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DEBATES

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Wednesday's Opposition day debate on the impact of the Government's autumn statement on women, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury disparaged and undermined the work of the House of Commons Library. I am sure, Mr Speaker, that you agree with me that the Library is the very heart of our Parliament. It is non-political and non-biased, and it presents research for us all to use. In the same debate, he went on to discredit the research of the Women's Budget Group—an independent network of economists and academics.

Although I recognise that all research methodologies should be open to robust scrutiny and discussion, there is a pattern emerging in the Library's gender impact analyses of successive Budgets and autumn statements. The Treasury appears to undermine the Library's work by calling into question its integrity and objecting to its analysis, yet the Treasury has continually refused to carry out its own gender impact analysis of its economic policies, as is prescribed in the Equality Act 2010.

Mr Speaker, will you advise me please on how best to proceed with this matter to ensure that the Chief Secretary retracts his statement, makes an effort to engage with the Library to discuss and understand its methodologies, or apologises to the Library and the Women's Budget Group for undermining their sterling research?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, but I fear that she invests me with powers I do not possess. Every Member is responsible for the veracity or otherwise of what he or she says. If any Member feels that he or she has made an incorrect statement in the House, it is open to that Member to correct it, and it should, indeed, be corrected. Where there are matters of debate and argument, I do not think that it is appropriate for me to intrude.

Suffice it to say that I think the hon. Lady has found her salvation and, no doubt, done what she thinks is right by the fine employees of the Library by raising this point of order, which is now on the record and which, I trust, will be seen by the very Library staff whom, if I may say so without excessive pun, she has just championed.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Ratification of Convention) Bill

Second Reading

9.38 am

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The UK signed the Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence back in June 2012 but has yet to ratify it. The Istanbul convention, as it is better known, is a unique, groundbreaking international legal instrument that enshrines in law the basic human right of women and girls to live lives free of violence and the fear of violence. Crucially, it provides a comprehensive set of mechanisms to achieve those aims. The provisions of the convention aim to prevent violence against women, protect the victims and survivors of abuse, prosecute perpetrators and hold them to account for their actions. It commits Governments to provide not only properly resourced support services through a strategic policy framework, but robust monitoring, data collection and public scrutiny.

The convention is a formidable package of measures, which Scottish Women's Aid has described as

"quite simply the best piece of international policy and practice for eliminating violence against women that exists, setting minimum standards for Government responses to victims and survivors of gender based violence... It is a blueprint for how we move from small change at the margins... to a system that is designed to end domestic abuse and violence against women."

We badly need a step change in efforts to eliminate violence against women. Two women are killed by their partner or their ex every week in England and Wales alone. According to the crime survey for England and Wales, in the past year 1.2 million women were victims of domestic violence. In Scotland last year, more than 58,000 incidents of domestic violence were reported to the police. Across the UK as a whole, the police recorded more than 87,500 rapes and more than 400,000 sexual assaults. Given that many—possibly most—incidents of sexual assault and rape go unreported, we must not underestimate the scale of the challenge we face.

We live in an environment where gender-based violence is so pervasive and normalised that we hardly even notice how much we put up with. Last week, here in Parliament, we heard harrowing accounts from the hon. Members for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson), for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) and for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), who so courageously spoke out about their own dreadful experiences. One in three women experience domestic abuse or sexual violence in their lifetimes—and that figure is recognised as likely to be a conservative estimate.

Even those who avoid personal attack are living in a world saturated with images of glorified sexual violence, with a toxic public discourse in which boasting of sexual assault is reframed as locker room talk, women who are raped or assaulted are frequently shamed or blamed, and lives are blighted, and in some cases irreparably harmed. It affects us all. It restricts where we go, what we wear and what we dare to say out loud. In my view, we need to name violence against women for what it is: the most pervasive and systemic human rights abuse in

[*Dr Eilidh Whiteford*]

the world today, affecting women in every street in every village, town and city in every country around the world.

We need to understand that violence against women is grounded in and compounds gender inequality. Those of us who are committed to pushing the issue up the political agenda have our work cut out for us. Although domestic abuse and sexual violence primarily affect women, we should acknowledge that they also affect men, non-binary people and especially children—girls and boys.

We need to understand that violence against women is neither natural nor inevitable. We can prevent it and challenge it. We can hold the perpetrators to account. Those of us who have the privilege of shaping and influencing legislation need to acknowledge our responsibility to put our shoulder to the wheel and make the elimination of gender-based violence a political priority.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on the Bill, which I support. She mentions children. Is she aware that, extraordinarily, something like a third of domestic violence against women starts during pregnancy and that in more than three quarters of cases involving children being safeguarded or taken into care domestic violence is the single biggest element? It is a huge challenge for our society.

Dr Whiteford: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point. Many people are very shocked when they hear those statistics for the first time and hear that so much domestic abuse begins when women are probably at their most vulnerable—during pregnancy, when they are bringing new life into the world and yet do not have the protection they should expect from the fathers, often, of their children. He makes a very important point, and I am grateful to him for supporting the Bill.

I want to take a bit of time to set out why the Istanbul convention is so important, why it offers such a powerful vehicle for tackling gender-based violence and why the UK needs to prioritise its ratification. The treaty has global, national and local dimensions. In a globalising world, it recognises that gender-based violence often crosses state borders. States that ratify the convention commit to promoting and protecting the right of all their citizens to live free from violence in the public and private sphere, to working to end discrimination, to promoting equality between women and men, and to working within a co-ordinated, strategic, accountable and adequately resourced framework of policy and practice.

The convention is broad in scope. It covers aspects of criminal, civil and migration law. It sets out minimum standards for the protection of survivors and for access to services. It requires signatories to work to prevent violence and bring about attitudinal change. It explicitly addresses many of the most common manifestations of violence against women, including physical and psychological abuse, stalking, sexual violence, including rape, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and so-called honour crimes—that is not an exhaustive list. It recognises the differentiated risks women face depending

on their circumstances. Although we know that women from all backgrounds—all income groups, ages, ethnicities, cultures, religions and political perspectives—are affected by these types of violence, we also know that poorer women are more exposed to risk. We know that disabled women are more likely to experience abuse than able-bodied women and that refugees and asylum seekers are especially vulnerable. In this respect, we see gender inequality cutting across and compounding other forms of disadvantage, and the convention addresses those and other forms of discrimination in its articles.

Several weeks ago, I had a conversation with Dr Lisa Gormley of the London School of Economics, who is one of the UK's leading experts on the Istanbul convention. She emphasised that the key bit of the convention is found in articles 7 to 11. That surprised me. At first glance, when we turn to them—well, let me read out some of the headings: “Comprehensive and co-ordinated policies”; “Financial resources”; “Non-governmental organisations and civil society”; “Co-ordinating body”; “Data collection and research”. That is pretty dry stuff—we might say it is quite technocratic—but it is the engine that will drive the machine. Those provisions will turn a good critical analysis of violence against women and a collection of useful case studies of policy initiatives into a strategic and dynamic vehicle for real and ongoing change. They will allow us to learn from others' experience of what works and force us to think more strategically about how we provide support to women across different levels of government—local, national and international. Crucially, those provisions will improve the protection of funding for women's refuges and helpline services at a time when austerity cuts to local government budgets and voluntary sector funding are placing such lifeline services in jeopardy.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I support the hon. Lady. She mentions local government. Women's refuge shelters are under the hammer and being forced to close down in many places.

Dr Whiteford: The hon. Gentleman makes a vital point. One reason why it is important that we ratify the convention is that it gives protection in law to those services for the first time in a co-ordinated way, so that we do not have one local authority cutting services while another maintains them. The convention also forces Governments across the piece to work with one another and to think strategically about how to go about providing services in a way that is co-ordinated rather than piecemeal. That is one of the most important longer-term things that ratifying the convention will do. It will also make every level of government think twice before they pull the funding from the voluntary organisations delivering lifeline services to women living with domestic violence or trying to flee from it.

We are already seeing the impact of the Istanbul convention. The UK Government and many non-governmental actors from civil society were actively involved in the development of the convention and the negotiations surrounding it, and it is evident that that process has already been a powerful impetus to modernising domestic legislation in a number of relevant areas. It is important to acknowledge the steps the Government have taken in recent years to pave the way for ratification, most notably with new legislation on forced marriage,

modern slavery, stalking, female genital mutilation, so-called revenge porn, and controlling and coercive behaviour, all of which prepare the UK for compliance.

We have seen similar legislative progress in Scotland, most crucially with the Equally Safe strategy and the forthcoming domestic violence legislation, which is currently out for consultation. In that respect, the convention is already driving change, but we need to finish the job. Having signed the convention in June 2012, the UK has still to ratify the treaty.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for her Bill, which is doing a very important job this morning in this House. I wrote to the Government in January this year about the ratification of the Istanbul convention. The reply I received in February said:

“We will seek to legislate when the approach is agreed and Parliamentary time allows.”

Does she agree that that approach to this issue does not show nearly enough urgency?

Dr Whiteford: I agree entirely that this is an extremely urgent issue. Nobody can use the excuse of parliamentary time any more, given the way that business has been collapsing in recent weeks. There is plenty of parliamentary time; what we need is political will. I hope that my Bill will be a step along that road and give us the opportunity to examine this in more detail and to push the Government to follow up their words with actions. They have said consistently that they want and intend to ratify the convention, but we have reached a hiatus, the process has stalled and the convention has now been languishing on the backburner for over four and a half years, which is far longer than Council of Europe conventions usually take to ratify. The Bill is an attempt to shift the logjam and give the Government the impetus they need to take the final steps to bring the UK into compliance.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Lady on her Bill. This is a vital matter. What does she think is holding the Government back from ratifying the convention?

Dr Whiteford: I have some theories, and I hope to come to those in due course, but at the end of the day a lack of political will holds these things back. The fact that so many Members are here on the Friday before we break for Christmas shows that many people recognise how critical this is.

As Members will see, this is a short and straightforward Bill that would require the Government to provide a clear timetable for ratification within four weeks of Royal Assent and require the Home Secretary to come to Parliament annually to report on our compliance with the convention. This would afford Members across the House better opportunity to scrutinise the Government's record and plans for tackling violence against women. Ratification needs to be more than a tick-box exercise. It is a challenge for us all, as legislators and policymakers, to make sure that it works in practice to improve women's lives. Strengthening parliamentary accountability would also improve our compliance with article 70 of the convention.

I want to turn to those areas where the UK is not yet fully compliant with the convention. The main sticking point appears to be article 44, which makes provision

for countries to establish jurisdiction over an offence committed by one of their nationals outwith their territory. I am told by learned friends that extraterritorial jurisdiction can be a tricky legal area—parliamentary Clerks and civil servants visibly blanch when those magic words are spoken—but the UK already exercises extraterritorial jurisdiction in relation to dozens of serious offences in a wide range of areas, including in several relevant to the convention, such as forced marriage, trafficking, female genital mutilation and sexual offences against children. There are still a number of offences, however, including rape, sexual assault and domestic abuse, where it does not yet apply and where compliance would require changes to domestic law.

Moreover, some of those offences relate to areas of devolved responsibility in Scotland and Northern Ireland, so UK Ministers would need to work with Ministers in Holyrood and Stormont to secure the necessary legislative changes in the Scottish Parliament and Northern Irish Assembly, or agree legislative consent motions. I am pleased to say that the Scottish Government have signalled their willingness to push this forward, and I have been heartened by the support for the convention and my Bill from Northern Irish MPs across the political spectrum.

I want us to be clear about the difference that ratification would make and why it matters. A few weeks ago, the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) raised in Prime Minister's Question Time the case of a constituent of his who—it is alleged—was raped by another British national outside the UK. If we had already ratified the Istanbul convention and integrated the provisions in article 44 into domestic legislation, the authorities here could have investigated and prosecuted that crime, and crimes like it.

Another example is that the women's organisation the Southall Black Sisters has been working tirelessly to highlight the circumstances surrounding the death of Seeta Kaur, a UK citizen whose family believe was the victim of a so-called honour killing in India. The UK already has extraterritorial jurisdiction over the crime of murder, but the contested circumstances of Seeta's death have made it difficult for her family to get the police here involved, even though they claim there is evidence that a serious crime was planned in the UK. Again, ratification of the convention would strengthen the law to provide unambiguous protection for those at risk of honour-based violence.

The Istanbul convention would offer significantly enhanced protection to women who spend time working overseas and those who work for airlines or on cruise ships. Many women travel abroad in the course of their professional lives, but if, for example, a colleague sexually assaults or rapes them in a country where the law is weak, they may have little or no redress. Workplace harassment policies are not designed to deal with criminal violence, nor should they be. We need to give our police and our courts the authority to hold UK nationals and habitual residents accountable for behaviour abroad that would constitute a serious crime at home.

We already exercise these powers in relation to child sex offences, but not sexual offences against adult women. We exercise extraterritorial jurisdiction in relation to terrorist offences, but not to those terrorised behind closed doors. It is important that we send a strong signal that crimes such as rape, sexual assault and domestic abuse committed by UK nationals will be

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taken seriously wherever they occur in the world. The key point is that the very existence of extraterritorial jurisdiction and the possibility of sanction will act as a powerful deterrent and help end the impunity with which some of the most violent perpetrators evade justice. These people should have nowhere to hide.

The Government need to take the Istanbul convention out of the bottom drawer, where it has been filed for far too long in a pile marked “too complicated, too difficult, too low a priority,” and we need to work together, across the House, across Departments and across the devolved Administrations to move things forward.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend on the Bill. Does she agree that it is important that the UK ratifies the convention and shows global leadership on this issue? We heard in Westminster Hall recently that in South Sudan and its capital, Juba, over 70% of the female population have been subject to sexual assault. It is used as a weapon of war. That is completely unacceptable, and it is vital that the UK shows global leadership by ratifying the convention.

Dr Whiteford: My hon. Friend’s point is well made. The shocking statistics from that part of the world remind us of just how serious this issue is globally. His substantial point about leadership is also right. If a Parliament such as this one, where the rule of law is well established and our legislative processes are robust, finds this too difficult, how on earth can we ask other countries that do not have the same traditions of governance to do it? We need to step up and show some leadership globally.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): As with other private Member’s Bills, is it not also about the message we send out? The fact that this has languished for four and a half years sends out the message that women and violence against them are not important—and then we wonder why women do not report attacks or intimidation in their own home.

Dr Whiteford: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We know that these crimes are terribly under-reported. Some of the organisations that work with victims and survivors estimate that as many as 90% of the women who use their services have not reported the crimes to the police, so, yes, we need to let people know that it is okay to speak up, that it is safe to do so and that support will be available. Until we do that, people will not come forward in the numbers the problem demands.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): We do not have to look as far as Sudan for examples of countries that have not ratified, and do not intend to ratify, the convention. One example is Germany. Last new year’s eve, there was the most appalling violence against women, but Germany has not even signed, let alone ratified, the convention.

Dr Whiteford: I am really very surprised that the hon. Gentleman thinks we should follow the example of Germany on this issue.

I would like to thank sincerely hon. Members from all parties who have made the effort to be here today, giving up the last constituency Friday before Christmas and, in some cases, rearranging long-standing diary commitments. As well as Scottish National MPs, Labour, Tory, Liberal Democrat, Plaid Cymru, Social Democratic and Labour, Democratic Unionist, Green and independent MPs have signalled their support. In particular, I want to thank the hon. Members for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for their advice and help, as well as Ministers who have been willing to meet me for discussions ahead of the Bill. I am hopeful that a united voice from Parliament today can bring ratification significantly closer.

I want to acknowledge a number of women on whose expertise on the Istanbul convention I have relied in bringing forward this Bill. I have been lucky to have a formidably erudite team of advisers from all parts of the UK, and in no particular order I would like to thank Lisa Gormley, Marsha Scott, Hillary Fisher, Gemma Lindfield, Cris McCurley, Maria Bjarnadottir, Emma Ritch, Evelyn Fraser, Liz Law and Jackie Jones for all their assistance and invaluable insights. I want to thank my brilliant assistant Nathan Sparling who, in his own words, has been amazing.

I pay special tribute, too, to the women behind the IC Change campaign for their relentless determination to get the Istanbul convention on the statute book. They have been truly inspiring. Robyn Boosey, Rebecca Bunce and Rachel Nye run the IC Change campaign in their spare time on an entirely voluntary basis, co-ordinating with professional and non-professional women’s organisations and campaign groups all over the UK. They have been doing an incredible job, and I know they will not give up until they have achieved their goal.

Ratification of the Istanbul convention is not an end in itself; we need to see it as a platform for ongoing progress. Often the critics of international multilateral processes will point out that a treaty is just a piece of paper and that setting out rights and duties in international law does not necessarily give them effect—and, of course, that is sometimes demonstrably true. We must not let that happen here, because although the Istanbul convention is a solid foundation and a secure base camp, we still have a mountain to climb. We need to remember the scale of the problem and the magnitude of the task. We need to use this convention to measure progress and bank the gains. We need to use its robust monitoring, data collection and reporting mechanisms to drive sustained reductions in violence over the medium and longer term. The dynamic nature of the key articles of the Istanbul convention will be crucial to developing the policies and services that will deliver progress, along with the changes in attitudes and behaviour that will end the scourge of gender-based violence.

Lastly, I believe that ratification of the Istanbul convention is important because of its symbolism and the message it sends to women everywhere about our dignity, our right to equality and our right to live lives free of sexual and domestic violence. The powerful symbolism of the convention matters, because it reinforces the confidence of women in ourselves and in the moral force of our long struggle for equality. I believe very passionately that we can end violence against women;

no one is saying it is easy or that it will happen overnight, but ratification of the Istanbul convention takes us a big step closer, and I ask Members to support my Bill today.

10.2 am

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on securing this very important debate. She has my absolute and full support.

The Istanbul convention is historic, as has been said. It is the first international treaty that legally defines violence against women: a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women. I believe that this is absolutely the right time for this Government to ratify the convention. It is overdue, but this is an historic time: our Prime Minister is a woman; our Home Secretary is a woman; and a woman is bringing in this Bill. It is indeed a good time to bring this forward.

I applaud the Government for signing up to the convention four years ago. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), said this month that the Government are complying with every single aspect of the convention. I applaud the fact that this Government have extra-territorial jurisdiction over female genital mutilation and forced marriage, about which I have spoken previously.

Ratifying the convention is important for my constituents so that the Government are aligned with what is going on at the ground level in all our constituencies. Amazing work is being done in my Twickenham constituency, but it was only through my work as a local councillor and now an MP in the area that I realised how appalling the challenge is. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, this is a huge challenge for our society, and I know it is a huge challenge for Twickenham.

On average, the police are called out in my borough two to three times every night for domestic violence. A few months back, I spent a Saturday night/Sunday morning shift with the police, and even though I knew the statistics I was horrified by what I saw. That afternoon, I had been knocking on doors down one of our prettiest streets in Twickenham—I had spoken to many people that Saturday—yet that night and in the early hours of Sunday morning, I was in the police van after a serious incident of domestic violence. I did not know whether I had spoken that afternoon either to the victim or to somebody who had committed violence. There was absolutely no way I could have known that. I realised that, given that MPs tend to knock on doors on every street, we might be meeting someone who is either a victim or a perpetrator of this crime on every street.

I had a constituency meeting with police, charities and the Greater London Authority to talk about what we could do in our area. It was chilling to hear from one of the police officers when he said that in this borough “we are more unsafe in our own homes than we are on the streets”.

Dr Philippa Whitford: It is recognised that we are more likely to see women from poorer backgrounds captured in the data, but in the more middle-class and

better-off circles of society is there not even greater pressure on women not to report? Working as a doctor, I met many women patients beaten below the neck, so that the injuries would not show. They were covered in bruises, yet they still came out with the “It’s my fault; I should not have done this or that” type of comment. We must not be misled by the data into thinking that this is not an issue among the better-off.

Dr Mathias: I think the data are likely to show that this is happening in every country, every street and in every type of household. My concern for London is that we are not aware of it going on much in our neighbours’ homes. What I find in Twickenham is that the good Samaritans are everywhere. If there has been an incident—thankfully a very rare incident—of violence on the street, about half a dozen people will be there immediately. If somebody has suffered a fall or a seizure or a heart attack on Twickenham’s streets—it does not happen that often—half a dozen people will be there immediately again. When that happens, somebody will contact me the next day—they know how to track me down—and they will ask me, “How is that person? Are they all right?”

We therefore know that in our communities the good Samaritans are looking out for each other, but there are never half a dozen good Samaritans when domestic violence happens in people’s homes. We need people to know what is going on, and all over the UK there is a 24-hour helpline, 0808 2000 247. We have a brilliant one-stop shop in my borough. People are reaching out, but what I am saying is that to ratify the convention we need to align with what is going on in our constituencies at ground level.

About 60 years ago, about 20,000 women marched in Pretoria, using that wonderful phrase, “Wathint’ Abafazi Wathint’ Imbokodo”—I hope I can be forgiven my bad pronunciation—“You strike a woman, you strike a rock”. I believe that this convention is our equivalent of saying precisely that. This is the time; I support the Bill.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, the Culture Secretary agreed to come back to the Dispatch Box if a further security breach were to be revealed at the national lottery. In the last few minutes, the Gambling Commission has published a document saying that it was

“more likely than not that a fraudulent prize claim had been made and paid out.”

There is potentially a great lotto robbery. Camelot has been fined £3 million and has been found to be in breach of three parts of its licence. Have you had a request, Mr Speaker, from a Minister to make an urgent statement to the House, so that the Department can guarantee to millions of lottery players in the UK that the game is safe?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer to him is no: I have received no indication that a Minister has any plan to come to the Chamber today. But I have known the hon. Gentleman a long time, and he is nothing if not a persistent woodpecker—that is a compliment—so my very strong hunch is that he will be in his place on Monday, using such devices as are available to him to try to secure the presence of a Minister to answer on

[Mr Speaker]

this important matter. Meanwhile, I hope the hon. Gentleman has an enjoyable, and moderately restful, weekend.

10.10 am

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I want to say a huge thank you to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) for introducing this Bill. Four years after the signing of the Istanbul convention we are here today to try to push the Government to ratify. That is long overdue,

I want to say, too—I intend to say a few uncharacteristic things—that I know how much the Government care about this issue. Long before I was elected to this place I worked very closely with Home Office officials, some of whom I know are here today. I worked with the Home Office under the then Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, for years, and I never saw anything that led me to believe they had anything but commitment to improving legislation in the area of domestic violence and sexual violence. In practical terms, when things had to be delivered—that costs money and falls under the Department for Communities and Local Government’s auspices—things did tend to break down. But in legislative terms, the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the measures against coercive control and other steps let me know that there was that commitment, regardless of all the things that divide us—and, my gosh, I could talk out a debate on how many things divide us, but I like to sleep at night and was raised properly.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): May I also put on record my support for this Bill, and for what the hon. Lady is saying? Does she agree that it is not enough just to pass legislation? We must also enforce it, which has been somewhat lacking over the last few years?

Jess Phillips: I entirely agree. What we tend to do in this building is pave the way with great intentions and great legislation—we have some of the best legislation on domestic violence in the world—but then open an enormous door into an empty room. It is very difficult for our police forces to enforce certain issues. That is not because they do not have the legislative framework; it because of a whole series of other reasons.

We all have to work together, a bit like yesterday in the social care statement, in every conversation in this place about the NHS. We need to work together to make this happen. I hope those on the Conservative Benches do not take offence at what I am about to say, but in a spirit of total pragmatism I would dance with the devil to make women and children safer; I will do anything.

I came to this place to bang my fists on this side of the table, because I got sick of banging them on the other side. I know the Government care about this, and I know that if they were perhaps not distracted by other things the ratification of the Istanbul convention would probably have easily passed. I say to those on the Conservative Benches that the stumbling blocks over compulsory personal, social, health and economic education and talking to young people about consent and the ratification of the Istanbul convention are a real threat

to what is not a bad record in this area; it is a pretty good record. But the record on the allocation of funding needs a lot of work—all the refuges in my constituency are threatened at present.

If I was not here and had not won my seat, I would today be surrounded by piles and piles of presents given by the local community to the refuge. My desk used to become like a fort, and we would have to organise parties to get the presents wrapped, in order to give out thousands and thousands of gifts to the women and children who lived in the refuge every year. We would always throw a party. It might not seem like it to those who have never worked in the field, but it was one of the happiest times of the year. One of the reasons it was so happy was that everybody—the chief executive of the organisation, the commissioner from the council, the cleaner in the refuge, the children in the refuge—rolled up their sleeves to achieve something together. We would all make the sausage rolls, and the women would be running in and out of their flats with plates of different food, so that we could all spend Christmas together knowing that there is a huge amount of solidarity in the world for victims of domestic violence.

One of the main underpinnings of the Istanbul convention is the idea that we all work together—that we need multiple agencies genuinely working together across the world to improve things for victims of domestic violence.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jess Phillips: No. That was worth thinking about for a moment, but I am sure the hon. Gentleman is going to get his say.

I want to say some thank yous to the people who have meant that we are here today. Our colleagues from Scotland have done a fantastic job and, as usual, are all sat in the Chamber now en masse. I want again to say perhaps an uncharacteristic thank you to the Leader of the Opposition who has shown his commitment and worked with us to make sure the Labour party today will show its commitment for this, and specifically to Amy Watson in his office; it is always an exciting time in politics when we just spend all day on the phone ringing round to get people to a place. I also thank the unions who have been involved in lobbying Members to be here today, including UNISON, and the Muslim Council of Britain. I got lots of lobby emails; all of that is down to the hard work of the volunteer women of IC Change, who have done an amazing job on almost no resources. That shows me how brilliant and powerful women can be. They can achieve pretty much anything when they put their minds to it, and the fact that all of us are here today—on the last Friday before Christmas—is testimony to their immense work. I say a massive thank you to them.

All of us will wake up on Christmas morning stressed out. It is the only day when it is acceptable to drink from 6 am. On holiday, it is 12 o’clock, on Christmas day it is 6 o’clock; that is the rule my family live by. We will all be stressed and we will be wondering whether we have bought the right presents, and one of them will have gone missing. Things will be more stressful, especially for the womenfolk of this world, than they are particularly festive or cheerful, because things are tense on Christmas day.

I ask everybody in here to imagine that that tension is not just because we are not sure whether we have got the rights gifts for our auntie or whether everyone will have a chair or the children's table is going to collapse like it did last year. Some people wake up on Christmas day and they will try not to say anything wrong; they will try not to put a foot wrong. They will make sure everything is perfect; they will have risk-assessed every single step they take throughout the day because on just this one day their children deserve not to have the monster that lives in their home erupt in their faces. On just this one day, their children deserve to have the peaceful day that all our children take for granted. For those people, all the stresses that we feel will be terror and control over everything they say and do in order to keep things safe. Ratifying this convention and sending them a message today would be the greatest gift that we could offer.

10.20 am

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to follow someone whom I am tempted to call my hon. Friend, but I know that I am not supposed to, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) speaks with such passion and expertise in the area of domestic violence. I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on bringing forward this important Bill. I had put today's date in my diary as a "PMB" day because my private Member's Bill is third on the list. I hope to see the same number of people here to support mine, but we will see how the day goes.

The Bill represents an historic opportunity to tackle domestic abuse and violence against women and girls. It is a shame that Parliament was not sitting last Friday, which was the penultimate day of 16 days of activism following the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. That might have been more appropriate, but events are determined by the days on which the House sits. It is shocking in this day and age that on average two women are killed by their partner or ex-partner every week in England and Wales and that 27.1% of women have experienced abuse since the age of 16. Last year, an estimated 4.5 million females aged between 16 and 59 were victims of domestic abuse.

Preparing my speech for today made me reflect, and I recalled the time when, as a child, my sister and I were at home with mum and a lady from the village knocked on our door. She was trying to escape domestic violence, and she and her two boys spent the afternoon in our house with me, my mum and my sister. The House of Commons is a strange place, and it does bring back memories from time to time and makes one reflect on experiences and how one felt at the time, but I digress.

The statistics are shocking, but they do not show the whole picture. Domestic violence is a largely hidden crime that is difficult to quantify accurately. Women do not always report or disclose occurrences of domestic abuse to the police for many and varied reasons. If the Bill is successful today—I hope it is—it will require the Government to ratify the Council of Europe's Istanbul convention as soon as possible. In addition to the measures that the Government have already put in place, including committing £80 million to violence against women and girl services, the Bill will help to end violence against women and girls.

Turning briefly to the Istanbul convention itself, between 2006 and 2008 the Council of Europe campaign task force looking at violence against women concluded that existing legislation to prevent and combat all kinds of violence against women was not being enforced. Services for victims were scarce and underfunded, and there was a huge disparity in protection between member states. The taskforce recommended that the Council of Europe produce a convention on preventing and combating violence, and the recommendation led to the drafting and publication of the Istanbul convention. The UK played a significant role in its production, and the UK coalition Government signed the convention on 8 June 2012.

Since that signing, the UK has made significant progress towards ratification. There has been legislation on forced marriage, female genital mutilation, coercive control and, most recently, stalking. In fact, in most respects measures already in place in the UK to protect women and girls from violence comply with or go further than the convention requires. It is just those final amendments to domestic law to take extra-territorial jurisdiction over a range of offences that has caused the delay in ratification. I hope the Minister will expand on that in his closing remarks, but I was pleased to read that there has been contact with counterparts in the devolved Administrations on whether the legislative changes for extra-territorial jurisdiction should extend to Scotland and Northern Ireland.

I am glad that the Bill has made it to the Floor of the House today and that Parliament has time to debate it. Let us hope that it does lead to ratification, which will give all women and girls the legal guarantee to the right to live lives free from both violence and the fear of violence. It is an important issue that sadly affects so many women, and one could ask why we need a private Member's Bill to do something about it. We know that the Government have already committed to ratifying the convention and have provided many examples of the work that they are doing to meet and go beyond its requirements, but this is an historic day and an important private Member's Bill, which provides a chance for everyone in the House to come together and show our support for an important issue.

The best way to end violence against women is to prevent it from happening in the first place. That means changing prejudices, attitudes and gender stereotypes through the further training of professionals and the use of NGOs to help people recognise and challenge different forms of violence and to prevent victimisation. I emphasise the need for co-operation between agencies. We must ensure that children are taught about equality at an early age and that intervention and treatment programmes are working as well as they possibly can. I recall visiting a women's refuge in the north-east several years ago. I was humbled to meet the women and children there, and I gained a deeper understanding of the fact that domestic violence has no social boundaries or age limits. Sadly, it cuts across all classes and all areas of society.

The women and girls who have been failed by preventive measures and have become victims of violence must be offered the best possible protection and support. They need support and understanding from Government agencies, the police, and health services, many of which already do terrific work. Specific measures include ensuring

[Wendy Morton]

that victims have access to adequate information in a language that they can understand, that shelters are established with an adequate geographical distribution, and that easily accessible rape crisis and sexual violence referral centres are available to those who need them.

Turning to the prosecution of perpetrators, one of the convention's biggest achievements is the range of measures, procedures and best practices for investigating and prosecuting violence against women. The convention ensures that victims must be protected at all stages of an investigation whether through emergency barring orders, whereby the police can remove a perpetrator of domestic violence from their home, or restraining and protection orders. Such orders must be available for immediate protection, allowed during subsequent legal proceedings and, possibly most importantly, issued without prejudicing the defendant's right to a fair trial.

The issue is not confined to the UK or Europe, so I want to discuss violence against women and girls abroad. Through my work on the International Development Committee and as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for sustainable development goals, I have seen and heard about examples of violence against women and girls throughout the world. Sexual violence is one characteristic of the ongoing insurgency in north-east Nigeria. Earlier in the year, along with my International Development Committee colleague, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—I hope I have pronounced that correctly [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]—I met representatives from "Bring Back Our Girls" campaign at the Unity Fountain in Abuja. They campaign on and highlight the issues relating to the missing Chibok girls. It is now 978 days since they were abducted and 196 of them remain missing. This campaign cannot be pushed to the sidelines, and this event was really moving. It was one of the memorable parts of that visit earlier in the year, albeit for sad reasons.

In 2014, the then Foreign Secretary, Lord Hague of Richmond, as he is now, hosted the first global summit to end sexual violence in conflict, along with the UN special envoy for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. It took place here in the UK and was the largest gathering ever brought together on the subject, with 1,700 delegates and 123 country delegations, including 79 Ministers. The summit agreed practical steps to tackle impunity for the use of rape as a weapon of war and to begin to change global attitudes to these crimes. As I said earlier, changing attitudes to these crimes and towards equality in general must surely be the best way of ending violence against women.

Similarly, in 2005 the UK successfully advocated for a stand-alone goal on gender equality as part of the sustainable development goals and the establishment of dedicated targets within the goals for all countries on ending all forms of violence against women and girls. It is only with measures such as these that we can hope to bring an end to the suffering of women worldwide.

It is also only fair to draw attention to some of the good work that the Government and the Department for International Development are doing throughout the world to help end violence against women and girls. DFID is running a number of successful programmes to tackle FGM, helping 15 countries to have a policy

framework or action plan to end it. The Secretary of State for International Development has demonstrated her commitment to this important work recently, committing £2.75 million to the UN trust fund to end violence against women, supporting organisations across the world to tackle gender-based violence. That takes the UK's total contribution to the fund to £11 million. The SDGs are global—they are universal—and it is right and proper that we recognise them today in this important debate. We must recognise that there is still a long way to go, but a lot of work has already been done on goal 5, which is to:

"Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls".

Let me come back to what is happening in the UK and the reason we are all here today. I am conscious that I am indulging your time, Mr Deputy Speaker—I am looking at the clock as I speak. Last year, there were more than 100,000 prosecutions for domestic abuse. The fact that more victims are having the confidence to come forward and report violence shows that we are moving in the right direction, but there is always more we can do, and ratifying the Istanbul convention is one way of achieving that. I end by recognising the work the Government have done already in line with the Istanbul convention, and they should be applauded. I will be supporting the Bill today, to help ensure that violence against a woman simply because she is a woman becomes a thing of the past.

10.33 am

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I intend to be relatively brief this morning, Mr Deputy Speaker. Let me start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on securing this very important private Member's Bill debate and on the consensus she has managed to build in seeking to drive this forward. We hope that by the end of today we will see the Bill moving forward to its next stage.

This issue was brought to me early in my election campaign of 2015 by a number of campaigners in Midlothian, and it was even raised as a question at one of our hustings. Luckily, I had at least a limited grasp of what the Istanbul convention was by that point, although sadly not all of those on the panel that night did. The journey we have taken even since that point and the awareness that has been raised among countless Members by the tireless campaigners already mentioned by my hon. Friend shows the real strength of feeling on this issue and a genuine change in attitude that we are starting to see coming through. But we do need to do more, which is why it is so important that this Bill makes progress today. In my constituency, Women's Aid, East and Midlothian has been campaigning on this issue for a number of years and it has told me that it sees the ratification of the Istanbul convention as the most comprehensive strategy for addressing violence against women and girls, and therefore as an opportunity to bring unprecedented positive change for women and girls.

I think we can all agree that we need to do something—we need to do more. In my brief contribution, I want to look at some of the other issues we see around us and at the role men can play in trying to address them and change attitudes. We all want to see an end to violence against women, and we need that attitudinal change. When we see discrimination and some of the

comments that are made online, all of us, but especially the men among us, have an important role to play—we need to challenge the attitudes of other men when we see that type of abuse taking place online. At this point, I must give particular praise to my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who is doing a huge amount of work on tackling this, via a number of different avenues, including by chairing the all-party group on the white ribbon campaign. I am sure we are going to hear from him shortly, but I cannot let this sitting pass without putting on the record my feelings of support, and I am sure those of my colleagues, for the work that he is doing.

We all have such an important role to play. We have an opportunity to be leaders in our own communities, to change attitudes, to take that stand and drive change for the best. If we can influence young people today and change their attitudes before it is too late, we can really get that shift change in attitude that will eventually see us taking those steps to eradicate violence against women. There is no need for any violence against women to take place and we need to do everything we can to stamp it out at every opportunity. We must not stand by and watch, whether we are talking about violence or simply about an offensive comment online. All of us have a responsibility to make a stand and do what we can to make sure that we make these changes. A fantastic first step in doing that will be to support the Bill today.

10.37 am

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I commend the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) for introducing the Bill and for the typically excellent speech she made? She is one of the best performers in the House of Commons and she further enhanced her reputation with her speech today.

This is a Bill to:

“Require the United Kingdom to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention); and for connected purposes.”

I do not expect to find much support in this House for some of what I want to put on the record today—that is normal, in my experience—but I expect that many people outside this House are more likely to agree. We have only to look at the EU referendum to see how out of touch this House is with majority opinion across the country.

This is a typical Friday Bill. It comes with a worthy sentiment; who could possibly be against trying to stop violence against women? The answer is nobody. I am not aware of anybody who wants to argue that people should be violent towards women and girls—of course they should not. The argument seems to be that, as long as someone supports the premise in the Bill’s title of “combating violence against women”, they must support the Bill, and that someone who opposes the Bill must be in favour of violence against women and children. That is the level of debate I would expect from the morons on Twitter, but I still live in hope that we might have better-quality debate than that in this House, although in my experience it does not actually get much better normally. I live in hope and will try again to have a sensible debate about these matters rather than the level of debate that we get used to on social media. I have a fundamental objection to the whole premise that we need to deal only with violence against women.

Jess Phillips: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: Erm, no! It was worth thinking about for a few seconds. If the hon. Lady comes back to me later, I may well oblige her—I could not resist that temptation.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: Yes, I will.

Sarah Champion: I really appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s tone and the fact that he recognises the seriousness of this matter. I must point out to him that there are two parts to the Bill: combating violence against women and domestic violence. It does not say whether the domestic violence is against men, women or children.

Philip Davies: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for highlighting that, and I will come on to that. As she rightly said, and as I tried to illustrate at the start of my contribution, there are two separate elements to this Bill, and I want to do justice to both of them if I may.

To be honest, I cannot believe that this needs saying, but it is so discriminatory and sexist to say that we should be focusing only on violence against women. If this was the other way around, there would be an absolute outcry from people in this House, and rightly so. I do not take the view that violence against women and girls is somehow worse than violence against men and boys. As far as I am concerned, all violence is unacceptable, and all violence against the person should be punished by law. Both men and women are victims and both are perpetrators of these crimes. I believe in true equality, and want people to be treated equally whether they are a victim or a perpetrator of crime.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a characteristically passionate speech, but does he not want to acknowledge that, over the past 20 years, half of the victims of murder who were women were killed by family members, and only 6% of males who have been murdered were killed by family members? That is quite a significant discrepancy and it needs to be acknowledged in this House.

Philip Davies: I will come on to the discrepancy between the levels of violence against men and women in due course, because it is worth highlighting.

I believe in true equality and want people to be treated equally. At the moment, whether people like it or not, men are treated more harshly than women in the criminal justice system—that is certainly the case when it comes to sentencing. I know that that is an inconvenient truth for many people, but it is the truth nevertheless. On top of that—this is where it relates to my hon. Friend’s point—all the evidence shows that men are more likely to be a victim of violent crime than women in this country.

Jess Phillips: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his graciousness—genuinely. When he started speaking, he said that a Member saying that they do not support this Bill does not mean that they support violence against women. He is absolutely right to say that it is not a

[*Jess Phillips*]

zero-sum game, but does he agree that wanting a Bill that supports women does not mean that we do not want one that supports men? There is no use of the word “only” in this Bill. If he wishes to bring in a Bill about violence against men, I will gladly co-sponsor it with him.

Philip Davies: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady. Perhaps then we can go back to the drawing board and make it clear that we want to introduce a Bill that targets men and women alike. If we do that, I would be delighted that both of us would be able to support it.

Dr Whiteford: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will read a bit from the Istanbul convention, to which I alluded in my speech. It says that

“measures to protect the rights of victims, shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, gender, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status.”

That is article 4, clause 3, of the Istanbul convention.

Philip Davies: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady. As I have said, we can go back to the drawing board and bring back a Bill that all of us can support. We have had four speeches so far, and I think I have heard only one passing reference to men. The whole thrust of this debate and argument, and the whole point of this Bill today, is simply about the unacceptability of violence against women. That is all we have heard so far. It is no good now trying to redraw the nature of the debate, because I am raising the point about true equality. If people really believe in equality in this House, let us go back to the drawing board and bring back a Bill that makes that clear.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Although it is true that article 4, which has just been quoted by the promoter of this Bill, says what she says it says, article 2 is the relevant article, because it sets out the scope of the convention. Paragraph 1 of article 2 quite clearly states:

“This Convention shall apply to all forms of violence against women.”

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will also come on to article 1, which makes it clear that discrimination against men is absolutely fine as far as the convention is concerned. It flies in the face of the impression that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan wants to give. There is an easy way to deal with this, as we all seem to be in agreement: we can go back to the drawing board and bring forward a Bill on which we can all agree.

Dr Mathias: In view of the fact that the Government have signalled that they will ratify this convention, is my hon. Friend saying that he does not want the Government to ratify it?

Philip Davies: I am against ratifying it, and I am trying to set out my reasons for my view. I want the Government to ratify something that targets all violence.

During the course of my speech, I will test out Members’ commitment to stamping out violence—whether it be by men or women.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Is my hon. Friend arguing that there is no point in doing something that is a good thing, unless it solves all the problems of the world?

Philip Davies: If my hon. Friend is happy for a convention to make it explicitly clear that it is fine to discriminate against men—[*Interruption.*] I know that a lot of people are up in arms. I suspect that most of them have not even bothered to read all of the articles in the convention. If they want to, off the cuff, repeat to me article 1 of the convention in full—[*Interruption.*] No, I did not think that they could. They are just up in arms because of what I said at the start of my speech. They think, “It seems like a worthy sentiment, so we must support a worthy sentiment.” They have no substance for their view, but I am sure that if they want to catch your eye, Mr Deputy Speaker, and explain all the nuances of the different articles of this convention, you will humour them. I suspect that there is not much substance behind all the hollering, as usual, from our Scottish National party colleagues. I will try to help out my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) by explaining why I think that this convention should not be ratified. I am trying to make it clear that I believe in true equality rather than in this kind of equality that applies only to one gender.

My premise is that all the evidence shows that men are more likely to be victims of violent crime in this country than women.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that two women a week are killed. I do not know whether he has ever gone to a funeral of a woman who has died and seen the children there. I can assure him that I have, and it is a very uncomfortable experience.

Philip Davies: There are also funerals of men who have died. I am sure that that is just as uncomfortable an experience for their children. I am very sad that the hon. Lady does not recognise that, when a father dies, it is just as upsetting for the children as when a mother dies. I take issue with that premise.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): When the hon. Gentleman gives that crime statistic, is he trying to say that all those men have been made victims of crime because they are men? This Bill is about combating violence against women that is committed precisely because they are women and girls. That is not the case with the vast majority of crimes that he is talking about in those statistics.

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman is going down an interesting route, as he is basically saying that, no matter the injuries a person sustains in a violent attack, all we should be concerned about is the motivation. If the motivation is not what the hon. Gentleman thinks—[*Interruption.*] That is fair enough. It seems to me, though, that if somebody comes up to a person because they hate them and beats them to a pulp, the nuance of why they hate that person is less important than the

scale of the injuries they suffer and the need for the person who perpetrated the crime to be punished. The hon. Gentleman clearly has a different opinion on that. I am more interested in the violence and the punishment of the perpetrator.

Mr Chope: In the preamble to the convention there is a reference to the Geneva convention of 1949, which is gender-neutral despite the fact that most of the victims of breaches of the Geneva convention are men.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly valid point. If we follow the logic of today's debate, the Geneva convention should have applied only to men, as they were much more likely to be subjected to what it was intended to cover. I think that that would be nonsense, and I suspect that my hon. Friend and most people here think that it would be nonsense too, but it is amazing that when it falls on the other side, everyone is silent. That is the hypocrisy I want to expose today and I am going to press on and expose it.

To highlight the fact that men are more likely to be the victims of violent crime, I will quote the recent statistics from the Ministry of Justice on the representation of females and males in the criminal justice system. They confirm that men are nearly twice as likely to be the victim of violent crime than women. According to the crime survey of England and Wales, 1.3% of women interviewed reported being victims of violence compared with 2.4% of men. My point also applies to children. Again according to the crime survey for England and Wales, in 2015-16 a smaller proportion of girls than boys reported being victims of violence—4.2% of girls versus 7.7% of boys.

It is not just with violence generally that men do worse than women. When it comes to the most serious cases, according to the crime survey for England and Wales, in 2015-16 women accounted for 36% of recorded homicide victims while men were victims in 64% of cases. Clearly, on every possible level of crime, a man is more likely to be the victim than a woman.

Although we have not heard much, if anything, about this today, men are also victims of domestic violence. It is right that in two thirds of domestic violence incidents a woman is the victim, which is absolutely outrageous, but in a third of cases the victim is a man. It may well be that some people in this House think we should only be concerned about the two thirds who are women, but I do not. We should be concerned about all victims of domestic violence equally. They are all victims of domestic violence and we should consider them equally whenever we consider a response to it, not just the two thirds who happen to be women.

According to the Office for National Statistics report "Focus on Violent Crime and Sexual Offences", which relates to the year ending March 2015 and which was released in February, the crime survey of England and Wales estimates that 8.2% of women and 4% of men reported experiencing any type of domestic abuse in the last year—that is all forms of abuse. That is equivalent to an estimated 1.3 million female victims and 600,000 male victims, all of whom, in my opinion, equally deserve our support. The ONS also confirms that 6.5% of women and 2.8% of men reported having experienced any type of partner abuse in the last year, equivalent to an estimated 1.1 million female victims and 500,000 male victims.

The Bill refers to preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Although the first part is relatively clear, the second bit, about domestic violence, is not so clear, because of the definition of domestic violence. Our definition of it includes non-violent components, so we need to be very careful when bandying around figures about domestic violence. That is inevitably the problem with a wide definition. It has the word "violence" in the title, and people then understandably assume it relates to physical violence, but that is not always necessarily the case and that can be quite confusing. We must also remember that domestic incidents include people in relationships, as well as those in family and other relationships that could be considered domestic in nature. What I am trying to say is that the notion that in every case of domestic violence or abuse the perpetrator is a big, burly wife-beater is just that—a notion, not fact.

I asked the House of Commons Library for some information on what is known as the Istanbul convention, which this Bill seeks to ratify. The Library said that it is a Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. It was adopted by the Council of Europe on 7 April 2011, was open for signature on 11 May 2011 at the 121st session of the Committee of Ministers in Istanbul, and entered into force on 1 August 2014. The UK signed the convention on 8 June 2012, but has not yet ratified it. Some countries have signed the convention, like the UK, and some have signed it and ratified it as well. I will not go through all the countries and give their positions on it, although it is very illuminating and relevant to the debate, but I do not want to test the patience of the House.

Some countries have signed the convention but not ratified it, like us. Sudan was mentioned as an illustration earlier. As my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) rightly highlighted, Germany has not ratified it. Nor has Iceland, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Croatia and Cyprus. They are all members of the European Union, which is apparently such a fine institution that SNP Members are desperate for us to remain part of it, yet their wonderful partner countries have not bothered to ratify the convention either. There was no mention of that, strangely, in the speech made by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan. It is particularly interesting to note that Ireland only signed the convention on 5 November 2015, and has also not ratified it. Perhaps the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) might want to have a word with his friends in the Irish Republic to ask why they have not ratified it.

SNP Members were up in arms earlier about something that they never bothered to read and that they knew nothing about, but I will help them out, as I can tell them what article 1 says. It sets out five purposes, and the first is to

"protect women against all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence".

The second is to

"contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and promote substantive equality between women and men, including by empowering women".

The third is to

"design a comprehensive framework, policies and measures for the protection of and assistance to all victims of violence against women and domestic violence".

[Philip Davies]

The fourth is to

“promote international co-operation with a view to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence”,

and the fifth is to

“provide support and assistance to organisations and law enforcement agencies to effectively co-operate in order to adopt an integrated approach to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence”.

Let us consider the first point. Of course we are all united in our opposition to any violence against women and girls. I will repeat that, Mr Deputy Speaker, if you do not mind, because I want to make it clear so that nobody misunderstands the terms of this debate. We are all united in our opposition to any violence against women and girls. I would be astounded if any of us were not. I pride myself on being one of the most hard-line Members on matters of law and order and sentencing, and I always find it rather strange that those who speak passionately about how we should have zero tolerance of violence against women and girls and violence against people—which I agree with—are often the same people who then argue that the perpetrators of violence should do anything but be sent to prison.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman has helpfully laid out the objectives of the Istanbul convention. Can he explain precisely what he sees as the downside of ratifying the convention, given all that it could do to achieve much greater focus and energy in the prevention of violence against women and girls, and for all those—whether male or female—who will be victims, particularly given the scale and nature of domestic violence?

Philip Davies: My hope is that, by the time I have finished speaking, the hon. Lady will be much wiser about why I wholly oppose the Bill.

Mr Chope: May I suggest one answer to the hon. Lady’s intervention? Our legislation in this country has a much broader definition of domestic violence than the one in the convention.

Philip Davies: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he makes a good point. As I made clear, our definition of domestic violence is very different from that used in most other countries. However, there are other reasons, which I will come to, and article 1 contains something I fundamentally disagree with.

We are in the ridiculous situation where 66% of men convicted at Crown Court in England and Wales of violence against the person are sent to prison, compared with 37% of women. If we really want to send out a message—I heard a number of Opposition Members say that that was the purpose of the Bill—of zero tolerance of violence against the person, the first thing, and perhaps the main thing or even the only thing, we should do is press for much tougher sentences for people who are found guilty. One way to prevent and eliminate violence is to send people to prison for longer, because while they are in prison, they cannot perpetrate any violence against anybody in their households, or anywhere else for that matter.

The Labour party, which is apparently so concerned about violence against women and girls, actually introduced a law in a previous Parliament whereby somebody who is sent to prison for committing violence against a woman or a girl has, by law, to be released halfway through their prison sentence, whether or not it is considered that they will go straight back into the household they came from and commit the same crime again. By the law of the land, those people have to be released halfway through their sentence. The last Labour Government introduced that, so it is no good Labour Members coming here today and saying how committed they are to stopping violence against women and girls, when they are the ones who are responsible for these people being let back out on to the streets and back into their houses much sooner than the courts originally intended.

If people want to do something worth while to prevent violence against women and girls and against other people, let us all press for stronger prison sentences. Let us all press for people to spend more of their sentence in prison, rather than being released out on licence. How many people are up for that in the House today? They all go amazingly quiet, because when it comes down to it, they want to huff and puff about being tough on violence against women and girls. When it comes down to the actual thing that most of our constituents would recognise as being tough on violence against women and girls—tougher prison sentences—Opposition Members run away, because they do not like people being sent to prison.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very valid point. Does he not feel that there may be some correlation between the fact that the figures for violent crime are increasing and the fact that, as he has just pointed out, criminals know they will be let out halfway through their sentence?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is not rocket science: the more criminals who are in prison, the fewer criminals are out on the street committing crimes. That is not really a massively difficult concept to grasp, although Opposition Members appear to be struggling with it. It is not that difficult to understand that if the people who commit these crimes are in prison, they cannot be committing these crimes. My hon. Friend must therefore surely be right in his suspicion.

The convention does not just cover violence, as article 1b mentions, and that is one of the reasons why I have a fundamental problem with the convention. Article 1b wants

“the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women”,

but I do not see how introducing a specific duty to eliminate all forms of discrimination against just women is not discriminatory in itself—I sometimes wish people could see the irony of their proposals. Surely, we should want to eliminate all forms of discrimination—full stop. Article 1b is, in effect, saying that discrimination against a man is okay because all we want to do is end discrimination against women. Well, it is not okay; no discrimination is okay. If this convention said, “Actually, what we want to do is end all forms of discrimination—full stop,” I would be the first to support it, but it does not say that. It talks about discrimination against women

only. Surely, Members cannot support that form of discrimination. It flies in the face of everything we are supposed to believe in if we believe in true equality.

Then we have the phrase “including by empowering women”. This is obviously a legal document, and I am not entirely sure what the legal definition of that is supposed to be. We have some very respected people of the law in the Chamber today, and they may be able to help us out with the legal definition. I genuinely do not know, and I will bow to other people’s superior knowledge. The English dictionary definition of empowering is

“approving having qualities that give a person or a group of people the means to take more control of their lives and become stronger and more independent”,

and we are all in favour of that I would like to think.

Most concerning to me, however, is the fact that this whole strategy seems to be based on the premise that all this violence against women is committed by men. Why else would it link discrimination, stereotyping and violence? That certainly seems to be the thought of many of the people who are supporting the convention and the Bill. The impression people might be under is that the perpetrators of all these crimes against women are men. Indeed, on the website of one of the campaigns endorsing the Bill, women were holding up placards with the slogan:

“Together we can end male violence against women”.

So it would seem that they are not interested in ending all violence, regardless of whether the victim is male or female, or even in ending all violence against women.

Despite what people want to believe, violence against women is not caused only by men. Indeed, there is no evidence to support that underlying assumption. A letter I received from the Crown Prosecution Service said:

“We are unable to provide information on your specific requests of ‘the sex of both the defendant and the victim’... This is because we record the sex of the defendant and victim as separate statistics rather than as a joined statistic.”

So today’s Bill is based on an assumption that can quickly be proved wrong. We only have to look at the individual cases that come to our courts to see that there are plenty where violence has been committed by a female offender against a female victim. Let me just give a flavour of those cases.

How about the case of Samira Lupidi, who stabbed her two young daughters to death in a refuge in November last year? Lupidi had been placed in a refuge with the girls after she called the police to their house, claiming her partner had been violent. Speaking about Lupidi’s relationship with the father, the judge said:

“You reacted to this very difficult situation by saying ‘If I cannot have them’—

the children—

“neither can he’... This is a crime which speaks of rage and I sentence you on the basis that you killed them in anger and out of a desire for revenge.”

A jury of six men and six women found her guilty of murder after only 90 minutes’ deliberation.

What about the case of Sadie Morris, a female paedophile who was sentenced to five years in jail after photographing herself abusing a three-year-old girl? The offences took place between 1 and 31 July 2013, with photographs involving one category A image—the most serious level—and one category B and one category C image. What about

the case of a Romanian sex gang led by women who trafficked vulnerable women into Britain and forced them into prostitution? The gang raked in more than £15,000 a month and forced the prostitutes to deposit the cash across 14 separate bank accounts.

Ending male violence against women would not have prevented any of these cases, as the offenders were also female. Crime does not discriminate. We have to get real: instead of speaking of female victims of male perpetrators, we should speak of all victims, regardless of sex, and all offenders, regardless of sex. Why do so many Members find that so difficult to do?

There are many female perpetrators of violence against both men and women, according to official Ministry of Justice figures. Its report, “Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2015”, says that violence against the person and theft were consistently the two offence groups with the highest number of arrests for both females and males. In fact, violence against the person accounted for 34% of all male arrests and 36% of all female arrests in the criminal justice system—we have not heard any of that in the speeches so far—while theft offences made up 21% of male arrests and 26% of female arrests.

Again, this is not restricted to women but also applies to girls. In 2015-16, violence against the person was the most common offence group for which juvenile females—10 to 17-year-olds—were arrested. In fact, 40% of arrests of girls aged 10 to 17 were for violence against the person. It is no good people shaking their heads; these are the facts—the official statistics—although they might be inconvenient. I am not surprised that Opposition Members have not heard about it; we never hear any of this in this place because we are so blinkered in only wanting to look one dimensionally at all these issues. I am not surprised that it has come as a shock to Opposition Members.

This is backed up by reports of cases such as that of Katie Neild, a 27-year-old mother of two who was rushed to hospital after a woman bit her and ripped a chunk out of her face, which left the victim with permanent scarring, even after an emergency skin graft. A case heard at my local court, Bradford Crown court, was that of a female who burgled a 79-year-old woman’s house in August last year. In her defence, the defendant’s barrister claimed that she would be extremely vulnerable in prison with a baby due in less than three months, despite her not being pregnant at the time of the burglary. However, Judge Thomas at Bradford Crown court—a fine man—said that his duty was to the pensioner whose life was so significantly affected that she had not left her home since.

This just gives a flavour of the vast array of cases where female offenders target female victims. The discriminatory underlay of this Bill is pointless and wrong, because not all victims are female and not all offenders are male. We should be bringing forward gender-neutral legislation that seeks to help all victims of crime—men and women—and to punish all offenders, men and women. Even in cases where people may assume that all violence is male on female, such as domestic violence, this is not so.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend has been referring to statistics from the United Kingdom. He may be aware of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights,

[Mr Chope]

which issued a very big report on violence against women—an EU-wide survey—in which it found that 11% of non-heterosexual women in Europe have experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of other women.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for alerting me to that fact, of which I was unaware. I was just coming on to that point, because it seems that the figures are worse than that in the United Kingdom.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend clarify something? Is he saying that if this Bill were gender-neutral, he would support it?

Philip Davies: Yes, I am very much saying that—that is the thrust of my point. I absolutely would support the Bill if it were gender-neutral, but it clearly is not, and we need only read the convention to see that fact and to have heard the speeches we have heard so far today to realise that it has nothing to do with gender neutrality.

In 2008, Stonewall found that one in four lesbian and bisexual women have experienced domestic violence in a relationship, with 49.3% of bisexual women experiencing severe physical intimate violence. On abuse during childhood, the recent MOJ report, “Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2015”, notes:

“The perpetrator of physical abuse against females was almost as equally likely to be the mother as the father (33% and 36% respectively).”

This is not as clear-cut as some Members would want us to believe, but the Bill supports the narrative that they want to keep talking about. What they say bears no relation to the facts, but it very much helps a narrative that they want people to take away. At some point, some of us have got to say, “No, we are not prepared to allow these distortions to continue. We are going to argue what the actual facts are, not what people would want the facts to be.”

If people do not want to listen to me—which I understand that they often do not, because I say things that they do not want to hear—perhaps they might have more sympathy for a marvellous lady called Erin Pizzey. In 1971, Erin Pizzey opened the world’s first women’s refuge in Chiswick specifically dealing with all victims of domestic violence. Perhaps because of her background, she has the credentials, which I am not afforded the luxury of being granted, to be given a hearing. She went to the United States at the invitation of the US Government and embarked on a Salvation Army-sponsored tour of 21 cities to help set up shelters for victims of domestic violence. She did the same when she moved to Italy, and she returned to England in 1997. More recently, in March 2007, she opened the first Arab refuge for victims of domestic violence in Bahrain. I hope that people may listen to her if they will not listen to me. In 2011, she said in a press release on the international day for the elimination of violence towards women:

“25th November 2011 is the international day for the elimination of violence towards women. Like everybody else who reads this statement I am of course totally in favour of the elimination of violence towards women but unlike the instigators of this event I believe that we should be eliminating violence against everyone and that includes men and children.

“I applaud the efforts of Viviane Reding who is the Vice-President and Commissioner responsible for justice, fundamental rights and citizenship, Cecile Grebolvel who is the Secretary General of European Women’s lobby and Mikael Gustatsson who is Chair of Parliamentary Women’s Rights and gender equality commission in their efforts to protect women but I am puzzled as to why this enormous empire of women with the huge self important titles manage to avoid any discussion of the effects of violence upon the family, fathers and children.

If we have any hope of tackling the tragic effects of domestic violence we have to face the facts that women can and are also guilty of violence against their partners. To concentrate only of women as victims is to deny the fact that children are also abused by their mothers. We can no longer afford to cover up the huge scandal that has existed for the last forty years where only men have been held up as perpetrators of all violence.

My hope is that sufficient political pressure will be brought to bear upon these women who sit in great positions of power to acknowledge that we do indeed need to make November 25th a day when we all agree internationally that there should be zero tolerance for violence against anyone and that we will all work to make the family a safe and harmonious place.”

I think that we should listen to that very carefully indeed. It sums up entirely my view on this issue. That is a woman who has far more credentials than many people in this place, having set up the world’s first women’s refuge.

In response to a parliamentary question asked by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), the Government said that they remain committed to ratifying the convention and set out what more needs to be done:

“The previous Government signed the Istanbul Convention to show the strong commitment it placed on tackling violence against women and girls and this Government remains committed to ratifying it... The UK already complies with the vast majority of the Convention’s articles but further amendments to domestic law, to take extra-territorial jurisdiction over a range of offences (as required by Article 44), are necessary before the Convention can be ratified. The Ministry of Justice is currently considering the approach to implementing the extra-territorial jurisdiction requirements in England and Wales and will seek to legislate when the approach is agreed and Parliamentary time allows.”

According to the Library, article 44 of the convention, on which the Government were placing great weight, states:

“Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to establish jurisdiction over any offence established in accordance with this Convention, when the offence is committed:

- a in their territory; or
- b on board a ship flying their flag; or
- c on board an aircraft registered under their laws; or
- d by one of their nationals; or
- e by a person who has her or his habitual residence in their territory.”

Paragraph 2 states:

“Parties shall endeavour to take the necessary legislative or other measures to establish jurisdiction over any offence established in accordance with this Convention where the offence is committed against one of their nationals or a person who has her or his habitual residence in their territory.”

Paragraph 3 states:

“For the prosecution of the offences established in accordance with Articles 36, 37, 38...and 39...of this Convention, Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that their jurisdiction is not subordinated to the condition that the acts are criminalised in the territory where they were committed.”

Paragraph 4 states:

“For the prosecution of the offences established in accordance with Articles 36, 37, 38 and 39 of this Convention, Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that their jurisdiction as regards points d and e of paragraph 1 is not subordinated to the condition that the prosecution can only be initiated following the reporting by the victim of the offence or the laying of information by the State of the place where the offence was committed.”

Paragraph 5 states:

“Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to establish jurisdiction over the offences established in accordance with this Convention, in cases where an alleged perpetrator is present on their territory and they do not extradite her or him to another Party, solely on the basis of her or his nationality.”

Paragraph 6 states:

“When more than one Party claims jurisdiction over an alleged offence established in accordance with this Convention, the Parties involved shall, where appropriate, consult each other with a view to determining the most appropriate jurisdiction for prosecution.”

Paragraph 7 states that

“this Convention does not exclude any criminal jurisdiction exercised by a Party in accordance with its internal law.”

It is, apparently, because of article 44 that the Government are dragging their feet.

Mr Nuttall: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for putting that on the record. I think it worth also noting that article 36 refers to “Sexual violence, including rape”, article 37 refers to “Forced marriage”, article 38 refers to “Female genital mutilation”, and 39 refers to “Forced abortion and forced sterilisation.”

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the subjects of those articles. It was probably remiss of me not to do so myself.

It seems that the Government are hanging their hat on article 44. Perhaps the Minister will be able to explain more about the difficulties that they are experiencing in relation to it and the other articles mentioned in it, to which my hon. Friend has just referred.

Mr Chope: Will my hon. Friend expand on the link between article 44 and article 77, under which a party ratifying the convention can specify the territories to which it applies?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but I am not sure that I can do as he asks, because this is a thorny issue. My hon. Friend has a great advantage over me, in that not only is he experienced in legal matters—which I certainly am not—but for many years he was a member of the Council of Europe. I hope that we may benefit from some of his expertise later, when he may, in passing, be able to answer his own question, which I am not able to do.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North tabled an early-day motion on this subject, which read:

“That this House notes that 8 June 2016 marks the fourth anniversary of the UK Government becoming a signatory to the Istanbul Convention on violence against women and girls; expresses disappointment that the Government, despite outlining their commitment to do so several times, has still failed to ratify this important convention; recognises that women still face a significant amount of inequality, with one in four women experiencing some form of domestic, sexual or psychological abuse during their lifetimes; further notes that ratifying the Istanbul Convention should ensure that a series of preventative policies will be introduced to help tackle and end violence against women, such as non-violent conflict resolution in relationships and the right to personal

integrity being included in school curricula at all levels; congratulates the campaign group ICchange for their continuing work in applying pressure on the Government to ratify the convention; and calls on the Government to accede to this pressure and ensure ratification as soon as possible.”

There are a couple of interesting things to note about that motion. First, when I last looked it had 47 signatories, so despite the contention by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan that the House was unanimous in its support for her proposal, that unanimous support does not seem to have found its way there. Secondly, notwithstanding Members’ attempts to do a bit of back-tracking now, and to start saying that they care about violence against men as well—they offered no such views in the speeches we heard earlier—the EDM lets the cat out of the bag. Those Members do not care about violence against men. The EDM makes no mention of violence against men. It is all about violence against women. Let us not try to pretend now, at this late stage, that this is about gender neutrality; it is not, and people obviously know that it is not.

There is an awful lot to the convention—far more than I intend to go into today; I am sure Members will be relieved to hear that. Although I am sure that I would be deemed to be in order if I went into all of it, I want to hear from other speakers. Given that the Bill requires the ratification of the convention, however, it is all very relevant, and I want to put on record some of the key facts that it contains.

The Council of Europe’s website sets out the position. It says:

“In simple terms, preventing violence against women and domestic violence can save lives and reduce human suffering. Governments that agree to be bound by the Convention will have to do the following: train professionals in close contact with victims; regularly run awareness-raising campaigns; take steps to include issues such as gender equality and non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships in teaching material; set up treatment programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence and for sex offenders; work closely with NGOs; involve the media and the private sector in eradicating gender stereotypes and promoting mutual respect.”

That last bit sounds a bit like media censorship to me, but I am not entirely sure what the Council of Europe has in mind.

“Preventing violence against women and domestic violence should not be left to the state alone. In fact, the Convention calls on all members of society, in particular men and boys, to help reach its goal of creating a Europe free from all forms of violence against women and domestic violence. Violence against women is pervasive because misogynistic attitudes towards women persist. Each and every one of us can help challenge gender stereotypes, harmful traditional practices and discrimination against women. It is only by achieving real gender equality that violence against women can be prevented.”

It is clear that the convention goes well beyond trying to combat violence against women, and has a much wider remit than people would have us believe.

The website goes on to say:

“When preventive measures have failed and violence incidents have happened, it is important to provide victims and witnesses with protection and support. This means police intervention and protection as well as specialised support services such as shelters, telephone hotlines etc. It also means making sure that general social services understand the realities and concerns of victims of domestic violence and violence against women and support them accordingly in their quest to rebuild/resume their lives.

[Philip Davies]

Some examples of measures set forth in the Convention include:

Granting the police the power to remove a perpetrator of domestic violence from his or her home: In situations of immediate danger, the police need to be able to guarantee the safety of the victim. In many instances this may mean ordering the perpetrator for a specified period of time to leave the family home and to stay away from the victim.

Ensuring access to adequate information... victims are usually traumatised and need easy access to clear and concise information on available services, in a language they understand.

Setting up easily accessible shelters in sufficient numbers and in an adequate geographical distribution: Victims come from a wide range of social realities. For instance, women from rural areas or disabled women need to have access to shelters as much as women from big cities."

There is not one mention of a male victim of domestic violence. In a moment I shall say something about the supply of refuges for men and women, because I think it important to establish the extent to which the Government are fulfilling that requirement.

The website continues:

"Making available state-wide 24/7 telephone helplines free of charge: Specialised helplines for victims of violence against women and domestic violence can direct the victims to the services they need..."

Setting-up easily accessible rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres: These centres provide immediate medical counselling, trauma care and forensic services and are extremely rare across Europe. It is important to make these services more widely available.

It should be borne in mind that it is not enough to set up protection structures and support services for victims. It is equally important to make sure victims are informed of their rights and know where and how to get help."

I absolutely agree that victims should be better protected and have more of a voice in the justice system, but as far as I am concerned that applies to male victims as much as it does to female victims. When it comes to domestic violence, it is actually male victims who have the least support, not female ones.

An Office for National Statistics report from February 2016 on violent crime and sexual offences relating to the year ending March 2015 states:

"Overall, 27.1% of women and 13.2% of men had experienced any domestic abuse since the age of 16, equivalent to an estimated 4.5 million female victims and 2.2 million male victims."

Those are shocking figures. New data from the ONS for the year ending March 2016 found that, of those who said that they had experienced domestic abuse, 1.2 million were female and 651,000 were male. As I established earlier, of every three victims of domestic abuse, two will be female and one will be male. Yet despite that split of two thirds and one third—we must all agree on that; they are the official figures and I have not heard anybody argue against them—there is absolutely no such funding split. Perhaps the Minister will explain why.

According to the Mankind Initiative:

"20 organisations offer refuge or safe house provision for male victims in the UK—a total of 82 spaces, of which 24 are dedicated to male DV victims only (the rest being for victims of either gender)."

Men have a chance of accessing only 82 spaces, only 24 of which—in the whole country—are guaranteed for them. The Mankind Initiative continues:

"For female victims, there are nearly 400 specialist domestic violence organisations providing refuge accommodation for women in the UK with c4,000 spaces for over 7,000 women and children."

Two thirds of victims of domestic violence are women and a third are men, but there are 7,000 places in refuges for women and a maximum of 82 for men. How can that possibly be gender neutral or fair? I genuinely want to know why people think that that can possibly be fair, if we are genuinely interested in being gender neutral. Of course, we know that many people are not interested in being gender neutral.

It is interesting, too, that male victims are much less likely to come forward than female victims, which again suggests that it is male victims who need more encouragement. According to the Mankind Initiative:

"Male victims (29%) are over twice as likely than women (12%) to not tell anyone about the partner abuse they are suffering from. Only 10% of male victims will tell the police (26% women), only 23% will tell a person in an official position (43% women) and only 11% (23% women) will tell a health professional."

On discussing sexual abuse during childhood, the recent Ministry of Justice report, "Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2015", states:

"12% of female victims and 25% of males told someone they knew personally about childhood sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) at the time, usually a family member (18%). Only 10% of female victims told someone in an official position, with 8% reporting the abuse to the police. Only 2% of male victims reported the abuse to the police."

Although sexual abuse is an absolutely huge issue among girls, with only 30% of victims telling anyone at all, it is also an issue among boys, but it is being massively under-reported, with only 27% of victims telling anyone, and only 2% telling the police.

The convention's position on the prosecution of perpetrators is interesting, too. The Council of Europe says:

"The convention defines and criminalises the various forms of violence against women as well as domestic violence. This is one of the many achievements of the convention. To give effect to the convention, state parties will have to introduce a number of new offenses where they do not exist. These may include: psychological and physical violence, sexual violence and rape, stalking, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, forced abortion and forced sterilisation. In addition, state parties will need to ensure that culture, tradition or so-called 'honour' are not regarded as a justification for any of the above-listed courses of conduct."

I am not sure how we deal with psychological violence, but most of those offences can have male victims, too. That does not include female genital mutilation, obviously, as that clearly relates only to females, and male circumcision is still considered to be legal. In the case of a forced abortion, which on the face of it is a female issue, if the person doing the forcing is not the father, there is potentially a father who is the victim of a lost child, so it is not just the woman who might suffer in that situation.

According to figures obtained by the Mankind Initiative:

"Of those that suffered partner abuse in 2014/15, a higher proportion of men suffered from force (37%) than women (29%). For emotional and psychological abuse the proportions were 61% and 63% respectively."

There is not a fat lot in it, as it happens. There is almost exactly the same number of male victims of psychological abuse as female victims.

On the issue of psychological abuse of children, the recent MOJ reports states:

“Of those who experienced psychological abuse as a child, the perpetrator was most likely to have been the victim’s mother (40%) or father (35%). Women were more likely to have experienced this form of abuse from their mothers (42%) than fathers (33%), whereas men were equally likely to be abused by either parent.”

The matter of actual violence and injury is also interesting. The Mankind Initiative states:

“Of those that suffered from partner abuse in 2012/13, 29% of men and 23% of women suffered a physical injury, a higher proportion of men suffering severe bruising or bleeding (6%) and internal injuries or broken bones/teeth (2%) than women (4% and 1% respectively). 30% of men who suffer partner abuse have emotional and mental problems (47% women). Only 27% of men sought medical advice whilst 73% of women did.”

This Bill would ensure the ratification of a convention that does nothing to address domestic violence against men, just women.

I want briefly to mention the other offences that might, on the face of it, seem to apply only to women. Government figures show that one in every five victims of forced marriage is a man. In 2013, there were 234 cases of forced marriage in the UK where the victim was a man. On stalking, which many will no doubt assume involves a man stalking a woman, 2.4% of men and 4.9% of women experienced stalking in 2014-15. Again, of every three victims of stalking, two are women and one is a man.

The Council of Europe says:

“Once these new offenses have found their way into the national legal systems, there is no reason not to prosecute offenders. On the contrary, state parties will have to take a range of measures to ensure the effective investigation of any allegation of violence against women and domestic violence.”

It does not say that state parties will have to take a range of measures to ensure the effective investigation of violence against men. It seems to me that that does not matter to the Council of Europe. It goes on:

“This means that the law enforcement agencies will have to respond to calls for help, collect evidence and assess the risk of further violence to adequately protect the victim.

Furthermore, state parties will have to carry out judicial proceedings in a manner that respects the rights of victims at all stages of the proceedings and that avoid secondary victimisation.”

In February 2015, the Joint Committee on Human Rights published a report, “Violence against Women and Girls”, on the UK’s progress towards ratification of the convention. Again, the report is about violence against women and girls, with nothing about violence against men and boys. I do not know what anybody else thinks, but if the son of somebody in this House is the victim of violence, would they consider that to be less important than if their daughter was a victim of violence? I would like hon. Members to explain why they think violence against their sons would be less important. We may hear about that from other Members later, but we have not so far.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): That’s because you keep talking.

Philip Davies: I am glad that I am educating the hon. Gentleman, because he certainly knew nothing about article 1 of the convention before I highlighted it for him.

Chapter 8 of the report looked at ratification, and began by setting out what others had said about it. The International Development Committee has called on the Government to do more to address violence against women and girls within the UK. Again, it is about violence against women and girls. It states that

“the UK’s international leadership is weakened by its failure to address violence against women and girls within its own borders”.

Professor Kelly argued in evidence that, although the Government are undertaking good work abroad on violence against women and girls, more needs to be done in the UK:

“I think we have a hypocrisy about human rights. We talk about human rights internationally for others, and we are mealy-mouthed about it at home. If we could have a common discourse that, actually, this happens here, too—then I think we might be able to have a more constructive conversation about it.”

The Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales said:

“Ratification would emphasise that the state has a positive duty in law to intervene in a proactive way to modify practices that result in harm, violence and degradation to women and girls. It would provide a further basis in law for those who wish to persuade the state to provide adequate and meaningful resources to construct an effective mechanism to protect women from gender violence and harm.”

Again, this is not gender-neutral. How can anyone argue that the convention is gender-neutral? There is no gender-neutral language anywhere in it for anyone to read. The report set out the background to the then Government’s position, which I do not want to go through in detail.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Gentleman has said that he wants other Members to be able to get in, and I hope he will bear it in mind that we have a very long list of speakers.

Philip Davies: I appreciate that, Mr Deputy Speaker, but there are certain things that I say that nobody else can be trusted to say. If we could rely on balanced contributions from other people, some of these things would not need saying, but they clearly do need saying, so—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I may be able to help the hon. Gentleman, because who knows what people are going to say? I have a very long list of speakers, and some of them may add to what he has said, although others may not. We may get to that part of the debate if he lets them in.

Philip Davies: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I take that point on board. I assure you that others will not, not “may not” do so, but you make a good point. In that case—I think you will approve of this—rather than setting out the background to the Government’s position, I will leave it to the Minister to set out the Government’s position—

Mr Deputy Speaker: If he gets in.

Philip Davies: I would like to think that the Minister has been suitably embarrassed about setting out the Government’s position, but I am looking forward to hearing him do so.

Thangam Debonnaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Give him the chance.

Philip Davies: I am sure the Minister will get the chance to do so.

It is worth noting that the Equality and Human Rights Commission acknowledges in its briefing that “most of the Istanbul Convention obligations are implemented through UK legislation”, and recent steps have been taken on many areas. For example, a prohibition on possession of rape pornography was introduced by section 37 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015. This applies in England and Wales, and brings the offence of possession of extreme pornographic images more in line with that applicable in Scotland. A new offence of controlling or coercive behaviour in intimate or familial relationships was introduced by section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015. An offence of forced marriage is now provided for in sections 121 and 122 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. The Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 was amended by section 73 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 to include FGM protection orders, civil measures that can be applied for through a family court which provide a means of protecting actual or potential victims of FGM.

An email I received from the Muslim Council of Britain in support of the Bill quoted the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon:

“Violence against women continues to persist as one of the most heinous, systematic and prevalent human rights abuses in the world. It is a threat to all women, and an obstacle to all our efforts for development, peace, and gender equality in all societies... Let us take this issue with the deadly seriousness that it deserves”. I do not understand how violence against women can be an obstacle to gender equality—I sometimes think I must be speaking in Swahili—because this would mean that all violence against women is committed by men, and as I have already said, that is patently not the case. Perhaps someone can explain to me how violence by women on women can be an obstacle to gender equality? In relation to making the Istanbul convention law, the Muslim Council of Britain goes on:

“This is indeed a unique opportunity in the UK so that we can show our support to women and girls who should be living free from any form of violence, and the fear of it.”

I agree with the sentiment, but I would agree more if it talked about everyone, not just women and girls.

The Fawcett Society has said:

“This new landmark treaty of the Council of Europe opens the path for creating a legal framework at pan-European level to protect women against all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence. It also establishes a monitoring body to evaluate implementation and progress.”

There will be more meddling from afar if we ratify this convention.

The Council of Europe provides details of the monitoring mechanisms that must be put in place if we ratify the convention. It says that there would be

“an independent expert body, the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), which is initially composed of 10 members and will subsequently be enlarged to 15 members following the 25th ratification”,

and

“a political body, the Committee of the Parties, which is composed of representatives of the Parties to the Istanbul Convention. The task of GREVIO is to monitor the implementation of the Convention by the Parties.”

We will not do that in our own country; we will have an international body interfering and telling us how we are doing.

Mr Chope: Does my hon. Friend share my view that such a threat of interference is one reason why the German Government do not wish to ratify the convention? If that was the case, a lot of searching questions would be asked about their attitude to what happened in Cologne on new year’s eve last year.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend may well be right. I am loth to speak up for the German Government—I do not know what their motivation is—but that is entirely possible. It may well be unwelcome to have these meddling, interfering bodies telling us how we are doing when many of those people are doing far less in their own countries than we are doing in ours. We have seen that time and again with international bodies that are supposed to monitor what we are doing. They would be better off monitoring what they are doing in their own countries, rather than monitoring what we are doing in this country.

The Council of Europe also says:

“GREVIO may also adopt, where appropriate, general recommendations on themes and concepts of the Convention.”

This would be a living document, and would not just stick at where we are today. We have seen that with the European convention on human rights. It goes on:

“The Committee of the Parties follows up on GREVIO reports and conclusions and adopts recommendations to the Parties concerned.”

We would be signing up to an ever-moving feast. It adds:

“It is also responsible for the election of GREVIO members.”

There would be two forms of monitoring procedures: a country-by-country evaluation procedure, and a special inquiry procedure. A special inquiry procedure

“may be initiated by GREVIO when there is reliable information indicating that action is required to prevent a serious, massive or persistent pattern of any acts of violence covered by the Convention. In such a case, GREVIO may request the urgent submission of a special report by the Party concerned... After having been examined by GREVIO, the findings of the inquiry are transmitted to the Party concerned and, where appropriate, to the Committee of the Parties and the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, together with any comments and recommendations.”

What an absolute bureaucratic nightmare we will get ourselves into if we ratify this convention.

We have seen how public confidence in the European convention on human rights has been undermined time after time by ridiculous findings and perverse rulings that could never have been intended at the time it was ratified. It is perfectly clear that this convention would end up in exactly the same way: an ever-moving feast, with the goalposts always being changed to suit some politically correct agenda. The Government would be hamstrung because they had ratified something, not really knowing what they were getting themselves into.

There is even a flowchart to explain what happens under the urgent inquiry procedures. I will not say any more about that, other than to note that agreeing to be party to things obviously has consequences, and the procedures to ensure that the obligations are met are clear for all to see. There are integrated policies that

parties have to follow. Again, I would like the Minister to put some meat on how he sees the Government implementing those.

The Council of Europe states:

“An effective response to such violence requires concerted action by many different actors.”

These bodies would therefore be interfering in

“law enforcement agencies, the judiciary”—

even the judiciary is mentioned on the website. Some of the people who are today arguing for the convention are the same people who have been most robust in saying that people in this House should not interfere in the judiciary in our country and should respect the independence of the judiciary, yet clearly if we ratify the convention, as it says on the website, these bodies would look for actions from

“law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, NGOs, child protection agencies and other relevant partners”

that they deem should

“join forces on a particular case.”

What on earth would we be getting ourselves into by signing up to the convention? We can sort these things out for ourselves. We can pass any laws we want in this country to sort out any problems we deem it necessary to sort out. We do not have to sign up to some supranational, interfering, meddling body that wants to intervene, potentially, in the independence of our judiciary in order to sort out violence against people—even violence against women and girls.

I oppose the Bill because it would introduce unnecessary meddling from supranational bodies that we can quite do without to sort out problems that we can deal with perfectly well ourselves in our courts if we have the guts and the willpower to send perpetrators of violence and domestic violence to prison and keep them in prison. That is the best thing this House can do, but nobody on the Opposition Benches today seems to want to do it. They would sooner do some virtue signalling with this Bill.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend says that he is against the Bill, but at least we have a Bill. If it had not been for the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) bringing forward the Bill, the House might never have been able to discuss this issue before the Government went ahead and ratified the convention.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I did at the start, I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan on bringing the Bill forward, because it is important that the public know the full implications of something with a worthy sounding title and a worthy sentiment behind it, and why some of us are opposed to these supranational bodies interfering in what we do in this country.

I am against the Bill for that reason and because we should have a convention that deals with all violence: violence against men as well as violence against women. Of course we oppose violence against women, but I for one equally oppose violence against men and boys. Having a strategy for one but not the other is just not acceptable to me. It really is as simple as that. I cannot understand for the life of me how political correctness has become so entrenched in this country that people here today can see nothing wrong with a whole policy

on violence being based on just one sex, when, unbelievably, the evidence shows that it is the other sex who are more likely to be the victims of violent crime and when there are lots of male victims of domestic violence too. As I find myself saying all too often, you couldn't make it up.

11.54 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): That is 78 minutes that I will never get back.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Let's get on with the speeches.

Thangam Debbonaire: I have read the convention and I have spent 26 years working on violence against women and domestic violence, including working with male victims of domestic violence. I will start my very brief speech by answering some of the remarks of the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies).

If the hon. Gentleman refers to what he said in his own speech and to the British crime survey statistics, he will know that the overwhelming majority of victims of sexual assault, rape, chronic ongoing domestic abuse, severe domestic abuse causing injury, coercive control and domestic homicide are female, and that that is specifically connected both to their gender and to gender inequality. Violence against women is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality. That is why we have a gender-specific convention.

If we want to tackle gender inequality—and I do—we have to tackle the specific circumstances, belief systems, structures and behaviours behind violence against women. Hence the need for the convention. The hon. Gentleman asks for neutral legislation. I say to him: when you remain neutral in a situation of profound inequality, you are only siding with the powerful against the powerless.

The hon. Gentleman asked why there are so few purpose-built refuges for men. I can tell him exactly why there are so many refuges for women because I have been part of that movement for 26 years. Women set up refuges for women. There was never anything stopping men setting up refuges for men, but I know why they have not set up many. For 10 years, I worked for Respect, which among other things runs the men's advice line—the national helpline for male victims of domestic violence. I was the research manager there, so I know a thing or two. I can tell him that many men called the men's advice line each year, but refuge was very rarely what they wanted. They wanted a listening ear, practical advice and legal information, and that is what they got.

I was going to speak extensively about the work with perpetrators that I have been involved in for about 10 years, but I have crossed out much of my speech because I do not want to filibuster so that the Bill runs out of time. Instead, I will quote briefly from research that I helped set up while I was the research manager at Respect, the national organisation for work with perpetrators of domestic violence and male victims. It is called the Mirabal research and people can look it up on the Respect website.

The research was carried out by Professor Liz Kelly and Professor Nicole Westmarland, who were profoundly sceptical about the value of perpetrator programmes

[Thangam Debbonaire]

when they started. However, they found that most men who completed a Respect-accredited domestic violence perpetrator programme—and yes, we only examined men in this research programme, but that does not mean that there are not female perpetrators; it just means we were looking specifically at men in this research—stop using violence and reduce the instance of most other forms of abuse against their partner. At the start, almost all the women said that their partners had used some form of physical or sexual violence in the past three months. Twelve months later, the research team found that after their partner or ex-partner had completed the programme, most women said that the physical and sexual violence had stopped—most, but not all.

Programmes do not replace the criminal justice system or civil justice system—they are a complement to it—but they are part of the solution. If we are going to put men in prison, which the hon. Member for Shipley has called for, we still need to know what we are going to do with them. They will still have relationships with their children whether they are inside prison or outside. Most of them will come out one day, and when they do they will have new partners. Why not work out how we can work with these men, many of whom say they would like to change—and some of whom do not—and whose partners often say that what they really want is for their partner to change? Most of the partners and ex-partners of men on the programmes in the research said that they felt or were safer after their partner or ex-partner completed the programme.

I have scrubbed out more of my speech—Members can look up the research online if they want to know the detail. I will give a couple of examples before sitting down and allowing the Minister to make his remarks, which I hope will be helpful in concluding this stage of the Bill's passage. As a facilitator at the Domestic Violence Intervention Programme I found many ways in which women became safer. One was when their partner changed their attitude and behaviour and stopped using violence. We knew that because we had a separate but linked women's partner support project that told us whether the women felt or were safer.

The programme helped some women to be safe because they themselves, for the first time, were able to get help, advice and a way of moving attention away from them as responsible for the violence and allowing them to end the relationship safely. I remember one woman in particular. I never met her. She had a newborn baby. I was working with her partner in the men's programme. She was living under such extreme control that the only time she was free and safe to talk to the women's support worker was when we, the men's facilitators, had her partner in the room with us. Over several weeks, she was able to gain confidence and develop a safe plan for leaving; meanwhile, in the room with us, her partner—an arrogant man with a huge sense of entitlement—through talking a lot about his behaviour gradually revealed more and more about it, until we had enough information to report him to the authorities. They took action.

In some cases, the women and children were safer because we were able to find out more about the perpetrator's risk to other people through the individual assessment and group work that contributed to the

co-ordinated community response. For instance, one man had to put himself in the role of his own child while other men in the room re-enacted, with the facilitators, a violent incident he had committed; after that, he completely withdrew his application for child contact and sent a message to his ex-partner via her solicitor saying that he realised how frightened she and their child must be, and that he would wait until she decided the time was right and safe.

Above all, we, the group-work facilitators, modelled how a relationship between a man and a woman based on equality actually works. For many of the men we worked with, that was the first time they had ever seen that. We modelled disagreements in which we disagreed but dealt with it respectfully. As the only woman in the room, I was often the person whom the men in the room had to use to learn to manage how to disagree with a woman without being abusive, controlling or domineering, or trying to have the last word.

I know many people, particularly from women's groups, who were rightly concerned about or even very suspicious of perpetrator programmes when they started. Some still are. That is why a good accreditation system is so important. I declare an interest: when I worked for Respect I helped develop that accreditation system. I am very proud of it, because it differentiates between programmes doing good work to challenge men, and women, who are perpetrators of domestic violence and those programmes that are not effective.

Ratifying the Istanbul convention would place requirements on the UK Government to take the steps that the convention contains. It would be a statement of commitment. In so many ways, we as a nation are ahead of the rest of the world. We have led the way in setting up refuges, developing perpetrator programmes in Scotland—where so many of my colleagues in the Change project and the Midlothian programme, subsequently the Caledonian system, work—and in England and Wales, with the DVIP and the rest. We have set up pioneering work to challenge men whose behaviour is violent and abusive. We have set up prevention work with young people in schools, something else I was involved in before becoming an MP. We have developed risk assessment and risk management.

We have nothing to fear from adopting the Istanbul convention, and neither does the hon. Member for Shipley. It does not preclude our helping men and boys, and nor should it. It merely does what it says: it acknowledges that we live in a situation of profound gender inequality, which is both cause and consequence of violence against women and girls. It is about time we ratified the convention. The safety of women and children is too important not to.

12.3 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on introducing this Bill on such an important topic with a powerful opening speech.

The Government are absolutely committed to tackling violence against women and girls in all its forms. The coalition Government shared that commitment, and in 2012 signed the Istanbul convention to signal how seriously they took their responsibility for tackling violence against women and girls. This Government remain committed to ratifying the convention.

Before I turn to the detail of the Bill, I want to be very clear that the measures already in place in the United Kingdom protect women and girls from violence in nearly all cases, and comply with or go further than the convention requires. It is also worth taking note of the powerful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who gave us all food for thought and made the very valid point that we have to remember that there is violence against men and boys, and male rape. That is equally unacceptable, but we are dealing today with a specific private Member's Bill.

We know that some crimes disproportionately affect women and girls. The United Kingdom is leading the way internationally in efforts to tackle this issue in all its forms. In the last four years, we have undertaken a significant amount of work to ensure that victims are supported and perpetrators brought to justice and that we do all we can to prevent these crimes from happening in the first place.

Philip Davies *rose—*

Brandon Lewis: I will happily give way. [*Interruption.*]

Philip Davies: The Minister said that certain crimes disproportionately affect women and girls. There are more male victims of violent crime than female victims. Surely he will acknowledge that the Bill does not deal with one of the issues he refers to.

Brandon Lewis: First, I would say to Opposition Members that my hon. Friend has every right to contribute to this debate, so murmuring from a sedentary position when he wants to intervene and make a point that backs up the powerful speech he made is inappropriate and misses the point of having a debate in the House. Obviously, domestic abuse and domestic sexual abuse predominantly affect women, although I acknowledge that in terms of crime across the country, particularly violent crime, men do suffer, and my hon. Friend is right that we should be equally intolerant of that and that sentences should reflect the fact.

We have introduced new laws to ensure that perpetrators of violence against women and girls face the consequences of their actions, including the criminalisation of forced marriage, two new stalking offences and a new offence of domestic abuse covering controlling and coercive behaviour. We have also introduced new tools to protect victims and prevent those crimes from happening. We now have two new civil orders to manage sex offenders. Domestic violence protection orders have been rolled out nationally, and we have introduced the domestic violence disclosure scheme, known as Clare's law, which allows women to check whether their partner has a violent history. We have also raised awareness among the public and professionals, including through our acclaimed teenage relationship abuse campaign, which encourages teens to rethink their views of violence, abuse, controlling behaviour and consent, as well as new statutory guidance on forced marriage, female genital mutilation and domestic abuse.

Driving a culture of change in the police's response is also important, and we have been working on that, including by ensuring that the recommendations from Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary's review of domestic abuse are acted upon; all forces have now published domestic abuse actions plans. We also have a

range of activities to tackle so-called honour-based violence, including significantly strengthening the law on female genital mutilation and forced marriage, introducing female genital mutilation protection orders and a new mandatory reporting duty, and launching the Home Office's unit specifically looking at female genital mutilation.

While the nature of these crimes is often gendered, many of them affect both men and women, and I recognise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley rightly pointed out, that men and boys can also be victims of domestic and sexual violence; and they too deserve support and protection. All our policies are applied fairly and equitably to all perpetrators and victims of crime, irrespective of gender, and I recognise that male victims may need more specific support. As he rightly outlined, some of the reaction on Twitter, for example, highlights why sometimes male victims might need specific support to feel the confidence to come forward, as more and more women now do.

That is why the Home Office funds the men's advice line, which provides support to male victims of domestic violence, as well as Galop, which provides information and support to members of the LGBT community affected by violence and abuse. We are also providing central Government funding to support victims, including refugees, through the provision of rape centres, national helplines, independent sexual violence advisers and independent domestic violence advisers, as well as services to support victims of female genital mutilation and forced marriage and those seeking to exit prostitution. We are also providing funding to support new early intervention models developed by our partners in the sector.

In taking forward this work, the UK is already fully compliant with the vast majority of the convention, which requires signatories to ensure four key things: first, that legal measures are in place to address violence against women and girls; secondly, that there is appropriate support for victims; thirdly, that professionals understand the issues; and fourthly, that there is Government oversight. So we are making progress. More and more victims have the confidence to come forward, while police referrals, prosecutions and convictions for offences are all at their highest ever levels, but we are not, and cannot be, complacent. On 8 March, we published our new cross-Government violence against women and girls strategy, which sets out our ambition that by the end of this Parliament no victim of abuse is turned away from the support they need.

That strategy is underpinned by increasing the funding by £18 million for tackling violence against women and girls between now and 2020. This includes protecting the funding for rape support centres; £1 million for national helplines; a two-year fund for refugees; and a new £15 million violence against women and girls transformation fund to promote the very early prevention and intervention that has been outlined. This dedicated funding is supported by funding for innovative programmes provided through the police transformation fund and the police innovation fund. There is the troubled families programme and further funding through the tampon tax.

In addition, we published last week a national statement of expectations, which sets out the action that local areas should take to ensure that victims get the support

[Brandon Lewis]

they deserve. We published guidance for local commissioners and announced that we would introduce a new stalking protection order to allow the police and the courts to intervene early to keep victims safe and to stop stranger stalking before it escalates. We made available a range of additional resources on domestic abuse, including updated guidance on the domestic violence disclosure scheme. We want to see this new funding and the new tools that we have introduced used to aid, promote and embed the best local practice, and ensure that early intervention and prevention become the norm.

The measures we have introduced since 2012 have helped to strengthen our compliance with the Istanbul convention. As I have said, in nearly all cases, we comply with, or even go further than, the convention itself requires. Although some have suggested that the UK's not ratifying the convention signals a lack of commitment to tackling the issue internationally, I should stress that we, as a country, have played a leading role in ending these crimes overseas.

We should be proud of the international leadership we have shown at the global summit to end sexual violence in conflict and at the 2014 girl summit to end female genital mutilation and forced marriage. The Department for International Development runs a £35 million programme to tackle FGM, and a £36 million programme to end child, early and indeed forced marriage. It is also helping many countries to take more effective action to tackle violence against women and girls. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has increased its programme resources to tackle these issues by more than 60% in recent years, and its spending on these projects has increased by £2.6 million since 2015.

As I say, we are absolutely committed to ratifying the convention, but before we do that, we must ensure that we are fully compliant with it. We have already taken one of the legislative steps necessary to ratify it by criminalising forced marriage as required by article 37. Members have referred to specific articles, so let me deal with one that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley rightly pointed out.

Further amendments to domestic law are necessary to comply with the extra-territorial jurisdiction requirements, which are in article 44 of the convention. Article 44 requires the United Kingdom to take extra-territorial jurisdiction over these offences established in accordance with the convention when committed abroad by UK nationals. We already have extra-territorial jurisdiction over some of the offences covered by the convention, including the common-law offence of murder, sexual offences against children, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. However, we need to amend domestic law to take extra-territorial jurisdiction over a range of other offences—in England and Wales, as well as in Scotland and Northern Ireland—before we are fully compliant and able to ratify the convention.

As a general rule, Government policy on the jurisdiction of our courts is that criminal offending is best dealt with by the criminal justice system of the state in whose territory the offence occurred. Exceptionally, taking extra-territorial jurisdiction is necessary to address serious crimes committed overseas as a matter of domestic policy or as part of an international consensus in which we participate. Any extension, moreover, has an impact

on the criminal justice agencies—courts, prisons—including potentially increased demands on their resources. We need to ensure that we are able to consider carefully the extent to which it is necessary to take extra-territorial jurisdiction for compliance with the convention.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford *rose*—

Brandon Lewis: We have considered the Bill carefully, but before I outline that, I happily take the hon. Lady's intervention.

Dr Whiteford: I am grateful to the Minister. Does he agree that rape is a particularly serious offence that should be covered by extra-territorial jurisdiction, and that the deterrent aspect of extra-territorial jurisdiction will stop women from being taken out of the country to be violated?

Brandon Lewis: As I said, a range of areas, including murder, sexual offences against children, forced marriage and female genital mutilation, are already covered. The whole point is that we need to look carefully at what is covered by extra-territorial jurisdiction before we take a step further in that regard.

We have carefully considered this Bill and we support its key principles, which place a duty on the Government to take all reasonable steps to enable us to become compliant with the convention, and require the Government to lay before Parliament a report setting out the steps to be taken to enable us to ratify the convention and to make an annual report to Parliament, as the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan outlined in her opening speech, on the measures taken forward to enable the UK to ratify the convention, including any legislative proposals, and post-ratification any measures to ensure we remain compliant.

As I have made clear—and as my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) also made clear in her powerful speech—we are committed to ratifying the convention, and in principle therefore we welcome this Bill. However, there are some aspects of it which we will need to consider carefully. As Members will appreciate, the Istanbul convention applies to the whole of the UK, and it covers areas which are devolved, such as crime and criminal justice matters. I am therefore keen to ensure that we have appropriate time to consult more fully with the devolved Administrations on the measures in this Bill. In particular, the Government have concerns about the timescale put forward in clause 2, which would require the Government to lay a report that includes the date within four weeks of the Bill receiving Royal Assent by which we expect the UK to be able to ratify the convention. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan mentioned areas that could be considered for extra-territorial jurisdiction. Any new ETJ provision will require primary legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland as well as England and Wales, and I therefore have some reservations about the four-week timescale.

In addition, clause 3(1)(e) would require the Government to lay an annual report post-ratification which set out the UK's ongoing compliance with the convention. As Members may be aware, once we have ratified the convention we will be required to provide updates to the Council of Europe on compliance. This clause risks duplicating that existing requirement.

Seema Malhotra: Has the Minister been able to consider any alternative timetable that he might bring to this House if he disagrees with what is proposed in the Bill, and can he also commit in principle that Government time will be allocated to the ratification of the Istanbul convention?

Brandon Lewis: I hope my next words will put the hon. Lady's mind at rest. Both those points and any others Members may wish to raise are areas we will all want to consider more fully in consultation with the devolved Administrations and return to in Committee. However, at this stage I am pleased to say the Government support the Bill in principle.

12.17 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his words and will address them in some detail. I want to start, however, by congratulating the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on securing this private Member's Bill and on the hard work and graft she and her team have put into making sure this issue remains on the Government's agenda, maintains a high profile and is given the recognition in this country that it deserves. She said in her opening remarks that there had been 58,000 cases of domestic violence in Scotland in one year alone, and she went on to say that one in three women across the world will experience some form of abuse. That shows us why both this debate and the ratification of the Istanbul convention are so incredibly important.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) described her experience in her constituency and said that a police officer had told her that we are more unsafe in our own homes than we are on the streets. Again, that clearly illuminates the scale of the problem and the risks women are facing on a daily basis. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) spoke very emotionally of the work she did when running a refuge and made us all realise that Christmas is a very significant time for many families, when women are doing everything they possibly can to abate the violence they live with daily, so that their children can experience a safe Christmas, if not a joyful one.

I agreed with the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on one point: all of us in this House want true equality, but we get true equality by dealing with gendered violence when we see it, so that then we can go forward on an equal basis. Sadly, unless we ratify the convention and unless the Government keep doing their sterling work to eliminate violence against women and girls internationally, we will never get that to point.

It was particularly poignant to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) speak about her former role at the highly regarded charity Respect, where she worked on perpetrator programmes to prevent violence. We focus so much on the crime that we tend not to focus on prevention, which is where we fall short as a society. Unless we address the underlying motivations that lead to violence and coercive control within relationships, we will never eradicate the problem—no matter how good our legislation is.

My hon. Friend once said something that has always stuck with me: over the decades that she worked with offenders, she met only one or two where, had there

been appropriate intervention at an early age—whether at six, 16 or 26—they would not have become a perpetrator. It is this House's duty to ensure that perpetrator and early intervention programmes are at the core of all that we do.

Turning to the Minister's remarks, I welcome his saying that he will do much more work with the police. This is about not only about getting legislation here, but getting it applied on the ground to protect everyone and to ensure a safe society for all. I commend the police because they have moved seismically from not even really acknowledging in some cases that domestic violence could happen to actively getting involved in tackling it. I ask the Minister to ask the police to ensure that the children are safe when they attend domestic violence callouts because I still hear about cases in which that was not automatic.

I am pleased to be able to say from the outset that I support the Bill, and I am proud that the Leader of the Opposition has confirmed that a Labour Government would ratify the Istanbul convention. In a post-Brexit Britain, international conventions and their obligations will become more important than ever, providing us with an external perspective and the chance to learn from other countries. International human rights conventions create clear standards and minimum expectations that every citizen can rely on.

The elimination of violence against women and girls is an area of great importance to this House and one in which we should always be aspiring to achieve more. Ending violence against women and girls requires a radical, seismic, societal shift in power and attitudes, and this House must be instrumental in that work. We need to acknowledge that this is gendered violence carried out against women and girls because they are women and girls. It is this that makes the Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, otherwise known as the Istanbul convention, so important. It is an historic convention that provides an international legal framework for tackling violence against women and girls. It is the first of its kind, and I am proud that a Labour Government led the negotiations that brought it into existence. If implemented, the convention would provide a step change in how violence against women and girls is considered, tackled and prevented. It requires states to take comprehensive action, set out minimum standards and create legally binding measures to tackle and prevent violence against women and girls.

The Istanbul convention sets out the need to place victims at centre of all measures to tackle violence against women and girls. It highlights the role of civil society and calls on Governments to ensure that organisations have the resources and recognition required to do a good job. It sets out clearly what survivors of violence need, and can expect, from their Governments to live in safety. Importantly, it calls on states to prevent violence and to take steps to eradicate the prejudices, customs, traditions and all other practices that contribute to violence. The sheer strength of the convention serves only to highlight how disappointing it is that the Government have yet to ratify it. It has now been four years and six months since they signed it.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley said, the Government should be congratulated on their progress to end violence against women and girls.

[Sarah Champion]

The Home Office's strategy for ending violence against women and girls shows a demonstrable commitment to tackling these heinous crimes. I particularly welcome the fact that the Minister went into some detail about the work this Government are doing internationally, as it is a source of great pride to us all as a country, and they should be commended on it. But we do have so much further to go. As the Equality and Human Rights Commission has said, a legislative commitment to implement the Istanbul convention would drive forward important and necessary changes to the way the UK protects women and girls against violence. Without ratification, the convention is just a piece of paper. Without ratification, it affords no one rights, it creates no minimum standards and it is impossible to hold the Government to account.

The Government have said that they are committed to ratification, and I am grateful to the Minister for that, yet despite a co-ordinated and consistent campaign from Members from across the House, charities and the public, the Government appear to be dragging their feet. The Minister has said that the Government need to establish extra-territorial jurisdiction over a range of offences, as required in the convention, prior to ratification, but they have been saying that since July 2014. Both Home Office and Ministry of Justice Ministers have given the same excuse for their failure to ratify the convention for two and a half years. It is understandable that obstacles to ratification exist—they existed for all the signatory countries—yet our Government are yet to inform the House what exact legislative changes are needed. When will the Government set out the timetable for overcoming the obstacles to ratification? How many offences will need legislative change? As the Minister said, these changes will cut across devolved and reserved powers, so what conversations has he had with three devolved Parliaments and Assemblies? Will the Government commit today to setting out a timetable to achieve the cross-UK and cross-government changes needed to ratify the convention? We understand that changes to domestic law are required, but the Bill will hold the Government to their commitments.

I believe that two substantive areas of Government policy would require improvement to meet the provisions under the convention, although these things absolutely would not prevent ratification. First, there is an urgent need for statutory, age-appropriate, sex and relationships education in schools, to give children the knowledge, resilience and confidence they need to maintain healthy friendships and to recognise abusive or coercive behaviour. The convention contains explicit requests for education work to help prevent violence, and we can make huge steps towards fulfilling this requirement with statutory sex and relationships education. Secondly, the convention gives all survivors of domestic abuse the right to access the specialist support services, which they need to live in safety and rebuild their lives, yet refuge services see their funding shrink rapidly. Without a strategic approach to the delivery and funding of specialist domestic violence services across the country, this Government cannot claim to meet the provisions in the convention.

To conclude, the Bill would provide a duty to take all reasonable steps to overcome the final obstacles towards ratification. It would push the Government forward on

the reforms needed to meet provisions in the convention, such as sustainable funding for specialist refuges, and statutory sex and relationships education in schools. The Bill would provide us with the evidence we need that the Government truly are committed to ratification of the convention and a timetable to prove that they will do it. We need urgent action to tackle and prevent violence against women and girls, and the Bill would show that the Government are committed to that goal. I therefore urge all Members to support the Bill.

12.28 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): First, I wish to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) for bringing this private Member's Bill to the House. For me, tackling violence against women and girls is not a party political issue; it is a matter of basic humanity that unites us all across this House. We have all heard the statistics: one in three women globally is subjected to physical or sexual violence. It is appalling that 20 years after the UN declared violence against women and girls a global pandemic, almost half the women who were homicide victims around the world were killed by intimate partners or family members—just 6% of men suffered the same fate. Earlier this month, the femicide census powerfully set out how 936 women in this country have been killed by men in England and Wales in the past six years—that is three women every week for six years. We owe it to those 936 women to do all we can to tackle violence against women, whether it occurs in our constituency, our county, our country or in the wider world.

I was asked to attend this debate by several constituents, including Kirstie Stage who is in her lower sixth year at a school just outside my constituency. She said to me that

“our failure to ratify the Istanbul convention, which we helped to draft, is embarrassing.”

We all appreciate the fact that legal complexities take time to unpick. I am glad that the Minister has been able to clarify what progress has been made and to indicate a pathway on how the remaining issues will be resolved.

I thought long and hard before making a contribution today, because we have heard some very powerful speeches in recent weeks from people with direct personal experience who are now front-line campaigners. It is important that MPs such as me—white middle-class males—also contribute. Violence against women and girls is an issue that we should all take very seriously, and it is important to our constituents that we do so. It should not be just left to females and campaigners to make the case, because these crimes are largely committed by men, and we as men must challenge those men. This is not just a women's issue or a gender issue, but a human dignity issue that should exercise all our society.

As constituency MPs, we all see the human impact of domestic violence—how it ruins families, leads to long-term health problems and leaves lasting emotional impacts. We also see the importance of local front-line services in providing safe spaces where women can start to rebuild their lives. I pay tribute to the Salisbury women's refuge and all its staff for the outstanding work they have done over the past 32 years.

When I visited last July I was reminded that refuges are unique services. When other support is not accessible or appropriate in a crisis of such sensitivity, they provide a much-needed safe breathing space. In the Salisbury refuge, staff work around the clock, 365 days a year, to help women, and often their small children, to live independently and to access the support they need. It is more than just a safe building; it provides counselling and emotional support. It also provides budgeting assistance and access to educational programmes. As the manager, Sue Cox, said on our local radio Spire FM, it is about making sure that

“by the time they leave, everything’s on top form.”

Such services are truly vital, and it is therefore extremely welcome that the Government have pledged £80 million in funding to protect them and that the Minister has pledged to ensure that this resourcing remains under review. I hope that, if necessary, further resources will be provided in the future.

Protecting victims is a key plank of the Istanbul convention and includes accessible shelters, 24/7 telephone helplines and crisis centres. Not every country has the same infrastructure and wealth of non-governmental organisation expertise that we do. In many places, such things remain aspirational. When we ratify the convention, we will be sending a clear signal that we want to see those services extended, so that they can work effectively not just in our constituencies but everywhere around the world.

As the Bill rightly notes, this is not an issue that can be resolved by one individual agency. The convention calls for

“concerted action by many different actors”,

and for the Government to ensure that we have

“comprehensive and co-ordinated policies involving government agencies, NGOs as well as national, regional and local parliaments.”

It is important to consider how we can work across constituency boundaries at a national level. Since 2010, this Government have made preventing violence against women and girls and supporting survivors a key priority. I pay tribute to our Prime Minister for her commitment to keeping this issue at the top of the agenda and to ensuring that the national strategy did not fall by the wayside.

I welcome the significant new legislation that has been introduced to tackle stalking, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and revenge pornography. Crucially, a new domestic abuse offence ensures that coercive or controlling behaviour can be punished appropriately. The speed at which these changes have been made demonstrates the Government’s serious commitment to ensuring that professionals have all the right tools at their disposal. This is reinforced by the fact that in 2014-15 we saw total prosecutions for violence against women and girls offences reach the highest levels ever recorded. However, sometimes the legal tools are not enough. National action is also needed to address the root causes of inequality and discrimination and to support programmes that prevent domestic violence from happening in the first place. As the Prime Minister wrote in the foreword to the Government strategy,

“From health providers, to law enforcement, to employers and friends and family we all need to play our part.”

Every interaction must be treated as an opportunity to intervene. The femicide report talks about a girl who was just 17 years old telling her family she knew that one day her ex-partner would kill her, and he did. As MPs, we have to ask how such critical failures can occur, and what more we can do to stop them in future. That will require not only a shift in attitudes, but an understanding of the value of preventive and educational programmes.

In my county, the Swindon and Wiltshire police and crime commissioner, Angus Macpherson, recognised the value of such approaches through innovation funding. Splitz is one such charity that was commissioned in Wiltshire. It used a grant of £35,000 to develop a project working directly with young people on what a respectful relationship was. At the start of the project, about 60% of young people recognised the different forms of domestic violence, which increased to 93% at the end of the project. If just 10% of the audience of those workshops were better able to identify the signs of abusive relationships early on, financial savings could be in excess of £5.6 million, to say nothing of the human and emotional cost to victims and families that would be avoided. I hope that the Government’s new £15 million three-year transformation fund will recognise the long-term benefit and value of such and similar preventive measures.

As I have said, the Istanbul convention is about more than just the UK, and part of what we are here to debate today is the global dimension of violence against women and girls. On average, just over a third of women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence at some point in their lives. In some countries, this figure increases to 70%. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of suffering around this issue. The world is now more uncertain, with constantly changing threats, and we so often feel powerless to alleviate the devastating impact of war and internal conflict that we have seen all too recently in places such as Aleppo. It is therefore heartening to be reminded that the UK has played such a leading role in promoting international action to tackle violence against women and girls wherever it occurs. We can take heart from the progress that has been made in recent years and the Government’s efforts to move this issue up the international agenda.

For instance, the momentum generated by the 2014 girl summit demonstrates how significant UK leadership can be in prompting change. Over 490 signatories were secured for the girl summit charter on ending female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage. Following the summit, 18 Governments in Africa, the middle east and south Asia have made commitments to end these practices. National summits in Brazil, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nepal and Zambia show the model was successful in spurring national politicians and civil society to action. It is important that we continue to support these initiatives to ensure that commitments made on paper are translated into practical action on the ground.

I wish to highlight two other areas where the UK is pioneering new approaches and leading the way globally. The first is in tackling human trafficking. Adult women account for almost half of all human trafficking victims globally, and women and girls together account for about 70%. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 has made the UK a global leader, and we must now use that position to work internationally to achieve the UN target to eradicate this practice by 2030.

[John Glen]

Preventing sexual violence in conflict is the second area where the UK has made substantial progress. Following the global summit held in London in June 2014, the UK has committed over £30 million to support projects in Bosnia, Iraq, Kosovo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and others. The UK's team of experts have been deployed more than 80 times overseas, where they provide training on how to document and prosecute crimes of sexual violence, how to support survivors and how to protect civilians from human rights violations.

The Department for International Development has galvanised the international community and provided significant financial resources to tackle violence against women and girls. It now has 23 major programmes with a total budget of £184 million. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact reviewed this work earlier this year and, I am pleased to say, gave it its highest rating—something we should all be extremely proud of in this House.

As a man, I might say that I wished to speak today because I am a husband, a brother and a father, but I wish to contribute simply as a human being, moved to speak by the existence of this abhorrent practice, which shames our common humanity. These are global problems that will need different international solutions in different jurisdictions.

I pay tribute to the Government and their predecessor for the decisive leadership they have shown on many of these matters. It is important that we continue to build on their landmark achievements. The Istanbul convention offers us a clear opportunity to demonstrate once again our commitment to upholding the rights of women and girls, in this country and way beyond our borders. I am confident the Government recognise this opportunity and will act as soon as possible.

I commend the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan once again for her leadership in bringing this Bill before the House today, and I will be supporting it in the future.

12.41 pm

Michelle Thomson (Edinburgh West) (Ind): I aim to be fairly brief today. I commend and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) for bringing the Bill forward. She spoke most eloquently.

I want briefly to reference the speech I made last week and to give some thanks, first, to the Speaker's Office and, you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for being very supportive of me, and to my friend and colleague, the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin), who has been a great support to me.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I am undeserving of any praise, but I want to say that the hon. Lady inspired my wife, three days ago, to talk for the first time of her sexual abuse at the age of only six years. It is a great tribute to the hon. Lady that she has done so much for so many people. [*Applause.*]

Michelle Thomson: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for that. But, of course, I made my position very clear: it was not about this individual here; it was about women more widely, and indeed men, who have also

been affected by sexual or physical violence. I spent most of last weekend personally answering the literally hundreds of emails I got, and it was truly humbling, because people, for the first time, were writing their own stories and sharing their own stories. One phrase jumped out at me. Somebody said that they recognised that "black burden that shadows a survivor's back." We need to keep that at the forefront of our minds at all times.

That is why we have debates about this issue—about legislation and so on. It is about our driving need for change and leadership, and I commend the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) for offering his perspective on that. It is leadership and the driving need for change that we must keep at the forefront of our minds all the time.

I again challenge the Minister that while warm words about a spirit of intent are incredibly welcome, we are looking for hard, specific dates by which something will be done, because we need to send a message that resonates with the wider world that these things are unacceptable. Our culture, in many areas of the UK, is completely unacceptable. If there is one thing I learned last weekend from reading all these emails, it was the extent to which these stories go unheard.

Again, I say thank you to everybody who has supported me—I wanted to put that officially on the record. Finally, I thank all those agencies that—day in, day out, week in, week out, month in, month out—give their support to people who are in the most difficult circumstances.

12.44 pm

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) and congratulate her on introducing this debate. I am pleased to support this Bill and pleased that the Government will support it as well. That is not because I think that the Government are insufficiently committed to this agenda but because I think that our ratifying the convention in due course will set an example to other countries. This Government have done an enormous amount in the past few years to combat violence against women and children, both domestically and abroad. I was pleased to hear even the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) say that the Government had done a great deal in this area. As one of the Government's toughest opponents, praise from her means that we probably are not doing too badly. However, that does not mean that we should be in any way complacent about the work we do on tackling violence abroad or domestically.

Every week, two women are murdered by their partner or ex-partner, one of whom last year was sadly my constituent, Kelly Pearce. Whenever I am asked by a journalist or a member of the public whether I fear for my own safety after the horrendous murder of Jo Cox, I always reply that statistically I am still more at risk, as a woman, from a partner or an ex-partner. That is a fact that we cannot stress enough. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) was very eloquent about the need for gender balance and equality, but I think that even he will recognise from experience of sexual violence cases as a constituency MP that domestic abuse puts an enormous strain on our police, our social

services, and our health system, as well hurting our economy. Above all, it is damaging to the lives of the women affected and, in turn, their children. If we look purely at the economic and social effects of this crime, we see that there is an argument for the Government to be doing much more to tackle it and its wider social costs.

Over the past 12 months, I have taken part in the excellent police force parliamentary scheme, which has been a real eye-opener as I have seen the incredible work that Essex police do day to day. I have worked with various departments, including Operation Juno, which is part of Essex police's domestic violence unit. Essex police handle more than 90 domestic abuse calls every day, but Essex County Council suggests that the real picture of domestic abuse is likely to be closer to 125,000 incidents a year, the majority of which, of course, are not reported to anyone. Unfortunately, while we have made significant inroads into breaking down stigma attached to domestic violence, stigma still exists. I am therefore very pleased that the Juno teams are investigating every single allegation of domestic violence brought to them and doing incredibly well in successfully identifying the perpetrators. That has led to a huge increase in the number of people being charged for domestic violence and sexual abuse.

I have no doubt that much of this progress is due to the legislative changes that we have introduced in this House, whether on coercive control, stalking, Clare's law, or revenge pornography. It is also due to the increasing resources that Essex police and other services are committing to this area. Essex police have invested significantly in media awareness campaigns. They have created specialist units and incorporated domestic abuse into the force's performance framework. There has also been investment in training and communications so that officers and support staff are aware of their responsibilities in protecting vulnerable victims and survivors; they have even created a manual. However, they acknowledge that they cannot end domestic abuse in Essex solely by themselves, and they are therefore working very closely with other organisations, including Essex County Council, on some fantastic awareness campaigns.

I would like to draw Members' attention to the Change project, which is being run jointly by Essex County Council, Essex police, Thurrock Council, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, and the NHS. It is a social media campaign aimed at encouraging abusers to reflect on their behaviour. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley will be pleased to know that there are many examples in the campaign of women abusers being asked to reflect on their abuse towards male and female victims, so it is very gender-balanced. It is a superb campaign that is having real results, and I commend it.

We should all be pleased that more victims are coming forward to report domestic violence. The higher numbers in that regard should not be seen as a sign of failure but a sign that we are getting the message across and that the way in which the police are operating means that more and more people are willing to come forward.

Domestic abuse in relation to the workplace remains a serious problem. About 75% of people who endure domestic violence are also targeted while at work. It might be harassment by phone, text, stalking outside the workplace, or even turning up there. Domestic violence also sometimes makes it difficult for employees

to get to work, perhaps due to injuries that they want to hide or the perpetrator's having taken their car keys, money or work documents. Workplaces need to understand better the domestic abuse problems that their staff could be suffering, making them unable to fulfil their work duties. Too often, we hear of victims of domestic abuse losing their jobs because that is not understood or recognised at work, which leaves them even more vulnerable and isolated. Members may be interested to know that as a result of an initiative by Elizabeth Filkin the House of Commons is running a joint programme with the organisations Inclusive Employers and the Corporate Alliance Against Domestic Violence to raise awareness among employers of how to tackle domestic abuse in the workplace.

I have spoken as fast as possible because I know that we are short of time. Let me end by saying that I know the Government are serious about tackling this problem. I hope that their continued commitment to doing so, and the changes that we are making, are rapidly making life better for women who suffer domestic abuse, and will ensure that they report it more confidently in future.

12.50 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on introducing this tremendously important Bill. I want to focus on the issue of domestic violence in relation to women with disabilities.

The comprehensive nature of the Istanbul convention is welcome. The convention requires states to take all necessary measures to protect all victims from any further acts of violence, which means properly funded support through refuges, health and social care, legal and psychological counselling, financial assistance, housing, education, training, and assistance in finding employment. In cases of domestic violence, access to specialist services is vital, but according to the charity Women's Aid there has been a reduction of more than 200 in the number of bed spaces in refuges in England over the past four years. The current estimate is 3,639, but the estimated capacity requirement is at least 5,000. The charity also reports that local authority commissioners frequently favour non-specialist, generic providers who may not give survivors the expert support that they need.

The need for specialist services is particularly acute in the case of disabled women, who are, by definition, more vulnerable and may face greater challenges in seeking help. It has been estimated that they are twice as likely to experience domestic violence as non-disabled women, which is a shocking statistic. Disabled women are also likely to experience abuse over a longer period and to suffer more severe injuries as a result of the violence, often because of the difficulty of escaping and finding alternative accommodation. It is likely that both the overall rates of domestic abuse and the rates of domestic abuse experienced by disabled people are much higher than reported. Generally, studies have shown that the risk factors are lower educational attainment, unemployment and poverty, but we also know that domestic abuse is suffered by people of all genders and classes.

Domestic violence is caused by one person's desire to exert power and control over a partner. Disabled people are likely to be more physically vulnerable to abuse, and

[Margaret Greenwood]

less able to protect themselves. Abusers can include carers, whether they are partners, family members or paid carers, and the disability or impairment is often exploited by the abuser. Domestic abuse of a disabled person can take specific forms. For instance, a partner may withhold vital care, medication or food, or remove or damage equipment such as sensory or mobility aids in order to limit the person's independence. If someone has a visual impairment or mobility problems, a partner may create obstacles around the home. The abuser may claim disability benefits on the person's behalf, and then limit her access to funds. The abuser may also use her disability to criticise or humiliate her, or threaten to tell social services that she is not fit to live alone.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The hon. Lady has raised a crucial point about people controlling finances. Members who support the Bill will be specifically supporting disabled women who require protection from the social and economic impact of domestic abuse.

Margaret Greenwood: That is indeed an important issue.

It can be much more difficult for those who are disabled to communicate what they are suffering, and also to escape from their abusers. People with severe sensory, cognitive or communication impairments or mental health issues may have particular difficulty in communicating that they have been abused. Disabled people may be more socially isolated as a result of their disabilities, and more dependent on their partners or other carers. That, of course, often includes older people. When a partner is her carer, a disabled woman may have fewer chances to attend medical or other appointments alone, and may therefore have fewer opportunities to tell someone in confidence about the abuse. The Government have allocated funding for early intervention in cases of domestic abuse, but in the case of disabled people it is important to recognise that it may be especially difficult for someone to come forward and report abuse for practical reasons, or for the abuse to come to light at an early stage.

Some disabled women may feel particularly nervous about leaving their partner if they have had special adaptations made to their home. They may also worry about who will care for them if they move away, or about a change to their care package in a new area that could leave them with less support. Women with disabled children may also be hesitant in seeking help, because of concerns about the child's healthcare and the emotional impact that leaving their home may have on the child.

That is why it is important that funding is not cut for domestic refuges by capping local housing allowances for people who use them. After leaving refuge providers in great uncertainty while carrying out a prolonged review, the Government have at last announced that refuges will be exempt from the local housing allowance cap on housing benefit rates for those in social housing until 2019, when the new funding model will be introduced. I urge the Government to work closely with specialist providers such as Refuge and Women's Aid to design the system that will be introduced after 2019; to give particular attention to the needs of disabled women; and to ratify the Istanbul convention.

12.55 pm

Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) for promoting this private Member's Bill. I am pleased to say that I shall support it. I also commend the Home Office's work, not least because, when the Prime Minister was Home Secretary, every time I raised specific issues to do with domestic violence, especially relating to LGBT and orthodox religious groups, I found not only that she was on the button, but that she drove through significant change. I also commend my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, whose Department has been at the forefront globally of tackling the issues faced by women and girls, especially violence against them. Ratifying the convention will allow us to tackle a major problem and social issue across the whole world.

I am the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS. HIV-AIDS remains the biggest killer of women and girls of reproduction age, yet we often do not talk about the consequences of sexual violence against women. The taboo of sexual abuse against women has within it a hidden taboo, namely the HIV infection caused by the forced sexual violence of rape or coercion. The stigma and silence associated with that can compound the desire for secrecy.

I want to focus on that particular issue, because although sexual violence is vastly underreported as an HIV risk, it is an important risk that we need to talk about. Sexual violence and coercion may increase susceptibility to HIV, in so far as non-consensual sex is associated with increased risk through vaginal and anal trauma. I make no apology for using rather crude and what some people might call distasteful references to vaginal and anal penetration. I say it for effect, because too often we use euphemisms in this place when actually we forget about the real trauma, pain and suffering involved.

The incidence and prevalence of sexual violence, including mass rape, increases the likelihood of sexually transmitted infections and HIV. It may require only a very small internal or external genital injury to facilitate transmission. It is important that we call the issue out for what it is. We are not talking about a slap or something that is semi-glorified in soaps. This is something that has to be tackled in detail—gruesome detail—if we are genuinely to understand the life-changing and irreversible impact on the women affected by sexual violence.

If it is a major risk, we have to tack on to that the fact that rape is a weapon of war. Too often in this place we talk about the jets and the bombs, but we forget to talk about one of the biggest weapons of war that is used across the globe, and that is rape. It is happening not just in war zones; the decreased stability in unstable regions and villages contributes to a higher prevalence of opportunistic sexual violence. Given the high levels of sexual violence occurring in conflict-affected countries, we have to acknowledge that HIV is an unspoken impact of that sexual violence.

A growing body of evidence suggests that, even when the war is over, sexual violence and its ramifications do not disappear. Even when peace agreements have been signed, sexual violence continues, because rape is not

just a weapon of war. When women seek to put food on the table or seek safe passage from a village under bombardment, they may have to trade their body to get food and clothing, or to get to a place of safety, and that is rape in every sense of the word. I must tell the House that that violence is under-reported and we should call it out.

I realise that we are short of time, and other hon. Members want to speak, but I wanted to talk about HIV. In many such countries, a woman who is raped and violated suffers from stigma, and a raped and violated woman who is HIV-positive is even more isolated and stigmatised. Such women are often thrown out by and isolated from not just their family, but their villages and communities. If we are to break the cycle of sexual violence and HIV infection, we must ratify the convention, and we must send the message today that we want that to be done quickly.

1.1 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to be able to contribute to this debate on the ratification of the Istanbul convention. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on introducing the Bill. Naturally, I was disappointed not to be successful in the ballot for private Members' Bills, but I am delighted that she has used her success as an opportunity to raise this extremely important issue. I have been campaigning on this cause since I was elected.

Women's Aid, the White Ribbon Campaign, Zero Tolerance and many other organisations have all played an important part in this cause, and we owe them our thanks. I want to pay particular attention to IC Change. If I was allowed to say that Becca, Rachel and Robyn are in the Gallery today to watch the proceedings, I would say so, but I am not allowed to, so I won't. I thank them and other volunteers from IC Change who have worked extremely hard. They have held a series of lobby sessions and pestered every Member of the House to ensure that they are aware of the convention and of the positive effect that its ratification would have on tackling violence against women.

Tackling violence against women and girls is not a party political issue. As long as violence against women and girls occurs in our society, we should be united in our pursuit of ending that violence. We need to recognise that domestic abuse is deep-rooted in the societal inequality between men and women, and that women are far more likely to experience domestic abuse.

That brings me on to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). I rarely agree with him, and in fact, I sometimes question whether I am from the same species as him. He brought up the subject of violence perpetrated on men. All violence is shameful, but the vast majority of cases of violence against men are perpetrated by men, which is the point of today's proceedings. His attitude is not shared by as many people outside this Chamber as he thinks.

Like every decent-minded person, I want to live in a world where no one has to live with the fear of violence hanging over them. It sickens me that so many women live in a house where violence is the norm. Violence against women and girls happens primarily at home and is largely hidden.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) talked about women's refuge services. As an ambassador for Inverness Women's Aid, I have seen the great work that refuges do to help women to get back on track. Does my hon. Friend agree that refuges throughout the UK should be protected in the way that was described earlier?

Gavin Newlands: Absolutely. I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. We have heard many instances of the support that refuges offer. I am pleased to say that I support my local refuges. In fact, a local charity is building a new refuge at Jubilee House in Renfrewshire. My hon. Friend's point is well made.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): As we are approaching the Christmas period, will my hon. Friend recognise that it is at Christmas time that most domestic violence happens in the home? Can we therefore wish all women and young girls who are watching this debate a very safe Christmas, and wish all the refuges all the support they need to deal with what we know is likely to happen over this time?

Gavin Newlands: Absolutely; my hon. Friend makes a fantastic point. Before Christmas last year, I highlighted the increased incidence of abuse at Christmas time. I completely agree with what she said.

As we have heard, the stark reality is that a third of women will face violence in their lifetime. That is the reality that has motivated me in working towards ending the violent, sexual and psychological abuse that too many women still face.

The Istanbul convention aims to tackle violence against women on a number of fronts and covers such areas as prevention, protection, support, monitoring and persecution. Crucially, it establishes a link between achieving equality between men and women and eradicating violence against women. As long as the structural and systemic inequalities of power and the objectification of women persist, the abuse will continue.

That is why I am particularly keen on article 14, which addresses the importance of education. It states that all Governments should ensure that there is

"teaching material on issues such as equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity".

I am passionate about this point and believe that it provides an ideal opportunity to introduce a coherent, structured and consistent prevention programme in our schools. That is the missing link in the gender-based violence chain in the UK.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I am listening intently to the hon. Gentleman's excellent speech. Does he agree that the key problem is men—obviously, it is men perpetrating the violence—and that there is a responsibility on all of us as men, as well as on women, to talk to other men about how it is completely unacceptable to use violence and abuse against women? We must step up to the plate and speak out by becoming ambassadors for White Ribbon and other organisations. We must

[Geraint Davies]

preach to the unconverted and ignorant men in our land and across the world who continue to perpetrate this unnecessary violence.

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was addressing that point to the hon. Member for Shipley. He was right to mention White Ribbon. One way to do what he has described is to make the White Ribbon pledge, and I urge all Members of the House to do so.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on bringing forward the Bill. Does he agree that the Government need to ratify the convention as soon as possible to prevent further incidents of abuse against women like the one that took place against a constituent of mine two weeks ago, leaving her on a life-support machine?

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more. That is a shameful story. The important thing about the Bill is that it forces the Government to take the action that they have promised to take at some point, but have not found the energy to take. I will come on to that point in a moment.

I was talking about article 14 and education. The article also sets out how the principles of the convention should be embedded in more informal education facilities such as sports clubs, cultural centres and leisure facilities. The White Ribbon campaign, which stresses the positive role men can play in ending gender-based violence, is working hard and delivering training sessions on that very subject. It uses male ambassadors to act as role models for young boys. If we can eliminate sexist behaviour at an early age and engender a deeper sense of respect in boys, I believe we can prevent some of them from turning to this devastating gender-based violence later in life.

The UK Government signed up to the Istanbul convention, but their ratification of it is long overdue. It is just under a year since I first wrote to the then Home Secretary and current Prime Minister, urging her to ratify the convention. The letter, which was co-signed by more than 10 organisations, urged the Government to introduce a series of preventive policies that would allow us to take effective action against the violence that one in three women face in their lifetime. Unfortunately, I have to say that I received a fairly weak response from the then Home Secretary. I have continued to receive disappointing responses from the Government after every call I have made on this issue.

The Government signed up to the convention in 2012. Since then, 22 countries have ratified the convention, while the UK has been left behind. The average time taken for ratification has been just over two years. The UK has so far taken four years and six months. That delay alone should shame the Government into action to ensure that the convention is ratified as soon as possible.

Violence against women is not a women's issue. As the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) said, it is a societal issue. It is the responsibility of men to ensure that women and girls do not have to face violence.

The White Ribbon all-party parliamentary group, which I co-chair, stresses the positive role men can play by helping to challenge the sexist attitudes and behaviours that far too many men still exhibit. The White Ribbon campaign also actively supports the convention, as I have said.

This House and wider society uniting against the violence that affects too many women is extremely important. Those in a violent relationship deserve to have us work together in our pursuit to end that violence. We should not forget the power of this place. Passing this Bill will send a strong message to the thousands of women and girls who have experienced domestic abuse that they are not alone and that we stand with them. It will also say to the perpetrators of domestic, sexual and psychological abuse that that violence is completely unacceptable and that they will be held to account. Let us unite around the Bill and play our part in changing history for the better for women and girls.

1.11 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Before I became a Member of Parliament one thing I did as a volunteer was work in a homeless outreach service, spending time, usually late at night, finding people who were going to be sleeping rough that night and seeing whether we could help get them into some kind of shelter or safe place to spend the night. On one of my most memorable nights doing that, I met a lady sleeping rough on the steps of a church in Brixton. As we took her to a shelter, I asked her about her circumstances. She told me that she was married but had fled her home that night because she was frightened of staying there; because of what her partner might do to her she was frightened for her life. She felt safer sleeping rough on the steps of a closed church in a dark and frightening park in Brixton than spending a night at home under her own roof. The fact that someone could feel safer sleeping rough than in the same house or flat as their partner brought home forcefully to me the enormous and very present threat that violence from their partner is in someone's life.

That was just one example of what we have been talking about today, the day-in, day-out abuse of women in their homes—in what should be a safe place. That abuse also affects men and children, but we know that it predominantly affects women and girls, as they make up two thirds of the victims. We are therefore rightly focusing on what can be done to help that sector of society, although we are not overlooking the fact that we should also be doing something for men under threat of violence as well, and it is right that that has been brought up in this debate.

Other Members have talked about the enormous scale of this violence in our society. I am short of time, so will not reiterate the figures of more than 1 million women subjected to domestic abuse every year in the UK. But I want to put on the record that I welcome this debate, and congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on bringing the Bill forward and on all the work she has put in and support she has garnered. It is so important to be talking about this issue here in the UK, in Europe and the world, to shift some of the cultural norms that so often underpin domestic violence and try to change the childhood

experiences that can lead to someone thinking, as an adult, that the way to solve a problem is through violence rather than any other means.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady talks about scale. I have to say that since being elected I have been very shocked at the scale and severity of some of the cases that have come to me, including that of a constituent whose child was murdered by her partner and who had to change her name and move a number of times. Does the hon. Lady agree that refuges and women's aid organisations, such as my one in West Lothian, need the Bill, to give them the legislative framework, the power and the resources to continue to do their work and up the ante?

Helen Whately: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I will be supporting the Bill. On the importance of local refuges and services, I would like to mention one in my own constituency, Swale Action to End Domestic Abuse, which provides one-stop shops and drop-ins for people affected by or suffering from domestic abuse, and its success in reducing levels of repeat domestic abuse incidents in the area. Sadly, that is reducing the number of repeat incidents rather than preventing them in the first place, but it is a step forward.

We heard today a paradoxical point about progress. The increase in the levels of reporting of domestic abuse and of convictions might not seem like a good thing, but paradoxically it is a good thing and a sign of progress. *[Interruption.]* I think I might have run out of time, so I will sit down.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

The House divided: Ayes 133, Noes 2.

Division No. 113]

[1.16 pm

AYES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	Crawley, Angela
Alexander, Heidi	Creasy, Stella
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Arkless, Richard	Davies, David T. C.
Ashworth, Jonathan	Davies, Geraint
Atkins, Victoria	Day, Martyn
Barclay, Stephen	Debbonaire, Thangam
Bardell, Hannah	Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Black, Mhairi	Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Blackford, Ian	Durkan, Mark
Blackman, Kirsty	Efford, Clive
Blackwood, Nicola	Ellison, Jane
Bone, Mr Peter	Eustice, George
Brennan, Kevin	Ferrier, Margaret
Brock, Deidre	Field, rh Frank
Brokenshire, rh James	Foxcroft, Vicky
Brown, Alan	Freer, Mike
Buck, Ms Karen	Gapes, Mike
Buckland, Robert	Gardiner, Barry
Butler, Dawn	Gethins, Stephen
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Glen, John
Champion, Sarah	Glindon, Mary
Cherry, Joanna	Godsiff, Mr Roger
Churchill, Jo	Grady, Patrick
Clwyd, rh Ann	Greenwood, Margaret
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Hands, rh Greg
Cowan, Ronnie	Harris, Carolyn

Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, Helen
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hendry, Drew
Hinds, Damian
Hosie, Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kerr, Calum
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Chris
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Malhotra, Seema
Mathias, Dr Tania
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, rh John
McGarry, Natalie
McLaughlin, Anne
Milton, rh Anne
Monaghan, Carol
Morton, Wendy
Mullin, Roger
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
Norman, Jesse
Olney, Sarah
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Pawsey, Mark
Pearce, Teresa
Penning, rh Mike
Pennycook, Matthew

Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sharma, Alok
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheppard, Tommy
Siddiq, Tulip
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Cat
Spencer, Mark
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stuart, Graham
Thewliss, Alison
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Turner, Karl
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Mr Robin
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:
Marion Fellows and
Mr Alan Campbell

NOES

Chope, Mr Christopher
Hollobone, Mr Philip

Tellers for the Noes:
Philip Davies and
Mr David Nuttall

Question accordingly agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): We now—*[Interruption.]* Order. There is absolutely no need to clap. There might be a need for Members to express their great pleasure on something that has happened about which they are joyful—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Yes, that is the way to do it.

Question put accordingly, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 135, Noes 2.

Division No. 114]

[1.29 pm

AYES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	Barclay, Stephen
Alexander, Heidi	Bardell, Hannah
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Black, Mhairi
Arkless, Richard	Blackford, Ian
Ashworth, Jonathan	Blackman, Kirsty
Atkins, Victoria	Blackwood, Nicola

Bone, Mr Peter
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Brown, Alan
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Buckland, Robert
 Butler, Dawn
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Champion, Sarah
 Cherry, Joanna
 Churchill, Jo
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela
 Creasy, Stella
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Donaldson, Stuart Blair
 Durkan, Mark
 Efford, Clive
 Ellison, Jane
 Eustice, George
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Field, rh Frank
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Freer, Mike
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gethins, Stephen
 Glen, John
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Grady, Patrick
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Hall, Luke
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harris, Carolyn
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, Helen
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Hendry, Drew
 Hinds, Damian
 Hosie, Stewart
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Andrew

Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kerr, Calum
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Law, Chris
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 McCaig, Callum
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
 McDonnell, rh John
 McGarry, Natalie
 McLaughlin, Anne
 Milton, rh Anne
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullin, Roger
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 Norman, Jesse
 Olney, Sarah
 Osamor, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Paterson, Steven
 Pawsey, Mark
 Pearce, Teresa
 Penning, rh Mike
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pound, Stephen
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Rayner, Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Robertson, rh Angus
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Sharma, Alok
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Cat
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stuart, Graham
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomson, Michelle

Thornberry, Emily
 Turner, Karl
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Watson, Mr Tom
 Weir, Mike
 West, Catherine
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen

Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Wilson, Corri
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wishart, Pete
 Wragg, William

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Owen Thompson and
 Mr Alan Campbell

NOES

Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Nuttall, Mr David

Tellers for the Noes:
 Philip Davies and
 Mr Christopher Chope

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): May I say how delighted I am to see Members waving their Order Papers instead of putting their hands together? Progress.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have a unique procedural point—certainly I have never come across it since I have been in Parliament. On 7 December, the House passed by 448 votes to 75 an Opposition motion that includes the private Member's Bill that I am to present today. Unfortunately, because of the length of the first debate, we will not reach my Bill. However, we have had seven hours of debate on an Opposition day, so when I move the motion at 2.30, would it be appropriate for nobody to object to it, because the House has already debated the exact motion for seven hours? Is that how it works?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Well, I fully understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. In fact, it might possibly be a genuine point of order, but he knows that, regardless of the length of time a matter has been debated in this House, if the House decides that it wishes to support a motion or a question and no one opposes it, then of course it will pass without opposition. However, if even one person opposes the Bill—he knows this very well—I will be obliged to require further consideration. I am grateful to him for raising that unusual point, whether or not it is a point of order.

Double Taxation Treaties (Developing Countries) Bill

Second Reading

1.42 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I wish to start by quoting a statement from the UK Government with which I agree 100%—[*Interruption*]—strange as that may seem. The UK Government's aid strategy states:

“International development is about much more than just aid.

I am bringing this Bill forward, because international development is about much more than just aid.

I became interested in these types of issues many years ago when I first started doing international work. My first such job was for the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. Over the years, I have worked on 26 international assignments that have involved countries in the developing world. I have worked in places that I did not even know existed before I was asked to accept a contract—being a Scotsman I accepted the contract and then looked up the place on the map. I have been in places such as the Marshall Islands, in the middle of the Pacific ocean, and in the middle east, in places such as Oman and Yemen—where at one stage I thought I was being kidnapped—but most of my time and 16 of my assignments have been in Africa. On my last assignment before joining this House, I was funded by the Norwegian Government to evaluate the Benguela Current Commission's research unit, which was researching the Benguela current as it ran up South Africa, Namibia and Angola.

I have had a long interest in development matters. I have never been funded by a charitable body, always by bilateral Government arrangements or sometimes at the request of the United Nations or the World Bank, as well as on a couple of occasions by the Asian Development Bank. One thing that struck me in my early days doing such work was that although I believe passionately in aid and funding and that the Government have done absolutely the right thing by being at the forefront of paying an agreed percentage of GDP to the developing world, that will never be enough to address the needs of some of the poorest countries in this world. Indeed, there is great danger in seeing international development solely as a function of aid.

Let me tell the House one thing. There have been estimates that if somehow the world was able to stop all the tax evasion and tax avoidance in the continent of Africa, and to clean up the system, including in the small areas I am considering, the tax that could be earned in Africa would be far greater than the entire international aid that is fed into Africa. My challenge today is to people who say that they do not like international aid in the sense of our sending money for good purposes to the developing world.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I wonder whether my hon. Friend has anyone in mind when he says that.

Roger Mullin: Funnily enough, I have more than one person in mind. If we were to scour this House I might well find one or two who take that position, but I do not think that today is a day to be mean-spirited about anyone.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The hon. Gentleman should not invite a voice-activated intervention.

Roger Mullin: I can tell this is going incredibly well already.

One thing I wanted to say at the beginning of my speech was that, being who I am, I could have been very disappointed in the raffle, but here I am with 45 minutes or thereabouts to discuss my private Member's Bill. Most Members would be keen to get a full hearing and a vote, but I know that that is not going to happen with this Bill. However, I could not be prouder than to have my Bill considered following the one that this House has just chosen to accept. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] I am sure that there are many people who feel the same.

I come back to my experiences in different parts of the developing world. In the agencies I worked with over the years, I came across many people who, although they were devoted to helping alleviate poverty and engage in capacity building and believed in the need for aid—many had worked in this field for many years, including a great friend of mine from Lossiemouth called David Thomson, who has worked in more than 60 countries—they also passionately believed that we would never cure the problem until we liberated those countries so that they could better take care of their own resources.

What do we know about international taxation treaties or double taxation treaties? They are set up for firms, such as UK firms, that operate in a developing country but are headquartered in the UK. They are often called double taxation treaties because nobody wants a company to be taxed twice on the money it earns. So these treaties were set up—in many cases, many years ago—to try to prevent double taxation.

However, over the past 10 to 15 years, what we have seen developing are not treaties that allow companies to be charged in just one place, but treaties that are part of an arrangement that allows too many international and multinational corporations to avoid paying tax in any country. We want to find ways in which we can assist countries in the developing world to take responsibility—to take care of their own taxation system and to invest taxes in their own society as they see fit, thereby building a capability that means they are no longer dependent on traditional aid.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward the Bill. Does he agree that one country that could really benefit from being able to mobilise its own domestic resources through taxation is Malawi? He spoke about treaties being agreed some time ago. The treaty currently in place between the United Kingdom and Malawi is in fact between the United Kingdom and the colony of Nyasaland, because it was signed before the country achieved independence—something, of course, that we in Scotland hope to do eventually as well.

Roger Mullin: If memory serves me correctly—I go back much further than 1955—the treaty with Malawi does not include goods such as televisions, because they did not even exist in Malawi in those times. The treaty is so out of date that it does not capture the nature of modern commerce. The UK Government have been making moves in recent times to renegotiate the treaty, and that is very welcome, but it remains the fact that there is still a place for that 1955 treaty today, and it is by no means the only such treaty.

Research has been undertaken by, for example, ActionAid, and I compliment it on the campaigns it has been running and thank it for the assistance it has given me in constructing this small Bill. That research looked at more than 500 double taxation treaties throughout the world and suggests that despite all the good work the UK Government have done over the last 10 years or so, the United Kingdom and Italy still have more restrictive treaties than any other country—around 13 are still in place.

What are taxation treaties about? They are about how much tax should be paid. Some restrictive treaties actually prevent Governments from imposing taxes—say, some types of corporation tax—that they may wish to impose, so they remove democratic responsibility in terms of countries putting together their tax.

The second thing taxation treaties typically deal with is where the tax is actually paid. In a bilateral relationship, the treaty often favours the country where the company is headquartered. Why are companies in advanced western societies—not just the UK, but the US, Germany, Italy and the like—engaged with developing countries?

I do not know of any international corporation that wants to move its headquarters from London, Edinburgh, New York or Berlin to site them in some poor country in central Africa, but they do want to operate there. Why is that? The typical type of operation is to exploit the country's natural resources—minerals and the like. In another country I am very familiar with—Namibia—there is diamond mining, which is exploited by some large Australian corporations, among others, and uranium mining. Other types of natural resources are found in the Benguela current, which has some of the richest fishery grounds in the world.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I have had an association with Zambia through fundraising, and on a trip there I became aware of almost a new form of colonialism. There are many Chinese companies where not only the leaders but the entire workforce are Chinese, so copper is being mined, the profit is being taken away and there are no jobs at all going into the local economy.

Roger Mullin: I was unaware of that case, but there is a parallel. When I was first asked to go to Namibia shortly after its independence to meet members of the Government in the large fishing port of Walvis Bay, they asked me and the others who were there to do a study on how they could Namibianise, as they called it, the fisheries sector. We asked why that was a priority, and they said, “We have one of the richest fishing grounds in Africa, but we've been under the apartheid regime of South Africa and that form of colonialism for years. There isn't a single company in Walvis Bay

owned by Namibians, and more than 90% of the people employed in the whole sector are non-Namibians.” The Namibian Government eventually took control and Namibianised the entire fisheries sector within 10 years, and it was more productive afterwards. It was a great success. Perhaps we tend not to hear about the successes where Governments in Africa and elsewhere take control and make a real difference for themselves.

I passionately believe that if we could liberate these countries to have more control of their own economies and taxation systems, that would move them away from any culture of dependency that some people say they have. It would be more liberating for them and better for everyone all round. I could be wrong, but I believe that it would be a better way, in the longer run, to achieve everyone's objective of removing the scourge of the type of poverty that exists in these countries, with which we are entirely unfamiliar in the United Kingdom.

Patrick Grady: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again; he is being very generous with his time, as he is in so many aspects of his conduct. One country in central Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, should be one of the richest countries in the world. We all carry a little bit of the DRC around with us in our pockets because that is where the coltan that makes our mobile phones comes from. Yet because of the factors he is describing, it is one of the world's worst conflict zones. Does he agree that effective tax treaties would not only mobilise resources for Governments in such countries to invest in the development of those countries but help to strengthen their governance, bureaucratic and civil service structures, which would in itself provide stability and development?

Roger Mullin: I agree entirely. I will respond to that with a slight oversimplification. Let us look at it in this way. If a country has become solely dependent on aid funding for its development and does not have full control of its own taxation and its own mineral resources, what kind of governance structure is set up to accommodate that? It will be about people chasing aid funding, not developing and liberating themselves economically. In some countries, quite a large part of their administration and democracy is based on managing aid-related matters much less than on managing its own taxation and related matters. Therefore, the infrastructure will benefit through such moves.

I think that the Bill will provide a further advantage for the United Kingdom Government. In another field, I have been trying to persuade the Government to respond to my representations about international criminal activity in Scottish limited partnerships. I am delighted to see that the Financial Secretary is present to respond to the debate, because last week we had what I thought was an extremely constructive meeting about the issue. We recognised that to address the issue of Scottish limited partnerships we had to involve not merely the Treasury but the Home Office and its Criminal Finances Bill, as well as the businesses that would be conducting a consultation. Three different partners would need to be brought together, so that we could begin to create a joined-up approach.

What I am saying, and what my simple Bill is saying, is this. Would it not be a good idea if those who are responsible for negotiating tax treaties with countries in

the developing world had to take reasonable account of our own Government's international aid policy, because otherwise the Government's international aid policies, and what they want to achieve in that regard, could be countered in a negative way through the negotiation of tax treaties by others who do not support those aims? It must surely be helpful to governance here, as well as in other countries, to create a system that is much more joined-up. That is surely in everyone's interests. Who is going to argue against it? Well, my hon. Friends and I can probably predict who, but it seems to me that no rational person could object to a Government's pursuing their aims in a joined-up and rational manner.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this extremely important issue to our attention. Does he agree that his proposals would also go some way towards creating sustainable jobs and livelihoods in developing countries, an ambition that sits firmly at the heart of the sustainable development goals that the UK Government are signed up to achieve?

Roger Mullin: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. The joined-up approach that I mentioned is not just within Departments; it comes about through international commitments that the Government have made to others. It is therefore good that we sign wider international treaties relating to development.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): "Trade over aid" was mentioned earlier. Many companies and organisations in the United Kingdom, and particularly in Scotland, will benefit from the Bill. The Glasgow film-maker Carol Cooke, who runs Scrumptious Productions, works with Barefoot in Business in Uganda to support grassroots women's organisations and encourage women to run their own local businesses. The Bill will help more businesses of that kind, in the UK and specifically in Scotland, to go out to countries that are trying to develop their local economies.

Roger Mullin: That is a wonderful example. Double taxation treaties will benefit people in a wider sense—a cultural sense—although that is not stated in the Bill. If we can achieve fairer tax and fairer trade, along with mutual respect and more cross-pollination between countries than we have today, that, in its own modest way, will contribute to a more peaceful world. Generally, the more people engage with each other, the less likely they are to deal with each other in less than rational ways.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I commend the work that the hon. Gentleman has done on the Bill, and, of course, the work done by ActionAid. He has referred to fair tax and fair trade. I hope that the Bill will proceed, so that it can be improved in one significant respect. If there are indeed to be the new trade deals with developing countries that we are told there will have to be in the post-Brexit world, they should not take place without new tax treaties. The Bill deals with when such tax treaties are introduced, but it does not insist on their creation. That would be insisted on if new trade deals had to be accompanied by new tax treaties.

Roger Mullin: My main response to the hon. Gentleman is to apologise for being higher up the ballot than he is, because obviously he could have made a much better job of this than I have, but I hope that he appreciates my modest efforts. I agree with what he said. This is a modest Bill; it does not ask for anything particularly dramatic. I am only too well aware that it is likely to have technical flaws that the Government would like to address. If the Bill progresses to Committee, I would fully expect amendments to be tabled and debated, because that is what this process is about. A Second Reading debate is about the principles of a Bill, not about whether every i has been dotted and every t crossed. I would be keen to see the hon. Gentleman's point brought in to strengthen the Bill, if it progresses.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I appreciate my hon. Friend promoting the Bill. Following on from the point made by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), does my hon. Friend agree that, if the UK is going to be much more responsible for negotiating trade deals than it has been in recent years, it would be good to start the process with a big gesture of good will to put us on a much better footing with regard to negotiating both trade and tax deals in future?

Roger Mullin: My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is answering the point made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), but—I am not particularly criticising the hon. Gentleman, who addresses this House with expert rhetoric and I can always hear what he says—I am taking this opportunity to make a point about other Members who are sitting in that corner of the Chamber. It is not just an old-fashioned rule that when you stand up to speak, you must address the Chair; if you do not, your voice goes into the corner and the Minister, other Front Benchers and I cannot hear what is being said. I appeal to Members that, even though they are currently exchanging interventions with one another in that corner of the Chamber, they please address the Chair, because everybody else wants to hear what is being said. I am not criticising the hon. Gentleman; I am just asking for his co-operation.

Roger Mullin: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your wise words and for giving me the compliment that others in the Chamber wish to listen to me.

On the post-Brexit situation, I am sure that many hon. Members will acknowledge that there has been great concern about the imbalance between the negotiating ability of the UK Government, who have not employed negotiators for many years, and the capacity of the 27 remaining EU countries, which will have access to all the negotiators. It is thought that the Government will be at a disadvantage by having to face large numbers of really skilled negotiators and using people who may be less skilled.

I ask the Government to think about what we are saying about how treaties are negotiated between a country as powerful as the UK and countries such as Malawi and Namibia. I have been in countries that do

[Roger Mullin]

not have any of their own negotiators. Even worse, they sometimes have to bring in people from a country in the developed world to assist them in negotiating with that very country. When I was in a country in Africa, I worked alongside a German who was funded by the aid organisation GTZ, and part of his task was to negotiate on behalf of that country with the German Government. We can see that there is scope for difficulty—compromise and the like—in all that. We need to make sure that we build capacity in such countries to enable them to ensure fairness. There is an ethical responsibility on us to ensure that we deal with those countries fairly, which is in the interests of everyone.

The Minister is keen to have sufficient time to respond, so I will leave my remarks there, other than to say that I am very grateful to hon. Members for staying and showing an interest in what, for me, is an important matter. I wish everyone a happy Christmas.

2.10 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I will be extremely brief because, as the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) has said, we want to hear the Minister's response, which I hope will be constructive.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath and ActionAid on the campaign they have waged to bring the Bill to fruition. The thrust of the objectives he has set out is to ensure a fairer balance between wealthy countries and source countries in such negotiations, and we wholeheartedly support that. I regret the way in which the Bill is timetabled—unfortunately, it may fall—but I hope there will be an opportunity for it to be brought back. The Labour Opposition will support it if it is brought back.

I will sit down shortly, but we need to address a couple of issues. Concerns have been expressed about the drafting and development of such treaties. There is criticism of the lack of openness and transparency, and that almost follows from our parliamentary procedures. In the American system for scrutinising trade deals and agreements of this sort, there is an open committee process through which evidence is provided in advance of the legislation being agreed. In this House, the deal is brought before us following its agreement. I realise that there may well be issues about confidentiality in the negotiations, but when the Bill comes back or there is another Bill on the same subject we should reform the parliamentary procedure to make the process more open and transparent and to allow more engagement with interested parties.

The other issue on which we need to work on a cross-party basis is how to align our taxation policies with our development objectives. As we have heard in the discussions so far, there is a need for greater work with the Department for International Development and the Treasury to consider the development of tax policy in this country so that it is more in line with our development policies for tackling poverty across the world.

Having made those few remarks, I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing the Bill. He certainly has our support. If there is another parliamentary opportunity

to enable the Bill to proceed, we will support it. If not, I hope another Member of the House will bring forward a Bill at some future date to achieve the objectives that he set out so eloquently.

2.13 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): I am grateful to colleagues on both sides of the House for giving me an opportunity to respond to this debate, because both this Bill and this subject are important. I want to respond in the constructive way in which the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) advanced his argument.

Let me make it clear from the start that I very much share the aims of the hon. Gentleman's Bill. I share his belief in the importance of the UK's efforts to tackle poverty in developing countries—we have achieved a great deal of cross-party consensus on that in recent years—and I think we would all very much agree with the thrust of his argument that it is absolutely vital to help countries to build capacity and to move beyond the need for aid.

Patrick Grady: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: I have only just started, so if the hon. Gentleman does not mind I will get a little further into my speech before I give way.

I reassure the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath that tax treaties enable countries to achieve that objective by helping to encourage the stable environment that can pave the way for sustainable economic growth and facilitate revenue collection, which is another important point that he drew out in his remarks. Although we are in full agreement about the important principles of the Bill, the lack of feasibility in its practical requirements means that the Government are unable to support it. I will come on to outline those requirements, but I first want to say a few words about our commitment to aid in general.

Patrick Grady: That was the question that I wanted to ask. It would be very helpful for the House if the hon. Lady put it on the record that the Government remain committed to the 0.7% aid target, because there has been speculation in the press, including reported comments from the Chancellor, that their commitment might be wavering.

Jane Ellison: It was only this week that the Prime Minister responded directly on that subject, so the hon. Gentleman does not need my assurance because he has had it from much higher up the governmental food chain.

As the hon. Gentleman intervened earlier on the subject of Malawi, I want to get this point on the record. I have done a lot digging into this issue. It is true that we are negotiating an updated treaty with Malawi, which we hope to conclude soon, but the Malawian Government have stated that there is no evidence of any UK companies using the UK-Malawi treaty to deprive them of their revenues. An official statement from the Malawian Government said that

“both the Malawi Government and the British Government, as well as the nationals of the two countries, have evidently acted in good faith to ensure that neither party is exploited on the basis of the current agreement.”

I wanted to give the hon. Gentleman and the House that assurance on the Malawi treaty.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) has some laudable aims, but that he is pushing at an open door because the Government have already taken substantial action and agreed to implement two of the base erosion and profit sharing outputs? They are therefore travelling in the direction he is asking for.

Jane Ellison: My hon. Friend is right. The OECD’s BEPS project is really important in addressing some of the issues the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath talked about. The UK has played a leading role in that project and will continue to do so. A large number of countries have come on board with those principles and we will continue to move forward on them.

It is worth restating that the UK became the first G7 country to meet the UN target of spending 0.7% of gross national income on international development. The way in which we tackle the challenges in developing countries is very much in the spirit of what has been discussed in this debate. We understand the idea of helping people to develop capacity and independence so that they are not dependent on aid. At the heart of what DFID and the Government are doing is the idea of strengthening people so that countries can move forward and develop.

We help people to strengthen their economies and reduce their reliance on aid in a range of ways. Last year—I am particularly proud of this because it involves HMRC working closely with DFID—we committed to doubling the funding for tax projects in developing countries through the Addis tax initiative. HMRC has set up a specialist tax capacity-building unit, which deploys staff to developing countries to provide technical tax expertise. It is working closely with DFID on that.

Bilateral tax treaties can play a part. Treaties are important in encouraging private sector activity in a partner country. We know how powerful a force that can be in driving up employment, providing quality goods and services, and raising crucial tax revenues, which finance public services in those countries. We have about 130 treaties with countries across the globe, including several with developing countries, to support and sustain cross-border trade and investment by tackling double taxation and clamping down on cross-border avoidance and evasion.

The treaties are reached through negotiation by experienced officials from HMRC and are highly technical documents. Let me provide assurance on the specific points the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath made about who is involved and the process that goes into those documents. They follow consultation exercises that help to establish appropriate priorities. That process includes the consideration of representations made by UK businesses, NGOs, other Departments including DFID and the UK’s missions based in developing countries. The approach to these treaties is very collaborative and open so that we reach the right priorities that work for

both parties. Decisions on the negotiation or renegotiation of a tax treaty are taken on the basis of a range of factors, including the results of HMRC’s periodic review of the tax treaty network and the role of treaties in promoting development. The Government already strive to take wider issues, including development, into account and align our tax treaties with our wider development policies.

I know there are some concerns about the treaties, and some have been alluded to today. Let me be very clear that the UK never ties our wider assistance or investment to such treaties. We cannot impose tax treaties on other states, including developing countries, and we never try to do so. Every tax treaty we negotiate is necessarily a reflection of the interests and priorities of both states as equal partners. That of course will mean some trade-offs. Sometimes developing countries face a trade-off between reducing their tax rates and rights to encourage investment and maintaining those rates and rights and so risking losing investment. That is their judgment to make. Before engaging in a treaty negotiation any country would think about what its priorities are.

Mark Durkan: I have noted all that the Minister has said, but she must recognise that there is a concern that some of these treaties work more as double evasion treaties than as double taxation treaties. Beyond the treaties, in the last Parliament, against the grain of what the Government say they are about in the BEPS process, the controlled foreign companies rules were changed unilaterally and at the expense of developing countries’ exchequers.

Jane Ellison: There are two things I would say. First, our work on double taxation treaties cannot be seen in isolation from the wider work we have led through the OECD on the BEPS project and a lot of the legislation we have passed. Since just 2015, there have been more than 30 different measures that will come into effect on avoidance and evasion.

My second point, to reiterate what I was saying before I took the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, is that these are mutually agreed treaties. If a country is not comfortable with anything being proposed—not that the UK would propose anything close to what he suggested—the treaty is mutually agreed and it is right that we respect the balance developing countries wish to strike in negotiations as much as we would respect any country’s position. Our network of treaties with developing countries demonstrates that. We have no power to force a developing country to sign a treaty that is against its interests, and would never try to do so. If the UK and a potential treaty partner cannot come to an agreement that satisfies us both, the treaty simply will not go ahead.

I turn to some of the specific issues that the Bill would entail for any Government negotiating such treaties, because while we respect and agree with the thrust of the Bill’s intent, we do not think we could, from a technical point of view, carry out some of the analysis that the Bill suggests.

Let us take, for example, the idea of assessing the impact. Given the long timescales, the complex and shifting interactions with domestic law and the lack of a reliable comparator, we believe it is simply not possible to produce meaningful estimates of the revenue effects

[Jane Ellison]

of a tax treaty in the sort of timeframe that the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath is suggesting. These are long-term projects with partner countries. Successive Governments have never attempted to produce assessments of the effect on the UK, let alone for a partner country. To attempt to do the latter—to assess the impact for the partner country—would very likely not be welcomed by that country, as it would essentially represent the UK’s uninvited judgment of its tax policies. I entirely endorse his comments about mutual respect. However well intentioned, the idea of our passing judgment on another country’s tax policy runs counter to the key principle of mutual respect.

Roger Mullin: I am afraid that I do not accept the Minister’s point about evaluation for the following reasons. She says we have very good treaties, which are well respected and work well. How do we know that they work well if there is no evaluation of them? No one was suggesting that any evaluation would be one-sided. It is perfectly possible to have bilateral or multilateral evaluations.

Jane Ellison: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, but I still cannot agree with him. He asks how we can show benefits. I repeat that countries enter into these agreements willingly. We have over 130 of them, and there are more in the process of renegotiation, particularly those that are outdated. Countries would not be seeking to renegotiate or enter into that bilateral discussion if they did not feel there was mutual benefit in their doing so.

I have recently signed several such treaties—we have recently exchanged treaties with Colombia and Lesotho—and had the opportunity to talk to countries about why they do it, and it is clear they believe it is to our mutual advantage. Over time, these bilateral relationships must be to our mutual advantage. It is also worth noting that countries can rescind treaties. If countries did not think it to their advantage, they could rescind the treaties. We have not locked countries into these arrangements; they are entered into by mutual agreement, and countries can exit from them.

The Bill also asks us to assess the benefits of foreign direct investment, but again that would be very difficult, if not impossible, on the basis that FDI depends on such a wide range of factors. Investors will consider all sorts of things, including: existing and planned infrastructure; changes to the country’s legal system; political stability—often critical in the developing world; the education level of the workforce; and access to markets. The idea that we could assess in isolation the direct contribution of a tax treaty is impracticable. It would be part of a mix that moves a developing country from poverty to greater wealth; during that journey, all those things, and more, begin to fall into place to produce an environment in which wealth can be created to the benefit of the country because people want to invest there. To analyse one of those things in isolation, however, would be an extremely difficult proposition.

Mark Durkan: On the Minister’s point about mutuality and the nature of any treaty discussions, would she agree that when bilateral trade deals are negotiated post-Brexit they should be accompanied by new tax treaties, negotiated at the same time, in the spirit of mutuality she has talked about?

Jane Ellison: Brexit is a bit of a red herring in this regard. These agreements are bilateral, and the vast majority are outside the EU, although we have them with EU member countries too. I am happy to respond to the hon. Gentleman with further details, but his point is not directly relevant in the way he suggests.

Mark Durkan *rose*—

Jane Ellison: No, I will not give way again. To be fair to the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, the promoter of the Bill, I want to deal with a couple of his other points.

Parliamentary scrutiny was mentioned. We have a system whereby tax treaties are subject to parliamentary scrutiny and debate before they can enter into force. That means scrutiny through a Delegated Legislation Committee. There is a gap of several months between signature and debate, which gives hon. Members ample time to acquaint themselves with the contents of a treaty and to inform robust debate. There is also both the power and the precedent for referring treaties to the Floor of the House. That has not been done since 1984, but I would be delighted to discuss any of these on the Floor of the House if Members were moved to bring them forward.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for championing this issue and for the constructive approach he has taken. It has given us the chance to put on the record what I believe is an admirable track record in this country.

I will mention one more thing that might be of interest to the House. The Department for International Development is supporting the OECD’s new “tax inspectors without borders” initiative, which has raised more than \$260 million of additional revenue in developing countries to be spent on public services. Again, this is a record we can be proud of across parties.

While we fully support the principles of the Bill, many of its provisions are already in place, and where they are not that is due either to the technical difficulties involved or to the unintended and undesirable consequences that such measures would involve.

The debate has served to highlight a number of things, particularly the role that tax treaties can play in providing certainty and stability for increased investment in developing countries; the importance of our tax treaties being tailored to meet the individual tax policies of our partner countries; and the considerable impact that the success of these treaties can have on sustainable economic development.

Although we do not support the Bill, I would like to thank the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath for securing the space to consider these issues—

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 20 January 2017.

Business without Debate

CROWN TENANCIES BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 January.

SEXUAL OFFENCES (PARDONS ETC) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (21 October), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 20 January.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (NATIONAL DATA GUARDIAN) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 13 January.

WITHDRAWAL FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION (ARTICLE 50) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 13 January.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Further to your advice earlier in this session, is it not extraordinary that the Member who objected was the right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), the Deputy Chief Whip of the Labour party, whose motion is identical to the one that I have just moved? Is there any way I can get that on the record, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which was, of course, not a point of order, but a point of information. He asks how he can get it on the record; he has just done so.

North-east London STP

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

2.32 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Changes to our national health service are being planned all over the country, which are going to have profound implications for the quality of health, the availability of both primary and secondary services and for the size and location of our hospitals. There has been justified criticism of the secrecy with which this process of producing so-called sustainability and transformation plans has been carried out. The Department of Health has produced a five year forward view and a very large number of plans. I want to focus on the north-east London sustainability and transformation plan draft, which was published on 21 October, and on the eight delivery plans supposedly to implement it.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I want to put on record my personal gratitude to my hon. Friend on behalf of all the residents of Walthamstow, because we know that these plans are not going to be subject to parliamentary scrutiny. The fact that my hon. Friend has secured this debate today might be the only opportunity we have in Parliament to look at something that will fundamentally transform their local healthcare services.

Mike Gapes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who spends a great deal of time, as I do, campaigning with her local council to improve the NHS locally. Throughout our sub-region of north-east London, we are all concerned about what we are facing.

The King's Fund reported in November that the speed of development of these plans means that "patients and the public have been largely absent" from the process and that NHS England has instructed that freedom of information requests should be "actively rejected". Locally in north-east London a freedom of information request for the financial and working detail of the STP was rejected in November on the basis that: "Disclosure would be likely to inhibit the ability of public authority staff...to express themselves openly...and explore extreme options...Deliberation needs to be made in a 'safe space' to develop ideas and to reach decisions away from external interference which may occur if there is premature public or media involvement."

My local council, Redbridge Council, has been concerned that it has not been adequately involved in the process. It has made it clear that it will act in the interests of our local community and that Redbridge will not be signing off or endorsing the STP unless we are satisfied that it is in the interests of Redbridge residents

I understand that the STP programme boards are not required to hold meetings in public, and no agenda or minutes are published. The secrecy surrounding this process has not been helpful in building public trust and has caused suspicion within communities all over the country—I speak particularly from local experience—as to the intentions of the proposals. In many respects what could be a reasonable response in the circumstances to the crisis we face in terms of future funding, the ageing population and other challenges to the NHS, is being undermined because of process issues. The NHS needs to learn from these experiences about how better to engage with the public and key stakeholders, including elected local representatives.

[Mike Gapes]

We are fortunate in Redbridge and north-east London because there are good working relationships within the NHS and local government, and there is already a model of collaborative working. However, the problem with the STP is that it brings a top-down process into this situation and potentially undermines the joint-working that has been voluntarily established over recent years.

Redbridge along with neighbouring authorities will be strongly arguing that the developing STP governance structures should not stifle or negatively impact the local work that is happening. Redbridge and its partners in Barking and Dagenham and in Havering have over a number of years been developing cross-borough, collaborative approaches on the integration of health and social care. Redbridge is arguing that STP governance needs to ensure that this subsidiarity to the local level is taken as a model for the future, and is not undermined by the STP approach. We need to ensure democratic accountability if we are to get public buy-in, and we do not have that at present. Public engagement needs to be enhanced and improved.

The north-east London October STP draft is subtitled “transformation underpinned by system thinking and local action”. It says, however, that

“the system partners may not be able to work together collaboratively to deliver the plans.”

Today we have seen news about the reality we face in our NHS: large numbers of hospitals with dangerously high bed-occupancy levels and little or no flexibility. The CQC’s chief executive recently talked about hospitals being dangerously full. On 26 November, a leaked memo from NHS England revealed that hospitals were being banned from declaring so-called “black alerts” and told to prepare for the winter crisis by passing on scheduled surgery to private hospitals and discharging thousands of patients to get bed occupancy down from a national average of 89% to 85%.

However, north-east London’s population is massively increasing. The report states that the population of north-east London boroughs will increase by 18% over the next 15 years—equivalent to a new city—and yet there is no plan for an additional hospital to cope with that change. In fact, page 20 of the draft policy states that building an additional hospital is “not practical or realistic.” Indeed, the situation is worse than that. Not only is there no extra hospital, there is the planned closure of the A&E at King George hospital in my constituency. The plan is to stop overnight ambulances sometime next year, with a total closure in 2019. The STP is calling for that not only because it would meet some savings and restructuring requirements, but also because there are unsustainable costs. The previous Health Secretary announced in 2011 that the A&E at King George would close in “around two years”. That has not happened because it was deemed unsafe and because there is insufficient capacity at Queen’s hospital in Romford or at Whipps Cross university hospital in Waltham Forest to cope with the increased demand.

Despite our excellent and hard-working staff, all the hospitals in north-east London are in crisis. With pressure for early discharges, but inadequate social care and community support, we have large-scale bed blocking and delayed discharges. Sick patients then get readmitted because they cannot get GP appointments due to the

pressures that exist in that sector. The STP sees out-of-hospital and integrated community care as the way forward. However, Dame Julie Moore, who in 2014 chaired a commission on hospital care for frail elderly people, said:

“As much as it suits us all to have one nice neat solution to the problem of our growing, ageing population... the truth is that as a catch-all answer it is simply wishful thinking. Integrated community care is a good thing... but this can never be a substitution for hospital care.”

We still need hospitals and acute care. Plans to transform care in the community are good, but that requires a transformation of primary care, which needs resourcing. The STP projects a 30% shortfall in nurses by 2021, and we know that many GPs plan to retire over the next few years. Both are difficult issues.

Problems also exist in the potential financial situation, and one such issue is the estates strategy. The STP delivery plan highlights sites such as Goodmayes hospital, which is a large mental health hospital, and King George hospital as places where land could be sold. Contractual issues and other matters mean that that is probably an optimistic approach.

Stella Creasy: My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful case about why we must involve the public in some incredibly difficult decisions. We know that the financial situation we are facing is particularly dire. He has just mentioned the sites at Goodmayes, but in addition Whipps Cross has a large private finance initiative debt, where it is paying out a huge amount of money. No wonder the suggestion is being made that we need £578 million to bridge the gap.

Mike Gapes: My hon. Friend has given the figure I was about to cite. The STP executive summary states:

“Our total financial challenge in a ‘do nothing’ scenario would be £578m by 2021. Achieving ambitious ‘business as usual’ cost improvements as we have done in the past would still leave us with a funding gap of £336m by 2021.”

Those are eye-watering figures. The claim is made that “we have identified a range of opportunities and interventions to help reduce the gap significantly”.

However, the £240 million gap between the “business as usual” case model and the actual predicted figure requires a series of other measures, including significant funding from the sustainability and transformation fund, reductions and changes in specialised commissioning, and what is called

“potential support for excess Public Finance Initiative (PFI) costs.”

That covers Whipps Cross hospital, Queen’s hospital, Romford, and, to some extent, King George hospital. “Potential”, what a lovely word. So this is not real and it is not even planned—it is just “potential”.

These plans are based on unrealistic, heroic, Soviet-style assumptions. This is a truly Stakhanovite model of over-estimation of potential, yet the STP still proposes it can transform a deficit of £578 million in 2021 into a potential surplus of £37 million—and improve the services. That will not happen. The plans are also predicated on totally unrealistic assumptions about savings from closing the A&E services at King George hospital, and there is a lack of clarity as to when this will happen and how much we are talking about. I have been told that tens of millions would be invested in the sites at Queen’s and

Whipps Cross, but I have been told that at least £75 million is needed to do that, and there is no sign of where this capital is coming from in the Department of Health. So wards are being closed in one hospital and then millions are being invested in rebuilding wards or constructing wards at other hospitals, for no real net gain.

There is also a problem about what process will be involved in this closure at King George hospital. I am conscious that I do not have limitless time, but let me say that my local Redbridge Council is very concerned about this, because King George is supposed to be transformed from an acute hospital into an urgent care centre and so the local community needs to be involved. Redbridge is requesting that it should be involved, and I note that it has recently been agreed that it will be involved on the transformation board. However, Redbridge wants an independent chair of that board, because it is important to involve a person of public trust so that there is no controversy. There needs to be a transparent, open process as we discuss the options for the future of King George hospital, so that we can challenge the business case and take account of the fact that the assumptions on which this model is based are 10 years old. They go back to the misnamed “Fit for the Future” plans of 2006. The population growth that we have had and the growth that is yet to come, the young population that we have in the area and the movement in population means we have to look at these issues with great doubt and concern.

We need to assess the implications of all those issues. As Redbridge says, it wants to know how the reconfiguration to an urgent care centre assists primary care, community health services, adult social care, public health, and public health prevention and education. An opportunity exists in the changes, but we need public engagement in those changes, and we do not have that at the moment.

There will be enormous pressure on my local council because of budget problems, and I am worried about the situation. I am glad that the STP highlights the social care challenge, but it needs to be taken seriously by the Government if we are truly to have an effective health and social care system. The statement in this House yesterday did not offer a solution to my borough. It did not answer the challenge that boroughs such as Redbridge are facing. These boroughs are already ahead of the game in the integration of health and adult social services and are working with neighbours to take up the challenge by being a pilot for the development of an accountable care system.

Yet with all that transformation, Redbridge still faces a huge social care challenge. That is made worse by a triple whammy of public sector funding reductions to local government—my borough has lost 40% of its income since 2010—chronic underfunding of adult social care by the Government and the fact that Redbridge does not get a fair funding level in the first place. There is, potentially, a major problem. We face a shortfall of about £4 million in social care and the 1% extra on council tax raises less than £1 million. The responses that we have heard from the Government in recent days have been inadequate—indeed they have been worse even than the silence from the Chancellor in the autumn statement. They offer no real solutions to the growing crisis that will impact on some of the most vulnerable in our society.

I conclude with this plea: please will the Government look at the situation in north-east London and will the Minister meet me to discuss the fact that this plan is unrealistic, incredible, unachievable and will lead to disaster?

2.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) on securing this important debate. He is rightly known as a fierce defender of his local NHS services, and his constituents should be proud of his record.

As both a patient with a chronic and complex illness and a daughter of a cardiologist and a nurse, I know from both sides exactly how much heart and soul our NHS workforce put into their day jobs. It is easy in debates such as this about structures and processes to lose sight of that, so I wish to begin by paying tribute to all of those who work at Barking, Havering, and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust in the constituencies of the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for their dedication, determination and commitment to providing first-class services to all those in their care. We should just take a moment to note that.

The NHS’s own plans for the future, set out in the five-year forward view, recognise three great challenges facing the NHS: health and well-being; care and quality; and finance and efficiency. The five-year forward view also recognised that challenges facing different areas of the country will inevitably be buried. The problems facing Ilford will, by definition, not be the same as those facing Ipswich, and a single national plan would not be effective or appropriate. That is why NHS England’s 2015 planning guidance called for local commissioners to come together with their providers across entire health economies to develop a collective strategy for addressing those challenges in their own areas. In much the same way, in fact, Labour’s 2015 general election manifesto on health, “A Better Plan for NHS Health and Care”, said that to reshape services over the next 10 years, the NHS will need the freedom to collaborate, integrate and merge across organisational divides. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the King’s Fund, which has been clear that we need to strengthen parts of the STP process. It will be of interest to him that Chris Ham, the chief executive, has also been clear that STPs are the only chance the NHS has to improve health and care services. We have to drive this through and we have to get it right.

All local STPs are now published and, as the hon. Gentleman said, local areas should be having conversations with local people and stakeholders including Members of Parliament to discuss and shape the proposals, understanding what matters to them and explaining how services might be improved. These conversations will inevitably gain pace over coming months and we should all want and encourage as many people as possible to get involved. Where relevant, areas should build on existing engagement through health and wellbeing boards and other existing local arrangements. They should also look for innovative ways to reach beyond those existing relationships and into local communities.

There are 44 STP areas, as the hon. Gentleman will know. They cover the whole of England, bringing together multiple commissioners and providers in a unique exercise in collaboration. That is why this is quite a challenge.

Stella Creasy: It is good to hear the Minister say that she wants to see local people involved in these plans. Will she therefore commit not just to a conversation but a consultation with teeth to give people confidence that the very difficult decisions that we all know have to be made about changing the NHS can be done with their consent, and not simply given to them as a *fait accompli*?

Nicola Blackwood: Perhaps if the hon. Lady lets me continue with my speech, she will hear a little more about how the process will go forward.

The geographies have been determined not by central bodies, but by what local areas have decided makes the most sense to them. In the case of the constituency of the hon. Member for Ilford South, that has involved five providers, seven CCGs and eight local authorities covering the whole of north-east London. Each area has also identified a senior leader, who has agreed to chair and lead the STP process on behalf of their peers. In north-east London it is Jane Milligan, the chief officer of Tower Hamlets CCG, who is co-ordinating the development of the plan.

I was concerned to hear what the hon. Gentleman said about local authorities not feeling as involved as they should. It is important to emphasise that local authorities must play a role in developing these plans. Reflecting the social care needs of an area, which councils are obviously best placed to represent, will be key to the success of the NHS in the coming years, so they must be closely involved.

The plans offer the NHS an opportunity to think strategically and open up the public discussion about how we will meet the challenges facing the NHS in terms of demand and rising costs. It is inevitable that debate will become heated; it is simply a reflection of how important local NHS services are for us all. By planning across multiple organisations—both commissioners and providers—STP footprints can seek to address in an holistic way the health needs of an area and all the people within it in a way that we have never had the opportunity to have before.

We all know that the NHS faces tough choices about how we will design future services to meet rising demand, rising costs, and more chronic and complex illnesses. Choices have often previously been postponed again and again because they were too hard and because the discussions are too uncomfortable. I do not think anyone in the Chamber would think it is fair or safe for our local populations for us to keep putting them off in this way.

In north-east London, as elsewhere, that has meant having an honest conversation about the best way forward for services that are unsustainable as well as how to integrate services to give patients a clearer route through the system. All those conversations will help ensure that patients maintain access to high-quality care.

As I understand it, the north-east London October STP draft looks at these challenges in a number of different ways. The hon. Gentleman has described some of them. It also proposes embracing integrated services, from urgent and emergency care to mental health care and support as well as public health, which is important to me as the Minister for Public Health. The STP is also exploring how to improve patient outcomes through community-based care and preventive measures, which must be important if we are to manage demand. For example, the proposals include utilising initiatives to provide adequate housing in the area, and using new models of care to give health education. It also highlights three enablers for change for the area—workforce, digital enablement and infrastructure—and investigates how to improve its position with each.

I share the view of the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Lady that the public, key stakeholders and elected representatives should be closely involved in the development of STPs. With the plans now published, preparation for STP implementation must begin in the new year. Now is the time for STP leaders to reach out actively and engage patients and the wider public, and I expect nothing less. That means having frank, engaging and iterative conversations across areas, as well as some potentially difficult conversations about what the NHS could and should look like. Simon Stevens and Jim Mackey—the heads of NHS England and NHS Improvement—have written an open letter to STP leaders making that expectation absolutely clear. The letter reiterated that now is the time for local engagement to help develop the proposals and for those involved to make it clear that these plans must have a real benefit to patients.

I should also be clear that, nationally, all reconfigurations must meet the four tests mandated by the Government to NHS England in 2010, which require all local reconfiguration plans to demonstrate support from GP commissioners, strong public and patient engagement, clarity on the clinical evidence base, and support for patient choice. We would not expect any proposal to move forward that has not met all four tests. Patients must be at the heart of the NHS, and no plan can be successful unless they are fully engaged.

I close by saying that the hon. Gentleman has raised some very serious questions around details of his local STP plan and the quality of public consultation. I will ask the Minister responsible for community health—the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat)—to meet him and the hon. Lady to discuss the details to ensure that they are properly ironed out and that the public consultation and discussion are of the highest possible quality.

Question put and agreed to.

3.1 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 16 December 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Governance Code on Public Appointments

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): On 2 July 2015, the then Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), announced that the Government had asked Sir Gerry Grimstone to lead a review of the operation of the public appointments system. The completion of the review was announced on 11 March 2016, *Official Report*, column 27WS, HCWS609

Sir Gerry Grimstone's review placed an emphasis on the original conclusions reached by Lord Nolan in 1995 that Ministers should be at the heart of the public appointments system and concluded that Lord Nolan's principles have stood the test of time and are as applicable today as they were 20 years ago. The review also recommended a new principle of diversity and also a greater emphasis on transparency throughout the system.

The Government welcomed Sir Gerry's review and announced that they would implement its recommendations, including the publication of a new public appointments governance code, which I am publishing today. The new code will come into force in January.

The new code sets out that:

public appointments should be run in accordance to a set of principles: Ministerial responsibility, selflessness, integrity, merit, openness, diversity, assurance, fairness;

Ministers are responsible for public appointments and are central to the decision-making process;

the Commissioner for Public Appointments has a vital function regulating public appointments.

The Commissioner retains responsibility for monitoring and auditing appointments processes, but will not be directly involved in competitions; and

processes will be streamlined of bureaucracy with a stronger focus on customer care and transparency to ensure public confidence. There will be an emphasis on diversity in appointments.

The public appointments governance code can be found on the gov.uk website and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS368]

DEFENCE

Independent Medical Expert Group: Triennial Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): I am today announcing the conclusion of the triennial review of the Independent Medical Expert Group. Reviews are part of the Government's commitment to ensuring that Non Departmental Public Bodies continue to have regular independent challenge.

I am placing copy of the report in the Library of the House and it will be published on the www.gov.uk website.

The review examined whether there is a continuing need for the Independent Medical Expert Group's function and its form, and whether it should continue to exist at arm's length from Government.

The review found that the Independent Medical Expert Group provides valuable, high quality, well-respected medical and scientific advice to Ministers. The function the Independent Medical Expert Group fulfils continues to play an important role in ensuring that the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme relies on credible, up-to-date evidence, and is also perceived to do so by those who apply to it. Retaining the Independent Medical Expert Group as a Non Departmental Public Body remains the most appropriate option.

The review also confirmed that the Independent Medical Expert Group complies with the principles of good corporate governance and with the Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees and the Principles of Scientific advice to Government.

The outcome of this review is welcomed and demonstrates the effectiveness of the Independent Medical Expert Group as highly-regarded, independent experts whose function helps to maintain the medical and scientific integrity of the awards made under the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme.

[HCWS371]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine TB

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): Today I am updating the House on the implementation of the Government's 25-year strategy to eradicate bovine TB in England.

The strategy continues to deliver results. Next year we will apply for officially TB free status in the low risk area of the country where there is no significant TB in wildlife. This will boost trade opportunities and mean some herds require less regular TB testing, reducing costs for farmers and taxpayers. Bovine TB remains the greatest animal health threat to the UK. Dealing with the disease is costing the taxpayer over £100 million each year. Last year alone over 28,000 cattle had to be slaughtered in England to control the disease, causing devastation and distress for hard-working farmers and rural communities.

The Government are taking strong action to deliver a long-term plan to eradicate the disease and protect the future of our dairy and beef industries. The comprehensive strategy includes strengthening cattle testing and movement controls, improving biosecurity on farm and when trading, and badger control in areas where TB is rife.

There is broad scientific consensus that badgers are implicated in the spread of TB to cattle in the high risk area of England, which also has the highest badger density in Europe and has seen a large increase in badger abundance over the last 20 years. The approach of tackling the disease simultaneously in cattle and in wildlife has worked in Australia, is working in New Zealand and Ireland and is supported by the Government and DEFRA Chief Scientists, the UK Chief Vet and other leading vets.

This year seven new and three existing licensed badger control operations were delivered by local farmers and landowners in parts of Somerset, Herefordshire, Gloucestershire, Cornwall, Devon and Dorset. These areas comprise 10% of the high risk area, and all achieved successful outcomes. As part of our 25 year bovine TB eradication strategy I want to see further expansion of operations in the coming years. This is in line with the UK Chief Veterinary Officer's advice on what is needed to realise and maintain disease control benefits at regional level.

I have also today published a consultation on the next steps in areas that have completed the first four years of badger control. I am proposing to allow continued, strictly licensed, activity to stabilise the population at the reduced level. This will ensure the disease reduction benefits in cattle are prolonged for many years to come.

Following consultation earlier this year, the Government intend to make further improvements to TB testing in the high risk and edge areas of England and to introduce new arrangements for controlling the disease in non-bovines. Tough controls on cattle and non-bovine farm animals are an essential complement to controlling the disease in wildlife and our plans published today alongside our summary of consultation responses will help us to make further progress on the disease, while not overburdening our livestock industry.

Effective biosecurity is essential to protect the gains from reinforced cattle controls and badger control so I very much welcome the progress being made in delivering a joint government- industry TB biosecurity action plan. I am pleased that last month's launch of a new bovine TB herd accreditation programme by the Cattle Health Certification Standards body has started to attract herd owners keen to be recognised and rewarded for good biosecurity practices. We will consult next year on proposed incentives to encourage more herd owners to take up this option.

Innovations enabling our farmers to better protect their herds include access to advice on the TB hub, our interactive map of TB locations and the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board's list of dairy bulls with greater genetic resistance to TB, alongside farm demonstration events, accredited training for vets and new teaching and training resources for land-based colleges.

Although it does not provide complete protection or cure infected animals which continue to spread TB, badger vaccination has a role to play. We remain committed to promoting vaccination in the edge area of England albeit deployment continues to be hampered by a global shortage, meaning deliveries of the authorised vaccine are not expected to resume before 2018. We will start work next year with interested organisations on the design of a new Badger Edge Vaccination Scheme (BEVS) as a replacement to the former scheme which had to be cancelled because of the lack of vaccine.

In the meantime, supplies of vaccine for human immunisation will continue to be prioritised.

To ensure we have a successful and resilient industry as the UK enters a new trading relationship with the world, we are determined to implement all available measures necessary to eradicate this devastating disease as quickly as possible.

Copies of the badger control consultation and the cattle and non-bovine summary of consultation responses are available in the Libraries of the House.

[HCWS376]

HOME DEPARTMENT

European Union Opt In Decision: Asylum Measures

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):

The Government have decided not to opt in to the new EU proposals for a Qualification regulation, an Asylum Procedures regulation and a recast Reception Conditions Directive. The proposals reform the package of asylum directives adopted between 2011-2013 as part of the second phase of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS).

The UK chose not to participate in the corresponding second phase CEAS instruments due to concerns over the limits they would place on our national system. As a result the UK remains bound by the directives adopted as part of the first phase of the CEAS: the Reception Conditions Directive 2003/9/EC; the Qualification Directive 2004/83/EC; and the Asylum Procedures Directive 2005/85/EC. These directives established minimum standards and allowed member states a large degree of flexibility in implementation.

There is some merit in the new proposals, for example the overarching aim of discouraging abuse and unwarranted secondary movements. However, the Government's view is that decisions on asylum systems are best taken at national level. The proposals, in particular where replacing the use of a Directive with a regulation in the case of the proposals on Qualification and Asylum Procedures, would further limit the Government's ability to take decisions on the UK asylum system at national level and in the UK national interest. There is no reason to change the approach from that taken with regard to the corresponding second phase CEAS measures. Therefore, the UK will not opt in to the proposals.

Until the UK leaves the EU, it remains a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK's right to opt in to forthcoming EU legislation in the area of justice and home affairs on a case by case basis, with a view to maximising our country's security, protecting our civil liberties and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

[HCWS374]

European Union Opt in Decision: Dublin IV Regulation

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):

The Government have decided not to opt in to the EU proposal for the Dublin IV regulation.

The regulation will govern the process of deciding which member state is responsible for deciding an asylum claim and streamline the transfer process. The UK supports those aims, but the proposed Dublin IV regulation binds member states to participate in a quota-based distribution scheme. The proposal also permits the

Commission to impose considerable financial burdens on member states, of €250,000 per applicant not transferred under this mechanism.

The UK has long-standing reservations about such relocation schemes. Asylum seekers should claim asylum in the first safe country they enter and not be moved around the EU using allocation quotas.

By not opting in to Dublin IV regulation, the UK remains bound by the Dublin III regulation, which will allow the Government to return applicants where another member state is responsible for determining their asylum claim and discourage secondary movement or so called “asylum shopping”.

Until the UK leaves the EU, it remains a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK’s right to opt in to forthcoming EU legislation in the area of justice and home affairs on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our country’s security, protecting our civil liberties and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

[HCWS370]

European Union Opt In Decision: EU Agency for Asylum

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):

The Government have decided not to opt in to the EU proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Union Agency for Asylum.

On 4 May the European Commission published a proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Union Agency for Asylum and repealing regulation (EU) NO 439/2010. The proposed European Union Agency for Asylum would replace the existing European Asylum Support Office (EASO). The UK currently participates in EASO.

The aim of the proposal is an agency with more powers to promote the implementation and improve the functioning of the Common European Asylum System. The proposal provides the European Union Agency for Asylum with a significant degree of oversight over national asylum systems.

We are committed to running a high quality and effective asylum system but have always taken the view that the functioning of the asylum system is a sovereign matter.

The UK will therefore not opt in to the proposal for the EU Agency for Asylum.

[HCWS373]

European Union Opt in Decision: EU Readmission Agreement with Nigeria

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):

The Government have decided not to opt in to a Council Decision (11975/16/16) authorising the opening of negotiations on an agreement between the European Union and Nigeria on readmission.

EU readmission agreements (EURAs) ensure reciprocal procedures for the identification, documentation and return of persons illegally entering or remaining in EU member states, or the third country. We decide whether to participate in EURAs on a case-by-case basis, depending on the priority we attach to the country concerned in terms of numbers of immigration returns and the degree to which we enjoy a good bilateral relationship with that country.

In terms of returns co-operation, the UK already has bilateral arrangements with Nigeria via a memorandum of understanding, which work well, for example allowing the return of Nigerian nationals who have an expired passport. In 2015, there were 599 enforced removals to Nigeria and 1,361 voluntary removals.

We would not envisage an operational advantage if we were to change our current bilateral arrangements for conducting returns to Nigeria.

[HCWS369]

European Union Opt In Decision: Residence Permits (Third Country Nationals)

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):

The Government have decided not to opt in to the draft Council regulation amending the regulation on the uniform format for residence permits for third country nationals. The proposed regulation is intended to update the 2002 regulation, which was previously amended in 2008. The draft measure seeks to update the design and security features on the current version of the residence permit.

In reaching its decision, although the Government welcome measures that will strengthen immigration and border control, it has taken account of the cost of developing a document that the UK may never use. The UK will continue issuing the current format of the residence permit until we leave the EU and we are considering the options following exit.

[HCWS372]

JUSTICE

Written Statement HCWS225: Correction

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald):

On 27 October I made a written statement on the Government’s decision to opt in to the EU proposal amending the Brussels IIa Regulation on family law (HCWS225). There was a minor error in that statement. The statement said “The Government have today decided to opt in to the European Commission’s proposal which repeals and replaces regulation 2201/2003, also known as the Brussels IIa regulation, on cross border family matters”. It should have said “The Government decided on 5 October to opt in to the European Commission’s proposal which repeals and replaces regulation 2201/2003, also known as the Brussels IIa regulation, on cross border family matters”.

[HCWS375]

Petitions

Friday 16 December 2016

OBSERVATIONS

CABINET OFFICE

The boundaries of the Wellingborough Parliamentary Constituency

The Humble Petition of residents of Finedon, Northamptonshire and the surrounding areas,

Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that the boundaries of the Wellingborough Parliamentary Constituency should continue to include the village of Finedon due to the geographical, local government and historical ties that exist in the area.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Cabinet Office to encourage the Boundary Commission for England to retain Finedon as part of the Wellingborough Constituency in its upcoming review.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.—[Presented by Mr Peter Bone, *Official Report*, 28 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 1371.]

[P001983]

Observations from The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office:

The four Boundary Commissions are conducting the current Boundary Review in accordance with the legislation agreed in the last Parliament. It is for the independent Boundary Commissions to make proposals for new constituencies. The Government are not able to intervene in the review process and representations on proposed constituencies should be made direct to the relevant Boundary Commission.

Each Boundary Commission will undertake a consultation of 12 weeks on its initial proposals and there will be further opportunity for members of the public to submit representations as the Boundary Review progresses. The Boundary Commissions are required to submit their final proposals to Ministers by 1 October 2018.

The Government are committed to addressing the unfairness of the current Parliamentary boundaries, reducing the number of MPs to 600 to cut the cost of politics and making votes of more equal value. The Government believe it is essential that the Boundary Review is allowed to take its course, otherwise the next general election would be fought on the basis of electoral registers that are up to 20 years old.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of Erewash,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State

Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 14 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 9P.]

[P002000]

Observation from The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions:

The pension system, along with the whole welfare system, needs to change to reflect the reality of today. In recent decades we are living longer, and we are able to work for longer as we become healthier.

The equalisation and acceleration of State Pension age for both men and women was necessary to ensure the system's sustainability in light of increasing life expectancy and increasing pressure on public resources, and the package now in place is balanced and affordable.

The changes to the State Pension age began with the gradual equalisation of State Pension age at 65 for both men and women, which was first set out in the Pensions Act 1995. This was necessary to meet the UK's obligations under EU law to eliminate gender inequalities in social security provision.

The increase of the State Pension age to 66 was set out in the Pensions Act 2007 and due to increasing life expectancy the Pensions Act 2011 accelerated this process to allow for a rise to 66 by 2020 for both genders and provided for the equalisation of the State Pension age to 65 by November 2018.

During the 2011 Pensions Act the Government made a concession which slowed down the increase of the state pension age for women so no one would face an increase of more than 18 months compared to the increase as part of the Pensions Act 1995. Transitional arrangements at a cost of £1.1 billion were made in order to lessen the impact of these changes for those worst affected, and for 81% of these women the increase will be no more than 12 months. This concession benefited almost a quarter of a million women who would otherwise have experienced delays of up to two years.

Reversing the 1995 Act would be unaffordable—costing a minimum estimate of £77 billion. Without equalisation, and in 2010, women would spend on average 41% of their lives in retirement with a State Pension age of 60.

These changes were fully debated and voted on in 2011 when legislation was before Parliament, and all those affected by increases in State Pension age by the 2011 Act were written to in the period between January 2012 and November 2013.

The Department for Work and Pensions provided a range of additional information in order for all individuals to find out their State Pension age and the conditions of their benefits.

Since April 2000, the Department has provided more than 14 million personalised State Pension estimates to people who requested them either online, via telephone or post, and encourages people to request these State Pension estimates as part of on-going communications.

In addition, employment maximises people's opportunities to build up savings, helps to maintain social networks, and is beneficial to health provided the employment takes into account the person's broader circumstances. For most people work is beneficial not only because it provides an income, but also because it gives individuals greater control over their own lives, and independent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that the rise in women's State Pension age since 2010 has been accompanied by increases in employment rates for the women affected.

For those who struggle to find employment and where people need it, there is a safety net in place through the welfare system.

Supporting individuals aged 50 years and over to remain in the labour market and tackling the barriers to them doing so is a key priority for this Government. By the mid-2030s the number of individuals aged 50 and over will represent over half of the UK adult population and employers increasingly need to employ and retain the skills and experience of older workers. To support these individuals the Default Retirement Age was abolished, so individuals can retire when it is right for them, and the right to request flexible working was extended.

The Government are deeply committed to ensuring that employers are aware of the wealth of skills and experience that older workers bring to the workplace, and on 4 October the Government announced the appointment of the Business in the Community Age at Work leadership team led by Andy Briggs, CEO of Aviva UK and Ireland Life, as Business Champion for Older Workers. Mr Briggs and this team of employers will spearhead the Government's work to support employers to retain, retrain, and recruit older workers.

Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches have the flexibility to offer all claimants, including older people, a comprehensive menu of help which includes skills provision and job search support. Work Coaches undertake extensive training before taking up the post, and build up a wide range of skills and in-depth labour market knowledge, and additional training modules are available for Work Coaches when

they deal with older claimants to support them more effectively and in understanding the challenges older claimants face.

Older Claimant Champions were introduced, in April 2015, in the seven Jobcentre Plus Regional Groups to tackle the barriers faced by older claimants in getting back to work. Older Claimant Champions work with Jobcentre Work Coaches - and other staff - to emphasise the importance of supporting older claimants, share best practice and challenge out of date perceptions to support this group of people.

Where there are health conditions or disabilities, the Department has published the Work, health and Disability Green Paper which looks at ways of better joining up the health, welfare and employment systems to support those seeking work as well as those in work. A Carers in Employment pilot has been established across nine Local Authorities to explore how businesses can give employees with caring responsibilities more help, for example promoting flexible working patterns and setting up carers surgeries to help carers manage their caring responsibilities alongside their paid work.

In addition to increasing employment prospects for women above the age of 60, this Government have introduced the New State Pension. The system in place for people who reached their State Pension age before 6 April 2016 was extremely complex and the new State Pension brings greater clarity by helping people to understand their State Pension more easily. It is also 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 acceleration of State Pension age is taken into account. And, by 2030, over 3 million women stand to gain an average of £550 extra per year as a result of these changes.

The New State Pension works hand in hand with Automatic Enrolment, enabling many more people to save in a workplace pension. And, combined with reviews of the State Pension age, these measures are designed to form the main elements of a sustainable basis of retirement income in the decades to come.

The Government have already made transitional arrangements for those most affected by changes to their State Pension age and introducing further concessions cannot be justified given the imperative to focus public resources on helping those most in need.

Ministerial Correction

Friday 16 December 2016

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Science and Innovation

The following is the response to the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) during Business, Energy and Industry Strategy questions by the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation on Tuesday 13 December 2016.

Joseph Johnson: This Government are strongly committed to science and innovation. We protected the science budget at the spending review in 2015. In the last autumn statement, a few days ago, we committed to

spending a further £2 billion a year by the end of this Parliament. The creation of UK Research and Innovation, through the passage of the Higher Education and Research Bill, will increase the value and impact of our investments in science and innovation in the years ahead.

[Official Report, 13 December 2016, Vol. 618, c. 599.]

Letter of correction from Joseph Johnson:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) during Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions.

The correct response should have been:

Joseph Johnson: This Government are strongly committed to science and innovation. We protected the science budget at the spending review in 2015. In the last autumn statement, a few days ago, we committed to spending a further £2 billion a year **by 2020-21**. The creation of UK Research and Innovation, through the passage of the Higher Education and Research Bill, will increase the value and impact of our investments in science and innovation in the years ahead.

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BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL	
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**not later than
Friday 23 December 2016**

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