”

[Dr Julian Lewis]

I was surprised that Sir John made that statement. In the debate in March 2003, Tony Blair had said that

“there are two begetters of chaos: tyrannical regimes with weapons of mass destruction and extreme terrorist groups who profess a perverted and false view of Islam...Those two threats have, of course, different motives and different origins, but they share one basic common view: they detest the freedom, democracy and tolerance that are the hallmarks of our way of life. At the moment, I accept fully that the association between the two is loose—but it is hardening. The possibility of the two coming together”—

that, I think, is what Sir John meant by fusion—

“of terrorist groups in possession of weapons of mass destruction or even of a so-called dirty radiological bomb—is now, in my judgment, a real and present danger”.—[*Official Report*, 18 March 2003; Vol. 401, c. 768.]

We discussed in the debate on the Chilcot report the fact that there were plenty of references in the documents of the Joint Intelligence Committee and other intelligence organisations to the intelligence services’ real belief that Saddam still retained some weapons of mass destruction. I share Sir John’s conclusion that Tony Blair was guilty of exaggeration of the certainty with which knowledge was held about Saddam’s supposed possession of WMD, but that he was not guilty of lying to the House about that belief.

I have real concern with regard to the second argument, and it is on that argument that I believe the then Prime Minister Tony Blair will be held to have rather seriously misled the House. I revert to my exchange with Sir John Chilcot on 2 November, in which I said to him:

“I would like you to tell us to what extent Mr Blair was warned of the danger that, far from democracy emerging, Sunni-Shi’a religious strife would follow the removal of the secular dictator, who gave these warnings, and how and why they were ignored. In particular, I would just quote back to you a briefing note from your report which Mr Blair himself sent in January 2003 to President Bush.”

I ask the House to pay particular attention to this note, which Mr Blair sent to President Bush before the war began. The quote is as follows:

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

I put this to Sir John:

“Mr Blair knew that and he said it to President Bush, so why did he ignore that terrible possibility that he himself apparently recognised?”

This is Sir John’s reply:

“I cannot give you the answer as to why. You would have to ask him. But what is clear from all the evidence we have collected is that this risk and other associated risks of instability and collapse were clearly identified and available to Ministers and to Mr Blair before the invasion. I can cite all sorts of points, but you will not want me to go into that detail now. It is in the report.

There were other signals, too, from other quarters. Our ambassador in Cairo, for example, was able to report that the Egyptian President had said that Iraq was at risk—it was populated by people who were extremely fond of killing each other, and destabilisation would bring that about.”

**Mr Kenneth Clarke:** Was my right hon. Friend present when I intervened on the then Prime Minister in a debate on Iraq and asked him what he thought about the risk of causing great instability across the middle

east by invading Iraq? My recollection is that he laughed at me from the Front Bench and asked me what sort of stability I thought Saddam Hussein represented.

**Dr Lewis:** I believe that that is the most serious charge against Tony Blair. It was not that he did not believe that there were weapons of mass destruction, but that he knew—better than did those of us who did not have the advice of experts to give us a wiser steer—that if we removed the dictator the result would be internecine, deadly, lethal chaos, exactly as we saw it. I am not reassured when I hear from Members on the Front Bench that the National Security Council will prevent the same thing from happening again. When the same prospect came up over Libya, and when the Chief of the Defence Staff put it to Prime Minister Cameron that there would be the same consequences in Libya as there had been in Iraq, he was brushed aside. Until the Chiefs of Staff are properly integrated into the National Security Council, we can have no assurance that those deadly errors will not be replicated.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. I am afraid that my informal speech limit was an abysmal failure, so I will have to impose a six-minute limit to start with. It will have to go down, unfortunately.

2.37 pm

**Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab):** I start by paying tribute to everybody who served their country during the war in Iraq, and to those who tragically lost their lives. It was a pleasure to listen to the maiden speech by the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) and to the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). I am afraid I cannot say the same about the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn)—oh, he has gone—or the speech by the right hon. Member for Moray, neither of whom could find a word to say about Saddam Hussein; there was not a word about his use of chemical weapons against the Kurds, not a word about his brutal repression of his opponents and not a single word about his brutality. What a disgrace!

The right hon. Member for Moray was completely wrong when he blamed the conflagration in the middle east on the war in Iraq. The truth is that Libya was already in a brutal civil war before western air forces prevented Gaddafi from killing innocent people in Benghazi. Toppling Saddam did not fuel the rise of Isis or cause the conflict in Syria. As Martin Chulov, *The Guardian’s* middle east correspondent and expert author of a definitive study of ISIS, says:

“The Syrian civil war was not driven by Isis. It fed directly out of the Arab awakenings and was a bid to oust a ruthless regime from power.”

That is what started the conflagration in Syria, and for the right hon. Gentleman to blame it on Britain is completely wrong.

**Alex Salmond:** First, I am not the hon. Member for Moray. Secondly, I did not mention Libya in my speech; I think that the hon. Gentleman is confusing me with other people. Will he address the point about Sir John Chilcot’s clear statement that Tony Blair acted as an advocate in terms of the evidence for weapons of mass destruction, as opposed to giving the House the facts?

**Ian Austin:** I apologise for getting the name of the right hon. Gentleman's seat wrong. I have obviously not paid him the huge respect that his sense of self-satisfaction, to which we are all so frequently treated, deserves. I want to say—he has asked his question about three times—that it is perfectly in order for a Prime Minister to set out his case and to try to persuade people in this House and elsewhere that the course of action he is advocating is the right one.

I want to put this debate into context. Last week, we had the autumn statement, which is a disaster for working people in Scotland, and yesterday we learned that Scottish councils face a £553 million black hole. SNP Members do not want to debate any of that. They do not want to debate the educational attainment gap between the richest and the poorest that is growing in Scotland. They do not want to debate the fact that Scotland has the lowest percentage of university entrants from the poorest families. They do not want to debate any of that. They do not want to be held to account on their record. They do not want to discuss any of that. Despite all of that—all the problems faced by the people of Scotland, whom they are sent to this House to represent—they do not have a word to say about it. If we look at their recent Opposition day debates, we can see that they chose to debate this today, House of Lords reform in October and Trident last year, instead of the issues that people in Scotland worry about day in, day out—education, the health service, housing. They come here to score party political points, choosing motion after motion to divide the Labour party. That is what this is about—[*Interruption.*] That is what this is about, and they should be treated with the contempt—[*Interruption.*] Look at him laughing, as if Iraq was a subject for humour, as if it was a joke.

**Alex Salmond** *rose*—

**Ian Austin:** Sit down! We've heard enough from you. Sit down! I want to say this: the Chilcot report—

**Sir Roger Gale** *rose*—

**Ian Austin:** I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

**Sir Roger Gale:** The hon. Gentleman is doing the House no service. This is a very serious issue. Those of us on the Government Benches who have lent our names to the motion did so in the interests of our armed forces. That is what we are here to discuss.

**Ian Austin:** I accept that, and I paid tribute to the armed forces right at the outset. I now want to discuss the Chilcot report.

The Chilcot report will clearly never settle arguments about whether the war in Iraq was right or wrong, but it should lay to rest allegations of bad faith, lies or deceit. It finds, first, that there was no falsification or misuse of intelligence by Tony Blair or No. 10 at the time; secondly, that there was no attempt to deceive Cabinet Ministers; and thirdly, that there was no secret pact with the US to go to war. That means there is no justification for saying, as the co-leader of the Green party did at the weekend:

“Tony Blair lied to the public, parliament and his own cabinet in order to drag us into the Iraq war.”

That is not true. Whether SNP Members like it or not, the truth is that Chilcot rejected allegations that Tony Blair said one thing in public and another in private.

People can be for or against the war, but it is not true to say that Tony Blair lied about it. We have heard repeatedly this afternoon Sir John Chilcot's response to the question when he absolved Tony Blair of any attempt to mislead or lie.

Let us be honest about this: the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond)—I think I have got that right—has many skills, achievements and attributes, but I do not think that even the most sycophantic member of the SNP fan club would claim that self-effacing modesty or the capacity for self-examination are among them. Let us look at his record and judgment on international issues. In 2014, as Putin's tanks massed on the border of Crimea and after NATO had warned that Russia

“threatens peace and security in Europe”

and had criticised

“President Putin's threats against this sovereign nation”,

he said he admired “certain aspects” of Putin's leadership and that it was a “good thing” he had restored Russian national pride—

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is the hon. Gentleman in order to pursue these particular matters when we are in fact having a very serious debate on Iraq? [*Interruption.*]

**Madam Deputy Speaker** (Natascha Engel): Order. This debate is about the Chilcot inquiry and parliamentary scrutiny. I have given the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) quite a lot of leeway, but I would be very grateful to him if he got back to the subject we are debating.

**Ian Austin:** This debate is also about judgment, and the right hon. Gentleman's judgment has been found completely wanting at every stage. It is also about intervention—whether Britain intervened rightly or wrongly—and about the consequences of that intervention. For example, when Britain was intervening to save lives in Kosovo, he said it was an action of “dubious legality” and condemned it as “unpardonable folly”. He demanded a ceasefire and urged the urgent start of talks with Milosevic. When challenged, he said that “we shall see if I am right”.

History has proved him completely wrong—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. This is not a debate about the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond); it is about the Chilcot inquiry. I would be grateful to the hon. Gentleman if he moved back to that subject.

**Ian Austin:** This is the final point I want to make: of course we should learn lessons from the invasion of Iraq, but we must also learn lessons from successful interventions, such as those in Kosovo, but the right hon. Gentleman ought to show some humility and apologise for his mistakes and lack of judgment over the decades.

2.45 pm

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): I have to tell my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) that the House is at its best when listening to a maiden speech, but I am afraid it went rather downhill after

[*Sir David Amess*]

that. He made an absolutely brilliant speech. He commanded the House, and he brought in a great sense of humour. He was set a very high bar, in following a former Prime Minister, but who knows what will happen in the future. I am very jealous that he lives in the wonderful village of Bladon.

I rise, with pride, to support the motion. It is rather unfortunate that there is bad blood between the Labour party and the SNP—no doubt, if the Liberal Democrats were in the Chamber, there would be bad blood between them and the Conservatives—but I wish to concentrate solely on the lessons to be learned following the Chilcot report.

There are only 179 of us left who were in the House that fateful night in March 2003. To my utter shame, I did not follow my 15 colleagues in voting against the war, so the one lesson I have learned is not always to accept at face value everything that is said at the Dispatch Box. That is a big lesson I have learned. I pay tribute to all Members, including those from other parties, who were much wiser than I was. I genuinely thought that the weapons of mass destruction were targeted on our country and that they could reach here in 40 minutes. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) had a briefing with 11 colleagues, but I was not privy to that. I regret the way that I voted. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his speech, with which I entirely agree, and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) on his speech. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) intervened, and I congratulate him on everything he said.

As we have heard, the Chilcot report took seven years and cost £13 million. It found that military action had been taken before peaceful options had been exhausted; that the reliability of evidence on Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction was overstated; that the legal justification was far from satisfactory; that rather than bolstering the UN, the UK helped to undermine it; that UK armed forces were poorly prepared; that warnings about the consequences of removing Saddam were not taken seriously; and that the UK overestimated its ability to influence the US. I would have thought that was pretty damning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), who is not in his place, did an excellent job with his inquiry. He put it to the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Jeremy Heywood:

“Chilcot actually says, ‘Most decisions on Iraq pre-conflict were taken either bilaterally between Mr Blair and the relevant Secretary of State or in meetings between Mr Blair, Mr Straw, and Mr Hoon, with No. 10 officials and, as appropriate, Mr John Scarlett and Sir Richard Dearlove and Admiral Boyce’.”

In further questioning, he put it to him:

“Yes, but when the Prime Minister sent another letter to the President of the United States, using those now very famous words ‘I will be with you whatever’, he was advised by officials that this position should be shared with other Cabinet colleagues before he sent the letter and he refused to do so.”

The Cabinet Secretary replied:

“I certainly agree with you that private memos from the Prime Minister to the President of the United States setting out...the...position...should have been subject to collective approval”.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe also said that.

**Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con):** I was not in the House at the time of the vote, but I was a civil servant, and I wonder whether my hon. Friend would comment on the fact that the proper involvement of officials, rather than sofa government, could have prevented some of the excesses in 2003.

**Sir David Amess:** My hon. Friend makes a wise point. It is yet another lesson to be learned.

On 13 July, there was an exchange between my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe. My right hon. Friend said:

“It seems from the Chilcot report that, at some point between December 2001 and possibly March 2002 but certainly by July 2002, Mr Blair effectively signed Britain up to the American military effort... Under American law, to go to war on the basis of regime change is entirely legal. They do not recognise the international laws that render it otherwise, so for them regime change is a perfectly legitimate *casus belli*.”—[*Official Report*, 13 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 360.]

My right hon. and learned Friend intervened and said that

“with hindsight...given that Hans Blix was perfectly willing to carry on with inspections, if the Americans could have been persuaded to delay for another month, all this could have been avoided... The Americans dismissed Blix, however, and regarded him as a waste of time; they were trying to get him out of the way.”

My right hon. Friend replied:

“That is exactly right. That should have been the stance that Mr Blair took, but he did not. He chose instead to come to Parliament to misrepresent the case... Finally, Mr Blair was asked by Tam Dalyell”—

a great parliamentarian—

“about the risks of terrorism arising from the war, but the Prime Minister did not give him an answer—despite having been told by the JIC and by MI5 that it would increase both the international and domestic risk of terrorism and would destabilise the states in the area.”—[*Official Report*, 13 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 362.]

I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex has said that whatever the result of today's debate his Committee will look at this issue again. In six years, the former Prime Minister involved us in wars in Iraq, Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan. I am very concerned about that record. With hindsight, I should not have been partisan. Instead, I should have listened more carefully to the wise words of Robin Cook and Clare Short. We owe this to all those British servicemen and women who lost their lives as a result of the Iraq war. The world has been completely destabilised by the disastrous decision that Parliament took, and the general public will not understand if, after spending all that time and money on the Chilcot report, we did not put in place a mechanism by which lessons can be learned. I also think that the former Prime Minister should be brought before a Select Committee.

2.52 pm

**Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP):** I also congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on his maiden speech, although I note that he had 12 minutes, while I had only six for mine. I have a feeling of *déjà vu*.

As I did in the two previous debates on this issue, I start by declaring an interest: my brother served on the

frontline in Iraq and served two terms of active duty in Afghanistan. I do not therefore participate lightly in this debate.

Many in this Chamber and outside never thought we would reach this point in placing a motion before the House with cross-party support calling on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to conduct a further specific examination of this contrast between public and private policy and to report to the House on any actions it considers necessary. It was a disastrous series of events that still dogs the path to peace in the middle east and which has played a part in undermining unity in the western democracies against an expansion in non-democratic forces both near and far. It was the former Member for Sedgefield who stated the obvious. We need only look at a section of a note from him to the then President of the United States headed "Extending War Aims":

"There is a real willingness in the Middle East to get Saddam out but a total opposition to mixing this up with the current operation. All said: we know what you want, you can do it, but not whilst you are bombing Afghanistan....I have no doubt that we need to deal with Saddam. But if we hit Iraq now, we would lose the Arab world, Russia, probably half the EU and my fear is the impact of all that on Pakistan. However, I am sure we can devise a strategy for Saddam deliverable at a later date."

It would seem that the soothsayer whispering a self-fulfilling prophecy in the ear of the then President of the United States had a clear picture of the outcome of the decision to invade Iraq: Saddam removed—done; losing support in the Arab world—done; allowing the Government of the Russian Federation to cast themselves as a defender of state sovereignty—done; a divided Europe—done; undermining the stability of the state of Pakistan—done; inflaming a sectarian divide—done; undermining the credibility of liberal democracy—done. Therefore, to restore the integrity of our sense of democracy it is critical that the House recognises that the inquiry has substantiated the fact that the former Member for Sedgefield and others misled Parliament on the development of the then Government's policy towards the invasion of Iraq.

This position cannot and will not—at least not in this debate—go unchallenged. Even the former Member for Sedgefield's advisers suggested in their evidence to the inquiry that a decision to support regime change in Iraq had been made by the time of, or at, the Crawford Ranch summit in April 2002. For example, Sir David Manning, foreign policy adviser to the former Prime Minister, gave evidence to the inquiry, stating:

"On the one hand the prime minister was very clearly urging the president"—

of the United States—

"to go back or adopt the UN route and coalition strategy but was absolutely prepared to say that at the same time he was willing to contemplate regime change if this didn't work."

Fundamentally, as far as I and my SNP colleagues are concerned, this undermined the credibility of the UN and its ability to play its true role in delivering peace.

In May 2005, *The Sunday Times* published a leaked classified document written by the Cabinet Office's defence and overseas secretariat, entitled "Iraq: conditions for military action". It stated:

"When the Prime Minister discussed Iraq with President Bush at Crawford in April, he said that the UK would support military action to bring about regime change, provided that certain conditions were met".

Then in a memo dated 28 March, ahead of the summit, Colin Powell himself told the president:

"On Iraq, Blair will be with us should military options be necessary."

If we can achieve anything in this debate, surely, as I have stated previously, it must be to enhance the debate about the nature of our constitutional democracy and the duties of the Government in their attitude to war and peace. I will reiterate again, as I did on the publication of the report, that the words,

"I will be with you, whatever",

will be forever associated with the former Member for Sedgefield and will be his political epitaph. They will forever live, too, in the scars of those who were casualties of the war, whether members of our armed services or Iraqi civilians, and of our democracy itself. That is the true legacy of

"I will be with you, whatever."

2.58 pm

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on his maiden speech.

The central accusation in the motion is not a rerun of whether anyone was for or against the Iraq war. As we heard eloquently from my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) and for Eltham (Clive Efford), many Members who voted against the Iraq war will vote against the motion, because they know that that is not what it is about. Instead, the central accusation is that the former Prime Minister lied in making the case for it. The motion does not use that word, but that is the implication.

Sir John Chilcot made some serious criticisms of the decision making in the run-up to the war and in the aftermath, but he did not say that the decision was taken in bad faith. In fact, his report says of the intelligence presented:

"The JIC accepted ownership of the dossier and agreed its content. There is no evidence that intelligence was improperly included in the dossier or that No.10 improperly influenced the text".

In paragraph 806 of the report, he says:

"There was nothing in the JIC Assessments issued before July 2002 that would have raised any questions in policy-makers' minds about the core construct of Iraq's capabilities and intent."

In March 2002, the JIC said that it was

"clear that Iraq continues to pursue a policy of acquiring WMD and their delivery means".

These views on Iraq's capability and intent were not purely British; they were shared by intelligence services throughout the world, including in those countries that were vehemently opposed to military action.

Of the meeting with President Bush at Crawford, the Chilcot report said that Mr Blair said that it was important to go back to the UN and that he sought to persuade Mr Bush to act within a multilateral framework, not a unilateral one. At paragraph 802, the report said:

"Mr Blair and Mr Straw sought to persuade the US Administration to secure multilateral support before taking action on Iraq; and to do so through the UN."

So the accusation of lying is not true and is not backed up by the Chilcot report.

**Ian Austin:** Other countries, not just Britain and America, believed not only that Saddam Hussein had WMD, but that he had actually used them, perpetrating the largest chemical weapons attack against civilians in history and killing thousands in a brutal attack on his own people.

**Mr McFadden:** That is absolutely true, and it is a great shame that the Iraqi MPs who were watching from the Gallery earlier on cannot be heard in today's debate, because I am sure that they would make that point.

What is true is that the Iraq war and its aftermath raised major questions about military intervention, post-conflict responsibility and our capacity and willingness to act in the future. To go to war is a heavy responsibility and perhaps the most difficult judgment that any leader can make.

There is a temptation to think that history in Iraq began with our intervention. In his opening statement, the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) said that everything could be traced back to the 2003 intervention, but history in Iraq and the use of violence in the country and in the wider middle east did not begin in 2003. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) said, chemical weapons were used in the Anfal campaign against the Kurds, which began long before then, as did the brutal repression of the Shi'a uprising following the first Gulf war.

**Liz Kendall** (Leicester West) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks, including in Yemen in 1992, Mumbai in 1993, in Nairobi and Tanzania in 1998 and, of course, in New York on 11 September 2001? Terrorist attacks did not begin with what happened in Iraq in 2003.

**Mr McFadden:** I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I believe that there is a new imperialism afoot, which seeks to trace everything to western decisions to intervene or not intervene. Until we understand that violent Islamist jihadism has an ideology of its own, we will never be able properly to confront it, let alone overcome it. We have to understand that, despite our history, it is not always about us.

**Alex Salmond:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr McFadden:** I have already given way twice.

The controversy over the Iraq war and its aftermath has coloured every decision this Parliament has made on military intervention since—most notably, the vote in August 2013 not to take military action in Syria, following President Assad's use of chemical weapons against his own people. Who can say for sure what the consequences of that vote were, but we have a duty—do we not?—to reflect on them as we watch Aleppo being blown to bits night after night on our television screens. We can tell ourselves that because we did not intervene in 2013, we do not bear responsibility for it, but that is of little comfort to the children of Aleppo, as the bombs rain down on their heads in a horror seemingly without end. There will not be a Chilcot report on Syria because we did not take the decision to intervene, but are the consequences for the victims any less real?

There are certainly lessons to learn from the experience of Iraq and Syria, but they lie not in the sort of detective hunt based on false accusations of lying set

out in the motion, but in asking ourselves serious questions about when we should intervene and when we should not and how we live up to the responsibilities that come from intervention. Perhaps most seriously of all, is it really a morally better position never to intervene if the consequences are encouragement for dictators and no defence for their civilian victims?

In the aftermath of the Chilcot report—we have heard a lot about it in today's debate—there will be a process to learn lessons. Committees will be formed; processes will be changed; the National Security Council might be changed in one way or another—and it might do some good, because we need the best processes that we can, but this is not the heart of the matter. Nothing—no process; no Committee; no Council—will remove the responsibility of a Prime Minister and of MPs to make a judgment on military intervention. In the end, it is a judgment. That is what leadership is all about.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. I am going to drop the time limit down to five minutes.

3.5 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Since we debated the publication of the Chilcot report in July, I cannot be alone in hearing constituents express their doubts about the likelihood of any action on its findings—recalling previous occasions where evidence of failures was debated in this place, only to see the issues disappear without trace as the months and years moved on. Since the time when the matters on which Chilcot reported took place, we have watched the Arab spring rise and fall, Daesh has taken large swathes of the middle east back to the dark ages and a resurgent Russia provokes NATO—just as the hammer-blows of an ill-thought-out Brexit and the rise of Trump threaten to destabilise the relationships on which the alliance depends.

Already, those of us who believe the public still need answers see others characterise the Iraq war and the events that led up to it as ancient history. This is not a new phenomenon. In the 2010 Labour leadership race, David Miliband said:

“While Iraq was a source of division in the past, it doesn't need to be a source of division in the future. I said during the election campaign that I thought it was time to move on.”

But, of course, as the Chilcot report makes clear, it is decidedly not time to move on.

The exchanges in July's debate showed that the route to military action was settled directly between Bush and Blair. One of them was driven by a determination to finish the job left unfinished by his father, while the other was convinced that if he said yes to each step along the road to war, he could drag America back from the brink at the 11th hour.

“I will be with you, whatever”,

wrote Blair, as he subcontracted to Bush the decision on whether the war would go ahead. He committed UK troops to go, if that was what Bush decided. The report is damning on this point. Sir John said in launching his report:

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

It might have taken many years and millions of words for the UK to catch up on what its Prime Minister did, behind the scenes, in our name. In the US, the

verdict was arrived at long ago and the conclusion was clear: the Iraq war was not an innocent mistake; there was no need to argue over flawed intelligence; and the Bush Administration wanted a war and everything else was pretext. Blair's decision to hitch the UK armed forces to that wagon of deception is not something that we can allow layers of events to silt over.

The public have long demanded—and deserved—an explanation and action. The families of the servicemen and women killed in Iraq deserve to know the truth, and deserve to know that this will not happen again. Their loved ones were marched to war behind a dodgy dossier that was designed to mislead. Those with family members in the UK armed forces expect to see military intervention used to root out injustice and instability. Instead, that is what the Iraq war left in its wake.

On top of the dishonesty about the reason for going to war, the consequences appear to have received no thought from those leading the charge. If there was any post-invasion plan, it was the Bush Administration plan—to leave behind an Iraq deliberately weakened, politically and militarily. The result of that flawed policy was the first appearance of Daesh, growing from the ashes of the discarded Iraqi army—an Iraqi spark that became a flame in the war in Syria and threatens to engulf communities across the middle east, Europe and beyond.

Some right hon. and hon. Members would like us to move on. I was struck in July by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) who drew attention to the need to learn the lessons of Iraq in advance of the intervention in Libya, only to be told:

“We are not putting boots on the ground, so it isn't an issue for us.”—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 489.]

However, if we move on from Iraq now and leave the drawing of lessons from these events for another day, how many more Iraqs, Syrias and Libyas will there be?

In July, in response to the hon. Member for Bridgend, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said that he had voted for intervention in Libya because he was

“terrified that people would be killed.”—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 489.]

But, of course, people were killed, and are still being killed, in each of those countries and many more. They are dying as they flee once-thriving communities. Much of the destruction is still rooted in that flawed pact between Bush and Blair, and until we understand how we got here, it is not clear how we will find our way back. Why does that matter now? There are many reasons. Two of them are the largest aircraft carriers ever purchased by the UK Government. They are designed to project UK power across the globe, but to what end? If the policies driving the use of those vessels are not open to democratic scrutiny or review, will they and their associated air power add to our security or undermine it?

Since the launch of the Chilcot report, we have seen an increasing number of appearances by the former Prime Minister. He has read the runes and believes that scrutiny is over for him. However, I know that Members in this Chamber believe that the armed forces' sacrifice means that any decision to send them to war must be made with integrity and based on fact. In this case it was not, and we must scrutinise that further.

3.10 pm

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I rise to address a misapprehension that seems to have developed that the report of Sir John Chilcot's inquiry has cleared the then Prime Minister of misleading the House. As the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said earlier in an intervention, papers released recently as a result of a freedom of information request—after quite some resistance from the current Government—have shown that the Iraq inquiry was designed from the outset to avoid blame and to reduce the risk that individuals and the Government could face legal proceedings.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) is shaking his head. I can give him copies of the civil service memos that were released as a result of that freedom of information request. My point is, however, that not having been charged with investigating blame or accountability, or indeed the legality of the war, Sir John Chilcot—for whom I have the greatest respect—is in no better a position to absolve the then Prime Minister of blame for misleading the House than anyone else who has carefully considered the evidence and the analysis of it that Sir John has set out.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) indicated that he had placed in the Library a detailed report that carries out that analysis and suggests that the House was misled. I am not saying that; it was said by an independent expert who has looked at the evidence set out by Sir John Chilcot. Gordon Brown, the former Prime Minister, said that the inquiry would help us to learn lessons that would strengthen UK democracy, foreign policy and the military forces, but how is democracy strengthened if the House does not scrutinise the evidence and consider issues of blame and accountability when so many people have died?

I am conscious that I do not have much time, but I want to talk briefly about what those memos—the memos that were released after the current Government had fought so hard to prevent them from being released—show us. They show the thinking and advice at the highest level of government prior to Gordon Brown's announcement of an inquiry. They show that many officials who took part in the events that the inquiry investigated—including the former spy chief Sir John Scarlett—were involved in setting it up. They reveal that senior civil servants, under Gordon Brown, went against Whitehall protocol when they appointed a civil servant with significant involvement in Iraq policy during the period covered by the inquiry to the key role of inquiry secretary.

The documents, a series of memos from Whitehall officials, cover a four-week period in May and June 2009, and they show that the officials favoured from the outset a secret inquiry to be conducted by Privy Counsellors. In a memo to Gus O'Donnell, the Cabinet official, Ben Lyon, advised that the format, scope and membership of the inquiry could be designed to “focus on lessons and avoid blame”.

It was noted that a parliamentary inquiry of the sort suggested by the former Foreign Secretary, Lord Hurd, would

“attract a daily running commentary”,

like the Hutton inquiry. Gus O'Donnell also advised against appointing judges or lawyers who would adopt a “legalistic” focus. Indeed, as we know, there was no

[*Joanna Cherry*]

legalistic focus. The inquiry did not look at issues of blame and accountability. That is the reason for this cross-party motion: it is intended to enable the House to look at those issues now.

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Joanna Cherry**: I will not, because I do not have much time.

**Neil Coyle**: It is not a cross-party motion.

**Joanna Cherry**: The motion is supported by members of seven parties. It has been made clear this afternoon that Labour Members do not support it, and I think that that speaks for itself, as does the behaviour of some speakers. My point is that the purpose of the motion, which has the support of seven political parties, is to ensure that the House does the job that the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, said the inquiry would do—namely, to ensure that democracy was properly served.

If the House does not examine the outcome of Sir John Chilcot's findings properly and if it does not look at those issues of accountability, democracy and justice will not have been served. That is the point of the motion.

3.15 pm

**Phil Wilson** (Sedgefield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on his maiden speech. I know how difficult it is to make a maiden speech when your predecessor was Prime Minister, and the hon. Gentleman did an excellent job.

I want to make a couple of points about why the motion is about more than just Chilcot, and about how divisive it actually is. My predecessor was Member of Parliament for Sedgefield for a quarter of a century. For 13 of those years he was the leader of the Labour party, and for 10 he was Prime Minister. I have known Tony Blair for more than 30 years, probably longer than anyone else who is in the House today, and I am proud to say that he is a friend of mine. When I am called a Blairite, which is sometimes seen as a term of abuse, I wear that term proudly as an accolade.

I met Tony Blair in 1983, when he first became the Labour candidate for Sedgefield, in the community bar in Trimdon village. He believed then, as he does today, that the Labour party had a great ability to do good, but his opponents are angry about what he achieved. What he did achieve were great things, from the minimum wage to devolution in Scotland and the creation of the Scottish Parliament, which I would like to say the SNP used a bit more than it does at present. We also became, under Tony Blair, the party that was patriotic. It became "cool" to be British under his leadership and premiership. There is a reason why Conservative Members, in particular, do not want to see another Tony Blair. Given that he kept the Tory party out of power for the longest period since 1762, I understand their disquiet about those years.

Our opponents want to put as much distance between Tony Blair and the Labour party of today as they possibly can. My message to my colleagues today is,

"Do not fall into that trap", and I am pleased to note that Labour Members will oppose the motion. There is another reason why it is wrong. It is not about the rights and wrongs of the war in Iraq; it is essentially about calling Tony Blair a liar, and continuing to do so. That is mendacious, and it is an attempt to second-guess Sir John Chilcot, who said:

"I absolve him from a personal and demonstrable decision to deceive parliament or the public—to state falsehoods, knowing them to be false."

The SNP motion is part of a strategy to divide the Labour Benches. It is party political, divisive and cynical.

**Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent argument exposing the mendacity of the SNP's motion. Does he agree that the legacy of our former Prime Minister involves a commitment, ongoing to this day, to peace in the middle east, making him a figure that Labour Members should be proud of?

**Phil Wilson**: We should be proud of Tony Blair. We know about the efforts he is putting into the middle east and interfaith dialogue around the world. He spends most of his time with his charities trying to achieve those aims.

Some people want to define themselves against Tony Blair and the 1997 to 2010 Labour Governments. To them I say, "Be careful, because it is not useful or a good idea to define yourself against success." Like all Governments, Labour did things that generated criticism, disagreement, frustration and anger, none more than on Iraq. I sincerely accept that people outside and Members of this House have strongly held views on the rights and wrongs of the Iraq war, but let us disengage from this witch hunt pursuing a line of criticism abandoned by the Chilcot inquiry. Tony Blair did not lie.

My message to the SNP is this: "Use your Opposition days to talk about the issues that affect Scotland. You use such debates to deflect from your own weaknesses. You have no vision; your policy platform is absent. Labour gave you a Scottish Parliament. Use it. Look to yourselves before you start criticising others."

3.21 pm

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): The Iraq war is one of the great disasters to befall the world in this century. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed and injured—men, women and children, the culpable and the innocent alike, the invading forces and the often unwilling defenders. Saddam's vile tyranny was replaced by endless war. Here in the United Kingdom families grieve for their loved ones, lost forever, and survivors who served their country so faithfully suffer terribly. Terrorism spreads across northern Africa and Europe and is indeed a menace worldwide. Today the threat level here in the UK is again at "severe"; an attack is highly likely.

Compared to all that, misleading the House of Commons and the damage done to our reputation might seem to rank somewhat lower, but it is significant none the less, and damage has been done. Trust in Parliament, in Government and in individual MPs has declined disastrously, which is coupled with at best scepticism, and at worst widespread cynicism, about our democratic processes.

I was a Member of this House at the time of the march to war and I have a particularly vivid memory of Mr Blair presenting the House with the so called “dodgy dossier”. Even on first reading, it seemed to me it was a cut and paste exercise. I also took part in the enormous protest against going to war and was astonished by the variety of people joining in—not just the usual suspects but a true cross-section of society. There are many causes of the steep decline of trust in politicians and in our work, but some of the blame can be traced back to the way we were taken to war in Iraq, to subsequent disastrous events there, and to the public perception that no one has really been held to account.

As *The Observer* revealed last Sunday in a report concerning this debate:

“A spokesman for Blair declined to comment. But, privately, his supporters say similar motions have been tabled before without gaining significant traction among MPs.”

**Paul Flynn:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Hywel Williams:** I will not, as time is short.

Unsurprisingly, there is much cynical public resignation. Last summer, we had a two-day debate and there was a debate in the other place. On 26 October, the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) asked the Prime Minister for reassurance that, in respect of the Chilcot report, she had, as he put it, “a cunning plan to ensure that action is taken”.

In reply, the right hon. Lady said that the National Security Adviser was leading an exercise to learn the lessons from the Chilcot report, before adding:

“There is much in it, and we need to ensure that we do learn the lessons from it.”—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 277.]

Although that is most assuredly the case, for me there is a further question: who is this “we”?

I know nothing of the National Security Adviser. I have no doubt that he is a capable, industrious and conscientious public servant, but he is appointed by the Prime Minister and he reports to the Prime Minister. The House of Commons decides its own ways of working and of holding the Government to account, hence this proposed referral to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

“to conduct a further specific examination of this contrast in public and private policy and of the presentation of intelligence, and then to report to the House on what further action it considers necessary and appropriate to help prevent any repetition of this disastrous series of events.”

Given that the Prime Minister’s answer of 26 October is only partially relevant, I will refer to two more recent matters on the presentation of intelligence information. First, on the basis of that information was it reasonable to conclude that Iraq posed an imminent threat to the UK and so go to war? In evidence to the Liaison Committee on 2 November, Sir John Chilcot said in respect of the alleged imminence of the Iraqi threat to the UK:

“As things have turned out, we know that it was not.”

That is, the threat was not imminent, but he seems to be saying that a correct judgment on the matter is only possible with hindsight—“as things...turned out”. Significantly, he concluded by saying:

“As things appeared at the time, the evidence to support it was more qualified than he”—

Mr Blair—

“in effect, gave expression to.”

That prompted a further question from the Chair, referring to the

“test of whether a reasonable man would conclude that this evidence supported going to war.”

Sir John replied:

“If I may say so, that seems an easier question for me to answer, because the answer to that is no.”

The second point I would have liked to make is on the question posed by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) of absolving Mr Blair, but unfortunately I have no time.

Mr Blair said, famously:

“I think most people who have dealt with me, think I’m a pretty straight sort of guy and I am.”

Referral of this matter to PACAC will give him yet another opportunity to convince the world of his “pretty straight” credentials.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** We will have to drop the time limit to four minutes.

3.26 pm

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): I am delighted finally to be speaking in this most important of debates.

From the outside looking in, many people assume that this place is corrupt. Let us be honest: politicians do not have a good reputation. I know the vast majority of MPs are hard-working, diligent and honest, but every example of corruption, perversion, laziness, greed or dishonesty does not just taint the perpetrator; it casts a shadow over all of us and this place. The only way to convince the citizens of the UK that they have a Parliament to be proud of is through ruthless honesty, even when it hurts. The alternative is an electorate who are dissatisfied and feel disfranchised, and so disengage from politics and politicians. We have a duty to support the mechanisms of a democracy. We must respect, cherish and protect them. We do not own them; we are simply guardians who pass them on to future generations. That is why we must investigate thoroughly any possibility that the principles we claim to hold so dear have been abused.

The Chilcot inquiry highlighted serious shortcomings and misgivings. The report stated that the UK invaded Iraq before all peaceful options had been investigated. We now know that there was no imminent threat from Iraq or Saddam Hussein, and that the reasons for our invasion were predicated on flawed intelligence. Crucially, this flawed intelligence was not challenged as it should have been. Quite astoundingly, there is no formal record of the decision and the grounds on which it was made that led to the invasion that started on 20 March 2003.

The rush to war was so fast that our troops did not have time to stockpile the necessary equipment—uniforms, boots and body armour. A lack of helicopters and armoured vehicles made it more dangerous for our forces. By July 2009, 179 members of our armed forces had died. We will never know how many Iraqis died, but conservative estimates suggest at least 150,000, with millions more displaced from their homes. How did this come about? How did this place get it so wrong? How were so many MPs misled?

[Ronnie Cowan]

In 2003, it was already US policy to change the regime in Iraq. Five years earlier, in 1998, President Clinton had signed into law the Iraq Liberation Act. It was

“the policy of the U.S. to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq”.

In 2003, Prime Minister Tony Blair threw his hat in with the US. Chilcot demonstrated clearly that Tony Blair bypassed his Cabinet, instead relying on his so-called “sofa government”. Key decisions on the future of the country were made in informal meetings, sometimes involving only a couple of the then Prime Minister’s friends, and without the input of senior members of the Cabinet. That is not how to solve a problem. The invasion of Iraq was an object lesson in how to escalate a problem. If the mission was to perpetuate instability in the middle east, it is mission accomplished.

The last line of the motion we are debating today is crucial. It calls on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to

“report to the House on what further action it considers necessary and appropriate to help prevent any repetition of this disastrous series of events.”

As I deliver this speech, our forces are involved in the battle of Mosul, so we can see that the ramifications of decisions made back in 2003 are still with us today.

In conclusion, we are voting today to instruct the Committee to

“conduct a further specific examination of this contrast in public and private policy and of the presentation of intelligence”.

I would say to any Members who were here in 2003 that, with all due respect, their responsibility to the future should outweigh their duty to the past. Supporting the motion today can only enhance the reputation of this place. It should be welcomed by all fair-minded elected Members.

3.29 pm

**Michael Gove** (Surrey Heath) (Con): I must apologise to the House for being absent during part of this debate. I was called to participate in a delegated legislation Committee upstairs.

It is a great privilege to speak in the same debate as my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), who gave an outstanding maiden speech and paid appropriate tribute to his predecessor. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sedgfield (Phil Wilson) for the generous words he said about his predecessor.

Talking of distinguished party leaders, the debate was opened in fine style by the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), a former First Minister of Scotland. He laid out his case, as he does always, with passion and verve and commitment. Unfortunately, skilled as an advocate though he is, as he was laying out the prosecution case against the former Member for Sedgfield, he did not have the evidence to sustain his case. The truth is that the Chilcot report makes it clear that at no stage was there a deliberate attempt by Tony Blair to mislead the House. More than that, the Chilcot report makes it clear that there was a proper legal basis—a Security Council resolution—for the decision to go to war.

**Joanna Cherry:** The right hon. Gentleman has been out of the Chamber, so he may have missed my contribution. I made the point that papers recently released, as a result of a freedom of information request, clearly show that the inquiry was not charged with looking at issues of blame, accountability or legality. Does he accept that?

**Michael Gove:** It is clear from what was published in the report that a decision was taken by Sir John Chilcot—I will not have any criticism made of him or any of those responsible for the report—that there was no deliberate misleading of this House. It is quite wrong to suggest otherwise. More than that, the right hon. Member for Gordon sought to suggest that the note passed from the former Prime Minister to President Bush saying that he would “be with you, whatever” was the equivalent of a political blank cheque. It was no such thing. When Mr Blair wrote that note he made it clear that there needed to be progress in three key areas: the middle east peace process; securing UN authority for action; and shifting public opinion in the UK, Europe and the Arab world. He also pointed out that there would be a need to commit to Iraq for the long term.

In judging Mr Blair—I think history will judge him less harshly than some in this House—we need to recognise that his decision to join George W Bush at that time was finely balanced. In reflecting on when this House decides to send young men and women into harm’s way, we also need to reflect not just on the consequences of acting but the consequences of not acting—the consequences of non-intervention.

**Alex Salmond:** The right hon. Gentleman will remember Chilcot’s findings on page 112 of the report. The note was not discussed or agreed with any colleagues and led to the possibility of

“participation in military action in a way that would make it very difficult for the UK subsequently to withdraw its support for the US.”

Does he not accept that Chilcot found the note to be of huge significance in binding the UK to George W Bush?

**Michael Gove:** It was not a blank cheque. It was not a binding statement. It was of significance, but, as I have explained, Tony Blair at the time laid out to George Bush that certain steps were required before he would agree.

The point the right hon. Gentleman does not attend to is the consequences of inaction: Saddam Hussein remaining in power in a country he had turned into a torture chamber above ground and a mass grave below. Power would inevitably have passed on to his sadistic children, Uday and Qusay, who would have carried on their genocidal conflict against the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs. They would inevitably have taken advantage of the erosion of international sanctions to restock their chemical and biological weapons arsenal.

Whenever we think about the consequences of action, we very rarely think about the consequences of inaction. In front of us now, however, is a hugely powerful reminder of the consequences of inaction: what is happening in Aleppo at the moment. I was not in this House when the decision was taken to vote on whether to take action in Iraq, but I was in this House in the previous Parliament when we voted on whether to take action in Syria. I am

deeply disappointed that this House did not vote to take action then, because as a direct result of voting against intervention we have seen Bashar Assad, backed by Vladimir Putin and the anti-Semitic leadership of Iran, unleashing hell on the innocent people of Aleppo.

I have a lot of respect for the SNP position on many issues, but when asked about what is happening in Aleppo and in Syria it has no answer; it can put forward nothing that deals with the huge, horrific humanitarian disaster that is unfolding. My own view is that there is much that we can do both to relieve suffering and to put pressure on Russia, Iran and Syria, but once again the long shadow cast by Iraq, which certainly should call us all to search our consciences, means politicians are sometimes fearful of making the case for intervention now and certainly those like the SNP who are opposed to intervention are emboldened to make their case for neutrality when we are confronting evil.

**Joanna Cherry:** I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman was in the House on Monday, but if he was or has read the newspapers he will have seen that I and many of my colleagues signed a letter asking the British Government to take action in relation to Aleppo by way of dropping aid on the city. We are not without answers, and I wonder if he would care to withdraw that suggestion.

**Michael Gove:** I was happy to sign that letter as well. It was initiated of course by the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), both of whom, as I have, have argued consistently for muscular intervention in Syria to help the suffering people of Aleppo, and it is simply not good enough—although I have great respect for the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry)—to say we wish to drop that aid but not to be willing to go further to ensure that appropriate pressure, diplomatic and otherwise, is placed on those people who are responsible for mass murder.

It is all very well to look back on Iraq and say that mistakes were made; of course they were, but if we are going to have an Opposition day debate on foreign policy in this House at this time it is a dereliction of duty to look backwards and try to blame Tony Blair, when the responsibility on all of us is to do something to help the people of Aleppo who are suffering now.

3.36 pm

**Caroline Lucas:** Few would now dispute that the Iraq invasion was the biggest foreign policy failure of recent times. The Chilcot report provides detailed confirmation that military intervention was by no means a last resort, and that all other avenues were not exhausted.

**Graham Jones:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Caroline Lucas:** I will make a bit of progress and then I will.

Chilcot also showed that Iraq posed no immediate threat to the UK, and, crucially, that hindsight was not necessary to see those things. That seven-year Iraq inquiry, which cost £10 million of public money, also officially recorded detailed evidence of the vast discrepancy between the former Prime Minister's public statements and his private correspondence. If we do nothing about

that and take no steps towards accountability for it, it is unclear to me how we begin to restore faith in our political system.

Sir John Chilcot made it clear earlier this month that Tony Blair did long-term damage to trust in politics by presenting a case for the Iraq war that went beyond “the facts of the case”.

Sir John told MPs he could “only imagine” how long it would take to repair that trust.

That need to restore trust in politics is a key reason why I support the motion. This should not be pursued as a personal or party political attack, and this should be reflected in our language and approach. This process must be based on the facts and the evidence.

**Paul Flynn:** Does the hon. Lady recall that world public opinion, especially in the Security Council, was greatly influenced by a presentation by Colin Powell in which he showed photographs of what he thought was biological weapons equipment? He has since retracted and said he was hopelessly deceived, that the pictures were nothing of the sort and that there was no threat from those weapons. He has shown some penitence; would it not be better if those responsible in this House showed some penitence as well?

**Caroline Lucas:** I am grateful for that intervention and, unsurprisingly, I agree.

The evidence in the Chilcot report does show that Tony Blair was responsible for fixing evidence around a policy while telling us that he was doing the opposite. It shows he was treating his office, the Cabinet, this House and our constitutional checks and balances with disrespect amounting to contempt. For that he should be held responsible.

But more than that, accountability must mean ensuring that any future decisions are taken with systems in place that guarantee proper Cabinet and parliamentary scrutiny and discussion.

In his report Chilcot does not judge the former Prime Minister's guilt or innocence, and, as we have recently learned, secret Cabinet documents show the Chilcot report hearings were set up precisely to stop individuals being held accountable and specifically to avoid blame, and that is another key reason why we need a Committee to look at the issue of accountability.

Hon. Members have already cited numerous examples of what could be called misleading statements, deception, untruths or whatever word we choose, but I want to add just one more. Tony Blair stated in March 2003 that diplomacy had been exhausted in efforts to seek to avoid an invasion of Iraq. Yet the Chilcot report shows, without question, that this was not the case, and central to his case was the role of France. To get support from his own MPs, Blair argued that diplomatic efforts to secure a resolution had been exhausted, because the French President was unreasonably threatening to veto any resolution. That was not true, and Chilcot shows that Tony Blair knew it. In a phone call with George Bush on 12 March 2003, Blair and Bush agreed publicly to pretend to continue to seek a second UN resolution, knowing that it would not happen, and then to blame France for preventing it. [*Interruption.*] I suggest that those who are saying from a sedentary position that that is not true look at paragraph 410 of page 472 in volume 3, section 3.8—

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Caroline Lucas:** No I will not give way.

**Mr Jones:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Caroline Lucas:** No I will not.

Chilcot then reveals that Tony Blair did two misleading things. First, he told his Cabinet the very next day that work was continuing in the UN to obtain a second resolution and that the outcome remained open. Secondly, he went on to repeat a deliberate misrepresentation of the French position at Prime Minister's questions on 12 March, in spite of the fact that, just minutes before, the French ambassador had telephoned No. 10 again to correct this repeated distortion. Blair did this again in his key parliamentary statement of 18 March 2003 and he also included it in the war motion before the House.

In short, the French position was to request more time for weapons inspectors, with war an explicit possibility, but Tony Blair kept deliberately taking out of context phrases from an interview by Chirac given on 10 March, saying that they showed that France would veto in any circumstances. France kept correcting that untruth, as the Chilcot report shows in black and white. Chilcot records that despite this Tony Blair instructed Straw to "concede nothing" in talks with the French Foreign Minister who was, in essence, calling for more time. Tony Blair needed to continue the misrepresentation of France to provide cover for his failure to get UN support for war.

Hon. Members have covered a great deal of other evidence in the debate, including the gross misrepresentation of Iraq as a growing threat to the region and to this country. Blair said that Saddam's weapons programme was "active, detailed and growing", and that the intelligence behind that assertion was "extensive, detailed and authoritative", yet the Joint Intelligence Committee had said just six months earlier:

"Intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction...and ballistic missile programmes is sporadic and patchy."

I appreciate that it is hard for Labour Members to hear some of these facts, but to barrack us for citing what is in the Chilcot report is deeply disrespectful and shows that we are not learning from that hideous escapade.

3.42 pm

**Roger Mullin** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): One of the most ridiculous arguments put forward here today by a number of hon. Members is that the Scottish National party has no right to have a debate on Chilcot and that we should choose subjects that are of concern to Scotland. I say to them: tell that to the Scottish families whose sons died in that war. Tell it to the Scottish families whose sons were injured and who will have to live with their scars, both physical and mental, for the rest of their lives. Tell it to those people—

**Graham Jones:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Roger Mullin:** I will not give way, for the very good reason that I tried often to intervene on—

**Graham Jones:** I have a family who suffered. He should give way. It's a disgrace—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. The hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) is not giving way.

**Roger Mullin:** Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I want to compliment one speech that I heard today, and it is that of the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale). In his usual understated way, he made some of the most telling observations about why we should still care about what happened and about the need to learn the lessons. I cannot see how it can be argued that we can learn the lessons if we are unwilling critically to review the results of the Chilcot process.

I was critical when my constituency predecessor in Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath set up the inquiry—as I am critical now—that it was not a judge-led inquiry. I have also been critical in the House about Sir John Chilcot's decision to invoke the Maxwellisation process, because he was not required to do so. That process allowed those who were criticised in the report to be the only ones to be given notice of what was being said about them and the only ones allowed to introduce new evidence into the process. For those reasons alone, this House needs to review and make its own judgment about the evidence. For me and many hon. Members from whom I have heard today, it is most telling that people recognise that the most important thing about the Chilcot report is not his personal views or interpretation, but the evidence that was presented, which this House is required to review.

I for one have confidence in the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, particularly in its Chairman, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), whom we are asking to take this forward. If there is any reason at all for why we need further consideration by the Committee, it was given by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) when reporting some of his conversations with Sir John Chilcot in the Liaison Committee. He asked a question about Mr Blair and if I quote him correctly, Sir John's response was:

"You would have to ask him."

How does this House ask him without asking him?

3.45 pm

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I pay tribute to all those who served, lost their lives or were injured in Iraq, to their families and to everyone who currently serves in our forces. I am delighted to support the motion that my colleagues have so ably put forward.

The scene was set in forensic detail by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), who started by asking what we should do in parliamentary terms in the light of the inquiry's findings. It is reasonable to consider parliamentary accountability as a tool that this House should actually use. He went on to highlight that no checks and balances currently exist in the system. Like all of us, he looks forward to the report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and its recommendations.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, said that lessons should be learned and that the Government are considering them. I believe that he meant that, so

does he agree that further specific examination of the contrast between public and private policy and presentation of intelligence vis-à-vis the then Prime Minister is desirable to help to prevent any repetition of past events?

The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) spoke about pursuing one individual. That individual was the then Prime Minister, who gave differing statements in private and in public—statements upon which, as we heard today, Members of this House relied. If statements were different in private and in public, why should we not debate that? To use the current context, how would we and members of the public feel if we thought that our Prime Minister—heaven forbid we were to be in such a situation again—was having private discussions with President-elect Donald Trump that differed—*[Interruption.]*

**Neil Coyle:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Ms Ahmed-Sheikh:** No, I will not. How would we feel if those discussions differed from the information that the Prime Minister presented to the House?

I welcomed the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts), who spoke with great eloquence and some good humour, and gave us a whirlwind tour of his constituency. He rightly paid tribute to the work of the organisations that exist there. I welcome him to the House.

The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) and the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) seemed to suggest that they should have some say in the motions that the SNP brings to this House on our Opposition days. We will decide that, thank you very much. What we choose will be based on our constituents' interests, which are at the heart of all that we do on these Benches. The Labour party can debate what it wants on its Opposition days. Let me be clear: we are not required to be sensitive to the Labour party's ongoing issues when choosing what to debate. That is its problem. We will remain sensitive to our constituents' issues and continue to stand up for them.

I thank the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) for his support for the motion. He made an excellent speech, as did my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), whose brother served. My hon. Friend quite rightly did not speak lightly and used his customary passion, conviction and principles, which the House so often enjoys. My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) spoke of the necessary further scrutiny. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) discussed how Sir John Chilcot was not charged with investigating blame and therefore is in no better position than anybody else to absolve the then Prime Minister.

The hon. Members for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), whom we also thank for supporting this motion, gave informative speeches with huge insight into this matter. My hon. Friends the Members for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) also spoke very well indeed, and I thank them for their contributions.

This is an important debate, not simply because it is about a former Prime Minister, but because it is about the fate of 179 servicemen and women who went to war

and did not come home. It is about their families, and the mental and emotional scars they bear. It is not about us—it is about them. And it is about the hundreds of thousands of dead and injured civilians in Iraq and beyond. It is also about Parliament—this institution—and about protecting the integrity of our democracy. When our democratic institutions are under immense stress and public faith in the political process is at a low ebb, it is vital for our democracy that we can reassert that the discussions we have here in this House may be contentious and controversial, but they are carried out in a way that recognises and does not distort the facts at our disposal. If we choose to look the other way, what hope is there for restoring the public's faith in this Parliament?

Today, we have a chance to take a significant step towards restoring parliamentary authority. This issue is above party politics, which is why I am glad to have the support of colleagues from across the Chamber and from Members from seven separate political parties. To his great credit, Sir John Chilcot's report forensically and repeatedly dismantles the public pronouncements of Blair as a catalogue of failure and neglect of the principles and duties of government. Chilcot stated that the actions of the Blair Administration were crucial in undermining the authority of the UN Security Council and that despite repeated declarations to the contrary, Blair personally committed the UK to joining the US in invading Iraq before all peaceful and diplomatic options had been exhausted. We have heard loud and clear about the following words today:

“I will be with you, whatever”.

Parliament must recognise that and must act.

**Ian Austin:** Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

**Ms Ahmed-Sheikh:** I will not give way, and I ask that Members also afford me the respect that I afforded them when they were speaking in this debate.

We must demonstrate that, a decade on from this disaster, we have listened and learned so that we are not doomed to repeat these deadly mistakes—that is what this is all about. It is about making sure that we do the right thing for the future. We know that the conflict and instability that has engulfed the region in the past few years was undoubtedly fuelled by the ideologically driven recklessness of Blair and Bush, but it is also clear from the lack of post-conflict planning in subsequent conflicts, both in Libya and the humanitarian disaster unfolding in Syria, that we have not yet fully embraced the changes that need to take place if we are to play a progressive role in an increasingly dangerous world.

Parliament must be at the centre of this process if it is to reassert its integrity at the heart of our democratic process in holding the Government to account. That is why the motion supports the current work of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which is examining the lessons to be learned from Chilcot on the machinery of government. This matter is not in the past; it is being spoken of in a Committee, and we are asking that that be extended further.

Today, MPs have a choice to make, and each of us, but perhaps Labour MPs in particular, has to make an important decision. We need to decide whether we act to address the issues raised by Sir John Chilcot and seek to reassert the place of Parliament at the heart of the

[*Ms Ahmed-Sheikh*]

democratic process, or whether to stand by while public confidence in this place is eroded even further. In the Lobby, we can stand up for parliamentary democracy and the importance of integrity, or we can look the other way. We can choose to learn from the lessons of the past or we can seek to brush this damning report under the carpet. I know the path that I will choose to take, and I hope MPs from across the House will support me in that endeavour.

3.53 pm

**The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mike Penning):**

Let me say at the outset, as the Armed Forces Minister and as a former serviceman, that I would like to pay tribute to those who did not come home, to those who came home with injuries that are going to be with them for the rest of their lives, physically as well as mentally, and to their loved ones, who have to live with those memories. It is for us, as parliamentarians, to live with the decisions that we make in this House. At times, these decisions are enormously onerous, but they are not as onerous as those of Prime Ministers and Ministers in Departments such as mine, which send our troops around the world, as we are doing today.

May I say at the outset that there is no perfect answer to the debate that we have had today? I sat in this House in 2003, not in the Chamber as a Member of Parliament, but in the Press Gallery as adviser and head of news and media for the Leader of the Opposition. I went to many briefings, and sat with the Leader of the Opposition for hours on end while we deliberated on what Her Majesty's Opposition were going to do. Many of my hon. Friends, some of whom are still in the House, made really difficult decisions on that night on how they were going to vote. Some voted with the Government and some voted with their party, but many voted with their conscience. In hindsight, some of the decisions that were made, which have been debated in this House this afternoon, were wrong. If I had been a Member at the time—it was another two years before I was elected—I am sure, based on what I knew, that I would have voted to go to war. We all have to live with our decisions.

We can debate this matter, but many Members made up their minds on it a long time ago. I do not think that there is a huge number of people in the House today who have changed their minds, but this Parliament is doing its job. I will not in any shape or form—either as a Back Bencher, which is what I was and which is what I probably will be in the future, or as a Minister—criticise any party for the motion that they bring forward on their Opposition Day; nor will I criticise a Back Bencher for the subject that they may wish to debate.

I was commenting to the Leader of the House a moment ago about the fact that people from seven different parties signed up to the motion. I said that there could have been more names had the motion not advertently put so much pressure on the Labour party and its previous Prime Minister. At the end of the day, that is what happens when we get motions such as this. Had it been worded differently, we might have had more people going through the Aye Lobby. Who knows?

Some parts of Chilcot have not been discussed. I had the honour of being with the 16 Air Assault Brigade a couple of days before they went into combat on our

behalf. We saw in the newspapers some of the real shortfalls in planning that occurred. I was with soldiers who had one magazine of ammunition the day before we sent them to war. We know that we were short of body armour, and that, catastrophically, lives were lost as a result. We all joke that there was not enough toilet paper in the theatre of war. The press made fun of that fact at the time. As a former soldier, I can assure the House that that is one of the most important things. That shortage could have been prevented if we had planned correctly. Chilcot goes into our planning in quite a lot of detail. Some would say, “Well, we had only a short amount of time.” Our armed forces need to be equipped on the basis that they will be doing this sort of thing, so we must ensure that the equipment is in place and that our boys and girls are equipped correctly.

It would be inappropriate for me, in the short amount of time that I have, not to pay tribute to our new colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), for a simply fantastic maiden speech. I will not be a hypocrite. I have criticised this House on more than one occasion, because we have too many accountants and lawyers—[*Interruption*—and a lot of them are around me at the moment. However, this House has been enhanced by his speech and by the way that my hon. Friend delivered it. May I ask him what I should do with all those photographs, posters and literature of him that are in the back of my car? Can they be suitably disposed of in a recycling facility? When I came to Witney to help him—I had never been to parts of Witney before, and my hon. Friend is right: it is absolutely beautiful—I was called back by friendly Whips on more than one occasion, so I did not manage to deliver the several thousand posters that his agent managed to give me.

The truth is that my hon. Friend said something fundamentally important: it is a privilege to be here on behalf of our constituents and to bring issues to the fore that concern them. In this case, SNP Members have decided that the Chilcot inquiry is such an issue. I am not going to be hypocritical and say that they do not have the right to do so, but my postbag is about housing, health and my local community. But that is their decision, and I fully respect that. I am not going to say that I have not had any correspondence on Chilcot; by tomorrow morning, I will have a lot more.

At the end of the day, I do not think that anybody wants to criticise Chilcot, his team or the report. It took a long time, and we can go over and over this. Whether the House decides to recommend to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) and his Committee that they look into this issue further, as I understand Select Committees, they make their own minds up about what they will do. It will discuss this matter whether the motion is passed or not. During the short time for which I sat on a Select Committee—I am looking around for the former Chairman of the Health Committee—we used to have in-depth discussions on what inquiries to do and how far they needed to go.

**Alex Salmond:** The Minister is making a very balanced speech. In his opinion, having read what he has read, is there a great contrast between the private commitments that the former Prime Minister gave to President Bush and his public statements and assurances to this House?

**Mike Penning:** I started to read the summary of the Chilcot report, but then read the report at great length, and if the right hon. Gentleman comes to my office he will see the markers in it. It took me several weeks. I respect what Chilcot said, and that is where we are today. If the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee or other Committees want to look at that further, fine, but my personal view and the view of the Government is that we do not need any more inquiries, so we will not go through the Lobby with the SNP this evening.

*Question put.*

*The House divided: Ayes 70, Noes 439.*

### Division No. 99]

[4.1 pm

#### AYES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina  
Amess, Sir David  
Arkless, Richard  
Bardell, Hannah  
Black, Mhairi  
Blackford, Ian  
Blackman, Bob  
Blackman, Kirsty  
Boswell, Philip  
Brock, Deidre  
Brown, Alan  
Campbell, Mr Ronnie  
Chapman, Douglas  
Cherry, Joanna  
Cowan, Ronnie  
Crawley, Angela  
Davies, Philip  
Docherty-Hughes,  
Martin  
Donaldson, Stuart Blair  
Durkan, Mark  
Edwards, Jonathan  
Elliott, Tom  
Ferrier, Margaret  
Flynn, Paul  
Gale, Sir Roger  
Gethins, Stephen  
Gibson, Patricia  
Grady, Patrick  
Grant, Peter  
Gray, Neil  
Hendry, Drew  
Hepburn, Mr Stephen  
Hollobone, Mr Philip  
Hopkins, Kelvin  
Hosie, Stewart  
Kerevan, George  
Kerr, Calum

Law, Chris  
Lucas, Caroline  
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan  
McCaig, Callum  
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm  
McDonald, Stuart  
C.  
McGarry, Natalie  
McLaughlin, Anne  
McPartland, Stephen  
Monaghan, Carol  
Monaghan, Dr Paul  
Mulholland, Greg  
Mullin, Roger  
Newlands, Gavin  
O'Hara, Brendan  
Oswald, Kirsten  
Paterson, Steven  
Ritchie, Ms Margaret  
Robertson, rh Angus  
Salmond, rh Alex  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Sheppard, Tommy  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Stephens, Chris  
Thewliss, Alison  
Thomson, Michelle  
Weir, Mike  
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh  
Whitford, Dr Philippa  
Williams, Hywel  
Williams, Mr Mark  
Wilson, Corri  
Wishart, Pete

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Marion Fellows and**  
**Owen Thompson**

#### NOES

Abrahams, Debbie  
Adams, Nigel  
Afriyie, Adam  
Aldous, Peter  
Alexander, Heidi  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allan, Lucy  
Allen, Heidi  
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Andrew, Stuart  
Argar, Edward  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Austin, Ian

Bacon, Mr Richard  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Baker, Mr Steve  
Baldwin, Harriett  
Barclay, Stephen  
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  
Barwell, Gavin  
Bebb, Guto  
Beckett, rh Margaret  
Bellingham, Sir Henry  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Benyon, Richard  
Beresford, Sir Paul

Berger, Luciana  
Berry, James  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Bingham, Andrew  
Blackman-Woods, Dr  
Roberta  
Blackwood, Nicola  
Blenkinsop, Tom  
Blomfield, Paul  
Blunt, Crispin  
Bone, Mr Peter  
Borwick, Victoria  
Bottomley, Sir Peter  
Brabin, Tracy  
Bradley, rh Karen  
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
Brady, Mr Graham  
Brazier, Mr Julian  
Brennan, Kevin  
Bridgen, Andrew  
Brine, Steve  
Brokenshire, rh James  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Bruce, Fiona  
Bryant, Chris  
Buckland, Robert  
Burnham, rh Andy  
Burns, Conor  
Burns, rh Sir Simon  
Burt, rh Alistair  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Cairns, rh Alun  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Carmichael, Neil  
Cartledge, James  
Cash, Sir William  
Chalk, Alex  
Chishti, Rehman  
Chope, Mr Christopher  
Churchill, Jo  
Clark, rh Greg  
Cleverly, James  
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey  
Clwyd, rh Ann  
Coaker, Vernon  
Coffey, Ann  
Coffey, Dr Thérèse  
Collins, Damian  
Colville, Oliver  
Cooper, Julie  
Cooper, Rosie  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Costa, Alberto  
Courts, Robert  
Cox, Mr Geoffrey  
Coyle, Neil  
Crausby, Mr David  
Creagh, Mary  
Creasy, Stella  
Crouch, Tracey  
Cruddas, Jon  
Cryer, John  
Cummins, Judith  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Dakin, Nic  
Danczuk, Simon  
David, Wayne  
Davies, Byron  
Davies, Chris

Davies, David T. C.  
Davies, Glyn  
Davies, Dr James  
Davies, Mims  
Davis, rh Mr David  
Debbonaire, Thangam  
Dinenage, Caroline  
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel  
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey  
M.  
Donelan, Michelle  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, Jim  
Doyle-Price, Jackie  
Drummond, Mrs Flick  
Duddridge, James  
Duncan Smith, rh Mr  
Iain  
Dunne, Mr Philip  
Eagle, Maria  
Efford, Clive  
Elliott, Julie  
Elliott, Tom  
Ellis, Michael  
Ellison, Jane  
Ellman, Mrs Louise  
Ellwood, Mr Tobias  
Elmore, Chris  
Elphicke, Charlie  
Esterson, Bill  
Eustice, George  
Evans, Chris  
Evans, Graham  
Evennett, rh David  
Fabricant, Michael  
Fallon, rh Sir Michael  
Farrelly, Paul  
Fernandes, Suella  
Field, rh Mark  
Fitzpatrick, Jim  
Fleelo, Robert  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Flint, rh Caroline  
Foster, Kevin  
Fovargue, Yvonne  
Fox, rh Dr Liam  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Francois, rh Mr Mark  
Frazer, Lucy  
Freeman, George  
Freer, Mike  
Furniss, Gill  
Gapes, Mike  
Garnier, Mark  
Gauke, rh Mr David  
Ghani, Nusrat  
Gibb, Mr Nick  
Glass, Pat  
Glen, John  
Glindon, Mary  
Goodman, Helen  
Goodwill, Mr Robert  
Gove, rh Michael  
Graham, Richard  
Grant, Mrs Helen  
Gray, Mr James  
Grayling, rh Chris  
Green, Chris  
Green, rh Damian  
Greening, rh Justine  
Greenwood, Lilian

Grieve, rh Mr Dominic  
 Griffith, Nia  
 Griffiths, Andrew  
 Gummer, rh Ben  
 Gwynne, Andrew  
 Gyimah, Mr Sam  
 Halfon, rh Robert  
 Hall, Luke  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip  
 Hammond, Stephen  
 Hancock, rh Matt  
 Hands, rh Greg  
 Hanson, rh Mr David  
 Harper, rh Mr Mark  
 Harrington, Richard  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Harris, Rebecca  
 Hart, Simon  
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hayes, rh Mr John  
 Hayman, Sue  
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver  
 Healey, rh John  
 Heapey, James  
 Heaton-Jones, Peter  
 Henderson, Gordon  
 Herbert, rh Nick  
 Hermon, Lady  
 Hillier, Meg  
 Hinds, Damian  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hollingbery, George  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Hopkins, Kris  
 Howarth, rh Mr George  
 Howarth, Sir Gerald  
 Howell, John  
 Howlett, Ben  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy  
 Hunt, Tristram  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hurd, Mr Nick  
 Jackson, Mr Stewart  
 James, Margot  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Javid, rh Sajid  
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil  
 Jenkyns, Andrea  
 Jenrick, Robert  
 Johnson, Gareth  
 Jones, Andrew  
 Jones, rh Mr David  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Graham  
 Jones, Mr Kevan  
 Jones, Mr Marcus  
 Jones, Susan Elan  
 Kane, Mike  
 Kawczynski, Daniel  
 Keeley, Barbara  
 Kendall, Liz  
 Kennedy, Seema  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirby, Simon  
 Knight, rh Sir Greg  
 Kwarteng, Kwasi

Lammy, rh Mr David  
 Lancaster, Mark  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Leadsom, rh Andrea  
 Lee, Dr Phillip  
 Leigh, Sir Edward  
 Leslie, Charlotte  
 Leslie, Chris  
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lewis, rh Brandon  
 Lewis, Mr Ivan  
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian  
 Lidington, rh Mr David  
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter  
 Lopresti, Jack  
 Lord, Jonathan  
 Loughton, Tim  
 Lucas, Ian C.  
 Lumley, Karen  
 Lynch, Holly  
 Mackinlay, Craig  
 Mackintosh, David  
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, Shabana  
 Main, Mrs Anne  
 Mak, Mr Alan  
 Malthouse, Kit  
 Mann, John  
 Mann, Scott  
 Marris, Rob  
 Marsden, Gordon  
 Matheson, Christian  
 Maynard, Paul  
 McCabe, Steve  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McCartney, Jason  
 McCartney, Karl  
 McDonagh, Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonnell, Dr Alasdair  
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
 McGinn, Conor  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McInnes, Liz  
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick  
 Meale, Sir Alan  
 Menzies, Mark  
 Mercer, Johnny  
 Merriman, Huw  
 Metcalfe, Stephen  
 Miliband, rh Edward  
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria  
 Milling, Amanda  
 Mills, Nigel  
 Milton, rh Anne  
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine  
 Mordaunt, Penny  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morgan, rh Nicky  
 Morris, Anne Marie  
 Morris, David  
 Morris, James  
 Mowat, David  
 Mundell, rh David  
 Murray, Ian  
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
 Neill, Robert

Newton, Sarah  
 Nokes, Caroline  
 Norman, Jesse  
 Nuttall, Mr David  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Opperman, Guy  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Osborne, rh Mr George  
 Paisley, Ian  
 Parish, Neil  
 Patel, rh Priti  
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen  
 Pawsey, Mark  
 Penning, rh Mike  
 Penrose, John  
 Percy, Andrew  
 Perkins, Toby  
 Perry, Claire  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric  
 Poulter, Dr Daniel  
 Pound, Stephen  
 Pow, Rebecca  
 Powell, Lucy  
 Prentis, Victoria  
 Pritchard, Mark  
 Pursglove, Tom  
 Quin, Jeremy  
 Rayner, Angela  
 Redwood, rh John  
 Reed, Mr Steve  
 Rees, Christina  
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob  
 Reeves, Rachel  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Robertson, Mr Laurence  
 Robinson, Gavin  
 Robinson, Mary  
 Rosindell, Andrew  
 Rotheram, Steve  
 Rudd, rh Amber  
 Rutley, David  
 Ryan, rh Joan  
 Selous, Andrew  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Shapps, rh Grant  
 Sharma, Alok  
 Sheerman, Mr Barry  
 Shelbrooke, Alec  
 Sherriff, Paula  
 Shuker, Mr Gavin  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Simpson, David  
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith  
 Skidmore, Chris  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smeeth, Ruth  
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew  
 Smith, Angela  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, Henry  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Julian  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smith, Royston  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas  
 Soubry, rh Anna  
 Spellar, rh Mr John

Spelman, rh Dame Caroline  
 Spencer, Mark  
 Starmer, Keir  
 Stephenson, Andrew  
 Stevenson, John  
 Stewart, Bob  
 Stewart, Iain  
 Stewart, Rory  
 Streetter, Mr Gary  
 Streeting, Wes  
 Stride, Mel  
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela  
 Stuart, Graham  
 Sturdy, Julian  
 Sunak, Rishi  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo  
 Syms, Mr Robert  
 Tami, Mark  
 Thomas, Mr Gareth  
 Throup, Maggie  
 Timms, rh Stephen  
 Timpson, Edward  
 Tolhurst, Kelly  
 Tomlinson, Justin  
 Tomlinson, Michael  
 Tracey, Craig  
 Tredinnick, David  
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie  
 Truss, rh Elizabeth  
 Tugendhat, Tom  
 Turner, Karl  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Umunna, Mr Chuka  
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward  
 Vara, Mr Shailesh  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa  
 Walker, Mr Charles  
 Walker, Mr Robin  
 Wallace, Mr Ben  
 Warman, Matt  
 Watson, Mr Tom  
 Wharton, James  
 Whately, Helen  
 Wheeler, Heather  
 White, Chris  
 Whitehead, Dr Alan  
 Whittaker, Craig  
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
 Wiggin, Bill  
 Williams, Craig  
 Williamson, rh Gavin  
 Wilson, Phil  
 Wilson, Mr Rob  
 Winnick, Mr David  
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie  
 Wood, Mike  
 Woodcock, John  
 Wright, Mr Iain  
 Wright, rh Jeremy  
 Zahawi, Nadhim  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Christopher Pincher and**  
**Chris Heaton-Harris**

*Question accordingly negated.*

## State Pension Age: Women

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected amendment (c) in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.19 pm

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned that the Government is not taking action to alleviate the injustice facing women affected by the acceleration of the increase in the state pension age, despite the House previously voting in favour of such action; welcomes the Landman Economics report into the impact of the changes to pension arrangements for women born in the 1950s, which identifies an affordable solution which would slow down that increase in order to give adequate time for women affected by the acceleration to make alternative arrangements; and calls on the Government to work with the Women Against State Pension Inequality and Women Against State Pension Inequality Voice campaigns further to explore transitional protection for those affected.

It is a pleasure to move this motion in the name of the leader of the Scottish National party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), and many of my right hon. and hon. Friends. We have long argued that the Government need to slow down the pace of the increase in women's pensionable age, and that the increase in pensionable age is happening over too short a timescale. There has also been an argument about whether women were given enough notice of the increase in their pensionable age. Indeed, some Government Members, such as the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), have conceded that there were issues with communication. That is putting it mildly.

Thanks to freedom of information requests, we learned two weeks ago that only in April 2009 did the Department for Work and Pensions begin writing to women born between April 1950 and April 1955, and it did not complete the process until February 2012.

**David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Blackford:** I will make some progress, and then I will give way.

The DWP wrote to women to inform them about changes in legislation that go back to the Pensions Act 1995, but it did not start the formal period of notification for 14 years. To take 14 years to begin informing people that the pension that they had paid in for was being deferred—that is quite something. Can we imagine the outcry if a private pension provider behaved in such a way? There would be an outcry in this House and, no doubt, legal action. This is quite stunning when we consider that entitlement to a state pension is earned through national insurance contributions, which many women have made for more than 40 years.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that these pension entitlements are not a benefit or a privilege but a contract, and they should be honoured?

**Ian Blackford:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are talking about women who have paid national insurance contributions on the basis that they

would get a pension. This is not a benefit. It should be a contractual arrangement between the Government and the women involved, and that is what the Government have wilfully removed.

**David T. C. Davies:** Given the hon. Gentleman's strong view on the matter, could he tell us whether the Scottish Government have written to pensioners in Scotland about it? Could he also tell us whether the Scottish Government are going to use their many fiscal and tax-raising powers, and their huge budget of some £30 billion, to compensate women in Scotland?

**Ian Blackford:** The hon. Gentleman might treat pensioners in Scotland and the rest of the UK with a little bit more respect than he has shown by asking that nonsense of a question. Just in case he does not know, pensions are a reserved matter. I would very much like the Scottish Government to have responsibility for pensions. Let us be quite clear: if this Government gave us access to the national insurance fund, we would not treat pensioners in such a shabby way as the Government are doing. That is the reality.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I want to go back to the first part of the hon. Gentleman's argument, when he described the absolute injustice that many of the women who are affected feel. I have met many from my constituency and from across Wales who feel that this is a terrible thing, which must be righted. They expected something; they are not getting it and we need to right that injustice.

**Ian Blackford:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point, and he is absolutely spot on. This is about justice and fairness. It is about people who have paid into a pension and who expected to get that pension—in the case of most of these women, at age 60. The discovery that they were not given adequate notice is a clear reason why the Government must change course and act in a responsible manner.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has spoken in many debates on this issue, and I pay tribute to him for that. The situation gets worse. The Government, through the back door, are examining the triple lock for existing pensioners. More importantly, responsibility for television licences for pensioners over 75 is being shoved on to the BBC, which will get the blame instead of the Government.

**Ian Blackford:** Again, I find myself agreeing with the hon. Gentleman.

As a House, we must reflect on the situation in which there are still 1.2 million pensioners in this country living in poverty. I am ashamed when I hear Members of the House saying that we should examine the triple lock, because we should protect our pensioners. One thing on which I will give an absolute commitment is that if we had responsibility for pensions, the triple lock would be secured by the Scottish National party. Pensioners would be secured with the SNP.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Blackford:** I will make some progress and then take more interventions. I am aware that many people want to speak.

The Government have changed the entitlement for something that women have paid in for with an expectation of retiring at 60. When the goalposts were moved, the Government could not get around to informing the women affected in a timely manner. A woman born on 6 April 1953, who under the previous legislation would have retired on 6 April 2013, received a letter from the Department for Work and Pensions in January 2012 with the bombshell that she would now be retiring on 6 July 2016. That is three years and three months later than she might have expected, but she received only 15 months' notice. That is what this Government have done to many women throughout the United Kingdom: 15 months' written notice on what they thought was a contract they had with the Government, but which has now been ripped up. That is the contempt that this Government have shown for the 2.6 million Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign women throughout the UK.

**George Kerevan** (East Lothian) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the attack was made on the WASPI women because they were an easy target, and that it is the first stage in a Conservative plan to downsize and dismantle the state pension altogether?

**Ian Blackford:** My hon. Friend may well be right. The Government are of course hoping that with the passage of time this issue will go away, but it will not go away, because the women are angry. If they do not begin to recognise the need to do something, each and every Member of the House will have the WASPI women coming to their surgeries and demanding action. Not only will they be demanding action, but that will run the risk that this Government will be taken to court.

**James Cartlidge:** The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. Is it still his policy to pay for this change from the national insurance surplus?

**Ian Blackford:** I will come on to cover that point, but the fact remains that the national insurance fund will be sitting with a surplus of close to £30 billion by the end of this decade. There will be £30 billion of contributions in the national insurance fund. There is no question but that the Government can afford to do this: there is a surplus. The national insurance fund has to retain two months' cash flow, but that can still be done by putting in place what we are asking the House to do today, which is—as in the Landman report—to push back the increase in women's pensionable age and to make sure that the women worst affected get recompense and fairness.

**Mr Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has mentioned that the WASPI women will not go away. That is one of the most delightful things about them. Way back, we carried a vote on a Back-Bench motion supporting them in this House. They were not satisfied that there had already been a debate in Westminster Hall, and they were not satisfied that they were holding meetings in every constituency, city and town in Britain. They are like the Grunwick women of 40 years ago, the little Gujarati women who would not give in, and the Tory Government had better realise that the WASPI women ain't going to give in either.

**Ian Blackford:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. He is right that the WASPI women are not for giving in, and those of us on the Opposition Benches—and, I hope, some Conservative Members—are not for giving in either.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Blackford:** I want to make some progress, but I will let the hon. Gentleman in later.

The Government, despite not giving reasonable notice, have so far not apologised for how they have treated these women. It is utterly, utterly shameful, and it raises the question: how much notice should be given for changes to the state pension age? The Pensions Commission, which reported in 2005, suggested that at least 15 years' notice be given on any further increase in pensionable age—15 years, not the 15 months given to so many women. Will the Government not recognise that appropriate notice has to be given and make changes?

Given the Government's failure to give proper notice, I tabled a written question to the Secretary of State, which I received an answer to yesterday. My question was:

“To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what his policy is on the minimum written notice to be given to people who will be affected by future changes to the state pension age.”

I received the following response:

“The Government has committed not to change the legislation relating to State Pension age for those people who are within 10 years of reaching it. This provides these individuals with the certainty they need to plan for the future. We recognise the importance of ensuring people are aware of any changes to their State Pension age and we use a number of different means to do this... Anyone can find out their State Pension age with our online calculator or the ‘Check your State Pension’ statement service.”

According to the Minister who responded, the Government accept that they should not change legislation for those within 10 years of pensionable age. That is all well and good, but what is the point if they do not inform those directly affected?

Yesterday, in response to a further question, a Minister stated that,

“following the Pensions Act 1995, State Pension estimates, issued to individuals on request, made the changes clear.”

“On request”! It should not be done on request. People should not have to ask the Government to inform them; that is this Government's responsibility. It almost seems like a script from the comedy, “Yes Minister”, rather than a Government acting in a proper manner.

**Ian Murray:** The hon. Gentleman has been dogged in pursuing this matter with colleagues from all Opposition parties. He mentioned “Yes Minister”. In 2011, I sat on these Benches as the then Liberal Democrat Minister pushed through the Pensions Act. Is he as astonished as I am that, having now left the House, that former Minister now says that the Act was wrong and unfair to women?

**Ian Blackford:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct that the previous Pensions Minister has made these comments. In fact, the last Pensions Minister in the other place, Baroness Altmann, made similar comments. Everyone can see the deficiencies in the Government's policy except the Government themselves.

**Mr Shailesh Vara** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): If the former Pensions Minister is to be referred to, it would be helpful to put the facts correctly. He said that the difference required was £30 billion. He went to the then Chancellor of the Exchequer and Prime Minister and asked for £3 billion. Then, when he was given a concession of £1.1 billion, he said, "That's a hell of a lot of money." So let us be clear: the difference was £30 billion but he only asked for £3 billion, which is a tenth of what the hon. Gentleman is arguing about.

**Ian Blackford:** We are not talking about concessions; we are talking about these women's pension entitlement. How dare the Government talk about concessions, when people have paid into their pension and deserve to get it!

This is not a comedy but the reality of a Government letting women down.

**Callum McCaig** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): There are suggestions from Conservative Members that money does not grow on trees, and that is correct, but this money came from these women paying in through national insurance. It did not grow on trees; it came, hard-earned, from their own pockets.

**Ian Blackford:** My hon. Friend is quite correct. We keep hearing about fiscal responsibility and how we cannot afford it, but of course we can, because the surplus is there in the national insurance fund.

When the new Prime Minister took office, the first thing she did was bring a motion before the House asking us to renew the Trident missile system, and effectively every single Conservative Member went through the Lobby and gave the Government a blank cheque. They can invest in weapons of mass destruction but they are not prepared to give women pensioners their just deserts.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Ian Blackford:** I will take some more interventions later, but I must make some progress.

As I have mentioned, this is not a comedy; it is the reality of a Government letting women down. The failure to write to those affected is a failure of responsibility. It is an abrogation of responsibility. To pass the buck and say that anyone can use the online calculator is, frankly, stunning. All prospective pensioners ought to be treated with respect. Some 2.6 million women were not effectively communicated with, and many are now struggling to cope financially with a later pensionable age than the one they had planned for.

Let us look at what is taking place currently. I have highlighted the current sharp increases in pensionable age, but they need to be gone over again for the simple reason that, so far, the Government have simply not got it and will certainly need to do so. A woman born on 6 March 1953 will have retired on 6 March 2016 at the age of 63. A woman born a month later, on 6 April 1953, will have retired on 6 July aged 63 and three months. A woman born on 6 May 1953 will have retired a few days ago, on 6 November, aged 63 and six months. A woman born on 6 June will have to wait until 6 March 2017, when she will be aged 63 and nine months. A woman born on 6 July 1953 will not get her pension until her 64th birthday in July 2017.

**Graham Evans** (Weaver Vale) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Blackford:** I hope that the Government are beginning to get the picture. For each month that passes, women's pensionable age is increasing by as much as three months. We should just dwell on that—a three-month addition to pensionable age for each month that someone was born later than their neighbour, friend or colleague.

I spoke about a woman born in March 1953 who retired this year at age 63, but a woman born a year later, in March 1954, will not retire until September 2019, when she will be aged 65 and a half. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members seem to think that this is funny, but we are talking about women who are being significantly disadvantaged over too sharp an increase in women's pensionable age. Those Members might find that acceptable, but I am afraid that I, my colleagues and many millions of other people in the country certainly do not. A woman born six months later, in September 1954, will have to wait until she is 66 in September 2020. Over an 18-month period, a woman's pensionable age will have increased by three years.

As we keep saying, we are not against equalisation of the state pension age—*[Interruption.]* My colleagues and I have said that in every speech we have given in this House. We have made it crystal clear, as have the WASPI women, that we agree with equalisation. It is the pace of change that is the problem, and Conservative Members are burying their heads in the sand over it and are refusing to face the reality.

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I must echo the very clear position that my hon. Friend has outlined. Does he agree that anybody who believes that, purely because someone is a woman and happens to have been born at a certain time they should lose out, is advocating a very warped and strange definition of equality?

**Ian Blackford:** Absolutely. Of course we have to face the gender equality that has been with us, with women paid less for such a long time and women gaining less access to occupational pension schemes, but Government Members just seem to want to make things worse. As we keep saying, we are not against equalisation of the state pension age; it is the pace of change and the lack of appropriate notice that are the real issues.

**Graham Evans:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

**Ian Blackford:** I will give way one more time.

**Graham Evans:** I am most grateful. If Germany can introduce equalisation of the pension age in 2009, why cannot the United Kingdom do the same? We are behind the game.

**Ian Blackford:** I am absolutely dumbstruck! I do not know how many times we have to say it, but we are not against equalisation. We support it. It is the pace of change imposed by the Government that is the problem.

While we are on the subject, the Government might wish to consider the fact that the Polish Parliament met on the 16th of this month and agreed to reverse the increases in pensionable age because they recognised the unfairness. Perhaps we should take a leaf out of the Poles' book, rather than this one.

**Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Blackford:** I want to make some progress, because I know that many other Members want to speak.

We should remind ourselves what a pension is. It is deferred income. Women, and men, have paid national insurance in the expectation of receiving a state pension. That is the deal, plain and simple. You pay in, and you get your entitlement. You do not expect the Government, without effective notice, to change the rules. What has been done to the WASPI women has undermined fairness and equity. The 2.6 million women affected by the increase in pensionable age have an entitlement to a pension and a right to be treated fairly: no more, no less.

The Government often state that the increase in pensionable age under the 2011 Act means that no women will have to wait longer than 18 months for their pensions. That is disingenuous, as it comes in addition to the changes in the 1995 Act, which are still in the process of being implemented. It is a fact that women's pensionable age is increasing by six years over a very short period. That is the issue. That is the reality. It is the impact of both Acts. The Government have a duty to be truthful about this matter.

Let me now turn to the Prime Minister's amendment. So much for her comments about supporting those who were "just about managing". Many of the WASPI women are not managing, and this ill-conceived, patronising amendment from the Government is frankly contemptible. Although the Chancellor confirmed in last week's autumn statement that the triple lock would remain for the duration of the current Parliament, he has ordered a review of the cost of the guarantee and whether it is affordable. We in the SNP remain fully committed to the future of the triple lock to ensure dignity in retirement for all our pensioners. Any roll-back by the UK Government will leave pensioners vulnerable.

The Government's commitment to pensioners needs to be questioned. We already know that, in reality, although the new headline flat-rate state pension will be £159.55 a week, many people will get less if they contracted out of second or additional state pension top-ups over the years. With the Chancellor and others wavering on the future of the triple lock, only the Scottish National party can be trusted to protect the rights of pensioners in Scotland. *[Laughter.]* Members may laugh, but I am glad to say that pensioners throughout the United Kingdom will be listening, and they will be watching the behaviour on the Government Benches.

The amendment is something that we might expect from a student debating society, but not from a Government who are taking the plight of the WASPI women seriously. What is it going to take for the Government to recognise that they must do something to deal with the unfairness of the sharp increase in pensionable age? Over the last few weeks, 240 petitions relating to the WASPI campaign have been presented to Parliament by Members on both sides of the House, which shows that this issue affects all parts of the UK. Parliament and the petitioners should be given more respect by the Government, and I hope that when the Minister responds to the debate he will withdraw their amendment. The issue is not going to go away: the WASPI women are angry, and will be lobbying MPs in the weeks and months ahead. The Government must act.

This is not the first time that women have had to campaign to defend their rights. In the House, we frequently pay homage to those in the suffragette movement who campaigned for voting rights for women. There are similarities between the suffragettes and the WASPI women. The suffragettes were known by the acronym WSPU, which stood for the Women's Social and Political Union, and they were well known for wearing purple, as do the WASPI women. The Government of the day, of course, stood steadfast against the demands of the suffragettes for many years before they were eventually forced into doing the right thing. My message to the present Government is not to be as pig-headed as previous Governments in opposing a campaign which, as I have said—and as was pointed out earlier by the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner)—is not going to go away. I say to them. "Show compassion. Show that you can do the right thing."

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my bafflement that in the face of evidence, in the face of campaigning and in the face of the many women who come through the doors of our surgeries to raise this issue, the Government have not yet changed their mind? This is not about equalisation; this is about a campaign against the WASPI women.

**Ian Blackford:** My hon. Friend is quite correct. The Government ought to reflect on all the petitions that have been launched in good faith, including by Conservative Members.

**Lady Hermon** (North Down) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman will understand that in Northern Ireland this change is having a negative impact on thousands of women. I am one of them, but I will have a pension from this House; thousands of women will not enjoy that privileged status. On 13 July, a new Prime Minister walked into No. 10, giving an opportunity for this Government to set a different tone. The Prime Minister has a golden opportunity to deliver on the hopes and expectations that she revealed on the steps of No. 10.

**Ian Blackford:** The hon. Lady makes a strong point. I appeal to the Government to listen to what is said by Members in all parts of the House, including on the Government Benches. They can do the right thing today and deliver justice for the WASPI women. They have a chance to show that they really do care about the women who have been left behind.

Although it is simply shocking that we are still debating this issue without resolution, should we be surprised? Historically, women have suffered decades of gender inequality, and while the Tories tell us that the changes are about equalisation and fairness, they continue to push women further into hardship by delaying their pensions and ensuring that their austerity cuts continue to fall firmly on their shoulders.

**Dr Alasdair McDonnell** (Belfast South) (SDLP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the WASPI women should be commended for the civil, decent and reasonable way they have campaigned? We have met them all in our constituencies. He just made the point that women had a gender pay gap and a resulting pension gap even before the changes, so an already unfair situation is compounded. Does he agree that the failure to introduce better transitional arrangements exacerbates the existing inequality?

**Ian Blackford:** I fully agree. I commend the dignity shown by the WASPI women in their campaign. They have been an inspiration to us all.

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Blackford:** No. I have to make progress, because many others want to speak. I have been generous in giving way.

We also need to remind the Government that the House has already backed a motion calling on them to take action. It was passed on 7 January this year, and it is worth reflecting on its contents. It called on the Government

“to immediately introduce transitional arrangements for those women negatively affected by that equalisation.”

Why have the Government ignored the will of this House? Does parliamentary democracy mean anything, or can it simply be ignored by a Government who choose to disrespect not only this House but the 2.6 million WASPI women? It is an affront to democracy that despite this House having voted for the Government to take

“action to alleviate the injustice facing women affected by the acceleration of the increase in the state pension age”,

the Tories are intent on resisting the will of the people. It is abundantly clear that we have won the argument. As well as winning the vote unanimously in Parliament for the UK Government to introduce transitional arrangements for the WASPI women, the Tories continue to shrug their shoulders at the will of the House. In various debates on this issue, we have won the argument. The UK Government must realise that, with the support of Members on both sides of the House, we will not be abandoning the WASPI women as they have done. We and the constituents we represent should be given more respect and consideration by the UK Government.

**David Rutley** (Macclesfield) (Con): On the point of fairness, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Blackford:** Fairness! [*Laughter.*] For the last time, and because of his sheer cheek, I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

**David Rutley:** Not once has the hon. Gentleman told the House that he will pay the £38 billion price tag. That will increase national debt and future generations will have to pay for it by having a much higher pensionable age. How does he answer that question about fairness?

**Ian Blackford:** That was pathetic.

There will come a time when not only the SNP but the Government Back Benchers who have pledged to support the WASPI women and the general public will question the role of this place, if it is not to listen and respect the will of the people. With internal dissent growing in the Tory party over cuts to employment and support allowance and the reduction in the work allowance, the cracks are beginning to appear. Maybe now is the time for them to change tactics and start listening to the Conservatives they claim to represent. I understand the motivation of those Members who have put their names to amendments (a) and (b), but I ask them to support the SNP today.

The SNP commissioned research to challenge the UK Government’s figures. A number of options are available to the Government, but we believe option two can give immediate relief to those women who are next to face delay in this Parliament. The Government must act now.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Ian Blackford:** With your forbearance, Mr Speaker, I am aware that I have been on my feet for quite some time and I want to move on to my concluding remarks. I have been generous in allowing others to come in, but I will not be taking any further interventions so that I can finish and allow others to speak.

Our report is a stepping stone. It should be adopted to help to end this injustice. We hope the UK Government welcome the report and act now to end this inequality. The SNP Westminster parliamentary group’s report detailed modelling by Landman Economics of the impact of different options for compensating women affected by the 2011 Act. One option was a return to the timetable in the 1995 Act, whereby women’s state pension age would rise from 63 in March 2016, to 65 in April 2020. The report estimates that reverting back to the 1995 Act for women would cost £7.9 billion between 2016-17 and 2020-21.

The Government estimate that the accelerated state pension age in the Pensions Act 2011 saved about £30 billion from both women and men from 2016-17 to 2025-26. However, that is simply not the case. The £8 billion cost is affordable given the surplus in the national insurance fund, which rightly should be used to end this injustice. The fund is in surplus and, according to the Government’s own actuary department, is projected to be at a £30 billion surplus at the end of 2017-18. It is time the Government paid out. After all, the WASPI women paid in and helped to create this surplus. They now need to be given their due.

The Minister said that it is simply too expensive and that public spending is complicated. We will not be fobbed off. The report was carried out by a credible and sound model that has been used previously by independent economists. Again, the matter returns to priorities—too expensive in comparison to what other expenses? The Tories have a choice here: this is not a necessity.

While we are trying to get the Government to act, others elsewhere are doing just that. Measures were brought forward by the Polish Government on 16 November to reverse the increase in pensionable age from the previous planned state pensionable age of 67 to 60 for women and 65 for men as of October 2017. The Polish Prime Minister claimed that there were enough state funds from more efficient tax collection for earlier pensions. Well, well! Of course, the parallel here is that we know the national insurance fund is in surplus. We can afford to put in place mitigation. If Poland can do it, what about a rich country like the UK? It is all about choices.

We published in our report the scale of increase in pensionable age in each European country. Only two countries are seeing a rapid acceleration of pensionable age for women in line with the UK: Italy and Greece. Is anyone on the Government Benches prepared to defend the increase in women’s pensionable age of three months per month? We have given the Government an option and, unlike their Trident nuclear weapons commitment,

[*Ian Blackford*]

it is costed. I say to the Government that we are not going away. More importantly, the WASPI women are not going away.

In conclusion, today is Scotland's national day. With deference to Rabbie Burns, if he will forgive me, I would like to adapt one of his better known pieces of work:

“Women, wha hae wi’ WASPI bled,  
Women, wham WASPI has af times led;  
Welcome to your gory bed,  
Or to victory!

Now’s the day, and now’s the hour;  
See the front o’ battle lour;  
See approach proud Theresa’s power—  
Chains and slavery!

Wha will be a traitor knave?  
Wha can fill a coward’s grave!  
Wha sae base as be a slave?  
Let her turn and flee!

Wha for Pensions rightly earned  
Freedom’s sword will strongly draw,  
WASPIs stand, or WASPIs fa’,  
Let them follow me!

By oppression’s woes and pains!  
By your daughters in servile chains!  
We will drain our dearest veins,  
But they shall be free!

Lay the proud usurpers low!  
Tyrants fall in every foe!  
Liberty’s in every blow!—  
Let us do or die!”

Justice for the WASPI women!

The Tory Government have ducked their responsibility for the WASPI women for too long. It is time to face up to the reality. Pensions are not a privilege; they are a contract and the UK Government have broken it.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. In a moment I shall call the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to move the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister, but first I must advise the House that no fewer than 13 Back Benchers wish to contribute to the debate, and they should be heard. The Secretary of State, equally, will want to respond, and probably comprehensively, to what he has heard, which is perfectly proper. I therefore ask Members to have some regard for the interests of each other.

4.55 pm

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green):** I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to the end of the Question and add:

“welcomes the planned average rise of £550 a year for 3 million women, including those born in the 1950s, who receive the new state pension; further welcomes the increase of over £1,100 per year of the basic state pension since 2010 as the result of the triple lock, which will also benefit such women; and recognises that the state pension must reflect the welcome rise in life expectancy in order to remain sustainable for generations to come.”

We have heard the case put fully by the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (*Ian Blackford*), and I want to start my response by putting this debate in full context. The pensions system, along with the whole

welfare system, needs to change to reflect the reality of today. What has happened in recent decades is not only that we are all living longer, which is welcome, but that we are able to work for longer as we become healthier. Of course this does not apply to everyone, and I will come to those who need financial help. However, although this is often a divisive debate, I hope the whole House can accept these four principles: first, that men and women should receive their state pension at the same age, a principle first set out more than 20 years ago in the Pensions Act 1995; secondly, that the age at which all receive a state pension has to rise as life expectancy rises; thirdly, that all who need help because they cannot work should receive appropriate support; and fourthly, that for most people work is beneficial not only because it provides an income, but because it gives them greater control over their own lives.

State pension age increases cannot be looked at in isolation. They fit into a wider array of changes, including changes in life expectancy, the huge and very welcome progress made in opening up employment opportunities for women, and the wider package of reforms we have introduced to ensure a fairer deal for pensioners, particularly the new state pension.

The state pension system for people who reached their state pension age before 6 April this year was extremely complex. The new state pension brings greater clarity by helping people to understand their pension more easily, and it is much more generous for many women who have been historically worse off under the old system. On average, women reaching state pension age last year get a higher state pension over their lifetimes than women who reached state pension age at any point before them, even when the accelerated equalisation of state pension age is taken into account. By 2030, over 3 million women stand to gain an average of £550 extra per year as a result of these changes.

**Fiona Mactaggart:** I probably should declare an interest as a woman who was born on 12 September 1953. The Secretary of State's remarks about women's extra income throughout their lives does not pay the bills today for WASPI women, and that is their problem. They do not disagree with any of his four principles—they accepted the equal pension age—but they have planned their lives responsibly, and in return the Government have been irresponsible.

**Damian Green:** I will come to the specific point that the right hon. Lady raises later in my speech, as she would expect.

The new state pension works hand in hand with automatic enrolment, enabling many more people to save in a workplace pension. Together, the new state pension and automatic enrolment, along with reviews of the state pension age, are designed to form the main elements of a sustainable basis for retirement income in the decades to come. We want to ensure economic security for working people at every stage of their lives, including retirement, and that is why we are protecting the incomes of millions of pensioners through the triple lock. Living standards for pensioners have been rising steadily for many years. In 2014-15, the proportion of this group living in a low-income household was nearly the lowest on record, in terms of the proportion and of pensioner numbers. That is the general position, which it is important for the House to recognise.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): How much notice would the Secretary of State expect his own private pension provider to give him of such significant changes? Would he be happy with as little as 15 months' notice?

**Damian Green:** We are discussing the state pension, not private pensions—[*Interruption.*] My principal pension is that of a Member of this House, so all aspects of it are exactly the same as those of the hon. Gentleman's pension.

Let me deal with the group that is principally affected by the changes. Of course I have met many of those women in my own constituency. There was clearly a problem, and that is why a substantial concession worth £1.1 billion was introduced in the Pensions Act 2011. As a result, no woman will experience an increase of more than 18 months, and for 81% of the women affected—more than four in five of them—the increase will not exceed 12 months compared with the previous timetable. This concession benefited almost 250,000 women who would otherwise have experienced delays of up to two years. The introduction of further concessions cannot be justified, given the imperative to focus public resources on helping those who are most in need.

**Andy Burnham** (Leigh) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about those in need as though the WASPI women are not in need, but of course many of them are. He has talked about resources, but what price justice? What price doing the right thing? These are the women who brought us up, who now care for older relatives and who are the mainstay of their communities. They are not some militant group. At a time when this House has a low standing, I believe that his dismissive attitude towards them will damage not only the Conservative party but politics as a whole in the eyes of the women who have made this country what it is today.

**Damian Green:** I am not being remotely dismissive, and if the right hon. Gentleman will be patient, I will come to the measures that the Government are taking to help women in that age bracket. I can absolutely assure him that I am not being dismissive.

**Mr Vara:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the luxuries for the Opposition is proposing to spend money that they do not have? Does he also agree that the comments from the Opposition parties ring hollow, given that these matters were not mentioned in their manifestos? They were not mentioned in the Labour manifesto or the Scottish National party manifesto.

**Damian Green:** My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point.

I want to deal specifically with some of the issues raised by the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber. He talked about communications. Since 2000—a long time before the 2011 Act—the Department for Work and Pensions has issued 14 million state pension estimates, which include mention of the state pension age. Between 2003 and 2006, the Department issued about 16 million automatic pension forecasts, which were accompanied by a leaflet about equalisation. There was also a media campaign in 2004. After the 2011 Act, as the hon. Gentleman admitted, the Department wrote to all those directly affected. There has been quite a significant communications campaign, going back more than 15 years.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Damian Green:** The hon. Lady certainly deserves to intervene on my speech.

**Melanie Onn:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He says that media and publications campaigns have been undertaken, but does he accept that some of the women did not receive any notification of the latest changes, which extended the period before which they would be entitled to access their state pension?

**Damian Green:** It is obviously impossible to talk about individual cases without talking to the individuals. All I can say is that the DWP tried hard after the 2011 Act and wrote more than 5 million letters to people's most recent addresses.

**Ian Blackford** *rose*—

**Damian Green:** I feel that the hon. Gentleman has had his fair share of the time, having used more than 35 minutes of a three-hour debate, and I want to turn to the specific option that he proposed. He mentioned the Landman Economics report that modelled the impact of several options. The SNP's preferred option would roll back the 2011 Act entirely, returning to the timetable in the 1995 Act. He said that that option would cost £8 billion, but I disagree. Our analysis suggests that the cost has to go beyond 2020-21 and must include the effects on national insurance payments and tax collection, which his economic model entirely ignores, and that it would cost over £30 billion.

Even if we accept the hon. Gentleman's figures, his other suggestion is that the costs could be met from the surplus in the national insurance fund that he conveniently discovered. In fact, there is no surplus in the fund because it is all used to pay contributory benefits. If we take from the national insurance fund £8 billion, £30 billion or whatever number one cares to mention, we take it from people who receive benefits. The surplus of £16 billion that he identified is two months' expenditure—an advisory level recommended by the Government Actuary as a prudent working balance. The money has been put there by a Treasury grant to maintain the fund at the recommended long-term balance. The Government Actuary does not forecast a long-term surplus, so this convenient pot of money for the SNP does not actually exist.

**James Cartlidge:** May I add to that? Others have tried to alight on this fund as a source of expenditure, but the then Financial Secretary Ruth Kelly said in 2003:

"The national insurance fund provides security for those contributory benefits. It is ring-fenced and cannot be used for other Government expenditure."—[*Official Report*, 21 October 2003; Vol. 411, c. 231WH.]

**Damian Green:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is knowledgeable on such matters.

The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber used to work in the financial services industry and has been a fund manager, so he knows what he is talking about. However, he must know that his characterisation of the national insurance fund as involving some kind of individual contract that relates what someone gets out of it to what they pay in is not true. The state pension is a social security benefit, funded through national insurance contributions.

**Ian Blackford:** Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Damian Green:** All right, I will finish this point in a minute.

**Ian Blackford:** I am grateful. I actually talked about a cost of £8 billion for this Parliament, which is affordable given the current surplus in the national insurance fund. Please do not twist what I said.

**Damian Green:** I did not twist what the hon. Gentleman said at all. Is he prepared to take £8 billion from people who receive contributory benefits? That is the only way that he could pay for it.

Returning to the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of the national insurance fund, he gave the impression that it involved an individual contract. As he knows perfectly well, the national insurance scheme operates on a pay-as-you-go basis, meaning that today's contributors are paying for today's social security entitlements and pensions. Those who previously paid contributions were paying for the pensioners of that time. In other words, contributors do not accumulate an individual pension fund. It is not like any individual's pension fund of moneys paid, which is personal to them. Instead, payment of contributions allows them, or their spouses, to access a range of social security entitlements. It is not an individual contract or fund. I gently suggest that the hon. Gentleman knows that perfectly well.

Moving on to the issues that affect the WASPI women, I absolutely accept that getting into work will be difficult for some older women, so I want to say what we are doing to help them and also what we are doing for those who simply cannot work.

**Maggie Throup:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that, however well intentioned, the message of the WASPI campaigners has been severely damaged by the hate campaign on social media and in constituency offices against MPs, such as me, whose viewpoint is different from the campaigners'? Will he condemn that and say that it must stop?

**Damian Green:** I deprecate any form of personal abuse. I think that one of the problems of modern politics is that everything becomes personalised. I have not been aware of such abuse, as every WASPI woman I have met has been entirely polite and entirely reasonable, and I would wish that to continue.

**Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab):** Does the Minister accept that the fundamental issue here is not equalisation, because that has been agreed, but fairness? He can give comfort to the 63,000 WASPI women in Merseyside who, through a quirk of their birthdate, will be hit hard and penalised. He can announce transitional arrangements that would give them some comfort that that is not going to happen.

**Damian Green:** I was coming on to discuss what we are doing and what we will do for this group. Supporting older claimants to remain in the labour market, and tackling the barriers to their doing so, is a key priority for the Government. To support that aim, we have abolished the default retirement age, so most people can now retire when the time is right for them, and we have extended the right to request flexible working for all. Flexible working is particularly important for this group of people, who may well have caring responsibilities.

**Fiona Mactaggart:** The Secretary of State will be aware that many of these older women are putting together two or three jobs, all of which are paid at less than £108 a week, as a result of which they do not get any national insurance contributions and that will affect their future pension. What is he doing about that? They can have their tax claimed, but they cannot get credits for a future pension.

**Damian Green:** What we are trying to do is what I am talking about, which is remove barriers to work, so that it is easier for these people to work. The arrival of universal credit makes it easier for people to extend the hours they work, so that they do not hit the old cliff edges under the other benefits. Paid employment maximises people's opportunities to build up savings—the point the hon. Lady was just making—and helps to maintain social networks, and it is beneficial to health, provided the employment takes into account the person's broader circumstances.

**Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con):** I appreciate that the SNP's proposal is not economically viable, but does the Minister accept that some women, including in my constituency, had to give up work for health reasons and were therefore not able to pay in, and they are not able to return to the workplace either? It does not seem that we have yet put in place adequate measures to be fair to those people, who cannot change their situation.

**Damian Green:** Absolutely, I quite take the point that my hon. Friend makes. Clearly, specific issues need to be dealt with for this group, and I am going through various of them now. Some of these people will not be able to work, as I made clear at the start; this touches on one of the four principles I set out at the start of my speech. Working-age benefits are specifically designed to help such people, and I wish to make it clear that this group of women will be entitled to working-age benefits. If there are barriers to their claiming them, we need to remove those barriers.

**Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con):** I, too, accept that the SNP proposal is totally ludicrous because it is totally unaffordable, but can the Secretary of State give me assurances on what can be done for WASPI women who say that they are finding it difficult to get back into work, with the job centres not geared up to help them, and who may have been out of the workforce for considerable time and do not have the skillset needed to get a good job?

**Damian Green:** Absolutely, and if my hon. Friend will bear with me for 30 seconds while I make one further point, I will then deal with precisely the point she raises, as I absolutely recognise it as an issue for many of these women. I should point out that the current average age of exit from the labour market for women is 63.1, which is well above the state pension age of 60 that the SNP proposal would take us back to. The number of older women aged 50 to 64 in work in 2016 stands at more than 4 million, which is a record high. That is one reason why the Government have extended the right to request flexible working and why job search requirements for those who are not in employment are adjusted to take account of individual circumstances. One purpose of the Green Paper on work and health

that we have just produced is precisely to look at ways to join up much better the health, welfare and employment systems, so that we can deal with health conditions or disabilities that may be particularly prevalent in older women who want to work. We need to make the system much better than it has been in the past at removing those barriers, so that people can work.

**Victoria Borwick** (Kensington) (Con): Will the Secretary of State, or a member of his team, personally examine some of the individual cases to see whether the women affected can prove that they are suffering hardship?

**Damian Green:** Absolutely. We are always willing to look at individual cases. My hon. Friend, the Under-Secretary of State for Pensions, has already done so. More widely, we introduced older claimant champions last year specifically to support older claimants. They work in jobcentres with work coaches and employers to raise the profile of this group and highlight the benefits of employing older jobseekers.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My right hon. Friend is being very generous, and I very much respect the interest that he has taken in this matter. On the older people's champions and in answer to my parliamentary question, since April 2015, his Department has appointed seven such champions to cover every jobcentre in the country, which sounds good, but, in practice, it will really not make a lot of difference, will it?

**Damian Green:** So far, we have appointed older people's champions at a regional level. This is the first step to a system that needs to improve. My hon. Friend and I will be as one on that, because this is an increasingly important part of what we need to do. One thing that I hope these older claimant champions will be able to achieve is to spread best practice. I am conscious that there will be different standards of practice in different jobcentres—I am talking about the capacity to deal sympathetically with older workers, particularly those who may not have been in a jobcentre before. We must get better at that.

**Andy Burnham:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way again. I hear what he is saying about people working, but it is difficult for many older women in this position to run a car. It is something that they often cannot afford, yet free bus passes are not available in all parts of the country. They are available to women at 60 in London, Scotland and Merseyside. People's ability to access work is different in different parts of the country. In Greater Manchester, they do not have that help. Will the Government do a very practical thing today and commit to helping all women into work by extending that free bus pass on the same basis all over the country?

**Damian Green:** The right hon. Gentleman, who has other fish to fry in the Manchester area, will know perfectly well that bus passes are the responsibility of the local authority, rather than national Government. I will of course urge everyone in the Manchester mayoral election to vote Conservative, but it may be that he has the chance to do something about that matter at some stage in the near future, as successive Mayors of London have done.

Apart from the older claimant champions, we have appointed Andy Briggs as business champion for older workers. He is the chief executive of Aviva, which is one of the most enlightened companies in dealing with older workers, and I am delighted that he has accepted this job, as he will work with employers not just to retain older workers, but to retrain and recruit them. If women in this age group are finding it difficult to find work, there will be more employers out there who are actively looking for them. We have also established carers in employment. We are carrying out pilots in nine local authorities at the moment. I recognise that people in this group are quite likely to have caring responsibilities, and combining those with work is inevitably complex. Ensuring that businesses are suitably sympathetic and flexible in dealing with that is one of the very important steps forward that we need to take as a society in the next few years.

**David Rutley:** My right hon. Friend is making some important points. In the way that he is providing support for people who are born in the 1950s and '60s to stay in employment for longer, does he not agree that that will also help the cultural change, which will enable future generations to stay in work longer? Obviously, that will be a requirement given the demographic changes.

**Damian Green:** My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. We are in the early stages of this change, and it will be increasingly important for future generations, assuming that we continue to live longer and be healthier for longer.

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making some very good points. He touched on the issue of carers. Is he aware that many of the WASPI women have dual caring arrangements, looking after not only husbands who might be ill but parents who might be very elderly?

**Damian Green:** Indeed. Like my hon. Friend, who has considerable expertise in this area, I have read the reports that suggest that the gap between childcare responsibilities and elderly care responsibilities for many families will get narrower and narrower. We are now piloting people who will teach employers about how to deal with workers who are also carers. As with the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), we are in the early stages of a journey that will become hugely important for society and the whole workforce in future decades.

Let me make some progress, as I am conscious of the time. I said I wanted to deal with women who find it impossible to work, and of course the system needs to be designed to deal with problems such as disability that prevent them from working and mean that they are most in need as they approach state pension age. We are committed to supporting these vulnerable groups, spending around £50 billion a year on disability benefits, which equates to more than 6% of all Government spending. Carers allowance and related benefits provide financial support and safeguards for carers and their families, including those who are disabled or who are ill, and this week I was pleased to announce that the earnings limit for carers will be uprated by £6, which will help those with caring responsibilities.

[Damian Green]

Early in the new year, we will propose a new strategy specifically for elderly workers—the fuller working lives strategy—and I would be very happy to deal with colleagues on both sides of the House who have questions about how we can specifically help older workers in general and, specifically, older women. I do not believe that a monopoly of wisdom in this area lies in Whitehall. We will propose a new strategy that will involve many Departments, but we will also need to include ideas from employers, charities and Members and their constituents.

**Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): The Secretary of State talks about reaching out to other Departments. This point has been made by my SNP colleagues, but we are about to spend £167 billion on weapons of mass destruction—the figure has gone up because of the collapse of the pound. Will he charge his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence to see whether they can find the £8 billion we are proposing from there?

**Damian Green:** The defence of this country is hugely important, but not, I think, a direct issue for this debate.

I hope that the House will see that I am extremely open to ideas to help this group of women but in ways that reflect the modern world of work and do not blur the lines between working age benefits and pensions.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Damian Green:** I think I have been very generous in giving way.

It should go without saying that any idea needs to be not only practical but affordable. None of the ideas proposed that concentrate purely on the pensions issue achieve this. The acceleration of the pension age for both women and men was necessary to ensure the state pension's sustainability in the light of increasing life expectancy and increasing pressure on public resources. For those who face hardship, we continue to provide a strong and well-functioning welfare safety net. I am always looking for ways to improve that. Of course there has been a considerable concession of £1.1 billion to lessen the impact on those most affected. As I have set out, we not only continue to increase the employment prospects for women above the age of 60, but provide the new state pension, which gives people greater security, choice and dignity in retirement. This is a balanced and affordable package for older women—and men—and I commend the amendment to the House.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. On account of the number of would-be contributors to the debate, I am afraid that it is necessary to impose with immediate effect a five-minute limit on each Back-Bench speech.

5.24 pm

**Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Mr Speaker. It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. I commend Scottish National party Members for tabling the motion, using their limited Opposition day time on the issue of accelerated state pension equalisation. I pay tribute to Members from my own party who have campaigned tirelessly and fiercely on the issue, alongside admirable WASPI campaigners. I support amendment (a).

The treatment of WASPI women seems like politics-by-Excel-spreadsheet in its crudest form. The decision to make the lives of working-class women even harder has thrown into turmoil the lives of up to 4,100 women in Batley and Spen, as well as many thousands across the country. It is a decision that moves the goalposts unfairly for women born in the 1950s. We have heard plenty of examples from Members' constituencies today. I would like to share some from mine.

One woman works in a care home. She was approaching retirement age and, having had a long and fulfilling career, she was looking forward to an equally rewarding retirement looking after her daughter's children. Her plans would have allowed her daughter to go back to work, get a career back on track and provide for her family. Although I support equalising the pension age, the clumsy way in which that has been introduced means that her daughter will not be able to seek the employment she wants, because of the cost of childcare, and it has caused great distress to my constituent, who is genuinely unsure whether she will be able to do such a physically demanding job for another five years.

Ministers may remember that during Question Time I asked about the assessment that they made of the knock-on effect on families. To be fair, I received an answer, but unfortunately not an answer to my question. I wrote to the Minister that day to ask for more information and I have yet to receive a reply. Perhaps when he sums up, the Minister will be good enough to shed some light on the issue.

The next example is from a letter I received just the other day. A woman born in 1954 was looking forward to retiring within three months of her husband and spending the precious years ahead together, living on money from savings and the state pension that they were promised. Now she will have to wait not months, but years.

**Andy Burnham:** Like my hon. Friend, I have a very vibrant WASPI group in Leigh. Does she know that today the Secretary of State described the Government's treatment of WASPI women as fair? How does she think her constituents to whom she refers will react to that?

**Tracy Brabin:** This is indeed about fairness, compassion and humanity towards women who have contributed so much to our society and are now left with difficult choices. One such woman is my constituent whose dilemma is to continue working, even though she does not feel physically able, or to stop working and spend the money that she has saved for retirement on getting by. She sent me questions to ask the Government. What can they offer her to make her life easier? Why cannot the Government phase in the change, understanding that life choices at this stage in the women's lives take proper planning? Why can my constituent not have what she is entitled to after 40 years of working and paying in? Those are good questions.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. My constituent Patricia has been severely affected by the changes. After spending years looking after her late husband Billy and then her mother, she now has to live off her hard-earned savings. Patricia feels under immense stress, knowing that the money will not last long, and

she is anxious about finding work at this stage in her life. Does the hon. Lady agree that such instances are all too common, and that this demonstrates that those who are suffering are the ones who we should be helping the most?

**Tracy Brabin** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Members should not use the intervention opportunity as the chance of a compressed—but not very compressed—speech.

**Tracy Brabin:** I thank the hon. Lady and agree that there are many constituents out there who feel the same. We have felt the anger in the Chamber today and we are right to be angry. Our constituents' lives have been thrown into turmoil. The former Prime Minister admitted that something had to be done, but we are still waiting. The Chancellor's big finish to his autumn statement—to some laughter on the Government Benches—was to abolish the autumn statement. A far more elegant and just end to the statement would have been a commitment to justice on women's state pensions.

**Melanie Onn:** The Government have previously accepted that the changes were an unintended consequence of their policy. Does my hon. Friend not think that now is the right time for them to accept that if this was an error on their part, they should make amends properly?

**Tracy Brabin:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, because although the answers and solutions may not be forthcoming today, the questions and the calls will not stop. For as long as our constituents feel they have been mistreated, we—the party of justice, compassion and humanity—will keep up the fight.

5.30 pm

**Nadine Dorries** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): There has been much agreement in the Chamber today about equalisation, but I am probably unusual in that I am not actually sure I agree. Maybe, when the majority of men become carers, and when all men have a menopause, I might, but I am not sure I do now.

I feel very sorry for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, because he has come to the Dispatch Box to pick up a mess that has been created by others. We knew equalisation was taking place, but the former Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), decided he would move things from 2026 to 2020.

I am terribly sorry to say this to the Secretary of State, but I am one of the WASPI women. I am also one of those who were not written to and informed about this, and I think the DWP knows where I live—I have made that point before. Many of these women were not informed and not able to plan, and that is because the former Chancellor wanted to save £30 billion.

I understand that the former Chancellor may have wanted to save that money. I also understand that the SNP is never going to be able to achieve anything in this debate. It is never going to be in power. When it makes financial claims, as it is trying to at the moment, that absolutely shows how unprepared it would ever be to be a party of government. The claim about the £30 billion is ridiculous, and the SNP is doing the WASPI women an injustice.

The crude way the former Chancellor tried to slip this £30 billion saving under the fence by moving from 2026 to 2020 without informing women was wrong, and many women are suffering as a result. I am not saying that, financially, we can achieve what most people are asking for. However, in the spirit of fairness, amelioration and pouring some oil on troubled waters, would the Secretary of State please go away and have a look at whether we can do something just around the edges, for some of the women, or perhaps the older women, in this group—I am 21 May 1957, by the way. I do not mean that we should deal with all of it or do something for everybody, but that in the spirit of fairness, there may be something we could do.

Obviously, I have constituents who are in this situation, and I have heard from lots of the WASPI women. I am actually appalled at some of the comments I have seen on social media, and I have stopped engaging with the WASPI women on social media—not the core campaigners, who are a very decent bunch of ladies—because some people have hijacked their cause for social media and unpleasant purposes. However, I have engaged with many of the WASPI women, and their stories are very difficult.

I do not know how many women in the Chamber or the House are of my age, but I would not like to be in the position where I thought I was going to get my pension but then had to get another job, because nobody would employ me. Who would employ a woman facing her 60th birthday? Despite the fact that we have a lot of skills and life experience, and that we are probably very good employees, it is difficult for women of a certain age to get employed. You become faceless when you reach a certain age.

**Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving such a powerful and impassioned speech, but could I correct her in saying, “Who would give me a job at my age?” I gave two ladies in my office who are in exactly that age group a job, because—I think this is what the Secretary of State was driving at—there is a change in culture.

**Nadine Dorries:** I thank my hon. Friend. I actually have a member of staff in my office who is older than I am, but I also know of many friends who are being made redundant and have lost their jobs. Recently, in fact, a whole group of people in a company—all women over a certain age—were made redundant, and they all know that it was because of their age. It is not the case that most employers want to take on women in their 50s and 60s—it just does not happen.

**Melanie Onn:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Nadine Dorries:** No, because it takes up other people's time. If the hon. Lady wants to speak, she should put in to speak. [*Interruption.*] I am sorry, but it is a fair point—a lot of people want to speak.

I ask the Secretary of State please to go away and have a look at this, because that would be a generous and healing statement on the part of the Government. We would be able to show that we are a kind, considerate and caring Government—because we are—in doing something for these women and making things a bit better for some of them, going forward.

5.36 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I confess that today I am in deep and utter despair because once again I find myself, for the fifth time, in a similar debate about the WASPI women. Each time, the junior Ministers who were rolled out for the occasion had what I can only call the brass neck to listen to plea after plea that the Government should and must act on this issue, and then respond by saying almost nothing at all, but characteristically taking a very long time to say it in vague and woolly terms. Today, however, we have the big cheese—we have the big gun rolled out—but his bullish and dismissive response was, quite frankly, astonishing.

I would say to all Members of this House—I am not referring to the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries) but talking about something that was said much earlier in the debate—that they should be very careful about trying to portray the WASPI women as a band of mad militants who go around threatening MPs, because that could not be further from the truth. We are talking about women who have acted with dignity throughout this campaign and organised themselves simply to access that which is already theirs by rights. Some Members have disingenuously suggested that we in the SNP are arguing against equalisation. It is the old trick of people trying to misrepresent their opponents when they fear they are losing the argument—in this case, losing it on rational grounds, on ethical grounds and on financial grounds.

**Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Patricia Gibson:** I will make some progress.

Despite four previous debates, a UK-wide petition that in my own constituency attracted 2,534 signatures, potential legal action against the Government in which they must surely fear a humiliating defeat—it is possible that the WASPI women will win a case against the Government on mis-selling of their pensions—and a report from the Work and Pensions Committee concluding that,

“more could and should have been done”

to communicate these changes, we still appear to be no further forward. How utterly frustrating! It is frustrating for us in this place, so can the Secretary of State begin to imagine how frustrating it must be for the women caught up in this nightmare? Well, 4,800 women in my constituency are caught up in this nightmare, as are many more across the United Kingdom.

When will this Government waken up to the fact that pensions are not a benefit, despite the chuntering earlier that suggested otherwise? They are a social contract, which has been cruelly broken. It is time for the Government to step up and take responsibility for the way in which this entire matter has been mishandled.

**Ms Ritchie:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Patricia Gibson:** I really am conscious of the time. Under the solution offered by the SNP, which was outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), it would be possible to increase women’s pension age to 66 in the 2020s. The UK Government’s view on this, even after mistakes in the process have been laid bare for all to see, has been

characterised by intransigence and wilful stubbornness. The Government have ducked their responsibilities in this matter for far too long. It is time to do what is right, fair and just. It is time for the Government to waken up and realise that pensions are not a privilege and they are not, as I have heard them referred to in another debate, a promise or a benefit.

A contract has been broken, and the breaking of that contract marks a fundamental shift between the Government and those they purport to represent. When contracts can be torn up and ignored, what does that say about a representative democracy? It is time for the Government to stop telling us that they have no choice. When it comes to writing blank cheques for Trident, there is a choice, so they have a choice here. It is time to make the right choice for WASPI women.

5.41 pm

**Mr Shailesh Vara** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): I think we all recognise that in the world of politics, there are very few easy solutions, and solutions are certainly never cheap. As far as the matter that we are debating is concerned, the cheap version—to undo the Pensions Act 2011—would cost some £30 billion, and to undo the Pensions Act 1995 would cost many billions more. We must recognise that any pension scheme that we have must be sustainable, and the Government have a duty to keep it so. It would be irresponsible for the Government not to act with a view to keeping the pension scheme sustainable.

Much has been said about transitional arrangements. It is important that colleagues realise that there have already been transitional arrangements. Those who take the trouble to read *Hansard* will find that on Second Reading of the Pensions Bill of 2011, the Minister speaking for the Government said,

“we will consider transitional arrangements”.—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2011; Vol. 530, c. 52.]

On Report, the Government delivered on their promise, because they made a concession worth £1.1 billion and reduced the time period from two years to 18 months. For 81% of the women affected, the increase in the time period will be no more than 12 months. It is fundamentally wrong to say, as the last line of the SNP motion does, that there should be transitional arrangements.

**Mr Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Vara:** Forgive me; I am mindful of the time limit.

If people want to seek a change to what has already been done, they should have the courage to say so. They should say that they do not accept the transitional arrangements that have been made, and that they want further changes. To say that no changes were made is, frankly, disingenuous. As far as notification and the 1995 Act are concerned, let us not forget that the Labour party was in government for 13 years and it did very little—in fact, it did nothing—in the way of notification, even though some 10 Pensions Ministers could have done so. In 2012, research by the DWP found that only 6% of women who were within 10 years of reaching their pension age thought that their state pension age was still 60.

There are, of course, a number of other factors that need to be taken into account. It is wrong that debates such as this focus solely on state pension age equalisation

and its impact on the women concerned. We have to take account of life expectancy, which is increasing. *[Interruption.]* It is good news, but nevertheless we have to take it into account. Employment prospects for women are far better than they have been at any time since the state pension was introduced in 1940. There is record female employment and record employment for older women. The Government have worked hard to engage with stakeholders and employers to make sure that they recognise and value all the contributions that older workers can make. There are also our broader reforms. We have protected the winter fuel payment, permanently increased cold weather payments, created a new and simpler state pension system, abolished the default retirement age and extended the right to request flexible working.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Vara:** I will not give way, because I want to leave other hon. Members as much time as possible in which to speak.

We must also mention other countries. Nine EU countries, including Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands, introduced equalisation as far back as 2009. I conclude by simply saying one thing: we have had many debates on this issue and the Government have repeatedly made their position clear, which is that they do not intend to revisit this issue. The issue was not in the Labour or the SNP manifesto, and by continuing to debate it, Labour and SNP Members are doing a disservice to the good women affected by giving them false hope. They should understand that doing so is opportunism pure and simple and political irresponsibility of the highest order. They should not give these good women false hope, and they should recognise that the Government will not give way.

**Ian Blackford:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We are being traduced by the hon. Gentleman. For clarification, this matter was in our manifesto, and perhaps the hon. Gentleman will correct what he has said.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** I think we all know that that is not a point of order, but, not to worry, it has been put on the record.

5.46 pm

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): If I may say so, this is starting to feel like *déjà vu*. The story is now one that we are all familiar with, and the injustices are being experienced right across the country. However, at the risk of repeating the same old argument, I am going to continue just in case anyone is in any doubt about where I stand on this matter.

Because of the 2011 pension changes, over 500,000 women born in the 1950s are now unable to collect their pensions until much later than they thought. Most Members will have substantial numbers of women in their constituencies who are affected by the changes. These women have worked hard all their lives, holding families together and, in many cases, holding down jobs. These women have been the carers of their children and grandchildren and, in many cases, of elderly parents. These women are the backbone of this country.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): As always, my hon. Friend speaks with great passion on a subject that she cares about. One of the things about the women born in the 1950s is that they were actively encouraged to give up work when they had children, so their pensions are actually smaller now than they would be had they taken maternity leave, and they are therefore at more of a disadvantage. Does she agree that we owe these women justice because they have been the backbone of this country for decades?

**Carolyn Harris:** I think my hon. Friend already knows my answer, but I would most certainly never disagree with him.

The Government's refusal to engage constructively on this issue has left many of these women very angry, and it has left many Members on both sides of the House frustrated at the Government's bloody-mindedness. I will not cite facts and figures or offer Ministers examples, because they have heard them all before, but I will just give them a warning. The women affected by the pension changes—the WASPI women—as well as their families and, increasingly, the general public are getting more angry and they are getting better organised. They are not going away, and we are not going to stop talking about the issue. Those of us who object to this situation, who I would even go so far as to say are offended by this Government's inaction, will stand up week on week in debate after debate to put forward the argument for the WASPI women until they get the justice they deserve.

5.49 pm

**Craig Mackinlay** (South Thanet) (Con): The Work and Pensions Committee, of which I am a member, worked on this issue at length earlier this year, and the SNP-commissioned report by Landman Economics draws upon much of our work—indeed, copies much of it. I certainly hope that the SNP did not pay too much for its report.

It is clear that there was a gross inequality in the old system, which had been untouched for some 70 years. It was very much a “kick it down the road” subject that few wished to touch, but we as Conservatives did touch it, because it needed touching. That said, I have not only taken the WASPI women's concerns on board, but actually done something about it. I wanted to hear directly from local constituents about their own experiences, and to that end I held a Thanet WASPI forum on Saturday 21 May. It attracted not only local constituents but others who had heard about it from across Kent. In all, 100 women came.

I have also encouraged WASPI women to come to my surgeries and met campaigners, as have many right hon. and hon. Members from the across the House, outside Parliament. I have written to, and discussed the issue with, current and former Pensions Ministers and Secretaries of State, and I have presented a WASPI petition to the House. Few could have done more to understand the issue, to listen to the problem and to try and get a solution. I have tried to come up with a single solution, but therein is the problem: WASPI does not speak with one voice. The reason is that no one solution fits all the problems.

**David Rutley:** I commend my hon. Friend for his efforts in trying to better understand this challenge—no doubt it is a challenge and there are people having to

[David Rutley]

cope with this—but does he agree that the question ultimately comes down not just to the complexity of the solution but to affordability?

**Craig Mackinlay:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Given the state of the nation's finances in 2010 and that 70-year-old inequality, something had to be done.

WASPI women find themselves in a difficult situation, having started out in a more traditional era of British life. Back then, women were more likely to be at home. If in work, they were unlikely to have been on a well-paid career path. Often part-time work would feature and low-paid work was the norm. The problems do not end there, though; this generation has parents themselves benefiting from increases in longevity, hence an extended caring function often falls upon them, while many WASPI women often support grandchildren as well.

The majority view among women at my forum was that there should have been no change at all to the 1995 Act and that the retirement age of 60 should have prevailed. Now, that clearly is not sustainable. None of the Opposition parties proposed it in their manifestos last year, and indeed this option—option 1 in the Landman Economics report—has been discounted even by the SNP. At £30 billion, it is simply too expensive and unfair. The SNP report advanced other options: option 2 was to wind back the 2011 pension change, which accelerated the age increase; and option 3 was a slowing down of the 2011 Act—a sort of Pension Act 2011-minus.

An option 4, suggested by Labour Members, is that pension credit be used to bridge the gap, but the great problem with that is that it might actually discourage work, or even encourage people to stop work altogether. Option 5 is for an actuarially reduced pension at an earlier age. I floated that with many WASPI women, and some supported it, given an appropriate discount rate. It could work—it works in the USA and Canada—but then another group of WASPI campaigners do not want to hear of it, and my worry is that, in 10 years, we might have a group of WASPI women who, having accepted less for longer, are now in poverty. I have discussed all these issues with my WASPI women, and there is very little agreement.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): On the question of what is acceptable, does the hon. Gentleman understand that many WASPI women, having been born in the '50s and done physical work, are physically unable to continue working and cannot be expected to do so? Moreover, those born in the '60's and '70's have a chance to retrain, whereas the WASPI women do not and are physically unable to work on their knees for physically demanding jobs. Surely that has to be a consideration.

**Craig Mackinlay:** I fully understand the hon. Gentleman's point, and I will cover some of those issues as I progress.

On the contract that many Members say was there, there was no contract for the Government to implement the triple lock, which has done more to alleviate poverty in older age than any other measure before it. There was no contract about the implementation of the new state pension, which will provide £155.65 per week on 35 qualifying years of national insurance. These were choices made by Conservative Governments and were

done for the right reasons. We will have increased the take-home pension by £1,100 a year since 2010. Many people welcome these things, which were done for the right reasons, as I said. WASPI women have the right to work for longer because they are not forced into retirement any more. If they are unable to work, there is a benefit system, which I support and hope would carry them through.

**Kirsty Blackman:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Craig Mackinlay:** I already have given way twice, and I do not have much time.

I have an option 6 to offer to Members today, which I even offer to Landman Economics for free. It has to be understood that later-age employment is difficult. Employers are not always as enlightened as they could be in recognising the value of older employees. I am grateful to colleagues here who have taken on older employees. I would offer a lighter-touch approach by the Department for Work and Pensions in jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance claims with no need to prove endless CV writing and job clubs and less formal job coaching, and advice on a simpler footing.

Finally, one of the most active South Thanet WASPI campaigners, still very much annoyed with me and the Government, recently came to see me. As a result of the changes, she had taken up an offer by Jobcentre Plus and she wrote to me to pass on to it how good it had been. We do not see much of that in our surgeries. Because of the great service she had received—she also attended a jobs fair that I had put on—she had found a job. I have never seen her so happy, but that would not have happened unless the changes had moved her in that direction.

It is very clear that one solution does not fit all. I would have supported the amendment proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), if it had been available to vote for this afternoon. I have to say to SNP Members, however, that I am sorry, but I am unable to support their rather blunt motion. As ever, I am afraid, it is pure political grandstanding, offering very few answers. There is an answer out there, and it will be found, I am sure, by the excellent work of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I encourage WASPI to speak to us with one voice, so that we can reach a solution that is right for the majority.

5.57 pm

**Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank SNP Members for bringing forward this debate, and I pay tribute to the WASPI women and their supporters up and down the country for their tireless campaigning on this important issue in the face of an obstinate Government who refuse to listen to their very rational arguments about the need for better transitional protection and arrangements for this group of women.

Most of all, I want to pay tribute to the WASPI group in Durham, which was formed after a visit to Parliament in June. I attended a meeting it held in my constituency on 10 November. I wish that the Secretary of State, who is no longer in his place, the Under-Secretary of State for Pensions, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) and indeed the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara) had been there to listen to what the women had to say. Most of them

had until recently been simply unaware of the changes to their retirement ages, and most of them will now have to wait years to receive their pension. Most of them had already had two significant changes made to their pension age. These women described in great detail the strain that their current situation was putting on them and their families. Many of them had planned to retire in order to care for family members, and were now having to balance social care needs with full-time work often across a range of different jobs. All were job-seeking.

One point that the Secretary of State did not acknowledge earlier was that for an older woman, trying to get a job in a depressed labour market is extremely difficult. Nor did he recognise that it does not matter how many older champions women have. If no jobs are available in their local labour market, women of any age will be unable to find employment, but it will have a negative impact on older women in particular.

Furthermore, the Secretary of State did not acknowledge two important factors: the regional disparities in the ages at which women will remain fit and active enough for work—especially if they have been involved in more strenuous occupations—and the differing ages of mortality across regions and, indeed, within specific areas. None of that has been factored into the Government's thinking, and that, in my view, is also pretty atrocious.

One of the things that I was asked to do by the women whom I met on 10 November was to write to the Secretary of State, and I did so on their behalf. I must say that I was pretty appalled by the response that I received. It answered the case relating to the equalisation of the pension age, which was not the issue that had been raised.

**Tom Elliott** (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): The hon. Lady was right to say that equalisation was not the issue. The issue is the fairness, or rather the unfairness, of the transitional arrangements. We have heard that there are transitional arrangements, but they are unfair.

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** Absolutely, and that was the point that was being raised. It concerned the way in which the changes were being implemented and the lack of proper transitional arrangements, rather than the equalisation issue itself.

I am pleased that Labour Front Benchers have come forward with an answer, or a partial answer, to the problems highlighted by the WASPI campaign. I am pleased that they have announced that we will not abandon those women to live in poverty, and that under the Labour plan, pension credit will be extended to those who were due to retire before the chaotic pension age increase introduced by the Conservative-led coalition Government and supported by the previous Conservative Government. Labour's proposal is to return eligibility for pension credit to the state pension age timetable of the 1995 Act. With the qualifying age continuing to increase to 66 by 2022, that policy would cost the Government only £860 million rather than the ridiculous £30 billion figure to which they have referred; they say that they cannot do anything because of that huge figure. The Landman Economics report, which has already been mentioned today, outlines some other policies that they could adopt.

It is simply not acceptable for the Government to say that they are not going to do anything. The message that they need to hear from us this afternoon is that we will continue to support the WASPI women and their campaign—we will continue to raise questions and initiate debates in the House to support them throughout the country—until they do the right thing by those women, and introduce proper transitional arrangements that will protect them from the hardship that they are currently experiencing.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. The good news is that I must reduce the speaking time to four minutes so that everyone can speak for the same amount of time.

6.3 pm

**Graham Evans** (Weaver Vale) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I am a little surprised that there are so few Members on the SNP Benches.

There is a clear need for equalisation of the state pension age. We are all agreed on that. We have an ageing population. People are leading healthier, longer lives. Given that an ever greater proportion of the population are drawing pensions, while an ever smaller proportion are contributing through national insurance, the pension system risks becoming unsustainable without the important measure that we debated and voted on in 2011.

On the most fundamental level, however, we as a House should champion equality. The new single-tier pension is much fairer and simpler. People who have worked for 35 years will receive £8,000 a year. It is a very simple process: 35 years of work will give us £8,000. I have already worked for 35 years, but I will not qualify for my pension until I am 67; the same applies to Mrs Evans. As we all live longer and healthier lives, that will increase, I am sure. Let us make that clear, here and now. The single-tier pension also takes into consideration for the first time the time off that people take to have children—maternity and paternity leave.

I supported the measure. When I was a member of the Work and Pensions Committee we investigated the matter. I contacted the DWP to find out my retirement date, and I have to say to the Minister that the document I received was rather drab—not the most exciting document to read. The first time I went through that process, in 2013, I was told I was going to retire at 65; when I did it in 2014, the answer was 66; and the following year it went up to 67. I had to read the documents very carefully indeed, so I think people can be forgiven for not realising that their retirement date had changed. I encourage the Government to take a look at the personalised documents that are regularly produced, with a view to perhaps introducing a little colour—for example, making the retirement date red and easier to see.

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments about information, but this is not a small mistake. I have constituents who will lose £30,000 or more by the shifting of the goalposts. Does he not think that because of the failure to communicate the changes, the Government have a duty to look again at transitional arrangements for the women affected?

**Graham Evans:** I do not agree, because, to be fair to the DWP, it has communicated with people. I think it could communicate better, as I have just described, but following the 1995 Act the Department issued a leaflet, among other press and publicity measures including direct mailings, to advise the public of the changes. In 2004, during the 13 years of Labour Governments, the DWP ran an information campaign distributing more than 2 million pension guides alongside adverts in the press and women's magazines to complement an interactive online state pension calculator. In addition, all state pension statements issued from 2001 would have included as standard the new state pension age as determined by the 1995 changes. Since then, more than 11 million statements have been issued.

The Government have been notifying women of the changes. Those most affected by the 2011 changes were written to directly. That involved sending out more than 5 million letters between January 2012 and November 2013. Research carried out by the DWP found that 6% of women who were within 10 years of pension age thought that their state pension age was still 60. However, those efforts were not wholly successful. Had they been, we would not be here now debating this subject. There are lessons to be learned by Governments of all colours, present and future, on effective communication of such important matters. Those who planned for their retirement want to live the retirement they planned for.

After the 2011 changes, the Government passed an amendment to the Bill that provided £1.1 billion-worth of transitional funding, delaying the equalisation of the state pension age. We have already considered this matter and taken mitigating action. The new state pension has been brought forward a year and many women will be significantly better off than they would have been. By 2030, more than 3 million stand to get an extra £550 a year. Likewise, the introduction of the triple lock, which ensures that the state pension rises by inflation, wages or 2.5%, whichever is greater, ensures that the basic state pension will be over £1,100 a year higher than it was at the start of the last Parliament.

To undo the 2011 changes would cost £30 billion in addition to the loss of £8 billion in tax revenue. To undo the 1995 changes—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order.

6.9 pm

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Here we are again. By my calculation, we have had no fewer than 10 debates in Westminster Hall and the Chamber since 2 December last year. In 20 years, I have never known such parliamentary attention on a single subject that was either not instigated by the Government or subject to proposed legislation. We have had over 240 petitions, mass demonstrations by WASPI women all over the country, the best attended all-party group meeting—I am proud to be a co-chair of the group—and unparalleled activity in this Chamber.

As hon. Members have said, this problem is not going to go away: WASPI women are not going to go away and we are not going to go away, yet throughout the entire past 12 months there has been no movement whatever from the Government. There has been no recognition of the very real hardship now being suffered by some of the WASPI women, and no recognition of

the disproportionate impact of pension equalisation falling on a minority—albeit a significant minority—of women. We have had three Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions who, notwithstanding my respect for the current incumbent, have refused to engage with WASPI women and sit around a table to hear what hardship is like in real life.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): The WASPI women in Cheltenham I have spoken to broadly recognise that the SNP's plan to reverse the entire equalisation process, at a cost of billions of pounds we do not have, is unrealistic and inappropriate. Where individuals can establish exceptional hardship due to circumstances beyond their control, however, is it not right to examine cost-neutral transitional measures?

**Tim Loughton:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will come on to that in the very limited time available.

I am concerned that the Government's amendment to the motion is just another example of them sticking their head in the sand and hoping the problem will go away. I acknowledge the wisdom of Mr Speaker in selecting the Government amendment, rather than those in my name and other hon. Members, but it appears to have little to do with the subject of the debate—the effect of pension age equalisation on WASPI women. I welcome the average rise of £550 a year for 3 million women. I welcome the increases in the basic pension, which the Secretary of State talked about. I welcome the introduction of the triple lock. Frankly, however, to produce such an amendment adds insult to injury. WASPI women will not be able to enjoy those benefits for up to six further years. That is the whole point. These women will not qualify for the benefits for a much longer time and they need help now. In addition, and despite what we have heard, women's life expectancy actually fell last year for the first time in many years. The Chancellor, understandably, recently declined to guarantee the triple lock for years to come. By the time many of the WASPI women qualify, they will not be able to enjoy the security of the triple lock. That is why I cannot support the Government amendment. I urge hon. Members to refrain from supporting it, too. Frankly, to vote for such a disappointing and inappropriate amendment would be an insult to the many WASPI women who have campaigned so hard.

I also have a problem with the SNP motion. Mr Speaker, you were lucky enough not to be here when the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) spent 36 minutes losing my vote. SNP Members have been unilaterally pushing this cause. I am grateful that they do so, but in Scotland they do not have to pay for it. That is why we never hear solutions from the SNP. The motion references the Landman report, which relies heavily on the magic money tree known as the national insurance fund. We know the fund has been in deficit and that the Government, who have a responsibility for pensions up and down the country, had to top it up. The SNP suggestion is, in reality, a pension fund-raiding exercise.

I am disappointed that Mr Speaker did not choose my amendment, simply because it asked for a dialogue to be opened up—that we prioritise looking at the most extreme cases of hardship, which we all now see in our surgeries. The amendment does not commit to specific substantial spending and it certainly does not call for a reversion to the pre-1995 status quo. We support pension

age equalisation. It is just that the speed of the transition process has led to unintended consequences for a large number of women. Many hon. Members have seen cases at first hand in their surgeries. We just want to talk.

**Robert Neill:** I agree that it is regrettable that we were not able to debate my hon. Friend's amendment. I would have supported it. Does he agree that we are where we are, and that we should not go down the extravagant SNP route? We should take the Secretary of State up on his offer of dialogue to find something constructive for those most in need.

**Tim Loughton:** I agree. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for seeing a delegation from the all-party group just a few days ago, even though there is no preparedness to discuss specific options. He has, however, offered to look at examples of hardship, particularly where women are being offered very inappropriate and impractical jobs by jobcentres up and down the country. We have examples from all over the place of women aged 65 being offered bar jobs in a nightclub or a job stacking shelves at 4 o'clock in the morning. It is just not working in practice. We need to be much more sensitive and sensible to the particular work needs of these women if they do indeed have to go back to work, and transitional arrangements cannot hold them back from doing that.

I also made the point earlier about there being just seven of these older people champions at jobcentres up and down the country. We do not need to go over the issues again. We heard them today, and we have heard them nine times before: the poor communication; the little notice or no notice of the change; the fact that women from the 1950s worked in very different environments, where they did not get equal pay or childcare benefits, or have access to occupational pension schemes, and typically worked part time. I believe if we proceed on these lines it will be a breach of trust between hundreds of thousands of women who have worked hard, brought up families and done the right thing—and some of them also have caring responsibilities—and the Government.

The state pension system is founded on the contributory principle. This is not a state benefit for which no prior commitment is involved, yet this group of women, who have been paying national insurance contributions over many years in good faith, now stand to have their reasonable expectations dashed.

I urge the Government to think again and to talk, and let us come up with a sensible proposal.

6.16 pm

**David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): There are times when Conservative Members support our Ministers and their policies because we know that they are doing something great to reform the country, whether it is giving more choice in the national health service, freeing up schools from local authority control or even delivering on Brexit. There are other times when we support our Ministers because we know they are taking difficult decisions for all the right reasons, because one of the centrepieces of this Government's policy is to bring Britain's books back into the black, to pay off the deficit and to solve the financial problems created by Labour Members, and that is what this is all about today.

We all have accepted, I think—perhaps bar one—the principle of the equalisation of the pension age, and we all accept that people are living longer, which is a wonderful thing, under our national health service. As a result, it is going to take us longer to get our pensions. However, there has been an issue with the transition. I meet women affected in my constituency, and they are honourable, decent women. They say to me that they were not informed. I am told that back in the 1990s and early 2000s, when different people were in office, they were in fact informed, but I believe these women; they clearly did not know what was going to happen.

I appreciate the help the Government have already given, but I ask them to continue to look at what is going on in jobcentres—what officials there are to help with special cases—to draw more attention to that, and, if the finances improve, to make further help available if at all possible. But I absolutely reject the ludicrous proposals put forward by SNP Members today. They have come up with an uncosted proposal that even they say will cost at least £8 billion, but which the DWP has said would cost about £14 billion. They do this knowing perfectly well that, if they chose to, they could find out all the women affected in Scotland and use the powers they already have to raise taxes, cut costs elsewhere or indeed borrow money—although that might be rather harder to do because even *The Guardian* has reported that they borrowed £50 billion up until 2020, and they may well find there are very few people left who would lend them the money.

The reality is that SNP Members jump up and say, "This is nothing to do with us," but, frankly, foreign affairs have got nothing to do with them either, yet that has not stopped them talking about Brexit. If they wanted to do something about this issue, they could, but they are not going to do anything because what they are really doing is playing political games—building up people's hopes, knowing full well that they are not prepared to take the decisions that they ask my hon. Friends on the Front-Bench to take.

SNP Members wrap themselves in the flag of the suffragettes. The Conservative party needs no lessons from them in its support of women's rights.

**Patricia Gibson** *rose*—

**David T. C. Davies:** I am not giving way.

I remind Opposition Members that it was a Conservative Government who equalised the voting age between men and women; that the first female MP to take her seat was a Conservative; that the Conservative party—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. Stopped in your prime, Mr Davies.

6.19 pm

**Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I will try to keep this swift in order to give other colleagues a chance. I agree with just about everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) said, although there is one point: the Work and Pensions Committee has stated that with hindsight previous Governments could have done a lot better in communicating. I would throw a slight challenge to Labour Members: they had 13 years—*[Interruption.]* The changes had been announced, and women like myself did not receive any communication about them.

[Jo Churchill]

I too have met my WASPI women, and I sympathise with the principles of their campaign. However, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) that this is a complex issue.

My first point is about affordability. This is not a movable feast, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara) pointed out. If the proposal is indeed affordable, I would urge SNP Members to put their money where their mouth is—as my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth suggested—and to pay those 100,000 women.

**Patricia Gibson** *rose*—

**Alan Brown** *rose*—

**Jo Churchill:** I am sorry; I am not taking interventions.

I draw hon. Members' attention to the fact that the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland has called into question the reliability of the figures that the SNP has been trying to sell to us. So let us look at this problem. We are living longer. If I start work at 16 and get a pension at 66, I will be receiving that pension for a third of my life. A third of babies born this year will live to 100. We are not a party that kicks the can of difficult decisions down the road. Can we create a policy without a cliff edge? No. My sister and I will go through a difficult period between 2026 and 2028, because she is 18 months older than me and will retire a full year earlier. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans), I have seen the pension age go up. We have had to make adaptations and it is tough.

Should we not be looking at this differently? The motion tells us that all women want this solution. That is not the case. I have had women write to me to say that they felt they had been informed. I would not want us to go backwards in this regard. I believe, as many hon. Members do, in the equalisation of the pension age. That is right and proper. Moreover, we should be fighting to remove the gender pay gap, which is not due to be equalised for 43 years. That is a much bigger problem. There are some exceptions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) said. A constituent of mine volunteered overseas and lost her professional registration. She now has a low-paid job, but she plans and she saves. I am grateful that the Minister is looking into these cases.

I will not support the motion. It ignores our children. Our generation has done better than they have done. They have tuition fees, soaring rents and difficulties with housing. I oppose the motion because it is financially unsustainable.

6.22 pm

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): As other hon. Members have commented, this is our umpteenth debate on the WASPI campaign. We have already covered this ground in huge detail. Indeed, the Work and Pensions Committee produced an extensive report on this subject, entitled "Communication of state pension age changes" in March this year. So what is new today? What has changed? In my view, there are three things.

First, the WASPI campaign has split into two. The original campaign required a reversal of the Pensions Act 1995, which was all about equalising women's pensions

with men's, but three of the five original founders have resigned over disagreements over what constitute fair transitional arrangements.

Secondly, the WASPI campaigners born between 1953 and 1955 are now close to receiving their state pension. Many of them will start receiving it in 2018, and all of them will receive it before the 2020 election. That fact is convenient because it means that Labour Members, who did not put this issue in their 2015 manifesto, will not be able to put it into their 2020 manifesto either, because it will no longer be relevant.

Thirdly, Scottish National party Members believe that they have found a way to fund a reversal of the Pensions Act 2011, which was accelerating the equality of women's pensions. In fact, they have gone further than that. The *Daily Business* quoted the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), in whose name this debate is taking place, as saying that he had found a solution:

"The Tories have tried to wash their hands of this crisis...which is why the SNP decided to do the work for them."

In doing the work for them, the hon. Gentleman he has identified that the national insurance fund—which funds welfare benefits—is the source of the £8 billion he believes will rectify the situation. The Government believe that it would cost £30 billion. His suggestion is arguably the most extraordinary of all time in this House. It is irresponsible, inappropriate and inaccurate, and it is seriously worrying that the hon. Gentleman, who has worked in the pensions industry for a long time, believes that he has done the work. His work needs serious improvement.

Interestingly, the SNP leader said that this is an issue on which the

"UK government must make transitional arrangements".

However, while pensions remain a UK Government responsibility, things could be done by the SNP Government. The powers have been devolved, and the Scottish Government could use them now. The SNP is leading the WASPI campaign up the garden path. It is to be regretted that good women, some of whom are in trouble, are being so seriously misled by ostensibly serious politicians. We should turn the motion down.

6.25 pm

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am delighted to be called. Like many Government Members, I have the greatest of sympathy for constituents who have been left incredibly frustrated by the changes. Indeed, this group of people have held an expectation for many decades but have then found themselves, without notification in some cases, with little time to make things up. However, the ultimate point is that if reversing the changes will cost up to £39 billion, it is wrong of this House to raise expectations and suggest that the problem can be solved without any intelligent rationale for where the money will come from. Others will always have to pay. It will be a question of having to reduce spending on essential services that are listed in our manifestos. Health is a huge issue in my constituency, and I would like more money for social care, but I am realistic about what we can afford.

**Alan Brown:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Huw Merriman:** I will not give way, owing to the time. Will we see services cut to pay for this proposal, or, as is so often the case, will it be left to future generations to foot the bill?

My next point is crucial. Individuals in their 20s and 30s—often termed the packhorse generation—have had to pay tuition fees, which I and others did not have to pay, and are living with expensive private rents and cannot afford to get on the housing ladder. It will be left to them to pay—a generation that will be fortunate indeed to retire at 66, let alone 60. Many of them do not even have occupational pensions. The Opposition may scoff at some of the points made by Government Members, but they should ask themselves whether they are really thinking of those individuals in the same way as we are and protecting their futures.

**Alan Brown:** Will the hon. Gentleman way on that point?

**Huw Merriman:** I will not give way.

I raised my next point when I slipped over to the other side of the Chamber. Manifestos are where such changes should be proposed and where we should stand up and be counted for what we believe in. We should not jump on bandwagons mid-term when we do not have to cost things. This proposal was not in the Labour manifesto. I have looked through the SNP manifesto—it is a gripping read—and it contains a reference to not supporting pension changes above the age of 66.

**Drew Hendry:** Rubbish!

**Huw Merriman:** The hon. Gentleman says, “Rubbish,” so he can then state where it is. It does not appear at all in three sections. This is a cynical move that mismanages the expectations of the most vulnerable, who need looking after. They do not need cheap gimmicks from the Opposition that do not have intelligent costings. On that basis, I am going to do what is right for generations to come and not support the motion.

6.28 pm

**Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con):** I am grateful to you for getting me in, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will be brief. I will not hear any aspersions cast against the WASPI women. The women whom I have met have been completely sincere. I have received much correspondence from people facing difficult and challenging circumstances.

In Waveney, 2,249 people have signed a petition and the Conservative-controlled Waveney District Council unanimously passed a motion in support of the WASPI petition. There is an injustice here that we need to correct. I acknowledge that the finances are tight, something which I fear the SNP has not taken on board, but there are times when we need to do the right thing. This is one of those times. I urge the Government to sit down with the WASPI women and engage the experts in the DWP and the Treasury to come up with a fair, considered and affordable solution.

6.29 pm

**Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab):** Once again, the injustices suffered by 50s-born women at the hands of the coalition and now the current Government dominate proceedings here in Parliament. Labour Members would give our eye teeth to have the powers to help the people

we represent, but, sadly, all we can do is continue to try to help the Government out of the hole they are in. This will be the fifth time in the six weeks since I took on the shadow Pensions Minister role that I have spoken in Parliament about the WASPI women’s plight, which has been created through poor communication and mismanagement. Sadly, even our low-cost option to extend pension credit to those who need it has been turned down flat by the Secretary of State and his Pensions Minister. I would have said that it had also been turned down by the Treasury, but at Work and Pensions questions last week, it was revealed that the Secretary of State had not even bothered to run it past the Treasury, so it could not even consider the matter.

As I have said before, the Pensions Minister is a decent man, but he disappointed me by failing to fight for the WASPI women and he has done so again by refusing to set up a special proactive helpline for those affected to ensure they all access the social security benefits he says are sufficient to meet their needs. Labour Members do not believe they are sufficient, and we all know that hundreds of millions of pounds—if not billions—in social security to which many people are entitled is left unclaimed because people simply do not know that they are eligible. I have no doubt that that applies to many of the 50s-born women, including members of WASPI and WASPI Voice.

Perhaps the Government need reminding of the hardship that the poorly managed changes they have put in place have caused to 2.6 million WASPI women. We have heard from one woman who had her pension age moved back and could no longer afford to pay the rent, so she went spiralling into debt and was on the verge of losing her home. We heard about another who is struggling to keep her sick husband out of care, so that they can hang on to their family home, and is doing so without the state pension income that she was planning to use to keep them going in her retirement. Many Members have outlined similar cases, which are repeated reminders of the Government’s failure.

Some of those examples were given in a full speech from the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). It was just a shame that he had to murder the words of our national poet towards the end. The Secretary of State spoke of four principles and asked for support. We support those four principles, but principles are no good without action, and it is the WASPI women who are suffering because of the inaction.

The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) reminded us that some women never had the chance to build up contributions because of ill health or other reasons, and saw no provision for them—I do not either. My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) spoke of the turmoil of 50s-born women and of the care worker planning to help her daughter return to work by caring for her grandchildren. Neither of those things can now happen.

The hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries) suggested a different equalisation—for the majority of men to become carers and to suffer the menopause. One may be possible, but I hope the other will not. She, too, wanted more action to help the older WASPI women. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) spoke of the women affected as the backbone of our country—women who have probably sacrificed more than any of us.

[Alex Cunningham]

The hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) wanted a relaxation of the rules on JSA and ESA. Will the Minister consider that idea from someone on the Conservative Benches? My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) spoke of the need for vacancies in the labour market for women. If the vacancies do not exist—and they do not in the north-east, where I am a Member, too—people cannot get a job.

We must remember that the two main campaigning groups WASPI and WASPI Voice agree with equalisation of the state pension age, but this is about the means by which that is achieved. Contrary to what the Government say, we still need fair transitional arrangements in place to support the most vulnerable, and there have been plenty of options put forward by Labour that this Conservative Government have not properly considered.

The Government are now getting themselves into a deeper hole, as one of the WASPI campaign groups is planning to mount a legal action, with their representatives preparing legal guides for women who may have intentions to pursue maladministration complaints against the Department for Work and Pensions. That will be costly, too. These women are organised and they are taking the steps that they feel are necessary to make this situation right, but the Government are burying their head in the sand, hoping that it will all go away if they ignore it for long enough. One hon. Member said earlier that if we get to 2020, it will be too late, but it will never be too late for the WASPI women.

As we near the end of this debate, it is important to remember that, through devolution, the Scottish Parliament does have the power to provide top-up benefits for people in Scotland, but it has yet to act. We have already heard that the last joint working group on welfare shows that the SNP Scottish Ministers at Holyrood do not even feel confident enough to implement any of their new social security powers quite yet and have asked for the timetable to be pushed back. I suspect that there will be no joy for the Scottish WASPI women there.

**Alan Brown:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Alex Cunningham:** No, I will not.

Assuming that the SNP Scottish Government do have the powers to help the WASPI women, Scottish Ministers should overcome their shyness, make a real decision and agree to step in and aid the 250,000 women in Scotland. Not to do so will be seen as a missed opportunity.

**Ian Blackford** *rose—*

**Alex Cunningham:** The hon. Gentleman, who opened this debate, spoke for 35 minutes; I have 10 minutes.

If the Scottish National party in government in Scotland did that, it would further highlight the injustice faced by other WASPI women across the rest of the UK who would still get nothing. That is why we must have a UK-wide solution to the problem. We do not want one that sees British women in different parts of the United Kingdom treated differently on social security because of where they live.

We have said that the proposals are not fair, have not been implemented properly and are damaging the most vulnerable, but the Government have made it clear that they do not care about the plight of women up and down this country. Those women are frightened of these proposals because they do not know how they will cope. The Secretary of State spoke about the older people's champion. We could have a champion in each and every department across the country, providing a special helpline for the women affected.

Under our proposals, we are calling on the Government to extend pension credit to those who would have been eligible under the 1995 timetable, so that women affected by the chaotic mismanagement of equalisation will be offered some support until they retire. That will make hundreds of thousands WASPI women eligible for up to £156 a week. We will not stop there. We are developing further proposals to support as many of the WASPI women as possible. Importantly, they will be financially credible and will be based on sound evidence and supported by the WASPI women themselves.

It is disappointing that the SNP chooses to cost only the option in the Landman report—the one mentioned in the motion—to the end of this Parliament. This accounting trick has led it to promise the WASPI women that it has a long-term solution, but that is not the case. The measure will cost £8 billion until 2020, but more than £30 billion if it is to help affected women up to 2026. Sadly, this has confused the debate, when clarity was needed. As I have mentioned, if the SNP actually wanted to support the WASPI women rather than play games, it would have acted already in Scotland.

The Government could have done something in the autumn statement to support these women and then used the Pension Schemes Bill currently in the other place to put the changes into law. They still have time to do so in the new year.

I have had numerous emails, phone calls and meetings with women all over the country who are begging and pleading for Parliament to act. They are at their wits end. If they are not already suffering the full impact of the changes, they are dreading them, as they know this Government will require them to survive on very little—including those who are single or incapable of working.

My party believes in standing up for the most vulnerable, and that is what we are doing today. We will do that tomorrow, and we will continue to support the WASPI women in this fight. For that reason, we will support the SNP motion today, but we hope to have the real cost of its proposed solution up to 2026 properly acknowledged. Only Labour is taking a detailed look at the evidence and trying to find the best way forward to help dig both the Scottish and UK Governments out of the hole they are now in. Let us make it clear once again: it is not a Scottish, English, Irish or Welsh solution that we need, but a UK-wide solution, and this Government must act.

6.38 pm

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I have to start by saying that I am feeling very, very humbled here today, because the Conservative Benches are the busiest that they have ever been for me, talking on this issue.

Unfortunately, I have to start off on a negative point. Earlier, the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) talked about Members of Parliament finding themselves continually criticised for their point of view, whether that be on Twitter or when they meet people on the street or in their surgeries. The response to that should be for MPs to go away and reflect on whether they are in the right position and have the correct opinion. You do not turn round and call an entire fantastic, intellectual campaign hate-filled. You do not accuse them of having a hate campaign; you listen to them and you form your views.

We have debated this issue five times, I believe, so this is the fifth time I am speaking on it. It is important to reflect back on how we ended up in this position. Nearly a year ago today, I stood pretty much on this spot and argued for the WASPI campaign. I argued that this problem was happening and explained how it came about, and I tried to give the Government the benefit of the doubt. We said, "You have to accept that the Government have messed up. You have to accept that problems have been created and you have to come up with something." It is truly an embarrassment to this House that we are still waiting on a Government plan for making this better.

The SNP went away and spent our own money to get a constructive report. We could easily have said, "Get rid of the '95 Act altogether;" we could have said a million and one things, but instead we went away and found credible economists, put together a cracking report and tried to build a bridge that all parties in this House could cross. Instead—[*Interruption.*] If the Secretary of State wants to make an intervention, I am more than happy to take it. Until then, I suggest he listens.

When we put forward our report to the Government, so that they could listen to it, what was their response? In the Westminster Hall debate a couple of weeks back, the Minister said that,

"the Government's position is very clear: this was not a contract. State pensions are technically a benefit."—[*Official Report*, 15 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 44.]

That utterly pathetic response shows that this Government are determined to wriggle out of their responsibility for these women.

A Government Member said earlier that we now say to women that they have to pay in 35 years of national insurance and that that is how they are entitled to their pension, but the women we are talking about have paid in for 40 years, for 45 years and some of them for 50 years, yet we are being told that they are still not entitled to their pension. The Government are refusing to pay women what they are owed, and I am sure that the 2.6 million women will remember that the next time they are standing at the ballot box in an election.

The hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) said earlier that Germany made these changes in 2009 and he asked what the problem was with us doing it in 2011. I would point out to the hon. Gentleman—who, by the way, has a majority of 806, if I remember correctly, which I imagine consists of a lot of WASPI women who will remember his speech at the next election—that our report shows that the only other country in Europe that has made this level of change at this accelerated pace is Greece. As I said in the last debate, that is a country that a couple of weeks ago was teargassing pensioners who were campaigning and

protesting against austerity measures. Is that really what we want to base our arguments on? Is that the kind of model we want to follow?

This has been said a million and one times in the debate, and I have been biting my tongue the whole way through because of the incredible hypocrisy and lack of knowledge on these Benches—I was going to say on the Conservative Benches, but now unfortunately I have to add the Labour shadow Minister to that. Scotland does not have the power over pensions. If anyone wants to dispute that, I suggest that they get the Scotland Act 1998 and go to section 28, and they will see that in all the reserved matters that we are entitled to top up, pensions is not included.

Even if we did have the power to create pensions, and to fix them, I tell you something—and I think I speak for my colleagues not just in this Chamber but up the road as well—we are sick to the back teeth of using taxpayers' money to fill all the holes that this Government create: a Government with policies that we have never voted for in Scotland, that we actively rejected in the general election. We cannot be expected to plug every single hole that this Government create with their shambolic policies.

The Government now say, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) alluded to earlier, that they will never make changes to pensions unless people are within 10 years of reaching pension age. How can they justify that position but not do anything for these women, who have been told that they have to wait six or seven years to get their pensions?

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said that this was not in our manifesto. If he goes to page 21 of the 2016 manifesto for the Scottish elections, he will see it says that we support the WASPI campaign. He said that he would vote against our motion tonight because it is the younger generation who will pay—people in their 20s and 30s. I am included in that category, funnily enough, and I have to say that the issue is bigger than just the WASPI generation, because I want to know that when I am paying national insurance throughout my working lifetime, I am not going to be shafted at the last hurdle—that I am not going to be told at the last minute that the goalposts are moving. This is bigger. This is about the Government setting a precedent that pensions can change anywhere at any time, and that is not a healthy position for any Government to have.

The issue is altogether bigger than WASPI. The justification for the change is that we do not have enough money and this is about austerity. But the thing is that it is women that suffer under austerity. That is the reality; whether it be pensioners, single mothers or young women, it is always women that bear the brunt of this austerity.

**Alan Brown:** On affordability, is it not the case that the Government can revisit the £20 billion of tax giveaways in the last Budget—£8.5 billion in corporation tax and £5.5 billion in capital gains, inheritance tax and higher tax threshold relief? The Government can revisit those in the forthcoming spring Budget.

**Mhairi Black:** My hon. Friend makes his point very eloquently.

[Mhairi Black]

The Women's Budget Group has done tremendous work. I urge Ministers to look at it and see the impact that they are having on women's lives because of the Government's detrimental policies. The group's director said:

"We've known for some time that the poorest households and women have shouldered the greatest burden of austerity measures."

In fact, 85% of the burden is forecast to fall on women by 2020. These women are not unfortunate casualties. They are not people who just happened to get unlucky. This Government cannot claim ignorance. They cannot plead innocence and say that they have no idea of the impact that they are about to have on people's lives. These women, for whatever reason, are suffering under Conservative policies for no other crime than the fact that they are female and they are poor. That is the reality of what this Government are doing.

The legacy that this Government are leaving is absolutely shambolic and no amount of sympathy and flowery words from hon. Members is going to pay bills for people. It is not going to move things forward; it will not make sure that your citizens have a good, high-quality standard of life. The idea that the £8 billion spread across five years, as proposed in our report, is not affordable is an absolute joke. The national insurance fund, as we have said multiple times, will be sitting on a surplus of £30 billion. That figure has been disputed from the Government Benches, but it is worth pointing out that it comes from the Government Actuary's Department. It is a Government figure.

In every one of these debates I have said that politics is about choice, and I have lambasted the Government for choosing to bomb Syria instead of paying pensions. I have lambasted them for spending billions on Trident. I have had a go at them for doing up this Palace of Westminster for £7 billion, which funnily enough we can afford. I understand that sometimes it can be quite dull when politicians repeat things time and again, but now there is something new. We can now also afford to pay up for the Queen's house; we can now find the money to refurbish Buckingham Palace. So my question to the Minister would be this: are we going to be doing up Downing Street anytime soon? Are there any other houses filled with millionaires that need to be done up—that need a lick of paint? It is a ridiculous notion that we can afford to fork out money for palaces—literally, palaces such as this and Buckingham Palace—but we cannot pay pensions. It is a joke.

Our job here is to represent; it is to maintain democracy, to make sure that people watching at home feel as though they have a voice, to make sure that they feel there are people listening and standing up for them. When you see the quality of the debate that we have just sat through, no wonder people are quite depressed and disillusioned with politics. We have debated this subject five times. We have had 240 petitions all across the House. People are affected by this. Every single Member who handed in a petition has not just a professional duty, but a moral duty to walk through that Lobby tonight and vote with us, because if they do not, as my WASPI mother would say, hell slap it intae ye at the next election.

6.49 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington):** I have been to quite a few Opposition day debates in my six and a half years here, but I have never known one when there were no Back-Bench speeches from the party that brought the motion forward. I found that very sad. [Interruption.] I do apologise to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson)—there was one.

That does not mean that we have not heard extensively from the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who opened the debate. He has kindly referred to me in the past as an honourable man—in fact, a principled man—and I would say exactly the same thing to him, as I would, indeed, to my shadow from the Labour party, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). However, they painted the Government as heartless and as people who are not interested in pensioners, and that is absolutely untrue.

We have had a lot of platitudes and clichés about how taxing millionaires more could fund the WASPI pensioners. Everybody says, "We believe in equalisation." Everybody says what the problems are. Everybody talks of hardship. Everybody talks of examples from their constituencies. But when it comes to it, the Opposition have a licence to say anything they want—the Government have to make hard decisions. This Government and their predecessor—

**Andy Burnham:** Will the Minister give way?

**Richard Harrington:** I am sorry, but, for the moment, there is not time to take interventions.

Governments have to take hard decisions. The can that was kicked down the road for many years by the Labour party had to be dealt with by the coalition Government. I would just like to refer to some of the fallacies mentioned by Opposition Members. The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, in moving the motion, talked about the 1995 Act as if there was absolutely no communication from the Government—as if the DWP and everybody else suddenly forgot to talk about it. Well, that is not true. There were leaflets produced. There was an extensive advertising campaign. There were articles in women's papers. In addition, millions of people, who decided they were going to sort out their pension, applied, quite properly, to the DWP; in fact, more than 14 million people applied and received full details of what their pensions were. I mention that because it would appear that there was absolutely no communication whatever. After the 2011 Act, that was a direct mail campaign, where individual letters—

**Ian Blackford** *rose*—

**Andy Burnham** *rose*—

**Richard Harrington:** I will not give way. I have a very short time left.

There was actually very good communication. However, I would like to mention the various contributions we have had. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries), who was among many speakers from the Government side, said that women, including herself, were not informed following the 2011 Act. In fact, as I have just shown, millions of letters were sent between January 2012 and November 2013. She said it is difficult for women over the age of 60 to

find employment, and she said nobody would employ her. Actually, more than 4 million women in her age group are in employment—more than ever.

From the Opposition, we have had the argument, which I have had to deal with on many occasions, about the state pension being a contract. It is not a view but a question of fact that the state pension is a benefit, not a contract. As my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara) said, promises are cheap. The Government have to actually deal with facts.

I have much sympathy for Members who spoke of constituents who are finding it difficult to access the benefits system. [*Interruption.*] Someone has shouted from a sedentary position, “What are you going to do about it?” As hon. Members will be aware, and as the Secretary of State mentioned, we have a system of helping through the benefits system people who may need looking at. We have older claimants’ champions, and we are getting more of them. We will find a way to help people to find their way into the benefits system. For any constituents who are finding this difficult, if the Department can have their name, address and national insurance number—I have asked for this on many occasions—I will be very happy to personally see what the position is and get them the help they need to get through the benefits system. We hear a lot of talk from hon. Members about their constituents, but the actual factual details I get are few and far between.

Let me move on to the famous economic report from the Scots Nats. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who described it as irresponsible and inaccurate. I really could not have put it better myself, because it is, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire said, raising false hopes by saying to our constituents that this is a small problem that can quite easily be dealt with. I remind hon. Members that even the SNP costs this at £8 billion, and the Department, as I have written to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, has assessed it at nearer to £30 billion. We have looked at every alternative. We have looked at more than 25 options that have been mentioned to us about the WASPIs, and there simply is not a viable option, either because of cost, complexity or practicality.

The luxury of opposition is promising everybody money without having to consider how to pay for it. I view this as very irresponsible.

**Ian Blackford:** I must tell the House that the figures in this report, which has been produced by Landman Economics, are based on the Institute for Public Policy Research model, which has been tried and tested. It really ill behoves the House to traduce the economists who have produced these figures based on a Treasury model. When we had the debate two weeks ago, the Minister said that the cost was £14 billion. How come we have gone from £14 billion to £30 billion? It is the Government’s figures that do not make any sense.

**Richard Harrington:** I apologise to the hon. Gentleman—I could not hear the end of what he said because of the noise. I am not disputing that this was produced by proper economists—I accept that fact—but it is about what timescale they look at, in this case going to 2021, and how they brief. But okay, fair enough: even by the SNP’s calculations the figure is £7.9 billion,

which should apparently come from millionaires or from Trident. Government is not like that; these are completely separate issues. This country has a proud record on state pensions. This Government, and the predecessor coalition before it, did not have the luxury, partly because of the economic mess Labour left us in, of kicking the can down the road and ignoring these very, very serious issues.

The benefits system is available to people, and if they are not having the access to it they should, we will help them. I give an undertaking to look at every way that the benefits system can be used to help people who are in difficulty. Contrary to what some hon. Members have said, my door is open to people so I can speak to them. I hope I have shown that. I took this job to help pensioners, not to not help pensioners. It has been irresponsible to imply—

**Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP)** *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

*Question put forthwith,* That the Question be now put.

*Question agreed to.*

*Question put accordingly (Standing Order No. 31(2)),* That the original words stand part of the Question.

*The House divided: Ayes 234, Noes 293.*

#### Division No. 100]

[7 pm

#### AYES

Abrahams, Debbie	Clwyd, rh Ann
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	Coffey, Ann
Alexander, Heidi	Cooper, Julie
Ali, Rushanara	Cooper, Rosie
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Cooper, rh Yvette
Arkless, Richard	Cowan, Ronnie
Ashworth, Jonathan	Coyle, Neil
Austin, Ian	Crausby, Mr David
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Crawley, Angela
Bardell, Hannah	Creagh, Mary
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	Creasy, Stella
Beckett, rh Margaret	Cruddas, Jon
Benn, rh Hilary	Cryer, John
Berger, Luciana	Cummins, Judith
Betts, Mr Clive	Cunningham, Alex
Black, Mhairi	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Blackford, Ian	Dakin, Nic
Blackman, Kirsty	Danczuk, Simon
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	David, Wayne
Blenkinsop, Tom	Debbonaire, Thangam
Blomfield, Paul	Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Boswell, Philip	Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Brabin, Tracy	Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Brake, rh Tom	Doughty, Stephen
Brennan, Kevin	Dowd, Jim
Brock, Deidre	Dowd, Peter
Brown, Alan	Durkan, Mark
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Eagle, Maria
Bryant, Chris	Edwards, Jonathan
Burgon, Richard	Elliott, Julie
Burnham, rh Andy	Elliott, Tom
Cadbury, Ruth	Ellman, Mrs Louise
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Elmore, Chris
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Esterson, Bill
Champion, Sarah	Evans, Chris
Chapman, Douglas	Farrelly, Paul
Cherry, Joanna	Ferrier, Margaret
Clegg, rh Mr Nick	Fitzpatrick, Jim

Flelo, Robert  
 Fletcher, Colleen  
 Flint, rh Caroline  
 Flynn, Paul  
 Fovargue, Yvonne  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gapes, Mike  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Gethins, Stephen  
 Gibson, Patricia  
 Glass, Pat  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Grady, Patrick  
 Grant, Peter  
 Gray, Neil  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Greenwood, Margaret  
 Griffith, Nia  
 Gwynne, Andrew  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hanson, rh Mr David  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hayman, Sue  
 Hendry, Drew  
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen  
 Hillier, Meg  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hollern, Kate  
 Hollobone, Mr Philip  
 Hopkins, Kelvin  
 Hosie, Stewart  
 Howarth, rh Mr George  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Graham  
 Jones, Mr Kevan  
 Jones, Susan Elan  
 Kane, Mike  
 Keeley, Barbara  
 Kendall, Liz  
 Kerevan, George  
 Kerr, Calum  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kyle, Peter  
 Lammy, rh Mr David  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Chris  
 Leslie, Chris  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lewis, Mr Ivan  
 Lucas, Caroline  
 Lucas, Ian C.  
 MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan  
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, Shabana  
 Mann, John  
 Marris, Rob  
 Marsden, Gordon  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Matheson, Christian  
 McCabe, Steve  
 McCaig, Callum  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McDonagh, Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm  
 McDonald, Stuart C.  
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat

McGarry, Natalie  
 McGinn, Conor  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McInnes, Liz  
 McLaughlin, Anne  
 McMahon, Jim  
 Meale, Sir Alan  
 Mearns, Ian  
 Miliband, rh Edward  
 Monaghan, Carol  
 Monaghan, Dr Paul  
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Mulholland, Greg  
 Mullin, Roger  
 Murray, Ian  
 Newlands, Gavin  
 Nicolson, John  
 O'Hara, Brendan  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Oswald, Kirsten  
 Paisley, Ian  
 Paterson, Steven  
 Perkins, Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Pound, Stephen  
 Pugh, John  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Rayner, Angela  
 Reed, Mr Steve  
 Rees, Christina  
 Reeves, Rachel  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Reynolds, Jonathan  
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret  
 Robertson, rh Angus  
 Rotheram, Steve  
 Ryan, rh Joan  
 Salmond, rh Alex  
 Saville Roberts, Liz  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Sheerman, Mr Barry  
 Sheppard, Tommy  
 Sherriff, Paula  
 Shuker, Mr Gavin  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Skinner, Mr Dennis  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smeeth, Ruth  
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew  
 Smith, Angela  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Spellar, rh Mr John  
 Starmer, Keir  
 Stephens, Chris  
 Stevens, Jo  
 Streeting, Wes  
 Stringer, Graham  
 Tami, Mark  
 Thewliss, Alison  
 Thomson, Michelle  
 Timms, rh Stephen  
 Turner, Karl  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Umunna, Mr Chuka  
 Weir, Mike  
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh

Whitehead, Dr Alan  
 Whitford, Dr Philippa  
 Williams, Mr Mark  
 Wilson, Corri  
 Wilson, Phil  
 Wilson, Sammy  
 Winnick, Mr David  
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie

Wishart, Pete  
 Woodcock, John  
 Wright, Mr Iain  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Marion Fellows and**  
**Owen Thompson**

#### NOES

Adams, Nigel  
 Afriyie, Adam  
 Aldous, Peter  
 Allen, Heidi  
 Amess, Sir David  
 Andrew, Stuart  
 Argar, Edward  
 Atkins, Victoria  
 Bacon, Mr Richard  
 Baker, Mr Steve  
 Baldwin, Harriett  
 Barclay, Stephen  
 Barwell, Gavin  
 Bebb, Guto  
 Bellingham, Sir Henry  
 Benyon, Richard  
 Beresford, Sir Paul  
 Berry, Jake  
 Berry, James  
 Bingham, Andrew  
 Blackman, Bob  
 Blackwood, Nicola  
 Blunt, Crispin  
 Bone, Mr Peter  
 Borwick, Victoria  
 Bradley, rh Karen  
 Brady, Mr Graham  
 Brazier, Mr Julian  
 Bridgen, Andrew  
 Brine, Steve  
 Brokenshire, rh James  
 Bruce, Fiona  
 Buckland, Robert  
 Burns, Conor  
 Burns, rh Sir Simon  
 Burrowes, Mr David  
 Burt, rh Alistair  
 Cairns, rh Alun  
 Carmichael, Neil  
 Cartledge, James  
 Cash, Sir William  
 Chalk, Alex  
 Chishti, Rehman  
 Chope, Mr Christopher  
 Churchill, Jo  
 Clark, rh Greg  
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth  
 Cleverly, James  
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey  
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse  
 Collins, Damian  
 Colville, Oliver  
 Costa, Alberto  
 Courts, Robert  
 Crabb, rh Stephen  
 Crouch, Tracey  
 Davies, Byron  
 Davies, Chris  
 Davies, David T. C.  
 Davies, Glyn  
 Davies, Dr James

Davies, Mims  
 Davies, Philip  
 Davis, rh Mr David  
 Dinenage, Caroline  
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
 Donelan, Michelle  
 Dorries, Nadine  
 Doyle-Price, Jackie  
 Drax, Richard  
 Drummond, Mrs Flick  
 Duddridge, James  
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain  
 Dunne, Mr Philip  
 Ellis, Michael  
 Ellison, Jane  
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias  
 Elphicke, Charlie  
 Eustice, George  
 Evans, Graham  
 Evennett, rh David  
 Fabricant, Michael  
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael  
 Fernandes, Suella  
 Field, rh Mark  
 Foster, Kevin  
 Fox, rh Dr Liam  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Frazer, Lucy  
 Freeman, George  
 Freer, Mike  
 Fuller, Richard  
 Fysh, Marcus  
 Gale, Sir Roger  
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Gauke, rh Mr David  
 Ghani, Nusrat  
 Gibb, Mr Nick  
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl  
 Gillan, John  
 Goodwill, Mr Robert  
 Gove, rh Michael  
 Graham, Richard  
 Grant, Mrs Helen  
 Gray, Mr James  
 Grayling, rh Chris  
 Green, Chris  
 Green, rh Damian  
 Greening, rh Justine  
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic  
 Griffiths, Andrew  
 Gummer, rh Ben  
 Gyimah, Mr Sam  
 Halfon, rh Robert  
 Hall, Luke  
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip  
 Hammond, Stephen  
 Hancock, rh Matt  
 Hands, rh Greg  
 Harper, rh Mr Mark  
 Harrington, Richard

Harris, Rebecca  
 Hart, Simon  
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan  
 Hayes, rh Mr John  
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver  
 Heapey, James  
 Heaton-Jones, Peter  
 Herbert, rh Nick  
 Hinds, Damian  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Hollingbery, George  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Holloway, Mr Adam  
 Hopkins, Kris  
 Howarth, Sir Gerald  
 Howell, John  
 Howlett, Ben  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy  
 Hurd, Mr Nick  
 Jackson, Mr Stewart  
 James, Margot  
 Javid, rh Sajid  
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil  
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard  
 Jenkyns, Andrea  
 Jenrick, Robert  
 Johnson, Gareth  
 Johnson, Joseph  
 Jones, Andrew  
 Jones, rh Mr David  
 Jones, Mr Marcus  
 Kawczynski, Daniel  
 Kennedy, Seema  
 Kirby, Simon  
 Knight, rh Sir Greg  
 Knight, Julian  
 Kwarteng, Kwasi  
 Lancaster, Mark  
 Leadsom, rh Andrea  
 Lee, Dr Phillip  
 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  
 Lopresti, Jack  
 Lord, Jonathan  
 Lumley, Karen  
 Mackinlay, Craig  
 Mackintosh, David  
 Main, Mrs Anne  
 Mak, Mr Alan  
 Malthouse, Kit  
 Maynard, Paul  
 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, David  
 Morris, James  
 Mowat, David  
 Mundell, rh David  
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
 Neill, Robert  
 Newton, Sarah  
 Nokes, Caroline  
 Norman, Jesse  
 Offord, Dr Matthew  
 Opperman, Guy  
 Osborne, rh Mr George  
 Parish, Neil  
 Patel, rh Priti  
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen  
 Pawsey, Mark  
 Penning, rh Mike  
 Penrose, John  
 Percy, Andrew  
 Perry, Claire  
 Philp, Chris  
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric  
 Poulter, Dr Daniel  
 Pow, Rebecca  
 Prentis, Victoria  
 Pritchard, Mark  
 Pursglove, Tom  
 Quin, Jeremy  
 Quince, Will  
 Raab, Mr Dominic  
 Redwood, rh John  
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob  
 Robertson, Mr Laurence  
 Robinson, Mary  
 Rosindell, Andrew  
 Rudd, rh Amber  
 Rutley, David  
 Sandbach, Antoinette  
 Selous, Andrew  
 Shapps, rh Grant  
 Sharma, Alok  
 Shelbrooke, Alec  
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith  
 Skidmore, Chris  
 Smith, Henry  
 Smith, Julian  
 Smith, Royston  
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas  
 Soubry, rh Anna  
 Spencer, Mark  
 Stephenson, Andrew  
 Stevenson, John  
 Stewart, Bob  
 Stewart, Iain  
 Stewart, Rory  
 Streeter, Mr Gary  
 Stride, Mel  
 Stuart, Graham  
 Sturdy, Julian  
 Sunak, Rishi  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo  
 Syms, Mr Robert  
 Thomas, Derek  
 Throup, Maggie

Timpson, Edward  
 Tolhurst, Kelly  
 Tomlinson, Justin  
 Tomlinson, Michael  
 Tracey, Craig  
 Tredinnick, David  
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie  
 Truss, rh Elizabeth  
 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  
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah  
 Wood, Mike  
 Wragg, William  
 Wright, rh Jeremy  
 Zahawi, Nadhim

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Christopher Pincher and**  
**Chris Heaton-Harris**

*Question accordingly negated.*

*Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)),*  
 That the proposed words be there added.

*Question agreed to.*

*The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).*

*Resolved,*

That this House welcomes the planned average rise of £550 a year for 3 million women, including those born in the 1950s, who receive the new state pension; further welcomes the increase of over £1,100 per year of the basic state pension since 2010 as the result of the triple lock, which will also benefit such women; and recognises that the state pension must reflect the welcome rise in life expectancy in order to remain sustainable for generations to come.

## PETITION

### Climate Change

7.14 pm

**David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con):** I rise to present a petition of over 1,100 residents of the Macclesfield constituency on the subject of climate change.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Macclesfield,

Declares that climate changes impacts upon both people and places; further that the rapid progress towards ratification of the Paris Agreement is to be applauded; further that the UK requires a low carbon investment plan to transform the economy in line with the Climate Change Act 2008; and further that 1,100 individuals have signed a local petition on the same matter.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to publish an ambitious low carbon investment plan.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001986]

## Paisley (Cultural Contribution)

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(Heather Wheeler.)

7.15 pm

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to lead today's debate on Paisley's cultural contribution to the world. I am sorry to disappoint the undoubted millions tuning in from Northern Ireland, but I am most definitely not talking about the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley)—despite his party colleagues alluding to that fact on Twitter earlier this afternoon.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, although I know that Renfrewshire's ain, Madam Deputy Speaker—the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs Laing)—was hoping to chair the debate, but is otherwise engaged addressing a haggis, which is as good an excuse as any in this place. I know that she has taken a keen interest in developments in Paisley of late and will no doubt be bending the ears of the rich and powerful at her Burns supper this evening.

However, I am perhaps underselling Paisley's contribution. As Paisley's Member of the Scottish Parliament and fellow Buddie, George Adam, is forever telling everyone Paisley is, in fact, the centre of the known universe. Given that I am forever being compared to Gerard Butler and that he and I were born in Paisley and are proud Buddies, I think that George's point is well made. I should point out for the uninitiated that a Buddie is what people from Paisley are called.

This debate is a sheer fluke of scheduling, as it just happens to coincide with Paisley's bid to be named UK city of culture for 2021. I am not an impartial observer, but to my mind Paisley is one the UK's greatest towns. The Paisley pattern is quite literally famous all over the world and represents the legacy of our one-time place at the centre of the world's textile industry. Our rich and proud history is second to none, and people should not just take my word for it. Ian Jack, writing in *The Guardian* said:

“There is probably no more unjustly neglected town in these islands; there is nowhere of comparable size—77,000 people—that has such a rich architectural, industrial and social history and that once mattered so much to the world.”

It is for that reason that I would like to use this opportunity to touch on the town's positive future, should it be named as the UK city of culture in 2021.

For those unaware of the town, Paisley is the largest town in Scotland, with a population of around 77,000. We are proud to have Paisley Abbey, to accommodate a world-class university in the University of the West of Scotland, and to be home to the St Mirren football club; and we are proud of our industrial heritage, particularly in our heyday with the Paisley mills, which made the town an economic powerhouse.

In so many ways, Paisley well and truly punches above its weight in the impact that it has had on the world. Our cultural strengths are there for the world to see. We are the birthplace of music superstar Paolo Nutini, who earlier this month outlined his backing for Paisley being named UK city of culture and spoke about the “romance of the town” and its importance on his own career. Dr Who duo, David Tennant and Steven Moffat, also hail from the town and regularly come

back to Paisley to support local causes, as does Hollywood superstar, Gerard Butler, whose family stay in the Gallowhill area of Paisley, which I am proud to represent.

The list of famous Paisley Buddies that have forged a career in culture, media and sport is almost without end, including such names as: Andrew Neil, John Byrne, Kelly Marie, Gerry Rafferty, Tom Conti, Archie Gemmill, Chris Brookmyre, Alexander Goudie, Owen Coyle, Shereen Nanjiani, Phyllis Logan, Kenneth McKellar, Robert Tannahill, David Hay, John Byrne, Fulton Mackay—[*Interruption.*] I am pleased now to see the hon. Member for North Antrim in his place.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Gavin Newlands:** The hon. Gentleman is being very cheeky, but I will give way to him.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. I rather think that the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) should be here for at least five minutes before anyone gives way to him. Come on!

**Gavin Newlands:** I was trying to be generous, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I shall assume that the hon. Gentleman is here to intervene later.

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP) *rose*—

**Gavin Newlands:** In that case, I shall give way to my hon. Friend.

**Mhairi Black:** Would my hon. Friend like to congratulate the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) on wearing the traditional Paisley attire?

**Gavin Newlands:** My hon. Friend is correct, and he would be right at home at St Mirren Park if he wore that outfit on a Saturday afternoon.

**Ian Paisley:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Gavin Newlands:** I will in two minutes.

Let me return to my list, which is extensive. Other famous Buddies are Kenneth Gibson MSP—I would be under threat of death if I did not mention him—Paul Lambert, and two of Scotland's most weel-kent weather forecasters, Heather “the weather” Reid and Sean Batty.

While I am listing famous Buddies, it would be remiss of me not to give a quick mention to those outside the area of culture who have left an indelible mark on the world. From the world of business, there is the Coats family, of Coats threads fame, which once owned one of the UK's largest businesses. James Coats, and his sons who followed him, built up a business empire supported by vast mills along the River Cart. His son Thomas was particularly philanthropic towards his home town, and funded or donated some of Paisley's finest buildings. Marion Robertson decided to try and use an oversupply of oranges to her husband James's greengrocer business to make marmalade. The result was to prove very popular, and the enterprise is still going strong as the company that makes Robertson's jams.

Ian Hamilton was a renowned lawyer, but is perhaps better known for something a little less legal. Ian was the mastermind who led the repatriation of the Stone of Destiny to Scotland from that building across the road, much to the authorities' embarrassment. I note that Perth is trying to use the stone as part of its fledgling bid, but it was Paisley that helped to get the real one back before returning a replica via Arbroath Abbey—allegedly.

Members may not instantly recognise the name May Donoghue, but the case of *Donoghue v. Stevenson* has had huge repercussions throughout the legal world since the other place along the corridor ruled on it in 1932. May Donoghue had been enjoying an ice cream float in the Wellmeadow café in the town, but when she poured out the remainder of her ginger beer into the glass, a partially decomposed slug fell out. She suffered from shock, and was later treated for gastroenteritis. Having got nowhere with the café owner, she decided to sue the manufacturer, David Stevenson. Her lawyer's argument centred on the fact that Stevenson had a "duty of care" to the consumer, even without a direct contract, which had not obtained before that landmark ruling. The case is still taught in law schools, and has been quoted at the start of millions of damages actions throughout the world.

Buddies are rightly proud of all those who have made their mark, but Paisley is arguably more famous for the distinctive teardrop pattern that is world renowned. There are competing thoughts about the origins of the Paisley pattern, with some historians even suggesting that it can be traced back to ancient Babylon. However, although shawl production began elsewhere, because of the huge scale of shawl production in Paisley, which started in 1805, the pattern was given the name "paisley". Paisley's mills have long closed, but the impact of the paisley pattern can still be seen on catwalks throughout the world, as my tie so stylishly highlights.

**Ian Paisley:** I am not wearing a paisley pattern, although it is true that I once chatted up a girl and told her that my great-great-great-grandfather had invented the pattern and that he was a friend of Mr Tartan—but that is not the point. The point is that not everyone is lucky enough to have a town, or a city, named after them, and I am delighted about that.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on drawing our attention to the important issues of raising cultural awareness and the identity of the great towns and cities in this nation of ours. I hope that Ministers will continue to ensure that the whole of our nation is properly represented around the world, and that that includes all the great things that flow from the various towns, but in particular—Paisley.

**Gavin Newlands:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Perhaps one day, if he perseveres, he will be granted his own debate about his contribution to the world.

Paisley has produced an abundance of actors and actresses of stage and screen. One reason why that has been so, especially over the last quarter of a century, is PACE Youth Theatre. PACE was founded in 1988 by David Wallace, and has now grown to become the largest youth theatre of its kind in the UK, with a current membership of about 2,000. The success and

attraction of PACE means that more than 200 young people are on a waiting list for a place there at any given time throughout the year. As well as putting on shows for thousands, including the perennially sold-out pantomime and shows touring Scotland, PACE delivers up to 34 workshops each year that not only improve on the performance skills of those who attend, but aim to increase confidence and improve communication and self-expression. The list of those who have enrolled in PACE includes James McAvoy, Paulo Nutini, "Game of Thrones" actor Richard Madden, and "Star Wars" actor James McArdle.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I taught him. [*Laughter.*]

**Gavin Newlands:** I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution.

However, PACE amounts to a lot more than the acting or singing careers that it has helped to kick-start. It is about the lives of all the kids who attend its workshops. Founder David Wallace explained that better than I could when he said:

"We aren't all about finding the next Annie. If that's what a member is looking to achieve then that's great.

However, for me and the team, it's about providing our members with essential life tools such as self-confidence, team work and motivation and allowing those individuals to create their own pathways geared towards a successful and happy future, whatever that career may be."

Paisley is lucky to have David and PACE. Long may they continue their fine work.

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): I cannot let the moment pass without adding one more name to the long list of famous Paisley Buddies. My late father, Jimmy Cowan, was a Paisley Buddy. He played for the mighty Greenock Morton, but he also played 25 times for Scotland, including in two famous victories against the auld enemy at Wembley, one in 1949, when the English forward line was Matthews, Finney, Milburn, Mortensen and Pearson. We won 3-1 that day. My father was a famous Paisley Buddy and a Greenockian; I am happy to be a buddy of Paisley.

**Gavin Newlands:** The fact that my hon. Friend's father played for Morton was why I left him out of the list—[*Laughter.*]

Paisley's rich architectural culture runs through the town, from Paisley Abbey and the town hall down the high street to the museum, Coat's observatory and Coat's memorial church, often described as the Baptist cathedral of Europe. One of the town's not so well known facts is that it has the highest concentration of listed buildings anywhere in Scotland outside Edinburgh, but the jewel in Paisley's architectural crown is the abbey, which dates back more than 850 years. The building is known as "the Cradle of the Royal House of Stewart". Marjory Bruce, the daughter of Robert the Bruce, was married and later died in the abbey after a riding accident near the Gallowhill area of the town. Her son survived this accident and grew up to become Robert II of Scotland, the first of the Stewart monarchs.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): As an Ulster Scot descended from the Stewarts of the lowland of Scotland, it is a real pleasure for me to hear the hon. Gentleman's speech. Does he feel that there is a golden opportunity

[Jim Shannon]

for Paisley's traditions and culture to be twinned alongside the Ulster Scots of Northern Ireland, with their history, their culture and their language?

**Gavin Newlands:** It is not in my power to grant the hon. Gentleman's wish, but I note the keen interest of the Democratic Unionist party in tonight's debate—that is two interventions from DUP Members on a debate about our Scottish town.

**Jim Shannon:** We are proud to be Ulster Scots.

**Gavin Newlands:** Absolutely, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for it.

The abbey is absolutely stunning and when you pay a visit, Mr Deputy Speaker—not if, when—be sure to keep an eye out for the 25-year-old embellishment by the stonemasons who replaced one of the gargoyles on the roofline with a replica of the xenomorph alien from the Alien films. I would hope that the committee looking at the refurbishment of this crumbling edifice could perhaps take a leaf out of the abbey's book.

Benjamin Disraeli once warned his cabinet that they should “keep an eye on Paisley.” Disraeli might have been speaking about his fear of the guid folk of Paisley, rather than the hon. Member for North Antrim, becoming the source of revolution, but that quote is as true today as it was in the 18th century. Paisley is well known for its radicals. This is marked by a monument in Woodside cemetery which celebrates the 1820 martyrs, Baird, Hardie and Wilson—three of the leaders of the 1820 radical war who were executed for their part in it. That insurrection started largely due to savage cuts in workers', mainly weavers', pay and conditions.

Paisley's radical past is celebrated annually during the “Sma' Shot Day” festival. The sma' shot was a cotton thread that bound the shawls together, but the sma' shot was unseen in the finished garments, so the manufacturers—known locally as “corks”—refused to pay for the thread. The weavers had no choice but to buy the thread themselves, as without it the shawls would fall apart and the weavers would not be paid for their work. A long dispute followed. The Charleston drum, which was beaten through the streets of Paisley to summon the weavers in times of trouble, was beaten to rally the weavers to protest. After a long and hard struggle, the manufacturers backed down and the weavers were paid for the sma' shot.

**Mhairi Black:** Bearing in mind Paisley's phenomenal political history of responding to economic inequality, does my hon. Friend agree that the current Prime Minister could do with taking the advice of the once Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, who said, “keep your eye on Paisley”?

**Gavin Newlands:** I think my hon. Friend speaks for herself, as she did so very well in the previous debate.

On the first Saturday of July, the beating of the Charleston drum rallies the people of Paisley to a gathering outside the town hall. A procession is held through the streets of Paisley led by the Cork, an effigy of one of the manufacturers defeated by the Paisley weavers, which is then set on fire.

Paisley is fortunate to have two great education institutions in the shape of West College Scotland and the University of the West of Scotland. Both do a fantastic job at providing high quality and inclusive education. UWS is also the home of the internationally acclaimed sculptor, Alexander—or Sandy—Stoddart, who is the Queen's official sculptor in Scotland. Sandy created the monument to the Rev. John Witherspoon, a Paisley minister who became one of the signatories of the American declaration of independence. The original is positioned at the entrance to the university's Paisley campus, with an exact replica at Princeton University in the United States where Witherspoon moved to when he became the university's president. UWS, which was founded in Paisley in 1897, is also playing an important role in creating the cultural superstars of tomorrow through its highly successful school of media, culture and society. The school offers industry-ready degree programmes designed by staff with wide-ranging experience in broadcasting, film, journalism, music, performance and the visual arts.

The guidance that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport issued in 2014 said that the

“UK City of Culture should be expected to deliver a high quality cultural programme that builds and expands on local strengths and reaches a wide variety of audiences, creating a demonstrable economic impact and catalyst for regeneration as well as contributing to community cohesion and health and wellbeing.”

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Eight years ago, I was lucky enough to attend the National Mòd, Gaeldom's premier event for music and traditional arts, which was held in Paisley. It was an extremely good event. Paisley proved to be a wonderfully hospitable host. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a perfect example of Paisley showing that it is capable of hosting tremendous cultural events in the future?

**Gavin Newlands:** I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The economic impact of that event on the town was massive, with a 6:1 return on the council's investment. I know that the council is hoping to host the event again, hopefully in 2021 to coincide with Paisley being UK city of culture—obviously, we will be the city of culture in 2021.

We have not received updated guidance for those competing to be named UK city of culture. I hope the Minister can advise on when it will be published. Given that the hon. Member for Epping Forest received an unilluminating written response yesterday, I have my doubts. The second part of the guidance, on the need for a wider economic benefit if named UK city of culture, is critical to Paisley.

As I have said, Paisley is a special place. Our built environment matches that of any in the UK and the tenacity of Paisley buddies is second to none. We are a town with a rich history and the chance to have an equally bright future. However, despite all that I have said, Paisley has its challenges, which are deep-rooted in the fabric of the town. Poverty is a blight which afflicts too many. Shamefully, that includes generational poverty. In Renfrewshire, more than one in five of our children are growing up in poverty. In the affluent areas of Renfrewshire, boys are expected to live 16 years longer than those who stay in the poorest parts of Paisley—separated by only a few miles.

Paisley is home to what is statistically Scotland's most deprived area. Ferguslie Park, an area I represent, topped the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, confirming the generational nature of poverty in parts of Paisley. This is something that Citizens Advice Scotland refers to as poverty breeding poverty. Yet despite this, the community still has a strong sense of pride. One of the area's most famous sons, John Byrne, sums the area up perfectly:

"Paisley is a remarkable place. I support the bid wholeheartedly. I thank Ferguslie every day of my life for providing me all the information I ever needed about life, it was the best place I have ever been."

**Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Speaking of sons and daughters of Ferguslie Park, I am sure my hon. Friend will thank me for wheedling this in. Just to prove that people can fight the odds and achieve, one of the daughters of Ferguslie Park is heading up Paisley's city of culture bid. Does he agree that nobody is better placed than Jean Cameron from Ferguslie Park to win that bid for Paisley?

**Gavin Newlands:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I could not agree more with her point about her friend—and my friend—Jean.

As policy makers, the thought of kids waking up hungry, going to school hungry and going to bed hungry should motivate us all to ensure that we design more effective policies to prevent any child from living a life of hunger. That is why securing the title of UK city of culture is so important to Paisley. I believe it will generate a transformational change that will provide us with some of the tools to tackle our challenges head-on. For that reason, I believe this title means so much more to the town than those of other competitors bidding for it. Our bid will connect our communities and it will help us to take co-ordinated action against poverty through economic growth and opportunity.

Securing the title will bring around 1 million visitors to Renfrewshire in 2021. It will generate an estimated economic impact of around £50 million across our area. It will create hundreds of new jobs for local people and help grow our economy. It will breed new confidence in the town and make everyone believe that they are part of something special. It will transform Paisley's image nationally and cement a deeper sense of pride in Paisley. However, more importantly, the lasting legacy of being awarded city of culture is that it will help us tackle poverty in an innovative manner and make it easier for every child and family in Renfrewshire to access cultural activity.

We all have our reasons for wanting to see Paisley named UK city of culture. I was born in Paisley, and lived in the Seedhill area of the town for five years before moving to Renfrew—just north of Paisley—where I still stay. I will always have a deep affection for the town. That goes without saying, and not just because I was born there. Some of the proudest moments of my adult life revolved around representing the town during the 15 years—three serving as club captain—I spent playing for Paisley rugby club. Everywhere we played, I was proud to wear the Paisley crest on my top, although I think at times we could have done a better job in representing the town, as we took a doing quite frequently. The same pride that I felt playing rugby is growing

stronger again throughout Paisley. Buddies are proud of their history, and they are proud to be a welcoming place that has opened its arms to people from all over the world, evidenced recently with the arrival of our new neighbours from Syria.

Paisley has a lot to offer the world, but there is far more to come from our famous town. We are a town with our challenges, but if anyone researches our proud history, they will come across countless examples where the people of Paisley rose and overcame these challenges. We believe that winning the title of city of culture will serve as another example of Paisley seizing the opportunity and shaping a new, positive future for the town.

7.36 pm

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock):** It is a great pleasure to respond to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), and I begin by congratulating him on securing this debate on securing the UK 2021 city of culture bid for Paisley. I also congratulate him on, in so doing, uniting the United Kingdom almost like never before and on seeing so many Members representing different parts of Scotland and England and some good Ulster Scots also supporting his bid. This is about the UK capital of culture, and long may the UK capital of culture continue to be. That is enough of that point, but I think it is well mentioned.

Paisley has a fascinating history, and I note the excellent work Renfrewshire Council has done in putting this bid together, and there are some exciting plans to revitalise the town and create a new sense of optimism and pride, building on the wonderful history. The heritage, particularly in textiles, is important and global. The Paisley pattern transformed the town into an international textile producer, with tens of thousands of people employed in the thread mills.

The resurgence of the pattern in the 1960s led to the Beatles wearing Paisley print and the creation of Fender's unique pink Paisley Telecaster guitar, and it is wonderful to see the pattern coming back into fashion again today, as represented by so many Members. That is demonstrated not only by the Member for Paisley himself but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland, who sits next to me resplendent in his Paisley pattern tie, which brings together the best of the UK, because it is made by Ted Baker, showing Britain coming together. But there is more than history and more than just the Paisley pattern. There are fantastic historical buildings, including the 12th century Paisley abbey and the neoclassical town hall. In fact, the town has one of the highest concentrations of listed buildings anywhere in Scotland.

Support has been given over the past decade to Paisley and across Renfrewshire by the Heritage Lottery Fund, which is also supporting the public realm improvements that are taking place in the town. These will turn Paisley's historic core into a better place to work, live and visit, by converting empty buildings and enhancing the area's historic townscape. Should the bid be successful, I am sure that that would create a wonderful backdrop to a UK city of culture.

The town already has some important cultural assets. PACE Youth Theatre is one of the largest youth theatres in the UK, and runs workshops to improve young

[Matt Hancock]

people's communication skills, confidence and self-expression. The Spree festival of comedy, music and arts is held during the October school holidays each year, with free activities for families to enjoy. This year, one of the most prestigious events in the Scottish musical calendar, the Scottish album of the year awards, were held in Paisley. And of course there is the Paisley Museum, with its superb collection of Paisley shawls as well as other objects and displays relating to Paisley's history, art, textiles and natural history. The development of the museum is the flagship project in the council's regeneration programme, which aims to tell the story of Paisley's history and transform the town over the next decade. It is great that the council is placing culture at the centre of its regeneration plans.

That brings me to the broader point about the role of the UK city of culture. The impact and importance of culture in improving and anchoring the redevelopment of a town is increasingly being recognised. We have seen this across the past cities of culture, including Derry/Londonderry and Liverpool, as well as in Hull. It is estimated that being next year's city of culture will deliver a £60 million boost to Hull's local economy in that year alone. The city has seen investments of more than £1 billion since winning the city of culture title in 2013, and thousands of jobs have been created. This is about improving place and about giving a sense of optimism and positivity to a community. It is about strengthening the whole community. We have seen the cultural offer underpin the regeneration of towns and cities across the country from Margate to Newcastle and from Glasgow to Liverpool, and I hope that it will happen in Paisley, too, notwithstanding the result of this competition.

The hon. Gentleman asked some important specific questions, and I can tell him that we will be bringing forward the formal competition for the UK city of

culture 2021, along with guidelines for application, early in the new year. I am delighted that there is such a coalition of support for Paisley's bid, not just from Ulster but from Paolo Nutini and other cultural icons from the town. Ministerial colleagues from the Scotland Office, including my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, have met representatives of Renfrewshire Council to hear about their vision for Paisley and their bid to be the UK city of culture. This is the third UK city of culture competition and it promises to be incredibly exciting. I am delighted that Phil Redmond has agreed to continue as the chair of the panel for the 2021 competition. He brings a wealth of experience from previous competitions. I am sure that Paisley will engage in the formal process once it starts in the new year.

I wish the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues at the council and elsewhere well. I hope that the UK city of culture competition can bring our country together and provide the anchor for regeneration and redevelopment, for a sense of community and for a strengthened sense of place. I hope that he will play his part as we take this forward. There is only one thing that I am duty bound to deny him. I cannot give him the answer that he seeks. I cannot announce today that Paisley will win the competition, not least because other towns and cities, including in Scotland, are planning to apply. I look forward to the SNP meetings when those various plans are discussed. I can tell him, however, that it will be an open, fair, free and frank competition with towns and cities from right across the UK applying. In the past, the competition has brought the power to transform cities and towns, and I hope that it can continue to do so. I am really excited to see what the next step in that journey will bring in 2021.

7.45 pm

*House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).*

## Westminster Hall

Wednesday 30 November 2016

[MIKE GAPES *in the Chair*]

### Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme

9.30 am

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the seasonal agricultural workers scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. It is also a pleasure to see other colleagues here today, including members of the new all-party group for fruit and vegetable farming, of which I am the chair. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise British growers' concerns about recruiting workers in the coming years. I will focus my comments on the fruit and vegetable industry, but I emphasise that a flexible, seasonal workforce is vital for other parts of the food and farming industry, such as sheep and poultry farming. The industry as a whole is worth more than £100 billion to the nation's economy. Within that, horticulture is worth £3 billion. Fruit and vegetable farmers have a vital role to play in making us all healthier.

As the Minister knows, I represent the beautiful constituency of Faversham and Mid Kent in the heart of the garden of England. When I drive from Headcorn on one side of my constituency to Faversham and the surrounding villages on the other, I see fields full of great British fruit. Depending on the season, there are strawberries, raspberries, blackcurrants, apples, pears, cherries and plums. Apart from growing healthy local food, fruit and vegetable farmers are part of the fabric of rural life. British growers employ thousands of people across the food and drink sector, look after the environment and contribute to the local and national economy, but they are facing tough times. They are worried about the speed of the introduction of the national living wage, face uncertainty over our future relationship with Europe and struggle with falling farm-gate prices and declining profitability. While recent yields have been good and the volume of strawberries sold in the UK has increased dramatically, around half of fruit farms are making less than a 2% margin and fruit farmers' incomes have fallen by 43% over the past five years.

From speaking to local farmers, I know that opinions were split over Brexit, but one thing that all growers are worried about is access to labour, particularly since our decision to leave the European Union. The horticulture industry needs thousands of seasonal workers every year to pick and pack their produce. The British Growers Association estimates that the horticulture industry employed 80,000 seasonal workers this year and forecasts that that need will increase to 95,000 by 2019. The vast majority of those seasonal workers come from the European Union, and they do demanding work hand-picking fruit and packing it into punnets with care and speed. We should put on record the fact that we welcome those seasonal workers to Britain and are grateful for their contribution to our economy. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] It is getting harder for farmers to recruit seasonal workers. The National Farmers Union's end of season labour survey found that in 2015, nearly a third

of growers had experienced problems recruiting workers. Some 69% of growers expect the situation to get worse by 2018.

**Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): I, too, represent an area with a large number of horticulture businesses, including fruit farms, soft fruit and glasshouses. We have a big food production sector, too. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need action immediately? The old seasonal agricultural workers scheme worked extremely well before 2013. We need a trial scheme to be brought in as soon as possible.

**Helen Whately:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend about the need to bring something in soon. My farmers are asking for a new scheme to be trialled as of next year because of the problems they are already experiencing in recruiting workers for next year, but I will come on to that point.

Organisations that recruit seasonal workers, such as AG Recruitment in my constituency, have told me that there are four times fewer people looking for jobs than last year. The NFU surveyed seasonal worker recruitment companies, and nearly half said that between July and September 2016 they were unable to meet the demands of the sectors they were supplying. That compares with nearly 100% being able to recruit enough workers in January, February and March this year. One farmer in my constituency, Tim Chambers, has told me that normally he would expect around 80% of his workers to ask for a place next season as they leave. So far this year, it has been only 50%. David Figgis, another local farmer, says that compared with last year the number of seasonal workers he has been able to recruit to start in the new year has halved. There is already a problem recruiting workers, before we have even left the European Union.

**Mr Julian Brazier** (Canterbury) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the excellent speech she is making. It chimes exactly with what I am hearing from growers in my patch. May I add that seasonal workers exactly fit the Government's immigration policy, because the controlled environment that growers and farmers provide ensures that these are people who come and go, having done an excellent job in between?

**Helen Whately:** My hon. Friend is completely right about that, and I will come on to that point. Under the previous scheme, we know that the vast majority of seasonal workers went home after working. It is not a question of immigration.

Coming back to the current problem of recruiting workers, one issue is that the falling pound means that wages sent home are worth less than before. It is a fact that EU workers are feeling a lot less welcome, and many of these workers have a choice as to where they work. They do not have to come and work in the UK; they are in demand across the whole European Union. Another farmer in my constituency, Simon Elworthy, has told me that there is a genuine risk of British fruit going unpicked next year because of a shortage of labour.

**Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): Like other Members, this issue affects parts of my constituency. The west Lancashire part grows a lot of vegetables. Will my hon. Friend note that when we met the NFU, it said that it was not just the UK that was reliant on migrant

[*Seema Kennedy*]

labour? We need to put paid to that myth that all the workers could be UK-grown—all OECD countries are reliant on labour from outside their borders to pick fruit and vegetables.

**Helen Whately:** My hon. Friend is completely right about other OECD nations. I will mention other countries that have seasonal agricultural workers schemes for exactly that reason in a moment.

Another point that has been made by several of my local farmers is that because of the shortage of labour, there is a risk that British fruit farmers may go out of business. I mentioned how tight their margins are, but if we add to that an inability to pick all the produce because of a labour shortage, they will struggle to stay in business. One consequence is that we will probably see the cost of British fruit go up. That will happen just at the point when we want to improve our balance of trade. Fruit is a sector where I would argue we are among the best—and perhaps are the best—in the world. I suspect that my colleagues who, like me, have strawberry growers in their constituencies agree that you cannot beat a great British strawberry. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] The noise around the room suggests that there is consensus on that point. Despite that high quality, there is a risk that we may see British produce replaced by imports. What an enormous shame that would be. It would clearly not be a good thing economically.

**David Simpson** (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. I am sure she will agree that it is not just about the farmers struggling on workers or prices, but the processors that process the fruit or vegetables. In Northern Ireland, some of those factories are dependent on people from other countries, who can make up 40% and 60% of their workforce.

**Helen Whately:** The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. I am focusing my comments on pickers, because that is the most visible part of the supply chain in my constituency, but there are hundreds and thousands of workers involved in the whole supply chain—between the plant and the table, so to speak—including large numbers of packers, processors and all that. The whole supply chain is affected.

**Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. The issue is not only about processing in factories. In my constituency of Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk, a big farming area, up to 95% of factory workers are migrants. The issue is not only about fruit and veg, but about bacon and so on. Beyond that, the jobs cannot necessarily be done by my own constituents. I have only 635 at the moment who are looking for work. That is a big problem, too.

**Helen Whately:** My hon. Friend rightly refers to the large number of people working in the supply chain. Most of us—I know this is the case in my constituency—do not have many people looking for work.

Farmers have told me how their EU workers are genuinely worried at the moment about their legal rights to be in the UK. There are also concerns about their

safety following reports of attacks on migrant workers. I hope the Minister will reiterate that the status of EU workers in the UK remains unchanged. It would be helpful to communicate that clearly to EU workers in the UK to make absolutely sure that they feel welcome and understand that legally they are allowed to remain and work in the UK while we are in the European Union.

The recent referendum result was decisive and, rightly, the Government plan to negotiate a Brexit deal that controls free movement. However, that creates a challenge for an industry that relies on seasonal migrant labour largely from the European Union. This is where the Government may be able to help. I want the Minister to look into piloting a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme, known as SAWS, for 2017 next year.

We used to have a seasonal agricultural workers scheme until 2013, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) has mentioned. Similar schemes exist in other OECD countries, including New Zealand, Canada, the US and Australia. Organisations from the NFU and the Fruit Advisory Services to the Migrant Advisory Committee agree that our old seasonal agricultural workers scheme worked well, as my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier) mentioned. SAWS had robust entry and exit checks, which meant that more than 98% of those who came to work in the UK returned home when their work was complete. For that reason, those coming to Britain under SAWS did not count towards immigration figures. This debate on SAWS should not be seen as part of a wider debate on immigration. It is very much about the workforce for a specific sector.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and I congratulate her on securing this debate. On the seasonal workers who return home after they have worked here, whom she has mentioned several times, it is obviously the case that they are able to secure employment here more easily and more readily than is the case closer to home in their own nation states. As in so many other issues relevant to the Brexit negotiations, their countries benefit from the moneys that they earn here and return to their own nation states to spend, so it is not a one-way system; it is a two-way process that should benefit farmers in the UK and the workers' countries of origin as well.

**Helen Whately:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. On the new scheme that we would like to pilot, we would expect it to include all the positives of the old scheme: oversight by the Home Office; checks on arrival and departure; restrictions on the length of placement; and independently accredited standards.

People often ask, “Why can't British farmers employ British labour to do all the work? Why do we look to recruit people from overseas?” I have brought this up with farmers in my constituency. I know that they and many others have tried to recruit locally, and it is possible to recruit small numbers locally. I held a jobs fair in Maidstone a couple of months ago. Representatives were there from the local fruit farms and they recruited workers on that day. However, the problem, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), is that there simply are not enough

people looking for work. It is almost a downside of the very low unemployment rate that we have, which overall is clearly a good thing, but the fact is that there is not a swathe of people looking for work.

**Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point, and I refer Members to my declaration of interest. On a good labour supply, horticultural farmers and producers often plan 10 years ahead, so they are planning for well into the 2020s at the moment. For them to plan, they need a good labour supply and Government policy to deliver that, or they will not invest now for the longer term.

**Helen Whately**: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the investment decisions made in the farming sector where plans are made years in advance. It takes a long time for fruit plants to produce a crop, so farmers have to plan ahead and they need to feel secure about their future workforce. There is a short-term and a long-term problem, so reassurance is needed.

On the scale of the problem, in the picking season, farmers in my constituency need thousands of extra workers. A single large farm needs about 1,000 extra workers in the peak picking season. Across my constituency, between 5,000 and 10,000 seasonal workers are needed, and it is a pretty long season because strawberries can now be grown from March to October. However, in my constituency, only a few hundred people are on jobseeker's allowance, so there is a big gap between the scale of the demand and the number of people looking for work. There is a real problem of numbers.

The days of fruit picking as a holiday job for students are long gone. We not only have a very long season, but supermarkets put enormous pressures on farmers, demanding absolutely impeccable quality and consistency of product that has to be available at high speed to meet demand. That involves picking at a very fast rate, which requires workers who are experienced and physically fit. Although the work is seasonal, workers do it for a significant period of time, often year after year. They cannot just show up and do the work for a couple of weeks. That is a myth that I want to debunk.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on a concise debate. I have similar issues with growers in the vale of Evesham in my constituency. On the supermarkets that she mentioned, does she agree that they have an important role to play on pricing in their negotiations with farmers, because the price point is another pressure on many of our farmers?

**Helen Whately**: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Supermarkets clearly have an important role to play on price. We want the price to reflect the cost of production. However, there is a balance to strike. If prices go up significantly, will British consumers still buy the product at the same rate? It is not an easy nut to crack. I will do my utmost to make sure I am concise, as my hon. Friend commented, and I am coming to the end of my speech.

Although some say that we should solve the problem through British recruitment, there is another approach that I have sometimes heard proposed, which is that we should solve the problem through mechanisation. These

days all fruit and vegetables could be farmed mechanically using robots without a substantial workforce. There have definitely been significant advances in mechanisation. Lots of processes are now much more automated and mechanised. The horticulture industry is investing in mechanisation. I recently heard about a machine that has been developed for the robotic picking of strawberries, but that is some way off. It may be a decade or so before that becomes a real prospect.

**Mike Weir** (Angus) (SNP): The hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) made a point about price. Many of the machines are extremely costly and investing in them will not solve the problem of the prices paid for produce. The machines are possibly a dead end.

**Helen Whately**: The hon. Gentleman has made exactly the point that I was coming to. Mechanised fruit picking for many fruits is some way off, and it would be expensive, particularly in the early years. Many parts of fruit farming are capital intensive, so we could introduce new technologies only gradually; otherwise the product would be completely unaffordable. It will take some time, so he is absolutely right.

I will briefly repeat my requests to the Minister. Will he reiterate that the status of EU workers in the UK remains unchanged and emphasise that farm workers in the UK should and must feel welcomed, because we value their contribution to the economy? Will he look at issuing some guidance to farm workers confirming their legal rights to remain in the UK?

Will the Minister look at trialling a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme from next year? That would be welcomed across the agricultural sector, especially by fruit and vegetable farmers in my constituency who want to be able to carry on producing great, fresh and healthy British fruit and vegetables.

9.50 am

**Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on securing this very important debate and on the way she presented her case. As she did so well, there is no need to go through the statistics again on why we need such a scheme. However, I underline the points she made about the need to plan ahead, given the challenges faced by the agricultural sector in particular. We know that labour is still at the heart of agriculture in the UK and we need to consider the issue in terms of other agricultural sectors, not just horticulture, such as livestock and poultry.

I understand the argument from Migration Watch that we need to focus on innovation in industry and that to introduce a seasonal workers scheme would detract from the importance of investing in technology and skilling up the workforce, but I accept the points made by the hon. Lady about the time needed to deliver that kind of step-change in the industry and the difficulties that will be faced. I am confident that the industry will invest and innovate, but as she said, it will take time, and the agricultural sector does not have time when it comes to fulfilling its labour needs in the immediate future and the medium term—because of Brexit. Therefore,

[Angela Smith]

although Migration Watch has a point, that is subsumed by the immediacy of the needs faced by the industry.

The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) made a point about the high levels of employment in some parts of the country—not in all, but in some—that make it genuinely difficult to fulfil the needs of the farming sector. I represent a constituency with farming in the western aspects and unemployment in my constituency is 1.9%. That is perhaps unusual for a Labour constituency, but there is a real challenge for rural areas to fulfil employment needs and it is not always easy for people living in urban areas to travel to the countryside and do that kind of work.

The fact has to be faced that British workers are keen on permanent work and the supply of British workers to work on the land is not what it was. I grew up in an area where every morning women would pile into the Land Rover at the end of the street and go off to work on the land. That no longer happens. My own mother worked on the land in the horticulture sector, on and off over the years when she needed the money. The transitional nature of that work is something that the British workforce nowadays finds difficult to accept and we have to tackle that reality. I know that the National Farmers Union has some ideas on how to tackle that obstacle.

We are where we are and we cannot allow the industry to be damaged by a refusal to face the fact that we need to find labour over the next few years. The impact of Brexit is already being felt by the sector when it comes to labour supply, so I absolutely support the case made by the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent.

The Government have a responsibility seriously to consider the need for a seasonal labour supply scheme for the agricultural sector and to place the need for such a scheme in the context of an overall plan for Brexit. I do not think that we can run away from that argument this morning; it is really important. Agriculture wants certainty from the Government on labour supply over not just the next one or two years but in the medium term; the sector needs certainty on what Brexit is going to look like. It is not just the agricultural sector of course—the financial services sector, manufacturing and every part of our economy need that certainty—but we have to acknowledge that agriculture is very dependent on the European Union for much of its funding and for much of its supply of labour, so it is particularly vulnerable to how the Government respond to Brexit and handle the negotiations for Brexit with Brussels.

Are we going to have a Canada-type deal? Are we going to have Canada-plus? Are we going to have a deal along the lines enjoyed by Norway or Switzerland, or are we going to stay in the single market? The Government need to start answering those questions. Are we going to conclude the negotiations in the two years, once article 50 has been triggered, or are we going to need a transitional deal?

It is not just agriculture that needs certainty. The Country Land and Business Association points out that rural tourism is also very dependent on seasonal labour:

“Tourism Alliance data notes that one in four workers within the tourism sector are non-UK nationals. As such, the decision to leave the EU and the potential to limit the availability of a non-UK workforce will undoubtedly be of significant concern to these businesses.”

The evidence shows that urban tourism can stay open to some extent through the winter, perhaps with more limited opening, but rural tourism tends to close its doors. There is a real challenge here for the Government. We really need some certainty from the Government on what their plan for Brexit is going to look like.

Very good points have been made on the case and need for investment in the farming sector and for security in relation to labour supply if we are to give the agricultural sector—farmers—the confidence to invest. I agree strongly with those points. Certainty is everything in business—agriculture is no different from any other part of the economy in that respect—but the point can be made more strategically. If farmers and other rural businesses are to have the confidence to invest for the long term and to innovate and invest in the technology that enables them to become more profitable in the long term, they need not only the scheme under discussion this morning but a clear sense of the strategic direction being pursued by the Government on Brexit. I hope that the Minister will address that point; farmers up and down the country really want to know where Britain is going on Brexit. It is of huge importance to them and to the farming sector in my constituency and I look forward to the Minister’s response.

9.59 am

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on securing this important debate.

I welcome the opportunity to acknowledge the contribution that seasonal workers make to our rural economy. They are critical to UK agriculture plc. It is worth noting that a small number of seasonal workers are British citizens who go to work in the fields in the summer and autumn months to increase their pay packets, but the vast majority are non-UK nationals. I will focus my contribution on them, because they play a very large part in the north Cornwall workforce during the summer months.

We are facing a seasonal worker shortage at a time when UK food production may need to increase to meet the country’s needs. I believe that implementing a new seasonal workers permit scheme for non-UK workers would give farming businesses certainty at a time when they need it. Without such a scheme, the UK could be at a significant disadvantage, as many other developed countries around the world have a seasonal workforce. At this crucial time when we are withdrawing from the European Union, we need to give the agricultural sector certainty about future workforce planning. Farmers and other rural businesses need assurances about the labour market and about how any future schemes will operate, so they are confident that they will have that role in the long term as the UK removes itself from the European Union.

It is also worth looking at an accommodation strategy to house seasonal workers in the summer months. A lot of farm-based businesses in north Cornwall have raised the problem of accommodation with me. Having such a policy would mean that people coming to Britain to work knew they had somewhere to stay before they agreed to come. A seasonal scheme would also benefit other rural and coastal businesses, which face similar

increases in trade throughout the summer months. Tourism Alliance data show that one in four workers in the tourism sector, in which north Cornwall plays a huge part during the summer months, are non-UK nationals. A dedicated strategy to meet increasing pressures during the year for farmers and the tourism sector would be welcome.

Prior to 2014, there was a quota-based seasonal workers system that enabled farmers to recruit temporarily from overseas. It took a pragmatic approach to labour, and it was controlled through the UK Border Agency and managed by contracted operators. I ask the Minister to consider learning from what worked back then and to implement a strategy to check workers in and out. It should be overseen by the Home Office and managed by licensed operators, and it should not just support EU citizens but be open to the wider world. I ask the Minister to consider an accommodation strategy to cope with temporary population changes, and a 12-month permit in conjunction with other industries, such as food processing or tourism, that would enable us to offer a full year's work to committed non-UK workers.

This debate has been a great opportunity to put the farming case for seasonal permits. I look forward to the Minister's response.

10.3 am

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): As always, it is a pleasure to speak in this Chamber. I congratulate the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) for bringing forward this issue and for comprehensively setting the scene for us all to try to follow. My contribution will obviously be from a Northern Ireland perspective. My plea, like the hon. Lady's, is for us to help our seasonal workers.

I hail from Strangford, and my constituency has some of the finest agricultural land in the entire United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I represent the home of the trademarked Comber spud, which is a treat to any palate across the United Kingdom. Nobody who has had a Comber spud will ever want any other kind of spud—I say that with great respect to Members who will probably make a plea for their own areas.

The land in Strangford is so fertile that we can sometimes have three harvests in a year, as opposed to the two that farmers in other areas of the Province have. We have some of the lowest levels of rainfall—I hope I do not tempt providence by saying that, but that is what the stats say and they have been accumulated over a number of years. That is wonderful news for our farmers, who struggle to make ends meet and put food on all our tables. However, as my mother used to say to me when disciplining me for misbehaving as a young boy, "You reap what you sow." That is a solid principle. The harvest must come in or it is all for naught. If farmers do not have the labour to bring in the harvest, the result is clear: a waste of food and money. That is unconscionable.

**Jo Churchill:** Is not the point also that the industry is constantly pushing the boundaries of innovation and increasing productivity, thereby fulfilling what the Government are asking it to do by improving production and productivity? If we are not careful, we will constrain the one thing it really needs, which is a decent seasonal workforce.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Lady for those very wise words. I am sure the Minister is listening intently. I fully endorse what she said, and I am sure others do too. Governments have encouraged the agricultural sector to grow, and with that growth has come the complications for seasonal workers, which we are debating today. I hope that point is taken on board.

When there was a labour shortage in 2008, horticultural businesses lost an average of £140,000 as crops were left unpicked in the fields and retailers were left to try to fill their shelves with imported produce. We are not too old to remember 2008 and the peculiar difficulties that farmers and retailers faced. A shortage of labour puts at risk horticultural businesses, which contribute £3 billion to the UK economy and employ about 37,000 people on a permanent basis. We must address that issue, because we are possibly facing the same scenario again. I know that from my constituency, and I am sure the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent and other hon. Members who have spoken and will speak later will endorse that view.

The briefing outlines the situation that we are currently in. I declare an interest: I am a member of the Ulster Farmers Union, the sister organisation of the NFU, of which I am also a member. The NFU 2015 end-of-season labour survey has shown for the first time since the seasonal agriculture workers scheme closed that growers are starting to struggle to source an adequate supply of seasonal workers to meet their needs. Some 29% of respondents stated that they experience problems in 2015, and 66% said that they predict that the situation will worsen by 2018. That cannot be allowed to happen. This debate is an opportunity to address that problem at an early stage, and I hope the Minister and the Government will do so.

Those data were collected pre-referendum, with full freedom of movement within the European Union. Since the referendum, labour providers have reported a marked drop-off in interest from EU workers in seasonal work. That was demonstrated by the results of the NFU labour providers survey, which shows that between July and September 2016, 47% of labour providers said they were unable to meet the demands of the sectors they were supplying. That is almost half; it is a colossal figure. That compares with the 100% of labour providers who said they were able to recruit sufficient numbers of workers during January, February and March this year.

That is not good news for our farmers, for our constituents or for us in this place. Many crops produced in the United Kingdom are seasonal, which creates a structural problem that requires the annual recruitment of sufficient seasonal workers. Those jobs are fluid and flexible, but they do not provide the stable, permanent wage that people need. I say this gently: farmers do not want to undercut wages by bringing people in to do the work; the fact is that they cannot get enough labour to do the work at the right time.

I was taken by the figures that the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent mentioned—I think she referred to 1,000 workers for one section of land. Think about that for a second. That is 1,000 workers who have to be housed and looked after. That is a colossal figure, and it is for just one place, not the whole of the United Kingdom. That puts where we are into perspective.

In my constituency, we have Willowbrook and Mash Direct, which are local agri-food producers. I know how hard they work to encourage local people—those at

[*Jim Shannon*]

home—to work for them, but the reality is that a large portion of their workforce is not from Northern Ireland. In one of those factories the figure is 40%, and in the other it is 60%. We need seasonal workers in Strangford, across Northern Ireland and throughout the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Those companies could not operate without a seasonal workforce, and I know they are not alone. The NFU said that the industry currently uses about 80,000 seasonal workers, and that figure is expected to rise to 95,000 by 2021. The projected figures show that we need more seasonal workers; we must not decrease the number we already have. A flexible workforce is needed across food and farming—an industry worth £108 billion to the nation's economy. The input of agri-food, therefore, makes a massive contribution to the economy, as anyone who represents an agri-food sector or constituency knows—those who do not probably know from the facts and figures.

Workers from across the skills spectrum are needed throughout the industry—for example, in livestock and poultry businesses to process and pack meat. Cereal farmers need workers to weed crops and drive complex machinery. Farming is not as simple as it was years ago. There is more complexity to it today, and bureaucracy as well—there is a certain level of regulation to meet to move products throughout the world. Dairy farmers need workers with high levels of animal husbandry skills. I am old enough to remember the small milking ventures in my constituency, because I had many friends in farming. The systems were easy to work with then, but with all the complexity and technology today, people need a degree to work in a milking parlour.

The UK is not alone in the need to outsource help; Canada, the US and other countries do the same. My own son applied to go to Australia for a year on a work permit visa to see the country while working on different farms—he fell in with a girl, which of course put an end to all that, but that happens sometimes in this world, so he did not take up the opportunity in Australia. That scheme appeals to many young people wishing to take a gap year, and the Australian Government have made it easy for young people to do it, at great benefit to farmers and their economy. It is an opportunity to see other parts of the world, and to learn a wee bit more about farming and how people do things there.

The scenario is clear. We once had an extremely successful quota-based scheme for seasonal agricultural workers, which enabled farmers to recruit temporary overseas workers to carry out crop growing, harvesting, on-farm processing and packing. I have been informed that it was robust and effective, controlled by the UK Border Agency and managed by contracted operators. It has provided a pool of labour for the horticulture industry for the past 60 years. Exceptionally high rates of return to home countries meant that the seasonal agricultural workers scheme was never an immigration issue.

We must bring something similar into play as a matter of urgency, and that is why the debate today is so relevant to our times. The NFU has called on the Government in 2017 to trial a substantial fixed-term work permit scheme for agriculture and horticulture

targeted at non-EU workers. That is what the farmers in my constituency and I are calling for in today's debate. This country knows how to carry out such a scheme, because we have had one before. We only need to bring it back and update what is necessary.

The NFU has said that a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme could include “all of the positives” of the previous SAWS arrangements, but with “new criteria” that could include oversight by the Home Office—UK Visas and Immigration; I hope the Minister will respond to this point—management by licenced operators, and checks on arrival and departure for scheme workers. The scheme could be open to workers from anywhere in the world, have independently accredited scheme standards and include restrictions on the length of the placement period.

I ask the Minister gently but firmly to indicate how willing the Government are to take into account where we are, and to address the needs before we have to address a crisis. We should go from this debate in Westminster Hall and proactively put in the time and effort needed to bring a pilot scheme into play by 2017. That is what we are all asking for, and I look to the Minister for leadership. We need help, our constituents need help, and we need to make progress, as the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent said, to ensure that our agriculture sector can grow even more, producing more jobs, and so that great product, the Comber spud, can continue to be available for palates and plates throughout the United Kingdom and further afield.

10.13 am

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am delighted to be following so many illustrious hon. Members and, in particular, to be speaking in a debate called by my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), who has done an awful lot in the 18 months that we have been in this place to represent the farming and agricultural communities that overlap our areas so much.

It is a huge privilege to be at this important debate, because the question it asks is fundamental and, in many ways, will shape British agriculture not only for the next season, or even the next two or three seasons, but for the next generation. The danger, however, is that we could see British agriculture going from being an industrial heart of innovation and technological improvement, and from providing taste explosions such as those from the strawberries my hon. Friend was describing, to a desert—perhaps simply a commuter belt of dormitory villages.

The question is therefore fundamental to what we want our countryside to be in the next 20 or 30 years. I am pleased that my hon. Friend spoke with such passion and eloquence, and that so many voices from around the United Kingdom—I am sure we will hear from Scotland shortly—are speaking out, because it is not simply a matter for the garden of England, which we all know is the most beautiful part of the kingdom, and it is not simply a matter for soft fruit farmers; it is a matter, as everyone has mentioned in different ways today, of migrant labour in the different areas.

We must get the system right, because if we do, we will have migrant labourers who are able to come, perhaps for a period of a few weeks or months, depending

on whether they are here for tourism, fruit picking or other areas of the agricultural industry, and then to go. They will take their revenue and go home, continue their education, rejoin their families, or whatever it might be. If we get it wrong, we will have a real problem, because either we will have to close down large swathes of British agriculture, and perhaps swathes of tourism, or we will have done something that we did not intend, which is to create permanent migrants. The alternative to temporary migration when the economy is such a strong draw, as our growing economy is after six years of tough decisions, is that migration becomes permanent.

Communities might be complaining about a few thousand fruit pickers every now and again, but the pressure from people coming with their kids and families will be quite different. We should recognise that we are talking about a fundamental question for the United Kingdom industry. If we are to get this right, it must be a temporary migration scheme open to many other industries, not just agriculture. Such a scheme would open up an enormous opportunity for the UK to grow flexibly and create space for innovation.

One of the big problems for companies is that hiring workers is great, but firing them is not. No one wants to lay people off, in particular as companies innovate and come up with new ideas and new technologies, and as the agricultural sector revolutionises how we grow food in this country—as it has done, let us not forget, for the past 300 years, because we invented so many of the great reforms on land that allowed people to leave the soil and go to the cities, which led to the urban and economic regeneration of the United Kingdom that enabled us to become the powerhouse of the world. Those innovations are carrying on, but if we force people to have workers on permanent contracts, innovation will be discouraged, because the economic and emotional cost of moving people on and letting them go creates a drag. For an innovative sector such as agriculture, what we want and really need is temporary workers. They fill the seasonal hole and they allow innovation.

We can get this right, because here in the UK we are combining so many wonderful things. I joked a little about the garden of England perhaps becoming a desert, but the truth is that it is not one. It is already a centre of innovation, and what people often forget—I know that the Minister will not, because he has looked into this carefully—is that agriculture and technology work incredibly closely together.

Were the Minister to visit Kent, he would be very welcome at East Malling research centre, which is at the forefront of agricultural innovation. Not only are the people there developing new forms of apples and strawberries—some even better than the ones grown in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent, however extraordinary that might seem—but they are coming up with innovative ways of using water, so that food can grow in areas where water is very much at a premium, in particular in sub-Saharan Africa. They are also looking at the robotics that my hon. Friend referred to. Those areas are really challenging, but because we are blessed in Kent, we get the two of them working side by side and developing together, and that innovation spreads to the rest of the world.

**Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con):** I am reluctant to interrupt my hon. Friend's fabulous speech, which we are all enjoying, but as a fruit farmer's daughter and a fruit farmer myself, I feel it is imperative to ask whether he agrees that these agricultural workers are a fairly unique breed. They must be both skilled technologically and strong physically. The type of work we ask them to do is unusual, skilled and often back-breaking. As such, they are a group of people who need to be able to move around—perhaps even more than other migrant workforces.

**Tom Tugendhat:** I completely agree. My hon. Friend knows very well that we share a passion for the British apple. As my right hon. and hon. Friends here will know, it is now russet season. May I strongly encourage those who have not had a Kentish russet this season to do so? They are truly the champagne of apples—well, the English champagne of apples. They are the most fantastic product.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent said, we are talking about creating a system—I know the Minister is listening carefully and following the theme of this debate—that allows innovation in the agricultural sector to increase. As a boy in Kent, I did quite a lot of fruit picking, and I know that many other people did that too. My picking was not quite of the standard that my dear friend Marion Regan would require, as I was not packing for Wimbledon, which is where her strawberries go. We used to go as kids to a pick-your-own farm. Of course, we ate half the stuff before it got into the punnet.

Getting the system right would not mean some return to the halcyon days—which have not existed for a long time—of east-end Londoners going hop picking in the summer, because those east-end Londoners, thank God, now have very good jobs and spend their holidays all around the world. I am afraid that the idea that hop picking in Kent is an alternative to Ibiza is simply not credible for large swathes of people. Perhaps it is for some.

The change that we as a nation voted for on 23 June means that we have to reinvent ourselves and remember some old skills. Some of those skills are to do with imagination and creativity, which was the extraordinary thing about the seasonal agricultural workers scheme. Although other OECD countries copied the scheme, it was innovative when it came in. Indeed, extraordinarily, it almost—I do mean almost—still exists. It was last operated in 2013, which is only a few years ago. One of the many organisations that operated it, the Harvesting Opportunities Permit Scheme, or HOPS, stopped only then, and it still runs a recruitment agency for agricultural workers, so it could easily be brought back. We are not talking about a complete redesign; we are talking about switching back to a scheme that worked extremely well until only recently.

None of that will compensate for the many workers deciding not to come because they will take a 10% or 15% pay cut if they are paid in pounds but want to take their money back to parts of the world where they spend in euros, so a new scheme will not be a direct replacement. It will not simply turn on the tap immediately. We must recognise that there are still challenges for farmers, not just in Kent but around the country, but such a scheme will go some way to offering opportunities. If we look at the issue seriously, as I know the Minister

[*Tom Tugendhat*]

will, we will create the flexible scheme that Britain needs, that farming needs and that many of our friends in Europe need.

We are of course about to enter—in some ways, we already have—the toughest negotiations the world has ever seen, on hundreds of lines of Government business, industry, migration and any number of other questions. Everything is to play for. As we started those negotiations, we must demonstrate our good will towards our European neighbours. Whatever people may think about the European Union, we are all friends with our European neighbours, and we must show them that we are open. We must show them again that we are believers in free trade. We created the rule of law and the system of international agreement—that system was created largely in the Chamber not far from here. If we remind them that openness is something that we feel we still share, and that we are not just willing but actually very happy for their young men and women to come and do a significantly better job than I ever did in Kent's strawberry fields and take money home to enrich their own communities, that will go a little way—perhaps not far, but certainly a little way—to showing our good will to our European friends in particular, but also to people around the world. That would be an important gesture, not just for us but for them.

May I briefly sum up and ask the Minister a few questions, which I know he will be delighted to answer? Will he consider introducing a pilot scheme as soon as possible? I mentioned HOPS, which I am sure would be delighted to assist, should the Home Office be willing to engage with it. I am sure that he will not need to give reasons why he will not, so I shall skip over any explanation he might otherwise have given. Will he please collect data from that pilot scheme and share them with Members and groups such as the National Farmers Union, which has done a lot of work on this issue, and the Country Land and Business Association, which likewise has devoted an awful lot of energy to supporting not only the agricultural sector but all industry in rural areas? That would allow us to evaluate and, yes, to adjust. We do not pretend for a moment that the first scheme that will roll out will be perfect. It will not be, but we would be happy to work with him on that.

**Jo Churchill:** Does my hon. Friend agree that as the industry has been so proactive in asking us to have those discussions, it behoves the Government to involve the industry—the NFU, the CLA and so on—in developing the scheme that is most appropriate to service the issues that have come to light during this debate?

**Tom Tugendhat:** My hon. Friend makes an absolutely essential point. Not only does it behove the Government to consult the industry widely because of all the efforts it has made, but we simply will not get a very good answer unless we do that, because the experts are the people who are doing the work, not the ones who are legislating on it. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will be only too willing to meet members of the NFU and the CLA. I remember his willingness to meet all manner of groups in his former occupation as aviation Minister, when he listened carefully to the people of west Kent and came up with absolutely the right answer. We will skip over that.

My last point is this. We have offered evidence that businesses will not survive if they rely solely on UK workers—a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent made extremely well. The farmers in my community need help now. I know that the Government, my hon. Friend the Minister and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural affairs are listening. I urge the Minister to act with a little alacrity, because as my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent said, the season for strawberries is not in June; it is in March.

10.28 am

**Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP):** I am pleased to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on introducing the debate. I am a member of her newly formed all-party parliamentary group, and I look forward to doing much important work in this area.

I represent a constituency that sits in the middle of the Scottish soft fruit and potato areas, and I will concentrate today on soft fruit growers' particular problems with agricultural employment. When I was growing up, I picked strawberries, raspberries and indeed potatoes. Everyone did in those days, but the world has moved on and—dare I say it—the industry is much more professional. Part of the reason for that is the spread of cultivation methods, with different berries now grown—blueberries are an important crop in my area—changes in the industry and the increasing demands of the major supermarkets.

Recent trends show increasing use of polytunnels as against open-field production for growing soft fruit. Indeed the season can now last for up to nine months of the year. This is a vital part of the Scottish economy, particularly for areas such as Angus. The soft fruit sector alone contributed many millions of pounds to the Scottish economy in 2015. The total for the horticultural industry in the UK, as has been said, is over £3.8 billion.

Most of the growers in my area rely, to a greater or lesser extent, on migrant labour. Many previously utilised the SAWS scheme, but since its abandonment they have relied on labour from other EU nations. With the prospect of leaving the EU, the future of those people is uncertain and it would be an utter disaster if we got to the position where they too had to leave the EU, because that would lead to the complete collapse of many of those industries. The NFU has called for an assurance for EU workers already in a position to have the right of residency in the UK, which is a call I heartily support. I know the Minister will give the usual response, but Ministers really have to grapple with that. I appreciate that there are difficulties with our European neighbours, but that is important to the industries and, if it is not dealt with, we face real disaster. Many people have settled in our communities and become an important part of them. It is ridiculous that we cannot assure them that they remain welcome here.

The original SAWS scheme relied principally on young workers, often students. It is a huge pity that the issue of young people coming to work in the UK agricultural sector became tangled up with more general immigration. It is worth noting in passing that it is a two-way street. When I was at university I remember many people went to France to pick grapes, for example. Many of our young people also benefited from those opportunities.

**Tom Tugendhat** *rose*—

**Mike Weir:** I will make some progress, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind. The vast majority of those who came to work in agriculture were here specifically for a short period and always intended to return to their home nation at the end of their visa period. Indeed, as the NFU points out, there was a 98% return rate. Unfortunately, as in many other areas, there is often a serious collision between perception and reality.

Under the previous scheme, some 21,250 visas were issued in its last year of operation for workers to come to the UK for periods of between five weeks and six months. In the last year of the scheme, I was told by Angus Growers, a producers' group that covers Angus and the surrounding areas, of about 2,000 people whom it employed at the peak of the season the majority came through the SAWS scheme. It now employs many people from other EU nations.

It is worth pointing out the benefits to the UK of young people coming here. They not only earn money that they can take back to their home nation but learn English and gain a good impression of our country from the people they meet. That is an exercise in soft power and, if we end up outside the EU, we will have to look seriously at our relations with other parts of Europe and the world.

According to "Rural Scotland in Focus 2016", launched this week by the Scottish Government, three quarters of Scotland's migrant farm work is undertaken in Angus and Perth and Kinross, with the vast majority in the horticultural sector. Those areas—my area and adjoining areas—which are the heart of the Scottish fruit sector, rely on those workers. They should not be seen just as a form of cheap labour. Many companies have tried to recruit local workers and, as has been said by Members who are no longer in their place, one of the problems is that there are not sufficient local unemployed people to take up such posts.

**Tom Tugendhat:** A Conservative economic success.

**Mike Weir:** It is the Scottish Government's success—the hon. Gentleman is getting it wrong. There are many more migrant workers employed in my area than there are unemployed people, and not all of those who are unemployed are capable of the labour required, because picking raspberries, strawberries and potatoes is not easy labour—I speak from experience a long time ago. Indeed, my local authority, in conjunction with growers, set up a berry scheme with the aim of providing opportunities for the long-term unemployed that had some success but not enough to take the place of those coming for work. A seasonal workers scheme is therefore necessary.

If we are unable to get sufficient seasonal workers to come, that would have a devastating effect on the local industry. I stress that horticulture provides jobs not just in picking but in the whole infrastructure behind that, from administration, processing and packing to transporting the fruit which, by its nature, has to be done quickly and efficiently. That provides many full-time jobs for local people as well as for seasonal migrant labour.

As has been said, there are real concerns that fruit and vegetables could remain unharvested if growers cannot obtain sufficient labour. The growers and agricultural

industry in general are aware of the issues that surround the use of migrant labour, but they rightly point out, as I said, that many of them are students who come to this country, and there are genuine benefits to the UK from their coming and going back.

One issue that has not been touched on is what happens if the labour is not here? Some larger growers have already invested in farms in eastern Europe and are likely to invest more there. There has been talk of the great British strawberry, but unless we tackle this issue our export markets may disappear as that becomes the great Polish strawberry or the great Romanian strawberry. It is in our interests.

The National Farmers Union, with the support of horticulture and fruit growers, has come up with proposals for a renewed SAWS scheme, which it hopes would match its demands and tackle concerns about the use of migrant labour. In a rare degree of unanimity in the Chamber, I think we are all supportive of that, and perhaps of a trial, but, if the Minister is to go down the road of a trial, may we have one that takes in all parts of the United Kingdom, unlike for the post-study work visa, which, despite Scottish concerns, was for only a few English universities?

I make no bones about the fact that I firmly believe all existing EU workers should have the right to remain, but the NFU proposal is a sensible and genuine attempt to come up with a scheme that would meet Government objectives and allow this valuable industry to have the labour it requires. I urge the Minister, along with everyone else in the Chamber, to give that serious consideration.

10.37 am

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on her passionate defence of her position. We would not want the pricing model of the British strawberry to go the same way as Toblerone or Marmite—or, worse still, for it to be outsourced entirely. The discussion has highlighted the often overlooked yet crucial role of economic migrants in the rural economy and shown that we need carefully managed migration policies if we are to ensure that we will not be worse off as we voyage into these uncharted post-Brexit waters.

Whatever side of the argument we are on in that debate, we must all agree that a thriving agricultural sector is vital to the strength of our rural economy. The figures I have said that 302,000 people work in agriculture and that the total income from farming, although it is declining, was in excess of £3.75 billion in 2015. We have heard slightly different figures in the debate, but agriculture is the lifeblood of hundreds of communities up and down the country. Within that, the horticultural sector is an important plank of British agriculture. It contributes £3 billion to the UK economy. However, the nature of the life cycle of crops and fruits means that inevitably it relies on seasonal workers. Figures in the *Financial Times* yesterday put the seasonal workforce at 80,000, 98% of whom are from the EU.

I certainly do not want those jobs to disappear. It is of course right that British people should be encouraged to work in agriculture, but realistically the seasonal nature of much of the work means that it will be difficult to achieve that in the short term. As we have

[Dr Rupa Huq]

heard, there are gaps that need to be plugged. My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) eloquently dealt with the arguments of Migration Watch, and the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent described the difficulties with mechanical fruit picking. How do we resolve all that?

Obviously, agricultural workers, whether from the EU or of any other origin, should be allowed on UK farms seasonally, or permanently, and the Government need to work out a system that would guarantee a stable and predictable flow of farm workers. Most developed countries have some sort of temporary migration programme; it is not unusual. I believe that they even have one in Poland, in which they take workers from Moldova and Ukraine. It is not a bizarre idea; we have had it for a long time in this country. Economists value such systems and say that there is a triple benefit—I will not say triple lock; that is a bit controversial at the moment. There is a benefit to the host state, because the labour gaps are plugged; the system is good for the state that the migrants come from, because it does not engender the brain drain that we hear of.

**Mrs Helen Grant** (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): As the shadow Minister knows, there has been a terrible increase in hate crime since the referendum, 85% of which is race-related. Does she agree that that disgraceful behaviour not only threatens our identity and values but causes many overseas workers to reconsider whether to choose this country for work?

**Dr Huq:** The hon. Lady anticipates a later part of my speech. I was going to refer to yesterday's *Financial Times*, which reported that a chap called John Hardman, of HOPS Labour Solutions of Kenilworth, 20% of whose recruitment is for agriculture jobs—I think it is an employment agency—said:

“Post-Brexit, Romanians and Bulgarians have had the view that Britain is a xenophobic, anti-European place and that they can go to Germany, Holland and Belgium, with better conditions and earn better wages, since the devaluation of the pound has reduced their net income by 15-20 per cent.”

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent and other hon. Members alluded to such conditions. We do not want that to happen; it is a good point.

The hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir) pointed out that for the migrants themselves there are many benefits, including those to do with language. Such schemes are seen as good, and we had one from 1948 to 2013. Originally, the point of it was the opportunity for cultural exchange, with young people in war-torn Europe gaining the opportunity to contribute to the reconstruction of its economies—including Britain's—by offering seasonal labour. In 2009, 21,250 agricultural workers were given short-term permits under the scheme. All of those were from Bulgaria and Romania, as Britain had started to use the scheme to ensure that citizens from countries newly admitted to the European economic area could contribute to filling those identified labour shortages. Along the way there have been adaptations; under the Labour Government in 2005 the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, which we established to give trade unions an effective voice in the prevention of exploitation of tied labour, was incorporated.

There has been a large degree of consensus in the debate that the scheme was a sensible, managed and welcoming migration policy, but in 2013 the Government decided to scrap it—quite controversially. Conservative MPs for Kent and Essex constituencies voiced concerns at the time. Fast forwarding, yesterday's *Financial Times* contains some alarming things. The NFU, which many hon. Members have mentioned, is publishing a new survey later in the week. The article reports its worries that

“the supply of pickers for late-season crops such as potatoes and brassicas—cabbages, cauliflowers and turnips—was only enough to meet 67 per cent of the industry's needs.”

There is a shortfall there. The article also states:

“In a letter to Robert Goodwill, the immigration minister, dated November 10 and seen by the FT...the NFU's deputy president, warned: ‘There is a clear emerging labour crisis in the industry’ and ‘a very real risk that British fruit and vegetables will be left to rot unpicked in British fields in 2017.’”

We do not want to get to that point, obviously.

To some extent there were warnings in 2013. The British Growers Association said that scrapping the scheme would have

“a significant and damaging impact on investment and production decisions affecting the UK with immediate effect”.

The NFU, again, also gave a warning at that time. Even the Government's Migration Advisory Committee predicted:

“In the medium- and longer-term, farmers are likely to experience increasing difficulties in sourcing the required level of seasonal labour from the EU (including the UK) labour market.”

I was speaking in a debate in this same 9.30 slot a week ago; I am having an attack of déjà vu. It was a debate on the effect of Brexit on higher education. Some of the questions are enduring ones about, short term, allowing people in and out. These are not migratory flows that would have a long-term impact. There has been an unusual level of consensus in the debate; I do not think that anyone has argued against bringing the scheme back temporarily.

Researchers from the University of Sussex have found that the working conditions of agricultural workers have not changed in any substantial way since the closure of the scheme. As a result, attracting sufficient British workers to the task is becoming increasingly challenging. Those claims are worrying and, given the post-Brexit climate that we are heading into, they need to be properly addressed and considered. The Government need to work with employers and unions to see what impact the scrapping of the scheme has had on jobs, wages and working conditions.

The NFU is calling for the reintroduction of a migration scheme for agricultural workers to be piloted, with a particular focus on students, as the hon. Member for Angus mentioned. Perhaps the Minister could at least commit to offering a proper, comprehensive assessment of the impact of scrapping the policy. Has there been an increase in labour productivity in the sector that will feed through to higher wages? Are jobs disappearing in agricultural firms? As those firms will be unable to produce goods without access to labour, it would be good to have a level-headed assessment.

The Government cannot say that they were not warned. Anyone who hopes that leaving the single market will allow the Government to liberalise migration policy in

the agricultural sector will be as disappointed as the curry chefs who were told by the International Development Secretary that, if we voted to leave—

**Mr Brazier:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Dr Huq:** I am in the last minute of my speech, and I should prefer to wind it up: my apologies.

The Government aim to reduce immigration to the tens of thousands whatever the economic costs, and insist on the mantra “Brexit means Brexit”, even though we do not know exactly what that means. They include student numbers in the calculations, despite the overwhelming evidence that the public do not want that. They seem to have boxed themselves into a corner, because they will not be able to liberalise immigration in a sector when the economic case and rationale are clear.

I know the Minister from his previous incarnation. He is a very reasonable chap. I had a win for my constituents because of his actions; so I hope he can do the same thing today. We have seen that dogmatic quotas and targets can result in counter-productive policies. I hope that he will listen to the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent about having just a temporary trial scheme next year and about seasonal agriculture workers being at the forefront of the negotiations.

10.49 am

**The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) for initiating this important and informative debate, and I congratulate her on her elevation to the chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group for fruit and vegetable farming. She presented her case with her customary eloquence and passion, and I am grateful to her and to all hon. Members who have participated. I assure all hon. Members that I will reflect very carefully on the points that have been raised.

When I was appointed as the Minister for Immigration, I was interviewed by the Home Office staff magazine. One of the questions they asked me was, “If you weren’t a politician, what would you be?” I note in passing, and with relief, that they asked the same question of all of my ministerial colleagues at the Home Office, rather than it being a question solely for myself. I replied, “I’m a farmer, first and foremost. Politics has always been the other thing I do. My family have been on the same farm in north Yorkshire since 1850.” Indeed, I have carried out many of the same jobs as the hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir); I suspect my father should have been arrested for using child labour, given the age at which I began doing those tasks.

It is important that we consider the issues before us today. I understand the position of the farming community and, every bit as importantly, I absolutely appreciate the importance of food and farming industries as a crucial component of the UK economy and of the fabric of rural Britain. I will just put the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) right on one point before I move on: seasonal workers do not contribute to net migration figures; someone has to be here for more than a year to count towards those. Indeed, the

reason the seasonal agricultural workers scheme was closed was not because it was unsuccessful, but because the Government were required under EU law to lift the restrictions on Bulgarian and Romanian nationals, who then had unrestricted access to the labour market.

The issue of how we meet temporary labour needs in the agriculture sector is a long-standing one. In the past, the immigration system made provision for a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, under which overseas workers were admitted to for up to six months to undertake crop harvesting. Those arrangements worked very well indeed. The reason why the seasonal agricultural workers scheme was phased out was because the sector had access to an expanded pool of labour, following successive accessions of eastern European countries to the European Union.

As part of our commitment to reduce net migration, the Government’s consistent position has been not to introduce new migration schemes for non-EU nationals to meet labour needs at lower skill levels. The previous seasonal agricultural workers scheme was phased out on the recommendation of the Migration Advisory Committee at the point at which restrictions on the employment of Bulgarian and Romanian nationals were lifted. While the UK remains a member of the EU, EU nationals continue to enjoy the right of freedom of movement in accordance with the UK’s treaty obligations, and employers in the food and farming sector can continue to recruit EU workers to meet seasonal labour needs.

It is not the Government’s policy to admit non-EU nationals to meet labour needs at lower skill levels. However, I appreciate the concerns that have been raised about whether the present situation is sustainable. I met Minette Batters, the deputy president of the National Farmers Union, and Ali Capper, who is also from the NFU, at the beginning of the month. They raised that very point with me, and I have undertaken to reflect on it carefully. Indeed, at the Conservative party conference in Birmingham, I met the president of the NFU, Meurig Raymond, who also raised that very point.

I know there are concerns that the UK’s impending exit from the EU, or even the fall in the value of sterling, might lead to an immediate shortage of labour as EU workers go home, although the data do not support that so far. The most recent labour market statistics were published by the independent Office for National Statistics earlier this month. They cover the period up to September 2016—after the referendum—and show that the number of EU citizens in the UK labour force was higher in the quarter to September 2016 than it had been a year earlier.

Not only that, but the number of workers from the eight countries of eastern and central Europe that joined the EU in 2004, and from Bulgaria and Romania—the countries most commonly associated with low-skilled labour—are also up year on year. To be precise, there were 129,000 more workers from those countries in the UK in the third quarter of 2016 compared with a year earlier. That does not suggest that there is a major exodus from the United Kingdom although, as I have said, I will continue to monitor the situation carefully.

The Government wish to ensure that any decisions we take on the short-term need for seasonal migration schemes do not pre-empt future decisions about how the immigration system will work post-Brexit. As I am

[Mr Robert Goodwill]

sure hon. Members will understand, there are constraints on what I can say about the future arrangements for EU citizens who want to work in the United Kingdom; the way in which we will control migration post-Brexit is yet to be determined. One of the opportunities of Brexit is that we will be able to control both the numbers of migrants from within the EU and the activities that they undertake when they are here.

**Angela Smith:** Can I read from the Minister's comments that the Government's plan, if they are to control and restrict freedom of movement, is to leave the single market?

**Mr Goodwill:** I think that question goes above my pay grade. The Leader of the Opposition will have an opportunity to ask the Prime Minister about that at Prime Minister's Question Time—presumably once he has finished paying tribute to Fidel Castro.

What I can say is that, in framing those future arrangements, the Government will give careful consideration to the needs of the agricultural sector and, of course, every other part of the UK economy. The Government have made it clear that we will work with sectors of the economy to ensure that the potential impacts of Brexit are understood and taken into account when developing our approach. However, we will also be mindful that, in voting for the UK's departure from the EU, the British people sent a clear message that gaining more control over the number of people who come here from Europe must be a priority in our negotiations.

There is no doubt that there is a debate to be had about whether workers admitted to the UK to undertake seasonal work on a temporary basis are an immigration issue. For example, they may not, as I have said, count towards the official net immigration statistics produced by the ONS if their stay is less than 12 months. However, they certainly have an impact on the communities where they are located, and they do use public services.

A wider issue is the balance to be struck between short-term fixes and the longer-term sustainability of the sector. The horticultural sector has clearly acquired a profound dependence on migrant labour. A Gangmasters Licensing Authority survey following the closure of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme found that, of the 234 farms that responded, only eight had employed any UK nationals at all to undertake seasonal work. Whether we arrived in that position because UK workers have ceased to be available to growers, or because migrant workers have become more readily available to them—or both—may be an academic point now. However, it is still sensible to ask whether the Government should act to perpetuate that dependence in future.

I will deal briefly with a couple of points raised during the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent asked about those EU citizens who have already settled here. The Prime Minister has

made it clear that she wishes to protect the status of people already here. Indeed, the only circumstances in which that would not be possible would be if British citizens' rights in EU member states were not protected in return.

Points have been made about the reaction following Brexit and potential xenophobia. I am meeting the Romanian ambassador later today and I will make the point that this country still welcomes people to come and work here. Indeed, as long as we remain a member of the European Union, those people are free and welcome to come here and participate in our vibrant, thriving economy.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) made a point about accommodating seasonal workers. I agree that it is important that we look at accommodation, not only because we need to ensure the welfare of the migrants, but because the lack of rural accommodation is a barrier to the recruitment of UK workers. The working group on seasonal workers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs continues to look at how increasing the availability of accommodation can be incentivised. Employers can offer some accommodation costs against the national minimum wage. My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) said that non-EEA seasonal workers coming here temporarily do not impact on the migration figures. I mention in passing that I have two Egremont Russet trees in my orchard and I can attest to the quality of their fruit.

This has been an excellent debate, and I repeat my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent. I will allow her a few moments to sum up before the end of the debate.

10.58 am

**Helen Whately:** I thank the Minister for the time and care he has taken and for his comments. I particularly thank all hon. Members who have contributed. It has felt like a pretty lively debate. We have had strawberry wars about who produces the best strawberries. We have debated which the best apples are—the Russet performed very strongly; it is the English sparkling wine of apples, perhaps. We have also heard Kent compared to Ibiza. There has been a lot of emotion in the room as well.

To be serious, we have talked about how times have changed. Many of us have at some time picked fruit at a young age—who knows who was the youngest—and done our bit in the past. However, people do not work on the land any more, as the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) said, so we need a reliable supply of seasonal workers for our farms. I urge the Minister to keep looking at this, and to look not only at the overall figures for EU migrants but specifically at the agricultural sector to see what is happening to it. It is absolutely vital. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) said, this is an existential question.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

## **Criminal Justice System: Equality of Access**

11.1 am

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered equality of access to justice in the criminal justice system.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss this important topic. In the past six years, many lawyers have spoken of their fears about access to justice. When they do, they are often accused of special pleading, as if only lawyers care about people being able to use the protection our laws afford us.

There is a problem in this country with the debate about access to the courts and the provision of legal aid. The Government say that our legal aid budget is generous. The Government speak about court users, who must contribute to the running of the courts, as if most people have nothing better to do than spend their lives in court or as if people relish rushing off to court as often as they can. The truth of people's attitude is, of course, quite different. I can do no better than quote a giant of the Labour movement and labour law, Lord Bill Wedderburn. In his seminal 1965 book "The Worker and the Law", he wrote that

"most people want nothing more from the law than that it should leave them alone".

The truth is that most people would hope never to have to use the courts—the employee who is being underpaid or unfairly treated, the businessperson owed money by a customer who will not pay or the mother who is injured in a car accident on the school run. For those who commit criminal offences, the situation is very different, but no doubt many of them wish the law would leave them alone.

There have been cuts to legal funding in many areas of law since 2010. It would be wrong to suggest that cuts have been visited only on criminal legal aid, and it is important to put things in context. First came the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. At that time, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) was the Justice Secretary and Lord Chancellor. The Act removed eligibility for publicly funded legal assistance from a raft of areas of social welfare law. For those seeking legal help with debt advice, there is no support—no support for housing advice, unless someone faces being made homeless, and no support for welfare benefits advice; the latter is particularly troubling. Past figures show that many appeals against the Department for Work and Pensions are successful. Between December 2014 and June 2015, 53% of those who appealed against fit-for-work decisions had that decision reversed. People would have to go to court far less if the decisions of Government Departments were better.

The cuts have given rise to a geographical concept I have never heard of before: a legal aid advice desert. The Law Society has a campaign devoted to the eradication of the cuts. There are areas of the England and Wales jurisdiction where legal aid advice for housing cases is disappearing. My constituency of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney shares with the neighbouring area of Rhondda Cynon Taf just a single provider of legal aid housing advice.

The figures show that civil legal aid cases have decreased dramatically since LASPO became law. In July this year, Young Legal Aid Lawyers, along with the Legal Action Group and the Legal Aid Practitioners Group, wrote to the Prime Minister. They explained that in 2012-13, before LASPO, there were 724,243 civil law cases funded by legal aid. By 2015-16, that figure had plummeted to just 258,460. As they told the Prime Minister, that is a picture of justice denied. The Act removed most private family law matters from the scope of legal aid. Divorce proceedings, child contact arrangements and financial and property disputes are no longer eligible, save where there is evidence of domestic violence.

At the time of LASPO coming into force, the Government made a commitment to review the effects of the Act within three to five years. We are squarely in that timescale now. The calls for that review to start have reached a crescendo. In recent months, the Trades Union Congress and Amnesty International have produced reports highlighting the scale of the problem. I pay tribute to both organisations for their work. It is surely time that the Justice Secretary set that review in motion. Perhaps her reason for not acting is that she is in possession of another review—a review of the effect of employment tribunal fees—that the Ministry of Justice appear to be sitting on, which we strongly suspect is because that review is critical of the fees.

In 2013, the then Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), introduced more reforms. He sought to impose restrictions on the availability of judicial review; to restrict the ability of foreign nationals to receive publicly funded legal assistance; to remove publicly funded legal assistance for nearly every area of prison law; and to make further cuts to immigration law and to family law. A proposal for competitive tendering for criminal legal aid fees was also floated, but later abandoned.

The right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell asserted, without providing evidence, that the legal aid bill was spiralling. He also asserted, without providing evidence, that the public had lost confidence in the legal aid system and that campaigners were using judicial review as a tool to block his Government's unimpeachable legislative programme. We can debate whether the economic argument was ever really made out. However, those reforms were a further restriction on access to justice. Worse still are the restrictions on judicial review, which can only be characterised as a flagrant set of measures to reduce Government's accountability to the people.

During the past six years, we have witnessed a curious sight little seen before. Outside the Old Bailey here in London and outside courts across the country, we have seen the strange sight of gowned and bewigged lawyers protesting against cuts to legal aid. That, in turn, gave rise to more curious sights still: a huge and grotesque papier mâché likeness of the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell being carried aloft around Parliament Square, and the barrister and former Tory MP Sir Ivan Lawrence taking to a platform erected in Old Palace Yard to call on the legal profession to strike. If 2016 has been the year that saw old certainties undermined, perhaps we should have seen it coming from that moment alone.

The question is, what brought criminal lawyers to that point? The profession has not seen a rise in fees for more than 20 years. While it is abundantly clear that many

[Gerald Jones]

QCs have done and continue to do well from legal aid, the position is very different for the majority of junior barristers. Some reported at the time not being paid for their work or paying more in travel to get to court than they would receive for the court appearance itself. Solicitors firms throughout that time have had to do much more with much less.

The profession told of a real and present fear that it simply could not take more cuts. Diminishing fees would mean greater case loads and pressure to accumulate more clients and devote less time to those cases, all in order to stay afloat. For some professionals, that would mean compromises in quality and integrity that were a bridge too far, and they feared that firms willing to stack 'em high and sell 'em cheap would prevail.

It was rumoured that long-established and trusted law firms would disappear and that those that been a presence on the local high street and had served their local communities for decades would be replaced by warehouses of inexperienced and exploited paralegals. It was also rumoured that removing those firms from the high street would leave no physical presence, which would be replaced with a faceless website and call centre run by G4S, Tesco or even Eddie Stobart.

The Government abandoned their restructuring of criminal legal aid and opted for more cuts. Mr Grayling imposed a reduction of 17.5% on solicitors' fees, a huge reduction in resources that would have serious implications for any business. The cut was to be introduced in two stages: an initial 8.75% reduction last year with a planned further cut of 8.75% cut in April this year. The second cut was postponed for one year by Mr Grayling's successor, Mr Gove.

**Mike Gapes (in the Chair):** Order. The hon. Gentleman is aware that we normally refer to hon. Members by their constituencies, not their names.

**Gerald Jones:** I am sorry, Mr Gapes.

It is hoped that the new Justice Secretary will shortly confirm that there will be no further reduction, but the warnings from lawyers to the Government have continued. They have warned about the future of the justice system, miscarriages of justice, and two-tier justice with one law for the rich and another for the poor. That is the peril we risk creating if ordinary people are denied proper legal representation.

Wealthy defendants in criminal cases sometimes seem to have unlimited resources and create the mistaken impression that justice can be easily bought or easily evaded. That may be unpopular. People convicted of the most serious offences may have benefited from legal aid. Newspapers often howl with outrage at the sums involved, but such cases are often the longest and most complex. The answer is not to deprive people of representation. If the state and the public choose and demand that certain activities are to be criminalised, a cost is involved. It is the mark of a civilised society.

We must ensure that those who want representation are represented. Only then can we be confident they are properly tried, and properly acquitted or convicted. A proper trial means competent prosecution and defence, and since 2010, the Crown Prosecution Service too has

seen significant restraint. Its budget has been cut by around 25% and its staff has been reduced by 2,500. The Government will say this has not led to any problems and cannot be blamed for trials collapsing, cases being dropped or disclosure of important evidence being missed, but the truth is that the service is stretched and that has implications for access to justice.

Access to justice does not apply only to those accused. Victims of crime also need access to justice. They must be confident that their case receives the attention it deserves, that is adequately resourced and that it is handled with care and expertise. Austerity has made access to justice more difficult for thousands of people, not just for the reasons I have given. Yes, the Government have cut legal aid and the budget for the Crown Prosecution Service, but they have also closed courts around the country. In February, it was announced that 86 courts and tribunals would be closed, but it was reckoned that 97% of citizens would be able to reach their required court within an hour by car. That is fine for those who have a car and drive, but what about those who do not? Many people rely on public transport and for them the journey time is greater. With those closures and greater travelling times comes a diminution in the principle of local justice.

**Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab):** My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Two of the courts that were closed across the country were in my constituency. Some of the reasoning was that the closures would facilitate a roll-out of technology and that access to justice be more available than ever, but nothing has replaced the closure of those courts. There has been no technology, no hubs and no additional video link technology. We are left with a significant deficit in access to justice.

**Gerald Jones:** My hon. Friend makes an interesting and correct point, which underlines the position across the country where access to justice has been denied to too many people. It has been replaced not with an improved service, but with a diminution in the principle of local justice.

The Government have rightly looked at technology to ameliorate some of the problems. Trials have been launched with greater use of video links, including for defendants who need not appear in court unless necessary. Mobile vans have been parked near witnesses' homes to allow them to give evidence without going to court. However, there are other examples, to which my hon. Friend alluded. Solicitors in Exeter were left frustrated by a new court system enabling all defendants to appear over a video link from local police stations to Plymouth magistrates court but which, however, denied them proper and private consultations with their clients. Technology must be utilised, but it must not be assumed to be good in and of itself. It must not be adopted without allowing defendants a proper defence—there must be no compromise on that.

We are worried about access to justice. One of the first acts of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) on becoming leader of the Labour party was to ask Lord Bach to convene a commission to assess access to justice in our system, and it is considering what can be done to improve the current situation. An independent group of commissioners is looking at the whole system. They have been invited

not for their party sympathies, but for their expertise. An interim report was recently launched and is already a great piece of work with innovative and exciting ideas. It is hoped that it will be finalised next year.

Lord Chief Justice Thomas observed earlier this year that

“our justice system has become unaffordable to most”.

There can be no greater indictment of the position we find ourselves in today. I hope the Minister can offer some reassurance but, sadly, I do not hold out much hope.

11.16 am

**The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald):**

I join the welcome to you in the Chair, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) on securing this debate on an important subject.

Access to justice is at the heart of everything we do in the Ministry of Justice. The sad thing about the hon. Gentleman’s remarks—of course he is entitled to point to areas where things are unsatisfactory—is that he did not talk about the context. The context is that there are far fewer cases and that, because of that, in some parts of the country courts sit for only a quarter of the time they could sit. Therefore, we are working against a changing picture, and not least against the background of the Government spending £1 billion to modernise our courts and tribunals. Every time one introduces modernisation, one has fewer unnecessary directions hearings; and one enables witnesses to give evidence by video link. Any of these changes affect the sort of court estate we need and issues of access to justice, but in a positive way. It is clear that he has concerns about access to justice and I hope that I can reassure him.

We are still spending a great deal of money on legal aid. The changes the hon. Gentleman referred to were made by the then Lord Chancellor, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), to concentrate legal aid on matters of most importance to individuals—for example, when a home was a risk, where someone’s livelihood was at risk because of the threat of imprisonment in a criminal case, or where someone might lose their children in a care case involving domestic violence. I think most of us would agree that my right hon. and learned Friend concentrated the effort where it was most needed. I do not think it is seriously arguable that he did not.

A review by March 2018 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offences Act 2012 was promised; it has to be completed by a particular date in March 2018. We have only just entered the period in which the review might have started, so it is not as though we have been dragging our feet for years. The review will go ahead.

To say that in this country we do not have debt and housing advice is incorrect. What is the citizens advice bureaux network doing? It is providing just that. On Friday, I opened a new bureau in Letchworth, where the debt and housing advice from Citizens Advice is well regarded. Shelter, which has a contract with the Legal Aid Agency, is a fantastic organisation giving advice about housing matters. The Department for Work and Pensions puts a great deal of effort and time into welfare benefit advice and giving people information.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that there were legal aid deserts for housing law. That is not so. Every part of the country has housing advice available. The point about housing advice is that in some areas of the country there are many more housing cases in which people might lose their homes than there are in others, so the provision is not exactly the same in each place, but it is national. The fact that there is one provider with a number of offices in one place does not mean that there is no advice. There is advice from that provider, and often the provider is very expert. If we said that that area had to have two firms, we would reduce the amount of work available to the provider that has the expertise, so it is not as simple a question as the hon. Gentleman suggested.

I was glad that the hon. Gentleman mentioned Sir Ivan Lawrence. I do not remember the occasion in question, but I pay tribute to his contribution in this place over many years before his retirement.

Turning to access to justice more generally, I think it is true to say that our courts and tribunals are open to everyone, regardless of their circumstances and location. As my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor, the Lord Chief Justice and the Senior President of Tribunals made clear in their joint statement in September, a modernised Courts and Tribunals Service must be just, proportionate and accessible. It would be undermined if it were not. However, the services that our courts provide at the moment do not always accommodate our citizens’ busy lives or meet customers’ accessibility needs. Access to justice is not just about how close people are to a court. Our programme will reduce the need for many customers to attend court. Modern technologies offer significant benefits in that respect, and we intend to explore every opportunity to use those technologies to make access to justice easier.

**Holly Lynch:** To return to my point about the courts in my constituency having closed, I completely buy the notion, if we are starting from a position of what is best practice in supporting vulnerable victims and witnesses through the court process, that having old-fashioned buildings was not necessarily the best practice that we would like to see, but nothing—no technology, digitalisation or modernisation of the justice system—has come in to replace the courts in my constituency. Can the Minister give me any information on what might be happening?

**Sir Oliver Heald:** I am of course happy to look into the situation in Halifax and write to the hon. Lady, but I will make this point to her. Because our courts are used for only about 50% of the time, we are trying to use them more fully and to have courts that are more modern and have modern communications—wi-fi, video links and so on—so we are closing some courts and investing the money in improving the remaining ones. That is the overall plan.

The Lord Chief Justice gave this example—a Welsh example—the other day to the Select Committee on Justice. Wales is mountainous in parts and has road issues and so on, but in Dolgellau, where the court was closed, a video link has been established so that it is easier for local residents to give evidence and they do not have to travel to Caernarfon, for example. There are areas where such changes have already been made. There are some areas where we are proposing to make

[*Sir Oliver Heald*]

suitable alternative arrangements, and we have a more general programme of considering questions such as whether it is possible to sit a court for a particular case in, say, the town hall or another public building. Such courts have been characterised as pop-up courts. We also have that initiative, which we are working on at the moment. Attempts are being made, but I will of course write to the hon. Lady about Halifax.

A significant amount of the work of magistrates courts will be conducted online. That will of course mean less attendance at courtrooms. It will increase the speed of the process, save money and remove the need for defendants to attend court at all. Our ambition is for attendance at a court building to be reserved for the more serious cases, in which there is to be a trial or there is a serious issue of sentencing.

We are making a lot of progress. The common platform programme has already introduced the ability to plead guilty online for certain traffic offences, as part of the single justice procedure whereby one magistrate deals with the cases. We have introduced wi-fi into all criminal courts, and the programme will continue so that we get an end-to-end digital process. The police will build a digital file, which will go to the CPS, which will put it into the right condition for court. Then, once it is going to court, all the users of the system will be able to draw down that information, that case file. The judge will be able to give directions online. We will have far fewer ineffective hearings and hearings that it would be possible to avoid by using technology.

Many vulnerable people come into contact with the courts, and it is important, through the changes, to ensure that they are helped to access digital services. We are currently consulting on how to improve their access to the digital process, as part of the announcement that was made in September.

The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney represents a constituency in south Wales. He will know that, during the consideration of court closures in that area, particular efforts were made to find suitable alternative provision; we have discussed places such as Dolgellau.

I appreciate that some individuals may find themselves in difficult circumstances when needing to attend court. Anyone who has a concern about travelling to court on the same transport as the person they are accusing or anything of that sort should make it clear to the police and the CPS that they have that concern. Arrangements will always be made to ensure that witnesses can get to court in a satisfactory way.

It is right to thank the hon. Gentleman for initiating the debate. It is important to recognise that we are in a period in which crime is falling, the number of cases is falling and the way in which we do the work is changing, so he is right to say that, when it comes to legal aid for criminal cases, there is a case for discussion and seeing whether it is possible to improve the two main legal aid schemes: the advocates scheme and the litigators scheme. I can assure him that the Ministry of Justice is in productive discussions with both parts of the profession—the Bar and solicitors—to see whether we can find legal aid schemes for their work that are more attuned to modern needs, but that also fit in with career progression and all those things that are of concern to the Bar and solicitors. We are doing that actively at the moment; we are in discussions with them.

The hon. Gentleman recalled some remarks that were made at the time suggesting that judicial review would be dead following the changes made by the then Lord Chancellor, who is now my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport. In fact, more than 4,500 cases were started the following year, so I think he is right to feel that that did not happen after all.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the review of employment tribunal fees. I cannot tell him the outcome yet, because we are still doing it, but I think it is good that the Government are prepared to review that issue, just as we are also reviewing the immigration fees at the moment. I do not think that should be criticised; I think the hon. Gentleman should welcome it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.29 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## ESA and Personal Independence Payments

[NADINE DORRIES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered employment and support allowance and personal independence payments.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Dorries. First, I wish all my constituents a happy St Andrew's day. It is a privilege to bring the difficulties of many of my constituents to the House for consideration, and those of the people across the UK who have experience of trying to access support when they need it most through either employment and support allowance or personal independence payments. Since I became an MP, a large percentage of the constituency casework that I or my staff have dealt with has been a result of ESA and PIP issues.

Owing to the very nature of the benefit that they are trying to access, these people are vulnerable. Many are experiencing serious illness for the first time in their lives and are facing a huge process of adjustment. That is hugely stressful, and this process is hugely stressful for those individuals, who often feel dehumanised and part of a process. The assessment procedure only serves to make things worse. Of the ESA and PIP cases that my office has dealt with—I will discuss one particular case in detail today—many have involved complaints about the assessment process. These assessments are often inhumane, needlessly stressful and unfair to claimants. Many other cases have required intervention following unsuccessful personal independence payment claims, the vast majority of which have been overturned on appeal.

My constituency is sadly not an anomaly when it comes to appeals figures. The latest statistics on appeals against PIP decisions show that 65% of appeal decisions found in favour of the claimants. Not only does that highlight a deeply flawed system, but it clearly shows that a number of people who are subjected to these highly stressful and often prolonged, protracted processes to get the support that they need are ultimately entitled to that support. The statistic of 65% of appeals overturned evidences that, and unless the Government can tell me statistics to the contrary, I am going to assume that their system is not working. It suggests that the system needs to be radically reformed. The high appeal and overturn rate is unacceptable—and unsuccessful on the Government's part, if they are trying to drive down the number of illegitimate claimants—particularly when it impacts so negatively on the claimants who require this support the most.

If you will indulge me, Ms Dorries, I want to turn to the case of my constituent, Donna. I have the permission of my constituent to raise this issue, and they have asked me to do so in order to illustrate the impact of the benefits system on their life and to highlight the serious inequality they face. Donna, who lives in Carlisle, is a mother of two children. She has a supportive husband. She established a café called the Hope Café, which is a mental health charity, and she is an advocate and a champion for supporting those with mental health problems. I commend Donna on her bravery in opening up to me

so fully about her experiences with the Department for Work and Pensions. She has given me permission to share her story in full, because she hopes that it will illuminate the effect of malpractice and the effect that the assessments had on her life.

Donna became seriously ill with severe depression and anxiety 10 months ago. She told me that her mental illness made her believe that her two young children, aged eight and 10, would be better off without her in their lives. She told me that her mental illness made her believe that she was useless and worthless and had no skills worth sharing with the world. It made her think that her close friends and family were ashamed of her for being weak. That is the mindset of someone in the grip of depression, and it is incredibly difficult to break out of. Months later, thankfully, she is recovering, and as her background is working in mental health, she is keen to use her personal story to highlight the flaws in the benefits system and hopefully improve the process for others.

Donna went through the application process for both personal independence payment and employment and support allowance, which she found, in her own words, extremely harrowing. She first contacted my office to ask whether we could intervene to support her, as she was required to attend capability assessments for ESA and PIP. Donna, being logical and thinking that this would be an end in itself, asked whether she could endure one assessment. We are aware that this is not how the process works. Instead, Donna underwent an employment support work capability assessment and was asked back for a further personal independence assessment. On both occasions, she endured the lengthy assessment procedures, because these are classed as two separate benefits and the assessments are carried out by two separate providers. She found both assessments incredibly difficult. She told me that the questions she was asked made her re-live the worst days of her life, and she felt that if she had not got the award, it would have been overwhelming. At points, it made her want to give up.

Let me make the point clear: people experiencing severe depression already feel worthless. Being rejected for financial support gives concrete evidence for what they believe, in their minds, to be fact. For many people, it is the last straw. Donna told me that she was not surprised that, as a result, the suicide rates that she deals with every day are increasing.

Donna told me that her illness affected not only her, but her whole family; however, she has been lucky to have great support from her family and friends. Many others are not so lucky. For many people, where would they be without family support? At the point of rejection from the benefits system, who are they supposed to turn to? Donna's case highlights the fact that no consideration is given to the detrimental effect of the system on the already overwhelmed mental state of a person going through the assessment process. The reason they are in that position in the first place is often because of circumstances beyond their control. Consideration must be given to each individual applicant and their circumstances. The recent film "I, Daniel Blake" by Ken Loach highlights both the hard-hitting, honest and gritty reality and the brutality of this Government's policies.

Donna also brought up the fact that assumptions are made about claimants based on the observations of the health care professionals. She asked for a copy of her

[Angela Crawley]

medical assessment report and was disgusted that comments were noted about her appearance, personal grooming and whether claimants are tired or sweating. The comments were as follows:

“Looks tired...looks thin...underweight, clothing loose, dark circles under eyes ... unkempt, untidy ... unwell ... troubled ... sweating ... pale ... facial expression showed no emotion but was tearful ... restless ... fidgety... difficulty coping due to anxiety ... seemed agitated ... poor rapport, poor eye contact ... withdrawn ... self-harm thoughts identified ... no delusion ... no obsessive ideas ... unable to complete five rounds of ‘serial sevens’ ... unable to calculate correct change when asked a sum ... unable to spell ‘world’ backwards ... unable to remember three objects first time ... had insights into their illness.”

I ask the Minister: is this the kind of system that the Government have set out to achieve? Is this a system that offers fairness, dignity and respect? Where, ultimately, is the humanity in that process? Although many of those factors may be indicative of illness, many are circumstantial and subjective, given the particular illness that someone may or may not be assessing. For example, how would Donna’s entitlement have been affected if she had been immaculately dressed, had been having a good day or did not exhibit some of the behaviours outlined in that prescriptive list?

It has taken Donna 10 months to feel better. For seven of those months she has been awarded personal independence payment, and for the past four months she has been receiving employment support allowance. Access to those benefits has been vital to her recovery. Donna wishes to return to work when she can, and she can manage her own health. She knows her limitations, yet at this stage, due to her recovery, she faces the prospect of losing those benefits, which help her to sustain her family at this already difficult time. She is all too aware that if the support is removed too soon—which could mean pushing her back to full-time work—while she is at a vital stage in her recovery, she could end up right back at the beginning again.

Like physical illnesses, mental illnesses take a long time to heal, and there is no consideration of that in this process. Donna suggested that it would be helpful to her health to have a phased return to work—as a professional in this area, she knows only too well about recovering from depression—whereby she could still claim benefit and return to work slowly to build up her strength. Permitted work was explained to Donna, but as she knows only too well from her professional experience and from talking to others, as soon as a claimant lets the Department for Work and Pensions know that they are able to work for a few hours, they are ultimately called for reassessment and asked to go back to work full time. Donna told me that she would like to do a few hours a week volunteering, to get back herself back on her feet, but the criteria apply even to voluntary work. There is no middle ground.

Donna’s case illustrates that the work capability assessment is not fit for purpose. Sadly, that chimes with the calls from mental health organisations across the country, including Citizens Advice, the Disability Benefits Consortium, Mind and the Scottish Association for Mental Health. They have highlighted that the tick-box method of the work capability assessment fails to identify

claimants suffering from debilitating mental health problems, and it certainly fails to take their needs into consideration.

I mentioned figures for personal independence payments earlier. Similarly, the latest figures show that 59% of initial ESA decisions were overturned on appeal. The Government have made one small concession on ESA by scrapping the retesting of chronically ill and disabled claimants—so one small part of the system now relies on common sense over bureaucracy—but that has simply fixed one part of an altogether broken system. Although exemptions from repeated assessments for chronically ill claimants and those with long-term illnesses are welcome, it is extremely disappointing that the Department for Work and Pensions and the Secretary of State have not considered that for PIP claimants.

I hope the Minister will take heed of the problems I have discussed with the work capability assessment and consider the effects that the process can have on the mental wellbeing of claimants. I respect the hard-working staff at the Department for Work and Pensions who ultimately are asked to administer this Government’s policy. My constituents and people up and down the UK deserve a social security system that is designed to offer people the dignity, respect and fairness that they deserve. It is time that the Government stepped up to their responsibility. We are all citizens, we are all human and we all deserve respect.

Let me add that when the responsibility for personal independence payments is devolved to Scotland—I am sure the Minister will come to this point—we will look to design the system appropriately. As she will be aware, it takes time to get the system right, because ultimately we are talking about the most vulnerable people in society. They deserve a social security system that gives them fairness, dignity and respect. I am sure we can all agree on that.

**Nadine Dorries (in the Chair):** I now call Mr Shannon—you are on the list, Mr Shannon. Did you put in to speak?

2.43 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I did indeed, Ms Dorries. Absolutely. I am more than happy to be called—I am just surprised to be called right away.

**Nadine Dorries (in the Chair):** You are first on the list today; I know it is unusual.

**Jim Shannon:** The first shall be last and the last shall be first. Whenever it happens, it is always good to be called. Thank you very much, Ms Dorries—I actually thought that the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) might have been asked, so I was looking at him, but no doubt he will participate at some stage.

I thank the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for setting the scene well. We are back to discuss this matter again in Westminster Hall, and it would be remiss of me not to give a Northern Ireland perspective on where we are. I am grateful that the Minister is in her place and all of us in the House appreciate it when she responds. I will give my opinion today—and others will give examples—of where the system is falling down. I have to highlight those key issues because my staff and I deal with them every day

of the week. We see people across the table from us with angst and anxiety and all the associated issues of stress, and we say, “How can we help them and do things better?” I will speak about some of those things today.

I have recently spoken about the changes to the employment and support allowance work-related activity group and what that means for people. The biggest issue is that the Government need to understand the difference between “ill” and “unable to work”. That, in a nutshell, is what the debate is about—the interpretation by the Department for Work and Pensions of what it means to be ill and what it means to those people who sit across the table from me every day and tell me they cannot work. The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East referred to people being pasty, sweaty and anxious, and my staff and I see those things every day of the week.

In the last month, we have seen in my office a former ward sister, a former construction business owner and a social worker, all of whom are now on ESA. Let me be clear: I do not believe for a second that those people are choosing not to work out of laziness. Who would want to go from earning £500 a week down to £75? People do not, but that is what happens.

The inference from the Government in this whole policy is insulting—I say that with respect—and more importantly, is based on a false premise that cannot be allowed to stand. I have to challenge that in the House, respectfully and kindly, and say it to the Minister and Government directly. As hon. Members know, I do not criticise—I do not feel that that is necessarily what I do—but I need to highlight the issues and ask nicely for genuine compassion and understanding.

The rationale seems to apply to PIP applicants as well. PIP is supposed to be for the help that people need to work. Apparently, the PIP assessment is intended to provide

“a more holistic assessment of the impact of a health condition...on an individual’s ability to participate”

in everyday life. It covers sensory impairments, development needs, cognitive impairments and mental conditions, as well as physical disabilities. Those five categories cover everything—medically, physically, healthwise—that there can be. The assessment looks at the extent to which the individual is capable of undertaking various activities. For some activities, someone can score points to help to meet the threshold for PIP if they can undertake that activity only by using an “aid or appliance”. That could include such things as artificial limbs, colostomy bags, walking sticks and non-specialist aids such as electric tin openers and long-handled sponges.

I want to highlight two cases, one of which involves a young lady who has ulcerative colitis. My age is such that I can probably remember the day she was born. I have got to know her very well over the years due to her diagnosis with this unseen disease, and how it has affected her and other people in my constituency. She worked in the civil service but was granted medical retirement before 30 because her employer could no longer facilitate her working. A Government employer could not accommodate her ability to work one day and not the next, as her illness dictated.

I understand the reasons why the Government and the civil service had to take a decision and say, “Look, we are going to have to terminate your employment.” However, that is where the problem started, and I cannot

understand how they expect someone else to employ her when they let her go. It should be understood why this lady is no longer able to work and why her employer, the civil service—she was Government-employed—had to let her go. Why is this young lady in this conflicted position? She is asked, in respect of PIPs, “What job can you do? Where can we find you some work?” Let us be honest: that wee lassie would love to work if only she had the opportunity, but she cannot because of her disability. She is on ESA and is dealing with the stress of the proposed changes. We should never underestimate the impact of the stress of this position. I stress that as strongly as I can, because I see that all the time. She rang to make an appointment for her PIP form to be filled out. How will she be assessed? That is the question I am asking. She is currently on the higher-rate DLA—deservedly so, by the way. Will that be taken away from her? Government Ministers would say no, but the experience we have had so far in my office is raising fear in our mind and the minds of constituents. I see that all the time.

The young lady’s condition has not improved one iota since her last DLA application. If anything, I would suggest that it has worsened, and there is real concern that the PIP changes will not help. The stress makes her even more ill. It is a vicious cycle that is repeated over and over again. The PIP is for people who need help for hygienic purposes and for safety issues, but the problem is that that is not being translated into the new proposals. I genuinely hold the Minister in the highest esteem. From her response, we need to understand how the system works and how it can help the people on whose behalf we are here to make a plea, so that we can take away the stress and hassle.

On 11 March, it was announced that the number of points awarded in the PIP assessment would be halved for aids and appliances for “dressing and undressing” and “managing toilet needs”. Why would the Government reduce the points for things that are needed? I cannot understand that. As a result, 290,000 claimants will no longer receive the daily living component, and a further 80,000 will receive the standard, rather than the enhanced, daily living component. Budget 2016 estimated additional savings of £1.3 billion a year by 2019-20. That is great but where does it leave my constituent, who needs help during the night?

**Nadine Dorries (in the Chair):** Order. Mr Shannon, lots of people wish to speak. Would you try to keep your speech to about nine minutes so everybody has an equal amount of time? Thank you.

**Jim Shannon:** I did not realise that. I will try to go at my Northern Ireland speed, which is very fast. The young lady I was talking about needs her sheets changed at night, and often replaced entirely, as well as someone to come in and take care of her during her bad periods. Her DLA paid for a carer to help her. Will PIP do the same? The answer should certainly be yes, but the points system is not set up for illnesses such as ulcerative colitis and Crohn’s disease. The Crohn’s and Colitis UK website contains a link to a PDF offering help and advice on the PIP for sufferers. The PDF is 70 pages long—that is how complex the system is and how much help people need to fill out the application. If that does not put off someone who is seriously ill, I do not know what would.

[*Jim Shannon*]

Is this what was intended by the Government's welfare reform? Did they intend to make it so complex and intricate that many people will give up and live in sub-standard conditions, rather than get the help they need to live with their illness? We should be concerned about people retreating inwards, their lack of confidence and the problems they face.

Ms Dorries, you have given me a time limit. I just have two more paragraphs to get through very quickly. I wholeheartedly believe that the new system is failing people. I had a doctor on the phone to say that his patient's decision was made without the assessor taking the time to request any information about the patient from the surgery. The doctor said, "Jim, if he doesn't get this help he will have to go to a nursing home at 46 years of age." The care packages that health trusts put in place are not sufficient to handle people who are not able to pay privately for the additional support they require. On their behalf, I again ask the Minister, most sincerely, kindly and humbly: please look at this benefit, remember why it was set up and understand that, for many, it is the difference between having support to live and simply being able to exist. Do not continue to push these ill people, many of whom suffer from mental health problems due to the stress and strain of long-term illness. In this House, MPs are called to protect and help the vulnerable, but that is not what this new ESA and PIP system does.

2.54 pm

**Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, which seems almost a daily occurrence this week, Ms Dorries, given the Bill Committee I am also serving on. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley). This is an important debate and a topic that regularly comes up, particularly in this room, which shows the importance of Westminster Hall. We are fortunate that we have a Minister who is very engaged and proactive when it comes to listening—particularly when the system is not quite working as it is intended to—and when it comes to acting and working with experienced charities, policymakers and all sorts to bring us all together. What we all want, regardless of which side of the House we sit on, is a fair system that supports the most vulnerable in society. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who, during my time as a Minister, was really proactive and constructive on this issue. I had many good meetings with him to discuss specific issues and lessons we could learn from Northern Ireland, and to share best practice.

Two issues have been raised: PIP and ESA. I gently remind Scottish National party Members that Scotland could take responsibility, certainly for PIP. During my time as a Minister, I had a good relationship with my counterpart in the Scottish Parliament. He was aware that Scotland could take on that responsibility as and when it was ready.

Some 1.8 million people have already gone through the PIP process, which is considerably better than the old DLA system, and that is widely accepted by the vast majority of charities who represent people who have been through the system. Under DLA, only 16% of claimants got the highest rate of the benefit. Under PIP, it is 23.5%. It is far better at identifying hidden impairments

and fluctuating health conditions. For example—this has been highlighted in the two previous speeches—under DLA, only 22% of those who had a mental health condition accessed the daily living component, yet under PIP, 66% did. For the higher rate of mobility, it was 9% under DLA; it is 24% under PIP.

The new system is far better and more streamlined. The assessors are there to help people to fill in the forms. The fundamental problem with DLA was that it was, in effect, self-diagnosis. People would fill in a very long, complicated form. A lot of people did themselves an injustice by not highlighting all the issues they faced, often because they took them for granted. For example, they might think, "I can't sleep at night. That's just the way it is", but they did not then highlight that in their forms. The forms were complicated, so people would not necessarily know which were the right bits to put down.

Even worse, 70% of claimants on DLA had an indefinite award. It is very attractive for MPs to say, "We don't want anybody ever to go through an assessment", but the reality was that, under DLA, 70% did not. That sounds great, yet one in three claimants' condition changes so significantly within 12 months that they should be on a different benefit. The vast majority of people who go through the system have a deteriorating condition, so if their condition has changed, it has probably changed for the worse and it is highly likely that they would therefore go from the lower rate to the higher rate of benefit.

That was the single difference that contributed to why, under DLA, only 16% of claimants got the highest rate, and 23.5% get it under PIP. There were people who, for 10 or 20 years or more, were on a benefit below that which they were entitled to. They were unaware that they could have had an opportunity to go up. It is right, therefore, that we assess people to ensure that they are given the correct benefit.

Now, common sense kicks in. If someone is on the highest rate of benefit, they have a deteriorating condition. Unless there is some miracle cure, they are likely only to be reassessed at the end of the 10-year period, and it would probably be very light touch. In effect, someone would phone and ask, "Has there been a miracle cure?" The answer would probably be no, and they might ask, "Can you provide the GP's evidence that there has not been a miracle cure? That's fine. You will go through." It is those who are on the cusp of going from the lower benefit to the higher benefit who will have another assessment. The system is programmed to say, "This person nearly meets the highest rate of benefit. I suspect they will need it in nine months' time." It will automatically trigger a reminder to people that there is a reassessment, so they are not left languishing. I urge hon. Members to be careful in trying to stop people having an opportunity for an assessment.

In cash terms, in 2010, DLA delivered £12.7 billion of benefit support. The combined DLA and PIP is now at £16.6 billion. When the scheme was first launched, the time until assessment was terrible. We had lots of debates here on that. I was not the Minister then, but I was warned when I first went into the role that we would have almost weekly debates. Some people were waiting up to a year for their assessment. That was unacceptable. For nearly 18 months now, it has been in a settled state, taking about seven weeks for an assessment and 13 weeks for

the whole process, end to end, which is well below the initial target of about 16 weeks. Again, charities and those with a huge amount of experience accept that the system is working well. The forms have been streamlined. They are still longer than we might like, but it is always a balancing act because, if we do not capture all the information, people could miss out on the benefit they need. I repeat that the assessors are there to help the claimant. The Government set the amount of money and the points that are required, but the assessors are there to ensure that the form is completed.

I have sat through assessments, and I have seen two different extremes. I saw the assessment of a practising nurse, and the assessment was super-quick. They used lots of very long words of which I had no understanding, and they were able to breeze through. At the other extreme, I saw an individual for whom English was not his first language. He had a mental health condition and was socially isolated. If he had self-diagnosed under DLA, he would not have qualified, but the assessor spent one hour and 10 minutes teasing out and piecing together the jigsaw to make sure that all the challenges he faced in his everyday life were accurately reflected. He would have ended up getting a higher benefit than he would have received under DLA.

I urge those who criticise the assessments to go and view one, which can be arranged. They will have their eyes opened, because too many people claim knowledge based on a film that is there to make money, rather than based on the real world. Frankly, that is an insult to the huge amount of hard work that these trained professionals do to help some of the most vulnerable people. The facts are there to compare DLA with PIP.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Rather than commenting on the film, which is a dramatic portrayal, will the hon. Gentleman comment on the “Dispatches” programme? That was not fictional; it was an actual portrayal of the assessment process that people go through.

**Nadine Dorries (in the Chair)**: Mr Tomlinson, the same applies to you as applied to Mr Shannon.

**Justin Tomlinson**: I will not be long. I am glad that the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) intervened. I have a feeling that she will not let me intervene on her later, so I can link this in nicely. The “Dispatches” programme showed an isolated incident that was totally unacceptable. The individual was moved, and rightly so. That is why we have external inspectors. Remember that we are talking about 1.8 million people, and I urge her to take up my invitation to go and view an assessment. Hearsay is not the right way to hold Governments to account. This is so important that people in positions of responsibility need to invest some time in going to see what is actually happening.

**Debbie Abrahams**: That is patronising.

**Justin Tomlinson**: It is not patronising. This is an important subject.

There have been further improvements, including the removal of the 28-day rule for terminally ill people. That cross-party campaign has made a huge difference to those who are terminally ill, and it is a welcome measure. There is ongoing training, and I would like to

see automatic recordings of all assessments, which would help the appeals process. That requires a change in the contract, which I understand is the intention.

It is also right that assessors now encourage people to bring somebody with them into the assessment, which is particularly helpful for people who are not necessarily articulate, for whom English is not their first language or who would not have the confidence to display all their challenges.

As the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East said, the ESA and PIP assessments are not a million miles apart. I have too often heard of cases where someone has done one assessment one month and the other assessment the next month. In respect of the Green Paper, many organisations will lobby for some serious data sharing.

In conclusion, because I have focused on PIP, I will briefly address ESA. The Green Paper is a wonderful opportunity, as the charity Scope said, because disabled people need “expert, tailored employment support”. We need to focus on what individuals can do, rather than on what they cannot do. It is important to provide tailored support, to recognise that people have fluctuating health conditions and to utilise the best parts of the universal credit system to allow for flexibility and common sense, particularly in relation to voluntary work that builds confidence to get people back into work. We need to provide ongoing support, through a specific named coach, when people go into work for the first time. I will continue to pitch, as a matter of importance, the small employer pilot, which was so successful that it should be rolled out across the rest of the country as quickly as possible. We need to unleash the opportunity for disabled apprentices. Everyone agrees it is a great thing, and we have signed it off. We now need to see it making a real difference, particularly for those with a learning disability.

3.4 pm

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing this important debate. I will focus on some of the logistical issues around PIP that could be improved at local level, drawing on the experience of the excellent Merton centre for independent living in my constituency.

Merton CIL is a user-led disabled people’s organisation that delivers a range of services to disabled people across Merton. The practical experience and casework of its members has brought together a range of issues in relation to both ESA and PIP that demonstrates how disabled people are facing a significant and unfair disadvantage when accessing the benefits to which they are rightly entitled. Disabled people have been disproportionately hit by welfare reform, with the cumulative cuts to benefits and social care affecting them, on average, 19 times more than non-disabled people.

Merton CIL’s experience has shown that PIP assessment centres are amazingly inaccessible. Some of my constituents in Mitcham and Morden in south-west London have been asked to travel as far as Deptford and east London to get to their assessment centre, journeys of about two hours each way, which is unacceptably difficult for many disabled people, many of whom pass their local centre en route to faraway destinations. Even the local centres in Wandsworth and Croydon are difficult to get

[*Siobhain McDonagh*]

to, because many disabled people in south-west London lack transport links. Unbelievably, some centres have no disabled parking, and others are not accessible for wheelchair users. Most have cramped and unpleasant waiting areas. All that demonstrates a lack of consideration and thought into practicalities. It is imperative that all PIP assessment centres should have an audit of accessibility and should be fit for purpose for use by disabled attendees.

Research has also shown that the practice of overbooking appointments for assessment centres is commonplace and is based on the assumption that some people will not turn up, but the practice causes great distress and inconvenience to those who do. Shockingly, an assessor told Merton CIL that she had 20 assessments on her list per shift but that she expected to do only six in the time available.

Many of my constituents have had to wait hours to be seen, or have had their appointments suddenly cancelled less than an hour beforehand. Many disabled people need to wait a substantial length of time even to get an appointment, and then to be kept waiting for hours on end, or to have a last-minute cancellation, after weeks of preparation and after getting someone to provide transport and to attend the appointment is completely unacceptable.

Finally, and perhaps most worryingly, inaccurate assessments for both PIP and ESA are widespread, making the wrong decisions and causing a lot of pain to individuals who are entitled to those benefits. PIP works on a points system, and Merton CIL has witnessed many assessments in which people are assessed as having zero or very few points, with the result later being overturned in tribunal. For some of my constituents, their assessments were so far removed from their lived experience that they felt sure that their notes had been mixed up with someone else's.

Some of the disabled residents to whom I have spoken say that they have felt intimidated by aggressive assessors. Meanwhile, Merton CIL advocates who have attended appointments with residents have sometimes been prevented from asking questions or taking notes, in direct contravention of DWP guidelines. It is crucial that providers address that at local level by working with individual centres and staff.

There is a range of other ESA-related problems, such as the practice of arranging unnecessarily frequent repeat assessments, the unfair and sudden stopping of ESA payments and the difficulty of successfully contacting the DWP to correct issues. We all know of the terrible pain and hardship that come with the appeals process, and it cannot be acceptable that two thirds of people applying for PIP and ESA are being forced to undergo a lengthy appeals process in order to access a benefit to which they are entitled.

I hope the Minister will address some of the basic practical issues with the administrative process and with access to assessment centres in order to ensure that every centre is reasonably accessible by public transport and has disabled parking. People should expect to be seen when they receive an appointment.

I am sorry that I will be unable to be here for the Minister's speech, but I wish those practical issues to be addressed.

3.9 pm

**Corri Wilson** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing this important debate.

I was recently contacted by a constituent after his DLA was stopped when he failed to attend an assessment that he knew nothing about. A missing letter resulted not only in the loss of more than £400 a month in DLA payments but, because he was no longer in receipt of DLA, he had had more than £30 a week in severe disability payments taken off his ESA. If that was not enough, he had his plus one bus pass taken away. This gentleman suffers from severe mental health issues, including dementia, depression and anxiety. He also has a heart condition that needs regular monitoring. The lack of funds and the bus pass being taken away has meant that over the past few months he has now missed at least three health appointments. His dementia means he has memory problems, obviously, and because he is no longer in receipt of DLA he has now lost his carer and is solely responsible for his own medication. When he asked about all these changes he was told that he did not have a good enough reason for missing his appointment. The decision to remove his DLA will stand, and his failure to attend the assessment means he is not eligible for PIP. His appeal will not be decided until the new year.

While my office is looking into ways of helping this man, the fact remains that the Department for Work and Pensions, and by extension the Government, think it is perfectly acceptable to leave a man with dementia and a life-threatening heart condition with zero support for more than four months, just because he missed one appointment that he has no memory of being notified about. Sadly, he is not alone

The Government's ongoing transition from DLA to PIP means that thousands of disabled people are losing out. According to DWP statistics, of the more than 46,800 claimants in Scotland who have been reassessed from DLA to PIP, only 77% were successfully awarded the new benefit. Almost 11,000 people lost their award and were left at the mercy of the system. Despite the rosy picture painted by the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), the system is seriously failing people. As we have heard today, I am not the only MP with a large number of constituents who have lost access to the higher-rate mobility component. Taking away a person's mobility vehicle makes it significantly harder for them to sustain employment or education. It reduces their options, increases their dependency on family members and adds to social isolation.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East mentioned, the latest statistics and appeals against PIP decisions show that a staggering 65% of appeals find in favour of the claimant. Coupled with almost 60% of initial decisions on ESA assessments being overturned, a reasonable person would be left wondering about the cost-effectiveness of a system that routinely makes such bad decisions. When we add in the recent United Nations report that describes the austerity policies of this Government as amounting to "systematic violations" of the rights of disabled people, it is clear that the system is deeply flawed.

The Government's Green Paper on disability employment support is a critical opportunity to get the system right for sick and disabled people, but one cannot help but be

sceptical when they insist on pressing ahead with cuts to the ESA work-related activity group. The Government claim this will incentivise disabled people into work, despite there being no actual evidence to support this. The real barriers to returning to employment, such as ill health, the attitudes of employers, skills barriers, reasonable adjustments and the availability of suitable jobs are not addressed by cuts in financial support. In fact, creating additional financial pressure can make people less likely to return to the labour market, as the added stress damages their already fragile health.

By carrying out cuts to ESA WRAG, the Government are sending a clear signal that they do not recognise the additional barriers faced by those currently unable to seek work. People with the most complex needs often have higher costs related to work activities, as they need to spend money on transport and communication support to go to interviews, attend training courses and secure work experience. The cuts to ESA WRAG will further penalise people who are already struggling, and will not address those additional issues. Cuts to ESA should, as a minimum, be delayed until the provision suggested in the Green Paper is tested and shown to support disabled people into employment, including people with complex needs.

Some 15% of the UK benefits system is being devolved to Scotland, and I am pleased that the Scottish Government are committed to ensuring that the mistakes the UK Government have made with PIP and the assessments are not repeated. The priority is the safe and secure transfer of social security powers to Scotland to ensure that everyone who relies on benefits will receive the right amount at the right time. Nobody should fall through the gaps, and everyone should be treated with respect and dignity. That is the social security system I would like to see, but on current form I think it is unlikely that that is the system that will be seen in the 85% of the system still reserved here at Westminster.

3.15 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I wish to offer my thanks and congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on securing this debate. I am delighted to participate, although I really wish it was not necessary. I intended my contribution to be brief, but I am afraid that my efforts to help the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) will make it a wee bit longer than I thought it would be.

I wish that the austerity agenda—a political choice—did not fall so heavily on the shoulders of those living with disabilities. I wish that the UK Government would put an end to the revolving-door culture of work capability assessments for those seeking to claim personal independence payments, although I think we all welcome the removal of the merry-go-round of reassessments for those with chronic conditions. I wish that those who find themselves grappling with a health condition or a disability that limits their ability to work—indeed, their ability to live as full a life as they would wish—did not feel as though they were being punished for it. I wish that those claiming personal independence payments, or seeking to claim this benefit, which is gradually replacing disability living allowance, were not confronted with such a flawed system that needs radical reform.

**Justin Tomlinson:** I am sure the hon. Lady will welcome the fact that an extra £3 billion is now being spent to support those on DLA and PIP compared with DLA alone in 2010, and the fact that 23.5% are on the highest rate compared with 16% on DLA. That is good news.

**Patricia Gibson:** The hon. Gentleman would do well to remember the fact that, according to OBR figures, although more money is being spent, that is down to the fact that demand has increased, so we should treat those figures with a little more caution.

The fact that the system is flawed is demonstrated by the fact that 65% of appeal decisions found in favour of the claimants, which means that that 65% initially had their application turned down, causing untold stress and anxiety about how they would cope in future. The hon. Gentleman spoke of work capability assessments as an opportunity. Well, I am afraid that my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran did not see this process as an opportunity. Perhaps the constituents of North Swindon found it so, but certainly in my part of the world, that was not the case.

**Justin Tomlinson:** To be clear, I said PIP assessments were an opportunity; not the work capability assessments for ESA, which need to be reformed.

**Patricia Gibson:** Surrounded by such a wealth of opportunity, it is hard to keep up. Nothing in the system that my constituents experience is seen as an opportunity. It is seen as extremely negative, intimidating and humiliating. When the hon. Gentleman talked about the assessments, perhaps I misunderstood him, but if I have I certainly am not alone. One might think that these assessments always resulted in somebody's entitlement or benefit being increased, but I can assure him that in my constituency that is almost never the case.

The hon. Gentleman, perhaps in the interests of trying to be helpful to the Chamber, talked about how we should go and see an assessment taking place. Perhaps this is just me—I have not done a survey or anything—but these assessments are not a spectator sport. We are talking about people's lives. The people who go through them very often find them humiliating and damaging. If I were to go through one of those assessments, the last thing I would want is an audience. Perhaps I might want a member of my family, or a close friend, but I certainly would not want my MP, who would in effect be a stranger, although their name might be well known to me. I certainly would not want the occasion to become a spectator sport. We must be careful about MPs filling the galleries when people are having their lives exposed and deconstructed by strangers.

This is a debate about social justice. Employment and support allowance is a form of financial support for people with life-limiting conditions whose ability to live a fully satisfying life, something we would all hope for, is effectively removed. That should be remembered during debates such as this one—and during the assessments. The hon. Member for North Swindon has informed the Chamber that the assessors are there to help, and I am sure that they think so too, but claimants feel stressed. They are confronted by assessors who are, by definition, strangers and who have little or no knowledge of their condition. We have all heard stories: for those who have not heard them, Parkinson's UK can keep them going

[*Patricia Gibson*]

all day. There are stories, for example, of people with Parkinson's being asked by the work capability assessor, "How long are you likely to have Parkinson's for?"

We know that the criteria for work capability assessment are flawed and that people whose conditions fluctuate are always at risk of what might, strangely—as it is all relative—be called a good day. Such things are not taken into account by the work capability assessment, and nor is the impact of pain and fatigue, or the degenerative nature of conditions such as Parkinson's. As a result, too many employment and support allowance applicants are placed in the work-related activity group, instead of the much more appropriate support group, which recognises that the claimant is simply not well enough to work. I reassure the hon. Member for North Swindon that I know that the Government have reversed the need for repeated work capability assessments for the chronically ill—that is welcome, but it simply does not go far enough. It is a matter of great concern to all fair-minded people that from April 2017 people placed in the employment support work-related activity group will receive £30 a week less than someone in the same situation today. That makes the failure of the system more alarming.

Flawed criteria are a particular difficulty for people with conditions such as Parkinson's in receipt of disability living allowance—I could mention a range of conditions but time forbids it—when they are being assessed for PIP. Under DLA, if a person could walk no more than 50 metres they would be eligible for support. For PIP that distance has arbitrarily—randomly, it seems—been reduced to 20 metres. That is such a short distance that it is not a useful or helpful estimate of a person's mobility. Given the fluctuating nature of some conditions and the failure of the process to register such fluctuations, many people are losing their Motability vehicles, on which they rely heavily.

The hon. Member for North Swindon will be interested to know that recent investigations found that under DLA 82% of people with Parkinson's received the full mobility payment, whereas under PIP that has dropped to 40%. That is a massive drop, and those people lose their vehicles within 28 days of an assessment decision being made against them. I do not see how anyone can come to this Chamber and say that that is acceptable. Those people are being isolated in their own homes and effectively punished for their illness. Their dependence on family members increases.

**Nadine Dorries (in the Chair):** Order. Will the hon. Lady apply the restriction of nine minutes to her speech?

**Patricia Gibson:** Yes, Ms Dorries.

**Justin Tomlinson:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Patricia Gibson:** I am being pressed by the Chair to conclude my remarks.

Everyone welcomes the Green Paper. What we do not welcome is the headlong rush to cuts before there can be proper analysis, which could be used to correct the system. We need an evidence-based and compassionate approach. Frankly, I do not see that. We should all want

the same thing: we should all want to support people with disabilities into work, and to support those who cannot work. We need to make sure that we do that properly, and I urge the Minister to reflect on that and on all the suggestions made today.

**Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind) rose—**

**Nadine Dorries (in the Chair):** Ms McGarry, I did not get notification that you put in a request to speak, but I could call you for a few minutes if you concluded in three or four minutes.

3.24 pm

**Natalie McGarry:** Thank you, Ms Dorries; that was an oversight, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing the debate. She made an excellent speech, in which she articulated her constituency case well. She opened the debate in good style, with a lot of information.

Two weeks ago, there were two lengthy debates in the House of Commons on the Government's punitive welfare reforms—specifically cuts to the ESA work-related activity group; 127 MPs laid down a marker and said that the Government must pause, reflect and reconsider the cuts. The Government did not oppose the motion, and some would be forgiven for thinking that it was a sign that they were listening to our concerns. It feels as if we have debates such as this one week in, week out; but if we have to keep bringing the matter back to the Chamber we will. The time for conciliatory debate that does not powerfully challenge the Government is over. It is right for constituents and Members to be angry, especially when there is no evidence that cutting ESA WRAG incentivises people into work.

The people of Glasgow East—like people across Scotland and throughout the UK—listened to the Prime Minister speaking on the steps of Downing Street when she promised to fight injustice and lead a Government for the many, not the few. However, by the time the Chancellor stepped away from the Dispatch Box on Wednesday, the benefit of the doubt had evaporated. Sometimes what a person does not say is more telling—or more damning—than what they do say. The Chancellor of the Exchequer spoke at length—6,092 words—but failed to mention ESA once. He could even find the time and words to ask whether the shadow Chancellor could dance, but no words could be found for disabled people or ESA.

Since the Government announcement of punishing cuts, MPs of all colours and stripes have railed against them. The matter is so important that it keeps being brought back to the Chamber, and the Minister is constantly called back to answer. I appreciate that the Minister of State is present to do that today. The case seems to be devoid of logic and compassion. Reducing ESA to the rate of jobseeker's allowance is wrong for a number of reasons. People on ESA are already assessed as unfit for work, whereas people on jobseeker's can actively seek work. It is therefore unsurprising that ESA recipients should need more support, for longer, than JSA recipients. Indeed, more than half of ESA WRAG recipients are on welfare support for more than two years. Such long time periods are linked to higher associated costs of illness and disability.

It is extraordinarily perverse and callous to expect those with illness and disability to suffer on £73 a week for a prolonged period of two years. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made that point forcefully: why would someone with a job at £500 a week want to go down to £73 a week, if they could help it? I cannot, and I never will, understand how any elected representative or Government could support proposals that serve no purpose other than picking the pockets of the sick and disabled, and putting them through the trauma of a broken and unfair PIP or ESA assessment. Where is the humanity in that? Like other hon. Members, I look forward to seeing the Green Paper; but before then it is time for the Government to rethink the assessments, and to pause the cuts to ESA WRAG.

3.28 pm

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate, Ms Dorries. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing the debate and for the way she set out the case, highlighting how pressing the issue is, as our postbags show. She raised a case of great concern—the experiences of her constituent Donna. The assessment notes that my hon. Friend read out struck me as closely mirroring a constituency case that I am now dealing with. A gentleman, who had been in work, suffered mental health problems and as a result of them fell out of work. He was assessed for social security support and failed. Some of the notes from the assessments that my hon. Friend quoted were very similar to his. Sadly, my constituent committed suicide. The harrowing cases that we have heard today are very concerning.

I also note the contributions from other Members today. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly asked why on earth someone who had previously had £500 a week would choose to receive £73 a week. That is not a choice that anyone would make. He also highlighted the apparent dichotomy that is at play: the Government are telling his constituent that they are unable to employ him, while expecting employers to employ people who are in a similar position. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that.

I listened carefully, as I always do, to the contribution of the former Minister, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). He gave a stout defence of the Government and of his own record in government. As always, I want to be as constructive and as consensual as possible, but I must remind him that the accounts that we have heard today and in previous debates are personal testimonies from constituents, not just hearsay. I do not know whether that was a slip of the tongue from the former Minister, but the experiences of the constituents that were highlighted today are not just hearsay.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) rightly highlighted the disproportionate impact that welfare cuts are having on those with disabilities. They are affected many times more than those without disabilities. That appears to fly in the face of the commitment from the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, to protect those with disabilities in the social security system.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) to her place as the Scottish National party's new disability spokesperson.

She highlighted another very troubling constituency case; I hope the Minister has taken heed of it and will commit to looking into it.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) is absolutely right that this debate is centrally about social justice. She also rightly highlighted the indignity felt by our constituents when they go through these processes. If the Government are to get this right, they need to look at how people feel they are being treated. Whether the Government agree or not is irrelevant; what is important is what the people who experience the system feel, which is clearly different from what the Government feel.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) rightly said that, when it comes to ESA WRAG, we are not going away. I will focus on ESA WRAG for the majority of my speech, because this is a further opportunity to quiz the Minister on her plans. On 17 November, a motion on ESA that I moved in a Backbench Business Committee debate with the support of eight other parties was carried by Parliament. In that debate, the Minister took an intervention from the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), who supported the motion. He pressed her on potential financial mechanisms that would

“fully compensate for the loss of the WRAG payments for new claimants”.

The Minister replied:

“Yes. Let me give my hon. Friend that reassurance.”

Perhaps my interpretation of “fully compensated” is different from the Minister's, but I understood from what she said that new ESA WRAG claimants would be getting equivalent financial support through the mechanisms outlined by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate:

“the hardship fund, the flexible support fund and the third-party deals”.—[*Official Report*, 17 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 464.]

I tested that in a written question but I did not get a clear reply, so I hope that today the Minister will take the opportunity to say what she understands “fully compensated” to mean.

The Chancellor appeared in the autumn statement to undermine the Minister's apparent pledge. The Chancellor said in response to the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), that the savings of £330 million from the ESA WRAG cut would now be invested in a package of support, as opposed to in direct financial help. Presumably, he meant the Green Paper package, which is currently being consulted on and which was previously budgeted as £60 million next year. That is as clear as mud to me and to the many others who are looking on and trying to understand what the Government are going to do, how much they will commit and the mechanism by which that will be implemented.

The only thing that the Government have been clear about is that they want to cut ESA WRAG. They have not said what is coming in to replace it. They have really put the cart before the horse. I understand that fresh Ministers are perhaps flogging that horse to catch up, but the plans for halving the disability employment gap appear to be falling away; we do not know whether that is still a commitment. The cuts to ESA WRAG and the system to replace the Work programme should have been consulted on first.

[Neil Gray]

The point has been made across this Chamber today and it has repeatedly been made across the House in previous debates: the Government have it the wrong way round. It is like announcing that they are going to scrap the TV licence in April, but only now going through the process of deciding how it should be replaced, with no guarantee to the BBC of how much financial support it would receive. In fact, this will probably receive a third of the public funds, but get practical support in order to generate better outcomes. That just does not wash. It may be a policy that appeases some people, but it is clearly not the way to treat anyone. It has no evidence of being any fairer or delivering better outcomes, because we have no idea how the system is going to work.

I must critique what appears to be the Government's main motive, which is that for someone to get an extra £29 per week on top of jobseeker's allowance is a disincentive to work. Here is what my constituent Janice had to say when she got in touch with me this week:

"Being unemployed and reliant on benefits is demeaning and depressing. Employers need to focus on what people CAN do rather than on what they can't. There are ways to work around: many can work from home with flexible hours and would jump at that opportunity."

Does Janice strike the Minister as someone who chooses or wants to be out of work? Of course not. She is like hundreds of thousands of sick and disabled people up and down the land who desperately want to work. Cutting the money they could receive will not change their minds or incentivise them any more than what already motivates them: dignity, self-worth and getting a job that they can sustain. Cutting away that vital support will add an layer of stress and worry and, with additional work search costs, will hinder their ability to find the work that they so desperately crave. The MS Society points to research published last year by Scope's extra costs commission, which says that living with neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis can cost people an extra £200 a week.

I plead and hope that the Minister will say what she and the Government plan to do to help people by providing additional employment support and financial support. She must realise and accept that people who are in ESA WRAG are in that category because they are currently unfit for work; they have an illness or a disability that means that they cannot currently work. ESA WRAG is often their only income and yet, from April, people on ESA WRAG who are sick or disabled will somehow be expected to sustain themselves on the same rate as jobseeker's allowance. The Government must think again.

3.38 pm

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is lovely to serve under your chairmanship again, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on securing an excellent debate. It has been really constructive and has brought to light more cases to show the Minister and the former Minister, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), how people experience the cuts, how sick and disabled people experience the assessment process and the indignity they too often face. I wish Donna all the very best and I hope she continues to recover. It is the personal stories that bring this issue to life.

I thank all hon. Members who have contributed so well today—I should have started by saying happy St Andrew's day. It is so important to understand what people are going through and to put a human face to it. The former Minister said, "Go and observe one of these assessments." He is right that we should all try to do that, but I am sure he is aware of observational bias. We should not take our own observations as the only form of evidence. Up and down the country, we are hearing and seeing examples of what sick and disabled people are going through every day.

This is the first opportunity that I have had to discuss this issue with the Minister, and I want to focus on what the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) also focused on. We will not go away and this issue will not go away. We will continue to campaign on it, because it is a real injustice: £1,500 a year from the most vulnerable people, the poorest of the poor, some five million people—I will not continually repeat the statistics that we repeated in the two debates just two weeks ago.

What is so disappointing is that all the evidence—from the UN committees investigating human rights concerns and breaches of the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, from our own Equality and Human Rights Commission, from the Government's Social Security Advisory Committee, from a whole list of well-respected charities, such as Parkinson's UK, Scope and so on, and even from the Government's own Back Benchers—is being completely ignored. We heard about the Backbench Business Committee debate, when the motion was carried without contest, which is almost unprecedented.

The strength of feeling in this House has been expressed, yet what was so absent in the autumn statement was anything that sick or disabled people could grasp for how their lives would be made better. Their lives have been made a misery over the last six years and it will get worse. I know that the Minister is new in her post and she has said some very positive things. We have also heard very warm words from the Prime Minister, but when it comes to doing anything, the Government have put their hands in their pockets and turned away. We cannot have that. It needs to change.

The Government have put forward arguments about incentivising claimants and argued that cuts will incentivise people into work, which is quite disgraceful, really. It implies that people are making a choice. As we have heard, people are not making a choice to live on £70-odd a week when they have had a decent living before. They do not choose to do that. As the fifth richest country in the world, we have an obligation to treat people with dignity and respect. It is about choices.

I want to pick up on the point that other Members have made about what other discretionary funds people might be able to draw on. I was going through the Minister's earlier speech last night, and the flexible support fund was mentioned. We need to understand some things about that fund. First of all, it was investigated recently for fraud. The former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), tried to claim that it was being supplemented by £15 million a year to cover the costs. That is not the case; it is actually £15 million from 2015 alone. That fund does not go anywhere near to matching the loss that people will experience and the in-year deductions that will be made as a result of these cuts.

I will finish on a point that was raised in my constituency. We all have hundreds of different cases; my case load has gone up exponentially as people have been subjected to these increased cuts. I want to talk about John Ruane, who has a brain tumour. As a consequence, he has three to four epileptic fits a week. I was contacted by his surgeon, because John was refusing to have a life-saving operation, as he had passed his work capability assessment—how could that happen to somebody with a life-threatening condition?—and he was worried that he would be sanctioned, in the same way that we saw in “I, Daniel Blake”. John had no means of support, and it has taken us months to sort this out. He has now, finally, had his ESA reinstated, but he was scared of being sanctioned because of what had happened, and the stress that he was placed under, as well as the indignity, just is not right. That is one case; I could cite loads of others.

Within the context of ESA, we cannot ignore the work capability assessment. Again, more than two years ago the Work and Pensions Committee raised the WCA as an issue in its report on ESA:

“Simply ‘rebranding’ the WCA by taking on a new provider will not solve the problems: a fundamental redesign of the ESA end-to-end process is required”.

Very briefly, I want mention another one of my constituents, a young woman who is going through the PIP process. She was a high-flyer, in a good career, and she is only in her 30s, but she is suffering from Lipedema, Dercum’s disease, fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome. She has pain in every part of her body, but particularly in her hands. She cannot even cook or prepare her own food. She has gone through the PIP process and she feels that it is just like a slap in the face. She needs that support to enable her to recover, and she feels that she is being thwarted at every turn.

This is about choices—choices about what we do. It is about whether we as a country feel that it is right to support our most vulnerable people or to support those on the top incomes—which is what the autumn statement analysis shows that we did. We on the Opposition choose that we should protect and support the most vulnerable in our society. This is about choice, and I hope that the Government will listen and do something about it.

3.46 pm

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on securing this debate and all hon. Members who have contributed to it.

These are important services and they are at the heart of our nation’s values and its interests. Of the 2.5 million people claiming incapacity benefits, 1.3 million also claim PIP or DLA. A further million claim PIP or DLA, but not incapacity benefits. Many of these people will also access other support and state services, as well as support provided by partner organisations.

What we do is vital, not only to enable someone to meet their living costs and endure, but to support their ambitions. We have that dual responsibility. In addition, I am very conscious, because of the combined areas that I look after, that I have the largest budget of any Minister in any Government Department. That is a huge responsibility to the general public, who fund it, and to those whom these services are designed to help. It is a responsibility that I take very seriously indeed.

PIP and ESA are entirely different benefits, designed for different purposes, and each has its own legal criteria. ESA provides support to those who face barriers to work and looks at what work a person can do, rather than focusing on what they cannot do. Unlike ESA, PIP is non-means-tested and available to disabled people regardless of their employment status. PIP provides a contribution towards the extra personal costs arising from their disability or health condition and can be paid on top of other benefits.

The PIP assessment is designed to treat all health conditions and impairments fairly, and the assessment criteria take into account the impact of all impairments, including mental health, on an individual’s ability to carry out a broad range of everyday activities. That breadth is one of the benefits of the new system in comparison with what went before, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), who outlined some other improvements that the system makes.

The title of this debate refers to two benefits, but understandably much of the debate has focused on people, and quite rightly so, as the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) said. In developing our policy and delivering our services, we need to remember that it is not just about those who have been featured in today’s debate. It is also about those who have not been featured and who rarely get a mention: those who are not on benefits and are not yet in crisis, but are financially fragile; those in ill health; those with multiple caring responsibilities who do not qualify for carer’s allowance; and those who, despite hardship, do not for a variety of reasons access the benefit support available to them. Our concern and our support should stretch beyond the reach of our benefits. What we take forward from the Green Paper and all we do in the interim must have help for those people in mind.

ESA and PIP are massive systems, and both have rightly undergone, and will continue to undergo, continual improvements. Contrary to what the shadow Minister said, we have made many changes. Recent changes include the announcement that we will stop ESA reassessments for those with severe health conditions and disabilities. In designing the changes, I have asked that we plan ahead and see whether we could have permission to share information with local government. That could enable local authorities to stop requiring those very same people to fill in forms for locally administered schemes. In his speech, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) outlined some of the potential benefits of doing that when he mentioned social care and other services.

With ESA, we now have clinical data to hold contractors to account. I pay tribute to the DWP’s chief medical officer and her team for the work they have done on that and on data sharing. We have trialled greater flexibility on the time given to the early stages of an application process to ensure that all the health information is available to the assessor. That is the best way to cut down on incorrect decisions being made at that early stage.

**Debbie Abrahams:** Will the Minister give way?

**Penny Mordaunt:** If the shadow Minister will forgive me, I will make some progress.

[*Penny Mordaunt*]

We are rolling out that trial. The past presence test will no longer apply to claims for DLA, PIP, attendance allowance and carer's allowance with regard to refugees, people with humanitarian protection status and their families. We are extending hardship payments. The ESA appeals process has been reformed, with mandatory reconsideration clearance times down from 35 days to nine. The number of weeks and the percentage of case load having to go to appeal to get the right decision are both reducing. Huge strides have been made in identifying hidden impairments, including through training of staff.

The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East spoke at length about the factors of appearance. Many people might look perfectly together and presentable but have deeply hidden issues. We have done a huge amount in training staff to recognise that, and more is planned. The Secretary of State has announced his focus on the use of sanctions with those with mental health conditions, and the Green Paper gives us the possibility of major reform to different parts of the system in unison. In that consultation, we want to examine how we might simplify and improve the assessment process and how we can use information better to effectively support people, such as sharing data—with claimant consent—with support organisations and other state services. The reform of the work capability assessment—which we have not been able to do to date because it requires primary legislation—is a focus of the Green Paper. We could separate out decisions on entitlement to employment support and entitlement to financial support.

**Neil Gray:** Will the Minister give way?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I will just make a little progress, because I have some announcements to make.

The Green Paper also looks at statutory sick pay and other issues that would have benefited people such as Donna—if I have understood her situation—by enabling a phased return to work, which is obviously what people need. Rather than having someone continually jump through hoops, we want that support to be wrapped around the individual, whatever situation they have been landed in. Not only does that support need to be exactly what they need, when they need it and personalised—whether it is delivered by a jobcentre, a GP practice nurse or another—but their experience of the whole system has to be what they need, when they need it. Having to wait for an assessment to be carried out before someone can have a conversation about their situation and hopes is not smart. We need a joined-up, common-sense approach in all we do. We should not just start thinking about what assistive technology or equipment someone might need when they hit the employment market. We need to think about that when they are at school or college and receiving careers advice.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Forgive me, but I will make some progress.

That kind of quality support can be reached only through stellar local working. That is why the Green Paper consultation is more than an information-gathering exercise; it is a call to arms. We have to build new

commitments and shared outcomes locally. I urge all Members to help us in the consultation process and to come along to the drop-in event in the House on Monday between 3 o'clock and 5 o'clock. It will offer information specific to Members' constituencies, guidance on how to run an event or get involved in one, as well as bringing partners together to respond to the consultation and thinking about what needs to be done in the local area. During the consultation process, we will continue to develop those networks, facilitated by the flexible support fund, and also busting some of the myths about what local services we will commission to support those on benefits.

I briefly turn to Motability, which the hon. Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) particularly focused on. Members will know that a scheme has been set out—I am very grateful to Motability for doing that—to try to help with the transition from DLA to PIP. It is a challenging time for individuals. That scheme is the £175 million package that Members will be familiar with, which enables individuals to keep their car for seven weeks, allows them to buy back their old vehicle and offers a one-off payment of £2,000 to help to meet their continuing Motability needs. Motability is also helping to pay for new adaptations to non-scheme cars, with insurance thrown in. We are aware of how difficult it is—despite that mitigation and the other sources of transport subsidy that might be available—for an individual to be told that they will lose their vehicle with only a few weeks to make alternative arrangements.

There are other problems too. I want to outline one that is of particular concern to me. It relates to people leaving the country for extended periods longer than 13 weeks. That is a problem for students, but it is also a problem for someone who might want to take up a career opportunity, a sabbatical or other opportunities that require travel. Our systems must be able to support someone following their dreams and ambitions. They must enable a person to thrive, so this situation should not be left to stand. We have been discussing with relevant Departments ways to enable PIP claimants to keep their vehicle pending appeal, and we are exploring options to allow those who are not in receipt of the higher Motability component to have access to the Motability scheme. I am also exploring how claimants who are out of the country for extended periods can be better supported. We have a plan and the Treasury's blessing. This week I have written to Motability to ask for its help in delivering that plan. I anticipate that the plan will require some changes to its processes, but I know that it will do all it can to help us in this matter, as it has in the past. We have a remarkable and unique partnership with Motability, and I hope in my tenure to maximise that.

I have spoken at length about the work-related activity group. Time is short but, briefly, we are looking at a range of measures to help to ensure that someone's experience of these systems—that is fundamentally the heart of what Members have been discussing today—can be improved and that we are aware of all the issues. That includes looking at developing service user panels to create a real-time reporting mechanism on people's experiences. We can use those panels to design our benefits systems. There are a raft of other measures that I do not have time to outline today, but they will help us to do that. I will bring forward measures shortly.

The final thing I will do before I hand over to the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East is reassure her that I will be there to assist when devolution transitions further powers to Holyrood. I am already talking to her colleagues there about how we can get the best outcomes for the issues she mentioned. Again, this comes down to all Members of this House—whichever part of the country we represent and whatever our political hue—working together to get the best outcomes in the systems. I hope that all Members will come to the drop-in session next Monday.

**Nadine Dorries (in the Chair):** Six seconds.

3.59 pm

**Angela Crawley:** I thank you for that, Mrs Dorries. I thank all hon. and right hon. Members—

**Nadine Dorries (in the Chair):** Order.  
*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

## Road Safety: Sentencing Review

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

4 pm

**Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered road safety and the Government's proposed sentencing review.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. In January 2014, I stood before the House of Commons and called on the Government to review the sentencing guidelines for maximum penalties for driving offences that lead to death or serious injury. I urged the Government then to make changes to the rules and guidelines set out by law that mean that drivers who end the lives of innocent people on our roads sometimes have their sentences reduced to mere months.

**Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab):** In Bradford, our local "Stop the Danger Drivers" campaign calls for tougher action to tackle these criminal drivers. Does my hon. Friend agree that tougher action is needed to tackle dangerous driving, which blights so many of our local communities?

**Susan Elan Jones:** I agree with my hon. Friend 100%. Right across the country there are people concerned about this issue.

4.2 pm

*Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.*

4.15 pm

*On resuming—*

**Susan Elan Jones:** It is again a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

In January 2014, I raised the issue of the need for a sentencing review for maximum penalties for driving offences that lead to death or serious injury. Many Members of Parliament stood with me and explained why the issue mattered to their constituents and why the review is so desperately needed.

Let me begin by talking about why this issue matters so much to me and my constituency. In the village of Overton in my constituency, a nine-year-old boy was tragically killed in 2009 while crossing the road. The driver who so carelessly mowed young Robert down was unlicensed and uninsured. He hit Robert, took his life and then drove away. He did not stop to help and did not report the accident. He resprayed his car to hide the evidence, attempting to cover up his crime. The driver who took Robert's life incurred a pitiful sentence of 22 months, yet that was the very limit of what was possible under the law for that offence. That man hit a young boy and took his life, and after driving away and leaving that child to die he was sentenced to a grand total of 22 months and a four-year driving ban.

**Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con):** My constituent, Sean Morley, was similarly knocked over and left to die by a driver who left the scene. Does the hon. Lady agree that the sentence needs to reflect the severity of the crime? Currently, it is prosecuted under hit and run, so people get the same sentence that they would have got if they had knocked off a wing mirror.

**Susan Elan Jones:** I agree totally. That shows that this is a cross-party issue that affects communities across the country.

That driver served only 10 months in jail. Clearly, that cannot be right. Almost two years ago, I asked the Government to reconsider the arrangements for sentencing. Currently, those who cause death by driving in the way I have described face a number of charges and a wide scale of sentences, ranging from mere months to 14 years, but the reality is that sentencing guidelines mean that there must be a large and, frankly, improbable series of aggravating factors for a judge to issue anywhere near the maximum sentence. Tougher penalties are not being used, because judges are being held back by guidelines that prevent them from handing out longer sentences. I know from the many families I have spoken to that there are instances when tougher penalties were very much needed.

In 2004, the Labour party was right to fight for higher maximum penalties. The Government, encouraged by the tireless campaigning of many Members from all parties, were equally right to incorporate new rules on drug taking while driving into the Crime and Courts Act 2013 and to amend the Road Traffic Act 1988. We know that there is a tremendous amount of cross-party support on the issue in this House. Both of those Governments can be rightly proud of having introduced changes that go in the right direction, but there is much further to go.

I have spoken about Robert Gaunt from Overton in this House previously, and I wish I could say that that case is tragic but unique, but it is not. Innocent people have been killed by drivers who have been given low sentences across our country, and it has continued since I raised this issue in 2014.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this important subject to this Chamber. I just wish we had longer than half an hour to talk about it. My constituent, Joseph Brown-Lartey, was, sadly, killed by a dangerous driver. I have talked about him before and I am working on the Justice for Joseph campaign. I want to make the point that, as my hon. Friend said, she and indeed all of us present have been working on the issue for many years, but we do not seem to be getting anywhere with the Government. I hope that this debate will push it forward.

**Susan Elan Jones:** I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. Again, that highlights the point about diversity—she represents an urban constituency, mine is predominantly rural. These issues occur absolutely everywhere.

The average sentence served by a driver who kills or seriously injures another human being while driving is, believe it or not, only 11 months. Families are losing loved ones because of reckless, dangerous and negligent driving, and the law is not doing enough to hold those responsible to account. Innocent families are being let down by the system and the punishments given simply do not fit the crimes committed.

Let me explain the situation. If a driver is caught driving with

“a deliberate decision to ignore (or a flagrant disregard for) the rules of the road”,

the starting point for judges when sentencing is eight years. That can be longer for a number of reasons, such as when a person is killed or when the driver is driving a stolen vehicle. Let us reflect for a moment on how subjective that is—“a deliberate decision” about, or “a flagrant disregard for” the rules of the road. If a driver is seen to be creating significant danger—the lowest level of seriousness—the starting point for a sentencing judge is three years and the maximum term is five years. If a driver is injured, the sentence is shortened. If the victim was a friend, again the sentence is shortened; and on and on we go.

As I said in 2014, it is absolutely right that our criminal justice system differentiates between those who make a mistake, commit a crime and acknowledge it, and those who flee, hide and pervert the course of justice, as in the case involving Robert Gaunt in Overton. I wholeheartedly support the provision of a range of different sentences for driving offences—indeed, our country’s justice system is built on that—and I am calling for a logical development of the existing system and more consideration of the sentences given.

As a result of the rules and guidelines set out by the law, drivers who end the lives of innocent people on our roads have their sentences reduced again and again until, bit by bit, they decline to mere months. Drivers who plead guilty before their trials have their sentences automatically reduced by a third, and most will be released on licence after serving only half their given sentences. For the families of those who are killed, that is clearly not justice—nor is that justice for the rest of society.

After the injustice of cases such as that of Robert Gaunt and many others like it nationwide, people from my constituency launched a petition calling for sentences for this sort of crime to be increased. More than 1,300 names were added online and a further 2,000 collected on paper. The campaign continued, even though a change of Government meant an early closure of the online petition. Many of those who signed had probably never signed a petition before, and perhaps have not since, but they did so on that occasion out of a passion for justice for Robert and for other victims of road accidents throughout our country.

Almost two years ago, as I said, I asked the Government to look at the maximum penalties for driving offences that lead to death and serious injury. I asked for the same thing that the family of Robert James Gaunt was calling for back in 2009—but we are still waiting today.

In response to a recent parliamentary written question on this issue, the Government stated:

“It is our intention to commence a consultation before the end of the year which will look at driving offences and penalties.”

I welcome that, and I am pleased that the Government are still willing and open to do something. However, almost two years ago, that same commitment was made to me when I brought the issue to the House of Commons. I and other Members of Parliament who were passionate in support of a sentencing review were told that one would take place and that justice would be offered to those who had lost loved ones so tragically.

If we change the law and the sentencing guidelines are reformed properly, that will bring some measure of justice. I hope that that would give people who are uninsured or unlicensed grounds to pause before they

get behind the wheel of a vehicle. So let me be absolutely clear why I am here today: we urged the Government to act; the Government promised to hold a review; and the review has not taken place. It is taking far too long.

Since 2009, my constituents have been calling for changes, and many others across the country and across party have been making the same plea. At a recent meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for transport safety, I had the opportunity to ask the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who has responsibility for road safety, why that has taken such a long time. He admitted that there had been considerable delay. In response to a recent question in the House of Lords by Lord Berkeley on this issue, the Government responded that the criticism that they had taken too long was “fair”.

The Government keep telling the House their intentions. I am pleased that they intend to conduct a review. I am pleased that their intention is to take this matter as seriously as everyone in this Chamber does, but it has been almost two years since I was promised in the House of Commons in 2014 that a review would take place. On that occasion, the Government told me that a sentencing review would start, but for all the promises we have been given, I have yet to see anything actually happening. Intentions are grand and fine things, and they are to be welcomed, but they are not much use if we do not get a real review and if sentencing guidelines are not reformed. It is now time to see real results.

I have been urging the Government to look at the issues since 2011. I will continue to raise them again and again until action is taken, and many, many colleagues in this House feel similarly. It is time for the Government to give us the review that Members of Parliament are calling for. It is time for the Government to deliver on the promises they made to me almost two years ago. Most important, it is time for us to give families the opportunity to receive the justice that they have waited so long for. It is time for a review, and I and many others will keep asking for it until it arrives. This is not about politics; it is about justice. It is time for us to move on with the issue. I have left the Minister a considerable amount of time in which to respond and, I hope, to make some commitment on a timeline for when justice can be expected.

**Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair):** I understand that Mr Jake Berry wants to contribute. To be clear, the revised time for the conclusion of the debate is 4.43 pm. We want to hear the Minister’s reply, so brevity would be much appreciated, but before I call Mr Berry, may I confirm for the record that you, Susan Elan Jones and the Minister, are quite happy for me to do so?

*Susan Elan Jones indicated assent.*

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah)** *indicated assent.*

4.28 pm

**Jake Berry** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Thank you, Mr Bailey, for calling me. I congratulate the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) on an exceptionally good, thoughtful and thought-provoking speech. I want to add to it only briefly—I, too, want to give the Minister as much time as possible to respond.

I want to draw attention to an issue that I raised in Prime Minister’s Question Time on 25 November 2015. On 3 August 2015, an intoxicated John Morton offered Amy Baxter, aged 27, and Hayley Jones, aged 32, a lift home in his car. He crashed that car. The injuries that Amy Baxter suffered are so severe that she did not see her children for seven months, because of her head injuries. Even after that, it was too distressing for those children to see her. She is paralysed from the neck down. Her injuries have been life-changing. The issue is not just about death; it is also about serious injuries caused by dangerous driving.

Unbelievably, when Mr Morton pleaded guilty in March 2015, he was simply sentenced to a three-year driving ban, a fine and a 20-week overnight curfew. That is an appalling thing for the family to deal with. They feel that he really has had no punishment whatever for causing life-changing injuries to one of their family members.

But it gets worse than that. Three weeks after Mr Morton was given his overnight curfew, he went to Bolton magistrates court to have his tag removed to enable him to go to a stag party in Portugal. When his family came to see me, they said they felt like that was another sentence with which the magistrate had slapped them in the face. That is absolutely disgusting behaviour by our courts. I do not for one moment blame the magistrates, because I do not believe that they have the sentencing guidelines or flexibility to attach real punishment to people such as Mr Morton.

I wanted to contribute to the debate to say that I certainly have not forgotten Amy Baxter’s tragic injuries and the fantastic campaign that her mother, my constituent Pauline Baxter, has run. Following my question at Prime Minister’s questions to the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, I went to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who was at the time Secretary of State for Justice, and he told me, like he told the hon. Member for Clwyd South, that something would happen and there would be a review of sentencing. Amy Baxter’s is just one more appalling case, and I say from the Government side, reflecting cross-party support for the hon. Lady’s call: “For goodness’ sake, let’s get on with it.” We have had promise after promise. How many poor mothers like Amy Baxter have to see the drink-driver who caused them life-changing injuries not punished properly before the Government will take action? I hope that the Minister will respond with something concrete, because there is frustration on both sides of the House about the intolerable delay in the Government’s review of these sentences.

4.31 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah):** May I say how wonderful it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey? I thank the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) for securing this debate on road safety and the review of driving offences and penalties, and all hon. Members for their contributions. She first highlighted the tragic death of her constituent, Robert Gaunt, as far back as 2009. Young Robert’s death, which could have been avoided, must have been devastating for his family and friends, as she rightly and understandably outlined.

[*Mr Sam Gyimah*]

Many of us have had road deaths in our constituencies that need not have happened. It will be no comfort to victims and their families, but we should not lose sight of the fact that despite the significant increase in road users, our roads are getting safer and road deaths are at their lowest ever. In the time allotted to me, I will look at some of the issues that the hon. Lady raised.

On sentences and sentencing guidelines, once offenders are charged and convicted, their sentencing is a matter for the independent courts, which decide on sentences having considered the full details of the case and the offender. The courts are best placed to decide on just and proportionate sentences. My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) also referred to the sentencing guidelines in his passionate speech. Those guidelines are produced by the independent Sentencing Council, and the courts are required to follow them in deciding on a sentence, but it is worth stressing that a judge may depart from them if it is in the interests of justice to do so. The council plans to review those guidelines in due course. One good thing about them is that they lead to greater transparency about the sentences that are imposed and ensure that there is some consistency. A review of the guidelines for motoring offences involving death is on the Sentencing Council's work plan, as I have alluded to. That review was postponed following the Government's own review, which I will talk about. New draft guidelines will be subject to a full public consultation shortly.

Both hon. Members raised the question of maximum penalties. It is worth stressing that although sentencing is a matter for the courts, we all know that Parliament sets the legal framework within which the courts operate. Maximum penalties are set by Parliament to cover the most serious imaginable behaviours for specific offences, which is why the maximum penalty is rarely imposed. When deciding what sentence to impose, the courts are required to take account of all the circumstances of the offence and the offender, and any mitigating or aggravating factors. Some people have suggested that the courts should impose the maximum penalty in every road traffic case that results in death. However, imposing the maximum penalty for any death in any circumstance for any offence would be contrary to our system of justice. Making all sentences the same would remove the courts' ability to single out and highlight the most serious cases and offences.

The issue of release was raised, and it was suggested that those who plead guilty can get up to a third off their sentences at the judge's discretion. In fact, under statute, all offenders serving determinate sentences are released automatically at the halfway point; that is not the case just for driving offences.

Despite what was said, the Government have taken some action, although we want to ensure that the courts are able to respond appropriately to the full range of cases that they are likely to face. Changes have recently been made to the law. In the past, where offenders caused very serious injuries, the offence with which they were charged related solely to their driving, not the harm they caused to the victim. The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 created a new offence of causing serious injury by dangerous driving, with a five-year maximum penalty. In addition, in the

Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, the Government increased the maximum penalty for causing death or serious injury when driving while disqualified. The previous maximum was only two years; that has now been increased to 10 years. That came into force in April last year. Those changes mean that there is now a range of offences dealing with dangerous driving that have appropriate maximum penalties and more properly reflect the harm caused.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of failure to stop in the event of a so-called hit-and-run. Failure to stop is a summary-only offence with a six-month maximum penalty, because it is designed to deal only with drivers who fail to stop and report an incident. Where there is evidence that the driver caused death or serious injury, or the driver was found to have been driving carelessly or dangerously, separate charges apply. Where the driver seeks to evade detection, they may be charged with perverting the course of justice, which has a maximum penalty of a life sentence.

I touched on reduction of sentences as the result of a guilty plea, and I want to expand on that slightly. The sentencing guidelines provide a sliding scale of reductions, depending on the point at which the plea is made. The maximum reduction is a third, for a plea at the first reasonable opportunity; the recommended reduction falls to 10% when the offender pleads guilty on the day of the trial. Where the case against the offender is overwhelming, the guidelines provide for discretion on the part of the judge to give a lower reduction.

**Susan Elan Jones:** I am rather perplexed. The Minister is not providing total support for the existing guidelines. We are all very much under the impression that the Government want the sentencing guidelines to be reviewed. Can we have absolute clarity that they will be reviewed, and may we have a timescale for that?

**Mr Gyimah:** If the hon. Lady will bear with me, I am trying to deal with the points she raised and how the law stands. I will then come on to what further action the Government will take.

On murder and manslaughter—an issue that has been touched on—I understand why in many cases causing death by driving is thought to be equivalent to attacking someone with a weapon. Under the current law, the Crown Prosecution Service can and will charge a person with manslaughter when the evidence supports that charge, it is the public interest to do so and there is a reasonable prospect of a conviction. Successful prosecutions have secured manslaughter convictions in driving cases.

Careless and dangerous driving has come up in such debates and there have been suggestions that the distinction between careless and dangerous driving should be abolished and replaced with one offence of bad driving. What amounts to dangerous driving is determined not by considering the driver's state of mind or intentions, which in the context of driving is often difficult to ascertain, but by examining the nature of the driving.

The law sets out an objective test designed to compare the driving of the defendant in the specific circumstances of the case against what would be expected of a notional careful and competent driver. In general terms, if the court considers that the driving falls far below that standard and it would be obvious to a competent and

careful driver that the manner of driving was dangerous, it will find that to have been dangerous driving. Our law needs to reflect that while the harm caused in homicide cases and fatal driving offences is the same because someone has died, the culpability of the offender for the death may be significantly different.

Of course hon. Members want to know what happens next in the Government's review. There can be nothing more tragic than the loss of a child, or any life, especially when that loss was avoidable. I know that there are concerns about sentencing for some driving offences and about the maximum powers available to the courts, as we have heard in the debate. It is important that those serious offences are considered in relation not just to the range of driving offences but to the full range of criminal offences to maintain proportionality within sentencing.

As I acknowledged in a debate only two months ago in this place, for too long those concerns have not been acted on. At that time, I reaffirmed the Government's commitment to consult on the offences and penalties for driving offences resulting in death and serious injury and I do so again today. It is very much the Government's intention that the consultation will be delivered, as promised in the previous debate, before the end of the year. I intend to honour that commitment.

4.42 pm

**Susan Elan Jones:** I hope that the review comes soon, because people have been waiting for it for a very long time.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## Homophobia in Sport

4.43 pm

**Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair):** Before I call Stuart Andrew to move the motion for the next debate on homophobia in sport, I should inform Members that, owing to an administrative error, reference to evidence taken by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee relevant to the debate has not appeared on the Order Paper as it should have done. I convey the apologies of the House Authorities to that Committee and to hon. Members present for the debate.

4.44 pm

**Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con):** I beg to move, That this House has considered homophobia in sport.

I point out that the error on the Order Paper is not my fault—promise. I am pleased to have secured what I think is an important debate, because, for me, sport has the potential to be a great equaliser in society. It brings together people from many different backgrounds to participate and spectate in the best possible spirits—although, indeed, as a Leeds United fan, shall I say perhaps the spirits have not always been the best of late?

We have made great progress. There are great examples of some of our leading athletes who have felt able to come out. I am proud to mention two from my county. Nicola Adams, whom I am proud of, said at the time that she was worried about how everyone would react, so she used to say that she was single rather than that she was with a girl. She felt like she was lying all the time, and she did not like having to do that, so, in the end, she thought, "Well, this is who I am. And if there is nothing I can do about it, why should I hide it?" Keegan Hirst, the rugby player from Batley, said:

"I tick every macho box. How could I be gay? I'm from Batley for goodness' sake. No one is gay in Batley."

Those are two brave individuals who have come out and brought a bit of a spotlight on to the issue.

We notice most sharply that we have a problem when one of our nation's most successful athletes thinks that sexism and homophobia are still huge problems in sport and that they are inextricably linked. Sue Day, the former women's rugby captain, said:

"If she has got physical strength or something that is not perceived to be feminine, then she must be a lesbian. If a man is gay"

people think

"he can't possibly be good at sport because he is not masculine enough".

She went on to say:

"There is a huge amount of sexism in sport. The men have been allowed to play sport for many years whereas the women haven't. Sexism and homophobia are so inextricably linked."

**Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP):** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that many of those views start at an early age? At school, when we divide our children into certain genders and certain sports, that only reinforces these things. I played football growing up, but there were not many girls playing it—I had to play hockey; I was not allowed to play football at times. Do we need to widen access to all sports so that all genders get the opportunity to experience sports of all kinds?

**Stuart Andrew:** I am grateful for that intervention and I certainly agree. We can look at some of our successes—I think of the England women’s football team and the British hockey team—which are fantastic, but we need to encourage more choice in sport for all genders.

The perception that Sue Day spoke of is widely expressed in sport at all levels by professionals and spectators alike. I cannot emphasise enough how welcoming and inclusive sport is becoming, and much credit for that must go to the spectators. The vast majority of fans find the shared bonds of loyalty to their team far more important than anything else, but we must aim for the best on the field as well as off it. There is clearly some significant work to do.

I do not want to be perceived as being only critical of the situation in our sports clubs and among our spectators, because I am not. There is much good practice from clubs and governing bodies and great examples of spectators working together on the issue, but we need to pull all of that work together. When clubs get behind such initiatives they can have a huge impact, but we need some national direction. I would be interested to hear from the Minister on what the Government are doing in that respect and what progress there is from national governing bodies.

A great deal of good work being is done across the country by fans, clubs, coaches, professional leagues and governing bodies, but now is the time to bring that together. With the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport undertaking an important inquiry on this issue, we must build on the momentum to take a bold and strategic step forward so that we can start tackling the problem at all levels.

**Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I agree that some central direction is necessary to bring together all the good work happening at club level. One thing that prevents senior sporting stars from coming out is a feeling that they might lose corporate sponsorship if they were to reveal their true sexuality. Would it not be useful for the big corporate organisations to say it would not matter a jot to them or affect sponsorship if a footballer or rugby player or whoever decided to come out?

**Stuart Andrew:** My hon. Friend makes a valid point. In some aspects of sport—I will come on to football in a bit—huge amounts of money are spent on sponsorship, and I can understand why some players may fear that that would be a problem. He makes a strong point that I think all sponsors need to think about when drawing up those deals.

To come back to the inquiry that is happening at the moment, I commend the previous Culture, Media and Sport Committee report into racism in football, which also highlighted the prominence of homophobia in football and has done much to bring the issue into the open. I look forward to the important report from the current inquiry. Its terms of reference touch on some of the things I will raise, including looking at the experience of gay sportsmen and sportswomen and what those tell us about different sports and the progression of attitudes in general; the approach of governance bodies throughout sport; and how homophobic abuse compares with other forms of harassment.

I will also look at how successful governing bodies have been in tackling the issue; how homophobia is being tackled at school; what action is being taken by teachers and coaches involved in youth and amateur sport to ensure homophobia is challenged at an early stage; and whether football has a particular problem with homophobia in comparison with other sports. I will outline some of the problems that we still have in sport, including the effect on athletes, the potential loss of great talent, and the general lack of participation and the drop-off rates among LGBT athletes.

One thing that triggered my effort to secure the debate was a recent BBC Radio 5 live survey. I have to say that it included some positive figures, but one thing that struck me was the finding that 8% of football fans would stop supporting their team if one of its players came out as gay. The majority were obviously positive about it, but when we consider the huge number of spectators who go out and watch football every weekend, 8% is a significant number. Knowing how passionate and loyal many supporters are about their teams, the fact that something like that was a trigger to stop them supporting their team alarmed me.

The “Out on the Fields” report is one of the world’s biggest studies of homophobia in sport. It studied gay and straight people worldwide. Statistics from the UK in the survey showed that 77% of participants have witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport; 85% believe that an openly gay person is not safe as a spectator; the most likely location for people to hear abuse in sport is in the spectator stands, followed closely by the school PE class; and that most people surveyed believe that sport is more homophobic than the rest of society.

**Mrs Helen Grant** (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing such an important debate. Does he agree that this type of behaviour is abhorrent and inexcusable? Whether in the locker room or the playground, it should not be explained away as “banter” or simply “having a joke”, or that the person on the receiving end is overly sensitive. Such behaviour often amounts to hate crime or harassment, which carry serious criminal penalties.

**Stuart Andrew:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Language is incredibly important, and the wrong language can lead to much more dangerous actions if we are not careful. She is absolutely right that that needs to be tackled and understood, and washing it away as banter is unacceptable.

The “Out on the Fields” survey also found that 70% of gay men are completely or partially in the closet when playing youth sports, with many making the choice to give up sport so that they can lead an open life. What a sad choice that is. An online survey of more than 1,200 sports fans across Britain conducted this year for Stonewall looked into homophobic, biphobic and transphobic attitudes and experiences among sports fans. It found that 72% of football fans had heard homophobic abuse while watching live sports in the past five years. Disappointingly, 22% of 18 to 24-year-olds said they would be embarrassed if their favourite player came out as gay, while 22% were likely to agree that anti-LGBT language is harmless if meant only as banter. However, there were some positive trends. Some 88% would be either proud or neutral if their favourite player came

out as gay, while 63% said more should be done to make LGBT people feel accepted in sport, so there is a basis of positive work for us to build on.

YouGov polled some 2,000 LGBT people for Stonewall's 2013 "Gay in Britain" report, which found that more than 60% of gay and bi men, and nearly 40% of lesbian and bi women, expected to face discrimination from opposing teams, spectators, officials and fellow teammates when taking part in sports. LGBT young people frequently felt unwelcome or had negative experiences when taking part in sport. Research by the University of Cambridge involving more than 1,200 young people, again for Stonewall, found that 23% had been bullied while taking part in sport. Furthermore, METRO Centre's 2014 "Youth Chances" survey found that 24% of trans young people felt that their gender identity had stopped or reduced the chances of their participating in sports groups or organisations locally.

I will come on to football, because it is the one sport which thousands of people go to watch every week and is followed as a national treasure. I think, if we are honest, it is the focus of concerns about homophobia. Those concerns are not limited to football, but it does seem to have a particular problem. As I said, it is by far the biggest sport in the country, so it could therefore be the leader in this area and drive change across sport and throughout society. Some great work is happening. Stonewall greatly welcomes the FA's four-year action plan, which runs until this year and outlines the FA's plans for the inclusion of LGBT people in football. It covers key areas, including education, sanctions, steps to encourage reporting and partnership working. It is vital that progress on the plan is reviewed and a clear series of next steps is put in place.

There has also been some fantastic work by some of our clubs, such as Crystal Palace, which has a full-page LGBT fan group page in its programme for each match. Fan groups, such as the Proud Lilywhites of Tottenham Hotspur, the Gay Gooners of Arsenal and the Proud Canaries of Norwich City are all good examples, because visibility is valuable in tackling some of these issues; I believe that fan groups are a key element of that strategy. Last weekend, the Premier League, the Football Association, the English Football League, the Rugby Football Union and sports clubs across Britain hosted a rainbow laces takeover organised by Stonewall. Teams such as Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool laced up during training sessions and showed public support for the campaign on their social media channels.

However, to go back to that survey and the reasons why I tried to secure the debate, an article was printed in the *Daily Express*, the online version of which which attracted some appalling comments. I am not going to read them out because I do not think they are appropriate. As ever with these things, these people hide behind an anonymous name and have not got the guts to come out and say these things publically. If people suggest that there is not a problem, those words prove otherwise.

I mentioned the survey finding that 8% of fans would stop supporting their team if it had a gay player. That, together with the sponsorship issue, may be a reason why no major footballer in this country has felt able to come out as gay. That concerns me. As I said earlier, that means we do not get the best of them, but I am more concerned about their mental health. It must be incredibly difficult for someone to understand their

sexuality but feel that they cannot come out. As a gay man myself, I know how difficult it is to not have the confidence to go public and the relief you feel once you have done it.

When that survey came out, Greg Clarke from the FA said that now may not be the right time to come out. I am a fairly level-headed person, and I always try to give people the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he made those comments from the perspective of wanting to protect players. I can sort of understand that, but saying, "Now's not the time," is a very different point and sends quite a negative message to the players and the general public. Now is exactly the right time for us to address this.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. He is a well-known and very vocal defender of LGBT rights in the Chamber. Does he agree that the FA and the Scottish Football Association will be left behind, given the fact that our society is far more forward-thinking than they are with their reactionary and homophobic attitude to LGBT rights in sport?

**Stuart Andrew:** Absolutely. They need to catch up with the times. I look back in awe at how far society and this country have come in my lifetime. When I was in my teens, which feels like a billion years ago, the age of consent was 21, and now we have equal marriage in our country. That is fantastic. To say that now is not the time for gay players to come out is just not acceptable. The hon. Gentleman is right.

It is really important that there should be an onus on the clubs to support players and develop LGBT-inclusive stadiums and friendly environments. We talked a moment ago about banter. Football can sometimes lead the way. Show Racism the Red Card was a great campaign that has changed attitudes. People are now careful about what they say when they are watching football, but if someone makes a homophobic statement, how do they know the person next to them is not from the LGBT community? They need to think about that and how it makes people feel. That campaign showed how we can change and challenge racist attitudes, and we need to do exactly the same with homophobia.

There is a clear business case to be made to clubs about how detrimental concealing any aspect of a player's identity is to their wellbeing, to their high performance and to attracting and nurturing new talent. We should push for more co-ordination between the FA, the Premier League and other leagues across the country. As individual clubs have a great deal of autonomy, the leagues need to be the driving force behind this work. I want to outline what action should be taken by sport's governing bodies, which have to drive this if we are to achieve consistent progress across all levels of sport.

National governing bodies of sport have a responsibility to ensure that steps are taken to tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic abuse in sport and to increase LGBT participation. It is essential that that is done at both a grassroots and professional level. They should start by researching why we have such low participation rates. Unless we understand that, we cannot get to the root of the problem.

NGBs should take a clear zero-tolerance approach to this abuse by ensuring that appropriate sanctions are in place and that cases of abuse are monitored, recorded and

[*Stuart Andrew*]

dealt with appropriately. That means training staff appropriately—everyone from stewards and match officials at games to coaches and players. The most common place that we hear this abuse is, unfortunately, on the terraces. We must tackle that homophobic banter. The invisibility of gay people in the crowd can be a real issue.

We must make significant investment in supporting that work, with key deliverables for the short, medium and long term. NGBs should develop action plans to encourage wide participation. Those should be produced in partnership with LGBT sports organisations, clubs and supporters. The Amateur Swimming Association ran LGBT roadshows to get people to engage with its audit in partnership with the Government Equalities Office steering group, Pride Sports, Ditch the Label, Transsexuals in Sport and Stonewall. More of that should happen.

It is key that NGBs support grassroots clubs. Targeted guidance, training and resources should be produced that are easy to implement in these environments. Stonewall has developed a plain-English best-practice toolkit for grassroots sports clubs and would welcome input from NGBs in developing and promoting that further. I hope they will take it up on that.

The FA should lead the way on this issue. It is the wealthiest governing body, with the most participating clubs, and it can lead the charge, following the best practice of smaller organisations such as the Amateur Swimming Association. A co-ordinated, consistent and maintained strategy to deal with this is important. We need joined-up working and consistent pressure to apply and spread much of the excellent best practice. Crucially, we need to investigate the participation and drop-off rate as part of that strategy. The loss of talent because people feel that their sexuality is not compatible with their sport is alarming, but no governing body is looking into that.

I am aware that there has been some great work. The “Out on the Fields” report came about following calls from SportScotland, with the support of the Australian federal Government. We ought to work with the FA and others to renew the charter that is coming to an end this year and ensure that we have clear and achievable objectives and expectations. We must also make gay people more visible through the support and promotion of LGBT fan groups. We need to achieve a situation where we fully understand the issues and are committed, in a measurable and achievable way, to achieving the positive outcomes that most of us want to see, not only for the sake of LGBT people in sport but in order for sport in this country to flourish.

Nobody should have to make a choice between being open about who they are and continuing to take part in sport. That choice will ultimately cost people personally and will leave sports across the country without talent that could be adding so much to our future success. I hope we will be able to do as much as we can. All of us were very proud when Britain came back from the Olympics with so many medals. Let us be proud of every area of sport that truly reflects every part of our society.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair):** Order. The debate must conclude no later than 5.43 pm. We need to get on to the Front-Bench speeches no later than 5.23 pm. The Chairman of Ways and Means ruling is that the Scottish National party and official Opposition Front Benchers have five minutes and the Minister 10 minutes in a 60-minute debate. That leaves the Back Benchers with approximately five minutes. I hope Members will bear that in mind.

5.9 pm

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on securing this debate and on his excellent speech, which was detailed and heartfelt. I could not help but agree with everything he said.

Perhaps I should declare an interest in this subject, as an openly gay MP who plays a lot of sport, in particular football. I grew up playing football as a wee girl in West Lothian, and I have to say that at the age of 11—which was probably about the peak of my football talents—there were not many girls playing or a huge amount of encouragement.

Although I thoroughly enjoyed running rings round the boys in my school and the local community, it was unfortunate that, up close, there was a lack of support for girls. It was not until I got to university that I was able to play alongside other young women in a proper, structured setting. Funnily enough, in my University of Stirling team was a Scottish women’s national team player, Leanne Ross. The rest of us might have been a bit below par, but Leanne made up for it and she will be part of the Scottish women’s team when it goes to the European championships.

I care passionately about diversity and equality, particularly in football, because I played it growing up and still play occasionally. I worked at my local club, Livingston football club, selling everything from pies to pints, and I have been to my fair share of international and Scottish and English premier league matches. It is fair to say that in general terms women’s football does not have anywhere near the sort of issues that the men’s game seems to have. I have found that women’s football is generally very welcoming to women, whatever their sexuality. However, as the hon. Member for Pudsey identified, for a women to show sporting prowess seemed to define their sexuality. I tended not to find that when growing up, and I did not receive abuse in that realm. When I played football and a bit of rugby, for the first time in my life I met other women who were gay—and straight—and I felt in a safe space and among people who reflected similar ideals and values as me.

However, I can tell Members—sadly, from personal experience—that hearing homophobic jokes and jibes, and a general lack of acceptance in other parts of my life, prevented me for a very long time from dealing with my sexuality. The major societal shifts of recent years helped me to feel I could come out and that it would be okay. With the support of friends, family and peers in this place, I came out just after I was elected. It was personally challenging, but ultimately liberating. I am extremely lucky—I am always conscious of how lucky I am—not to have experienced much homophobic abuse. I stand on the shoulders of those who came before me and fought so hard for equality. For me, sport in its

various forms was a haven and sometimes a sanctuary in the years when I was struggling with and confused about my sexuality, and I felt safe.

It makes me very sad that today we are debating those who experience homophobia in sport and cannot come out and be who they are in their chosen sport. However, there are chinks of light, and the hon. Member for Pudsey alighted on some of them. I hope that discussing and lifting the lid on the issues will challenge people like Eric Bristow, the darts player who made some horrendous comments this week. I hope he sits at home thinking about what he said and realises that such comments and views should be consigned to the dustbin of history.

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee found that abusive posts are sent to football players on social media every 2.6 minutes. I am sure that many footballers do not want to add to that, but when the English Football Association's chairman made his comments about footballers not coming out, he did himself and the sport an injustice. Believe you me, Scottish football is in no way immune from offensive behaviour, but in Scotland the Equality Network has developed an LGBT sports charter to which a number of Scottish Premier League clubs have signed up. I do not doubt that a lot of good work is being done across England—we have heard about much of it—as in Scotland, but it is incumbent on us all to work with those organisations across the political divide and the various nations of the UK to stamp out homophobia in sport. I am sure that colleagues share a desire to see that happen.

At a time when record sums are spent in football, which is something the hon. Member for Pudsey referred to—Paul Pogba was recently transferred to Manchester United for £93.25 million—how can governing bodies and premier league clubs not have the funding or resources to put into this issue? That cannot be the case. I hope that in years to come, the sexuality of those of us in the public eye—in sport or whatever other walk of life—will be no more significant than whether we have Marmite on our toast in the morning.

5.14 pm

**Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): As Chair of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, I want to talk briefly about its inquiry and to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on securing this debate on this important subject. When we look back at the incidence of racism in football, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, it is clear that society has moved on hugely. That is something that the Committee has considered throughout its inquiry so far. The sort of racist banter and chanting from the stands that was commonplace at football grounds in the 1980s is simply unacceptable in society today.

The football bodies have strict rules that they enforce against people who engage in racist talk at matches. Fans can be evicted from stadiums and clubs may face sanctions in competitions if there is consistent racist chanting from the stands. That is simply not tolerated because it is not tolerated by society. So the question is: why should it be any different for homophobia? Why is there still more progress to be made?

The chair of the Football Association, Greg Clarke, told the Committee—the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) mentioned this—that he did not believe

that now was the right time for a footballer to come out in England. That does not mean that he does not believe the FA's job is to try to support players who want to come out, but he felt that now was not the right time and that football was probably a couple of years away from the right time. He directed his remarks to the attitude of fans in the stands. I do not think the issue is as simple as that. First, we have received evidence suggesting that there should be more training for stewards and people who work in football grounds to ensure that they are aware of homophobic abuse and tackle it if they hear it from fans, so that those who engage in such behaviour know that they will be ejected.

There is a second question about the culture within a sport like football. Why can Keegan Hirst, a rugby league player from Batley, play rugby league at a Huddersfield football stadium when a Huddersfield football player would find it impossible to come out and play in the same location and the same community? It is a myth that community support for football is not accepting enough, and it is clearly nonsense when seeing Keegan Hirst playing.

**Hannah Bardell:** The 8% of fans who were identified in BBC's Radio 5 Live survey were alighted upon by Gary Lineker. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with him that it would be no bad thing if those 8% of fans just stayed at home and kept quiet?

**Damian Collins:** The hon. Lady is quite right. People engaging in racist abuse would be evicted from the ground. They would have their membership card taken from them. Why should it be any different with homophobic abuse and why should the whole of football bow to a very small vocal minority? If someone like Keegan Hirst, a rugby league player, can come out and play with the support of his club and his team mates, why can a football player not do so as well?

The Committee took evidence from John Amaechi, the Englishman who played National Basketball Association basketball in the United States and who, as a sportsman, came out as a gay athlete. He said it is the job of the managers and trainers of premier league football clubs and elite athletes to know everything about their players. They know what they eat, where they live, what their home life is like and how stable their relationships are because all that has an impact on their ability to play. He said it is impossible for a club not to know that a player is not straight, but whether they know they might be gay is a different matter. It may be wrong for a club to confront an athlete about their sexuality, but they should know enough about them to understand there is a likelihood of gay players in their squad, so they should be able to police the culture and banter in the training ground and the locker room to make sure there is no discriminatory or discouraging language or behaviour.

A number of excellent organisations are seeking to promote the right attitude and to stop homophobia in sport. We should not think the solution to the problem is one or two premier league football players coming out and that the rest of society will fall in line. That is not the solution. There must be a broader movement across society to change the attitudes and behaviour of people who participate in sport and attend sporting events. Stonewall campaigned massively on the issue

[*Damian Collins*]

and will be giving evidence to the Select Committee shortly. My hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey mentioned the rainbow laces campaign. There are also organisations such as Athlete Ally and Sport Allies, which seek to use all participants in sport—all athletes—to support the cause of promoting, supporting and giving respect to gay athletes and encouraging and supporting people if they come out, to change the nature of the debate and the culture as part of a broader change in society.

I welcome this debate. The Select Committee hopes to conclude the oral evidence sessions for its inquiry on 13 December, when the Minister herself will give evidence, and we will produce our report in the new year.

**Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair):** I call Stuart C. McDonald, who has four minutes.

5.20 pm

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) for initiating this incredibly important debate and I welcome the work being undertaken by the Culture Media and Sport Committee on this issue.

Sport can be an immensely positive pastime or, for a lucky few, a profession. It brings immense enjoyment and huge health benefits, and can also be an incredibly positive social experience, but sadly, as we have heard, for too long sport has had an uneasy relationship with the LGBT community. That is not just a problem at the top of sport; it is quite possible that at grassroots level, away from the public eye, the level of homophobia is even greater. That creates a real problem with participation of LGBT people in sport, and in some sports in particular, whether as players or supporters or in any other capacity.

One piece of research mentioned in submissions to the Select Committee inquiry suggested that 40% of LGBT people have been discouraged from participation in sport. Another concluded that almost 60% would be more likely to participate if sport was more LGBT-friendly. That is bad for the LGBT community, but also for sport in general. I know that you will be very concerned, Mr Bailey, at the prospect that homophobia means that we will miss out on an LGBT player scoring the goal that finally takes Scotland to the World cup finals, for example. Perhaps more realistically, it means fewer supporters paying large sums of money to be badly disappointed yet again.

To increase the chances of either type of participation by those in the LGBT community, we need serious and persistent action to be taken to ensure that football and all other sports are as open and accessible as possible to the LGBT community. Hon. Members have highlighted various ways in which that could be done, such as by challenging attitudes and the language used in the school sports environment. There is also the significance of professional role models and the need for leadership from governing bodies and politicians and for a broad-based campaign against homophobia.

My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) mentioned safe spaces, so in the short time that I have left, I want to highlight and pay a wee tribute to the outstanding volunteers across the country who have indeed created safe spaces in sport for LGBT people—

homophobia-free places where they know that their participation will be welcomed. No doubt facing a good dose of scepticism and a decent dollop of ridicule, those men and women across the UK are, week in and week out, grafting hard in setting up and then running LGBT-friendly sports clubs. In some ways, they are doing all the things that we have asked for in the debate: showing leadership, providing role models, tackling prejudice and stereotypes, and boosting participation.

Almost certainly the best example of that is the Gay Football Supporters Network national league and each of its member clubs. Established in 2002, 15 clubs from Scotland, England and Wales now take part, and five more take part in a cup competition. From London Titans to the Nottingham Lions, and the Cardiff Dragons to the Leicester Wildecats, opportunities exist for LGBT players across the UK.

I can speak personally from my experience with Edinburgh's HotScots football club. If you were to watch one of our games, Mr Bailey, you might argue that there was not much "hot" about some of the football that we play, the weather we play it in or, indeed, anything else about the club. However, I can never speak highly enough of the fantastic and supportive environment that the club has provided for me and for so many individuals since its foundation a decade ago. It is a place where no assumptions are made about a person's sexuality just because they play sports and where two huge aspects of the player's identity no longer seem to collide badly. That club and others not only provide a safe and supportive space, but do important work in challenging perceptions about LGBT people in sport by regularly taking part in matches against other, so-called mainstream clubs and by running a five-a-side tournament open to other clubs and teams across the United Kingdom. Other clubs, such as Stonewall, Village Manchester and Glasgow's Saltire Thistle, participate in "mainstream" leagues.

HotScots has a positive relationship with the Scottish Football Association, and I encourage all governing bodies and all hon. Members who have such clubs in their constituency—

**Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair):** Order. I have to move to the Opposition spokespeople now.

5.24 pm

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on initiating this vital debate, not least because I applied for the exact same debate myself for this week. It has been an excellent debate, with excellent contributions, not least from the hon. Gentleman, who spoke of the challenges facing individuals, such as Nicola Adams, in deciding whether to come out and of the upcoming CMS Committee report on homophobia in sport.

In a good intervention, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) spoke about corporations playing a role by creating an environment that makes it easier for sportsmen and women to come out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) spoke of reaching the peak of her football powers at the age of 11, of her history of playing alongside current Scottish internationals and of the women's game

not having quite the same problem as the men's game. She also spoke movingly of the time when she was struggling with whether to come out.

The Chair of the CMS Committee, the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), spoke of the Committee's review and of his disagreement with the FA chairman's rather one-eyed approach to the problem. I look forward to the report being published and to analysing the recommendations. My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) spoke of volunteers creating safe spaces for LGBT sports clubs and of the Gay Football Supporters Network national league.

Last Sunday marked 38 years since the assassination of San Francisco city supervisor Harvey Milk. The Human Rights Campaign notes:

"Harvey Milk dedicated his life to advocate for a better and more equitable society, not just for LGBTQ people, but for all who had been marginalized—whether it was because of their race or ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity, age or socioeconomic status."

Harvey's vision, in which everyone receives the same dignity, respect, rights and protections, is a vision that we should all work towards.

"Hope will never be silent"

was Harvey's famous cry. Thirty-eight years is a long time, and although considerable progress has been made, it is clear that the barriers and homophobia that Harvey Milk battled against still exist in our society and, sadly, in certain sections of various sports.

I regularly talk about the power of sport to evoke positive change. Sport can help to improve an individual's physical and mental health. It can help to lift people out of poverty. Sport can bring people together, as we have heard. The power of sport can also bring about important political change. We witnessed that when the newly elected President of South Africa, Nigel—*[Interruption.]* Nigel? That is something we would not want to see. Nelson Mandela used the 1995 rugby world cup to unite all of South Africa following years of apartheid. That was around the time I started playing the game.

We should never underestimate the positive change that the power of sport can bring about. The Show Racism the Red Card and Kick It Out campaigns, which have been referenced already, have done a fantastic job in helping to tackle racism. The work that these organisations do helps to make football a safe and more welcoming space for all fans, regardless of their backgrounds. Showing the same attitude and commitment as these organisations is the way we will eliminate homophobia from sport. Tackling homophobia is not the responsibility of one particular group. Rather, it is the responsibility of us all to tackle it head-on and help to eliminate it.

I welcome the work being done by Stonewall to help to make sport inclusive of all. Its Rainbow Laces campaign, which has also been referenced already, is one that we can all support. However, a recent article by PinkNews highlighted the abhorrent abuse on social media meted out to players, teams and Stonewall following premier league football teams donning rainbow laces. That happened just recently—last week, I think. It shows that we still have a long way to go to achieve the vision of football being a safe environment for everyone, regardless of their background.

Following the BBC survey that several hon. Members have referenced, I contacted a range of bodies to find out what they are doing to tackle this important issue. I am pleased that all organisations are doing proactive work in this area and that agreement exists on the need to continue taking action to eliminate homophobia from football and sport more widely.

The worst thing that we can do about homophobia in sport is ignore it or kick the issue into the long grass. That is why I, too, was bitterly disappointed by the comments of the FA chairman, Greg Clarke. He suggested that he was "cautious" of encouraging a player to come out because they might suffer "significant abuse" from fans. He also said that he was unable to offer the required support if a player did come out. To my mind, that is even worse than discouraging players from coming out. It is completely the wrong attitude to take and shows a complete lack of leadership on the issue. Instead of urging people to remain silent about their sexuality, the FA chairman should be doing all that he can to ensure that football is a place for everyone. I know that the Minister feels strongly about that and I hope that she will outline what she and her Department are doing to encourage the FA to come into the 21st century on this issue.

Harvey Milk said:

"Hope will never be silent."

His words are as true today as they were in 1970s San Francisco, so let the majority of decent, well-natured and friendly supporters speak out against anti-LGBTI remarks made at matches, online or on the training ground. Let us speak out and say that football and sport more widely is for everyone to enjoy, without fear of abuse.

5.29 pm

**Dr Rosena Allin-Khan** (Tooting) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) for securing this important debate and for ensuring that it takes place today. This is a cause that I know everyone here cares deeply about. I also put on record my support for colleagues in the Culture, Media and Sport Committee for their continued work in examining homophobia in sport.

Personally, as a non-white woman who spent many years playing county-level sport, I know that prejudice can be deeply divisive. However, as a previous report on racism in sport showed, homophobia is becoming a bigger problem than other forms of discrimination. Like racism, like sexism—like any form of discrimination—homophobia has no place in sport. It has no place in our society. As the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) said, all too often homophobia is painted as banter or laddish behaviour on terraces and in the playground. A Culture, Media and Sport Committee report stated:

"The FA should work with relevant organisations and charities to develop and then promote a high-profile campaign to highlight the damaging effect of homophobic language and behaviour in and around football at every level."

The term "at every level" is key here, but it should not just be limited to football; we need to ensure that that happens in all sports.

[*Dr Rosena Allin-Khan*]

Tackling homophobia throughout society starts with education. A child believes only in the equality that they are taught by their peers. More work needs to be done to emphasise what is not appropriate in the classroom and in the playground. We need to ensure that our coaches and professional players lead the way in promoting equality and speaking out against all forms of discrimination.

When a young LGBT person has a negative experience, it can have lifelong consequences, such as a rise in mental health issues, including self-harm and depression, failure to attend school and low participation in sport. That is what we cannot afford to see in our country. In a survey of LGBT students who did not participate in sport, almost half said that sport culture was too intimidating and too unwelcoming. A similar number stated that negative experiences led them to avoid sport in school. That can go on to have a long-term, knock-on effect on educational attainment.

All too often, we hear stories about sportspeople posting homophobic tweets. These players are role models to aspiring, young children; these role models are message carriers and children look up to them. If a child sees their favourite player using homophobic language, they will deem it acceptable and attitudes will just not change. These attitudes will transfer over when that young person plays in their junior league. Social networking sites can play a big part in helping to combat homophobia and other forms of discrimination. I was pleased to add my name to a cross-party amendment to ensure that more action is taken on abuse on social networking sites. Many LGBT people continue to feel excluded from sport when it should be the other way round. As the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said, we must open up sport to anyone who wants to participate and not tolerate racists and homophobes.

Rugby has been a pioneer for LGBT inclusion. That was highlighted by the partnership between World Rugby and International Gay Rugby with the aim of eliminating homophobia in the sport. They have published a memorandum of understanding in which they agree to recognise and respect the common goal of eliminating homophobia and promoting the rights of each player, spectator and official involved.

Football has seen Stonewall's Rainbow Laces campaign take off in recent years. Just last weekend, we saw players, managers, officials and fans show their support across many of our top divisions. An article in PinkNews this week highlighted the abuse directed at clubs that supported the campaign on social media. Yet let us not believe that this abuse just occurs online; there would have been spectators in the terraces sharing exactly the same vile views as we saw in those tweets. Homophobic remarks are all too common and are unacceptable. Some 50% of football supporters say that they have heard homophobic abuse at matches. Fans can take a lead here, as whether or not we eliminate homophobia from sport is reliant on the response from spectators. I was as shocked as most that 8% of football fans stated that they would stop watching their team if it signed a gay player. However, let us appreciate that nine out of 10 fans would not see it as a problem. Let us make it clear that the people in that 8% are in a minority and that their views have no place in football or any other sport.

Up and down the country, from football fields to hockey fields, in the playground or on social media, we must ensure that homophobia is tackled head on with tougher punishments, better education and stronger campaigns endorsed by our sporting role models. We have all heard Greg Clarke's recent comments, which were met with anger on both sides of the House—I really do believe that. We need to channel our anger into positive action. As the hon. Member for Pudsey said, if 2016 is not the right year for a sportsperson to talk openly about being gay, when is?

5.35 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch):** As always it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) for securing this debate. I am also grateful for the excellent contributions that he and others have made today.

Next year marks the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of male homosexuality in England and Wales. Much progress has been made since then, including the introduction of equal marriage during the previous Parliament. Although my Department welcomes this debate on homophobia in sport, as it does the inquiry by the Select Committee, it is sad that in this day and age we are still having it. My Department has submitted written evidence to the Select Committee inquiry on behalf of the Government, and I look forward to giving oral evidence to the Committee next month. If, because of the time limitations, I do not cover all the issues that were raised during this debate, I am sure that we will do so during the Select Committee evidence session. I have been really impressed by the breadth and quality of the oral and written evidence submitted to the Committee so far, and also by the bravery of those who have spoken out in public about the challenges that we still face.

As hon. Members will be aware, we published our Government strategy for sport and physical activity last December. The strategy committed Sport England to placing

“equal emphasis on the support for LGB&T people in sport as it does for other characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010.”

It includes a number of other actions to ensure that all under-represented groups can take part in sport and wider physical activity. One of the actions was to ask Baroness Grey-Thompson to carry out an independent review of the duty of care that sport owes to all its participants at all levels. The review is wide-ranging, but I have specifically asked the Baroness to consider any particular issues relating to minority groups, including LGBT people. She will be reporting shortly and I look forward to receiving her recommendations.

Colleagues have asked about the role of NGBs in sport. In our evidence to the Committee, we pointed to some of the progress being made by our sporting bodies to promote inclusion, celebrate diversity and tackle discrimination in all its forms, from grassroots to the elite. We also provided evidence of the support given by the sport NGBs to clubs to carry out a number of anti-homophobia initiatives, working with established organisations such as Pride Sports, Stonewall, Kick It Out and Football v Homophobia.

At the same time, we recognise that homophobia in sport continues to be an issue and does need to be addressed with further action. It should be acknowledged—as others have done—that it feels like this issue is more prevalent in men's competitive team sports than in women's. However, I noted from the statistics provided by my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey—nearly 40% of lesbian and bisexual women expected to face discrimination—that maybe the reality is quite different.

As others have acknowledged, sport and physical activity provide enjoyment, improve physical and mental health and wellbeing for millions, and contribute to the country's economy. Data from the last Active People survey suggested that the percentage of people who play sport regularly who are gay, lesbian or bisexual is slightly less than that of the heterosexual population. Research with the LGBT community in the UK shows that homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in sport are still prevalent, and barriers remain to participation.

We recognise that there could be under-representation or specific barriers to taking part in sports and physical activity for some LGBT people and that that may not be apparent when looking at overall participation levels. My officials and I are working closely with the Government Equalities Office and others across government to identify measures to address that under-representation and break down those barriers. The Government are also working hard with sports bodies in this area. We will measure the success of programmes to increase LGBT participation through the Active Lives survey, which is Sport England's new way of measuring engagement in sport and activity in England.

I will mention two things briefly in the time that is left. We should acknowledge not only that we broke records in the medals tables at the Rio Olympics and Paralympics, but that Team GB broke another record. Rio 2016 had a record number of out Olympic athletes—44—almost double the number competing at London 2012—and nine out Paralympians. My hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey mentioned Nicola Adams. We had the gold-medal-winning hockey team, which included Helen Richardson-Walsh and Kate Richardson-Walsh, the first married couple to stand on the top step of an Olympic podium together. Tom Daley has made history on a number of occasions, but since he announced that he was in love with a man, after he competed in the Olympics in 2008, he has been publicly supported by very many people, including his fiancé at the games. Lee Pearson, our 10-time Paralympic gold medallist, who has been supported by UK Sport for over 17 years, was chosen as the Paralympic GB's flagbearer for Rio 2016. He has been openly gay throughout his time competing. Of course, Team GB walker Tom Bosworth, who gave

evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, is the first British track athlete to come out as gay. He proposed to his partner on the beach during the Rio games; that is one of my favourite memories of the summer.

The recent launch by Sport England and UK Sport of the sport governance code fulfils a major commitment in our sport strategy. It keeps us at the forefront of global work to ensure good governance in sport. Improving leadership and diversity in the workforce and in governance is central to ensuring that we have the very highest standards of governance across all sport bodies that receive public money. To be reflective of wider society, we need to increase diversity among sporting organisation leaders and to help the sport sector to be more inclusive and welcoming to all.

I want to turn to football, because many people have mentioned it. It is fair to say that football has made a great deal of progress, but it clearly has a long way to go. English football continues to deliver the “Inclusion and Anti-Discrimination Action Plan” for the whole sport. That includes the implementation of football's protocol to support LGBT players, managers, referees and other participants who decide to come out. The Football Association reports to my Department about the plan every six months, on measures relating to education and guidance to clubs, players and managers, stewards and spectators. Football is assisted in its efforts to address homophobia in the game by well-established anti-discriminatory groups. However, there is evidence to suggest that homophobic chanting and language are still an issue at football grounds, and that, of course, can have a serious impact on those who play football.

Let me turn to the comments from the chairman of the FA that hon. Members have mentioned. When anyone comes out, it is a personal decision. Now could be as good a time as ever for somebody to come out, but the chairman's saying that is the complete opposite of the kind of support that a player needs. I hope that that will be reflected upon. As others have said, we cannot let a small but vocal minority spoil the game for everyone else.

In conclusion, we have had an excellent debate; I am grateful to all those who have contributed. I am looking forward to appearing in front of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. Rio 2016 showed us we are moving in the right direction in some sports. Clearly, we have a long to go in other sports—

5.43 pm

*Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).*



# Written Statements

*Wednesday 30 November 2016*

## COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Homes and Communities Agency

#### **The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell):**

Since 2010 Government have delivered almost 900,000 new homes, including 293,000 affordable homes. However, we need to build many more homes if we are going to create a housing market that works for everyone, and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) will play a vital role in this.

On 10 February 2016, my predecessor as Minister for Housing and Planning announced to Parliament the commencement of a tailored review of the HCA. I am pleased today to announce the publication of the tailored review.

The agency is the national housing, land and regeneration agency and the regulator of registered social housing providers in England.

The review concluded that functions exercised by the HCA are required, and, with the exception of social housing regulation, should continue to be performed by the HCA in its current form as a non-departmental public body (NDPB). The review recommends that the agency's regulatory function should be established as a standalone NDPB, reaffirming the Government's commitment to a strong, independent regulator for social housing. This is a purely administrative change that will not affect the regulator's powers or operations. This change will result in no increase on existing Government budgeted spending. The regulator will also be part of plans for increased sharing of back office functions across the DCLG Group. DCLG will today launch a consultation on using a legislative reform order to establish the regulator as an independent body. This comes shortly after a consultation issued by the regulator on introducing fees for social housing regulation. Taken together these changes will ensure the regulator remains independent, and retains the powers and resources needed to maintain the confidence of the sector and lenders.

The review has also made a number of recommendations for improving the efficiency, effectiveness and governance of HCA. This includes changes such as improving stakeholder engagement, reducing bureaucracy and ensuring that the agency has the right set of skills. The Chairs of the HCA and the Regulation Committee have welcomed the recommendations. My Department and the agency are working closely together and have developed a timetable for implementation of the recommendations.

The tailored review has been carried out independently within Government and with the full and active participation of the HCA. I would like to thank the HCA and all stakeholders that have contributed to the review. The review is being deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tailored-review-of-the-homes-and-communities-agency>.

[HCWS294]

## SCOTLAND

### Scotland Act 2016: Commencement Regulations

#### **The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell):**

In March this year, Her Majesty the Queen gave Royal Assent to the Scotland Act 2016, marking an important milestone in fulfilling the UK Government's commitment to deliver on the Smith Commission agreement, making the Scottish Parliament one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world.

Since Royal Assent, a number of important provisions in the Act have come into force, including new powers in relation to consumer advocacy and advice, gaming machines, equalities, transport, and welfare.

I can today inform the House that the UK Government have made the commencement regulations for the following sections of the Scotland Act 2016:

- 13: Power of Scottish Parliament to set rates of income tax
- 14: Amendments of Income Tax Act 2007
- 15: Consequential amendments: income tax

The regulations ensure that the transfer of income tax powers will occur, as agreed by the UK and Scottish Governments, from 6 April 2017, bringing into force substantial new financial levers enabling the Scottish Government to set income tax rates and thresholds for the earned income of Scottish taxpayers.

In addition, commencement regulations will be made on 5 December for the following sections of the Scotland Act 2016, to be commenced in April 2017:

- 20: Borrowing
- 21: Provision of information to the Office for Budget Responsibility
- 67: Destination of fines, forfeitures and fixed penalties

These commencement regulations represent another milestone in delivering the recommendations of the Smith Commission agreement, and it is a testament to the constructive work between the UK and Scottish Governments.

The two Governments continue to work closely together to ensure a safe and secure transition of the remaining powers in the Scotland Act 2016.

[HCWS293]



## Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 30 November 2016

### CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

#### Historical Sexual Abuse (Football)

*The following is an extract from the response to the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) during the urgent question on historical sexual abuse in football by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on 29 November 2016.*

**Karen Bradley:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the bravery of Andy Woodward. I understand that during the time I have been on my feet, over 250 reports have been made to the NSPCC helpline, of which 51 are in Cheshire alone.

*[Official Report, 29 November 2016, Vol. 617, c. 1403.]*

*Letter of correction from Karen Bradley:*

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) during the urgent question on historical sexual abuse in football.

The correct response should have been:

**Karen Bradley:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the bravery of Andy Woodward. I understand that during the time I have been on my feet, over 250 reports have been made to the **police**, of which 51 are in Cheshire alone.



# ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 30 November 2016

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Wednesday 30 November 2016

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# MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Wednesday 30 November 2016

	<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT</b> .....	5MC
Historical Sexual Abuse (Football) .....	5MC

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  
Wednesday 7 December 2016**

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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.

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**Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]**

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