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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 12 January 2017

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Network Rail

1. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Ministers of the Scottish Government on further devolution of Network Rail. [908115]

5. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Ministers of the Scottish Government on further devolution of Network Rail. [908119]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I met the Minister for Transport and the Islands in the Scottish Government, Humza Yousaf, in October last year. I welcome working together to improve services for rail passengers within the current devolution settlement.

Peter Grant: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer, but can he explain why the Government are happy to devolve responsibility for maintenance and track operations on the Oxford to Cambridge line, yet they are so reluctant to devolve the same responsibility to the Scottish Government for Scotland?

Paul Maynard: The point we have consistently made is that there was no recommendation by the Smith commission to devolve the whole of Network Rail to Scotland. The Scottish Government can specify, fund and procure for ScotRail and the Caledonian Sleeper. They can also specify and fund all major projects, and we are devolving the British Transport police. That strikes me as a hefty menu for the Scottish Government to be engaged with.

Chris Law: I thank the Minister for his reply. The Reform Scotland think-tank published a report in November calling for Network Rail to be devolved—perhaps the Secretary of State has read it. The Minister will also be aware that an ever-growing list of people advocate further rail devolution, so will he do the right thing and commit to a date for opening discussions with the Scottish Government on this matter?

Paul Maynard: Devolution does not just occur within Governments and within Whitehall, and between Whitehall and Scotland. A significant amount of operational devolution is occurring within Network Rail as we speak. A Scottish route within Network Rail that will have much more independence and freedom of action is being set up. I urge the Scottish Government and Scottish Members to engage in that devolution process, not least because the Scottish Government are co-operating with the Office of Rail and Road on the periodic review that will determine the output for control period 6 within Scotland.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): A report commissioned by Transport Scotland showed that Network Rail's original cost estimates for Scottish projects were unreliable. Does the Minister agree that, especially when projects overrun by hundreds of millions of pounds, those who commission the work should have the power to hold Network Rail to account?

Paul Maynard: I reiterate the point that with the new devolution settlement within Network Rail and the growing independence of the Scottish route within Network Rail, there are ample levers available to Members here and indeed the Scottish Government to influence how the Scottish route director delivers those infrastructure projects.

Drew Hendry: Why does the Minister feel that Scotland does not need a rail project capability based in Scotland that is accountable to the people of Scotland?

Paul Maynard: I return to how I started my answer and remind the hon. Gentleman that we had a lengthy discussion about what was contained in the Smith commission. This did not emerge from that commission, so we are not taking it forward.

Southeastern Rail

2. **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What plans he has to improve services for passengers on Southeastern rail. [908116]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): We will launch the formal consultation on proposals for the new Southeastern franchise in February. I hope that people across the franchise area will participate in it, enabling my Department and the team working within the franchise to make informed decisions about the specification for the next franchise, particularly regarding how we expand capacity for passengers.

Matthew Pennycook: Not only are my constituents of all political persuasions disgusted by the manner in which the Secretary of State has politicised this issue, but they have absolutely no confidence in his proposed solution for the Southeastern franchise. A previous attempt to merely involve Transport for London in the design of Southern's 2009 to 2015 franchise failed because that did not involve its proven concession model for suburban rail services, so can the Secretary of State tell us why on earth he thinks that repeating this failed approach will deliver much-needed improvements for Southeastern passengers?

Chris Grayling: There has been no politicisation of this discussion. This decision was taken after the Mayor's business plan was analysed across government, and after discussions with neighbouring authorities and people who know the route. The truth is that the Mayor's proposals offered no extra capacity for passengers but a whole lot of uncoded, unfunded promises. They also involved a very substantial top-down reorganisation. The approach we have chosen is the same one that we have taken for Northern and in the midlands, which is to create a partnership to develop a franchise that will work for all passengers in Kent and south-east London to deliver the capacity that we need.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I support the Transport Secretary on that. My constituents in Kent are deeply concerned that, for too long, London has acted as a selfish city seeking to benefit itself at the expense of the people of Kent and the other home counties. It is not right for London to act like a "Hunger Games"-style capital seeking to subjugate the districts. We need fair rail services for Kent, Essex and the other home counties, and I urge the Secretary of State to carry on and to uphold his decision.

Chris Grayling: I assure my hon. Friend that I have every intention of doing so. This is a partnership arrangement that brings together London, Kent County Council and my Department to do the right thing for passengers. It is interesting that the Mayor could offer no proposals to expand capacity on these routes. I intend to bring forward proposals that do offer expanded capacity for passengers on those routes.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The Secretary of State's leaked letter reveals that he reneged on the suburban rail agreement because of his obsession with keeping services "out of the clutches" of a potential Labour Mayor—those are his words. He has put party politics ahead of passengers and clearly prefers to see trains running late than running on time under Labour. Will he now agree to an independent assessment of the proposal by a respected figure outwith his Department, given yesterday's revelations of conflicting commercial interests, to restore credibility to the process and ensure proper consideration of the needs of long-suffering passengers?

Chris Grayling: I cannot believe what I have just heard from the hon. Gentleman. He talks about putting party politics before passengers in the week when the Leader of the Opposition said that he would join a picket line to perpetuate the unnecessary strikes on Southern rail that are causing so much damage to passengers. I will not take the hon. Gentleman seriously until I hear him condemning those strikes and telling the workers to go back to work.

Cross-border Transport

3. **Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab):** What recent discussions he has had with Ministers of the Welsh Government on cross-border transport. [908117]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently met the Welsh Government's Cabinet

Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure, Mr Ken Skates. Their positive and useful discussion recognised the importance of cross-border transport and our commitment to deliver improvements, such as the investment we are making in the Halton curve.

Ian C. Lucas: The investment by the Welsh Government of £43 million in the Wrexham to Chester line, mainly in England, will lead to a partial dualling of that line by April this year. What more will it take to persuade the UK Conservative Government to match the Welsh Government's investment by investing in more transport infrastructure in that region, for which an unanswerable case has been made?

Andrew Jones: The Government are already investing significantly in our rail network—more than at any point since the Victorian era. The Mersey Dee rail taskforce has produced its growth prospectus—Growth Track 360—and it is working with the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). I understand that it is now prioritising its objectives, and we will continue to work closely with it.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): The case for reopening the station at Bristol Road, Stonehouse, has been well argued and firmly established. Does the Minister agree that that is exactly the kind of initiative we need to enhance links between Wales, Gloucestershire and the south-west of England?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point, and I agree with him.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the Halton curve; he will know that it is an important part of the cross-border links between my constituency and Wales. Will he confirm that the project is on time, and tell us the date on which it will be completed?

Andrew Jones: I will check the latest information and write to the hon. Gentleman, but my understanding is that it is exactly on time.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): As the Minister knows, the Operation Stack relief lorry park is vital for cross-border transport links between Kent and the continent. The owner of Westenhanger castle has been actively seeking a meeting with the Department for the past six weeks to discuss accessing the compensation package that he has agreed with Highways England, in return for which he will withdraw his application for a judicial review against the park. Will the Minister urge one of his ministerial colleagues to meet me and the owner of Westenhanger castle so that we can resolve this matter and get on with building the lorry park?

Mr Speaker: Focusing on cross-border matters relating to Wales would help.

Andrew Jones: That was a very entrepreneurial question, Mr Speaker. I can certainly confirm to my hon. Friend that the roads Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), will indeed meet him.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Government could do something about the cross-border position between the Rhondda valley and the upper Afan valley because they still own the tunnel that was used by the train from Treherbert down to Swansea. Will the Government please make sure that I can have the meeting with the Secretary of State for which I have been asking for several weeks to come up with innovative ideas so that this can become a major new cycle track?

Andrew Jones: I am afraid that my local knowledge of those tunnels has not kept pace with the hon. Gentleman's. All I can say is that I have heard his point and will take it forward with my colleagues.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Six lines radiate out from Chester, two of which are cross-border lines, hence the "360" in Growth Track 360. Chester is recognised as a pinch point within that railway development, so may I invite the Minister to have his next meeting on cross-border transport with Ken Skates in Chester so that he can see what preliminary work might be done before he presses ahead with the main work?

Andrew Jones: It is always delightful to visit the city of Chester, and I look forward to doing so.

Transport Infrastructure: Teesside

4. **Tom Blenkinsop** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What recent investment his Department has made in transport infrastructure in Teesside.
[908118]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (**Andrew Jones**): The Tees valley is benefiting from the Government's significant investment in transport infrastructure across the country. Most recently, we have agreed to fund the Tees valley authorities to develop their plans for a new Tees crossing and to improve connectivity from Teesport to the A1.

Tom Blenkinsop: I thank the Minister for his reply. Last week we received the welcome news that Tesco will be basing all its non-food warehousing at its existing centre in Teesport. Given that economic and employment boost for Teesside, will the Minister reciprocate by pledging full backing and funding for the A66 and a second Tees crossing, as called for by the Teesside combined authority?

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor committed to dualling the A66 in last year's autumn statement. On the new Tees crossing, we have provided funding to take the business case to the next stage. We will happily work with the area's local authorities. I recognise the importance of Teesport to the local economy and the value that a new Tees crossing would provide, so I am very keen to see that take shape.

High Speed 2: Costs

6. **Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): What recent estimate he has made of the cost to date of High Speed 2.
[908120]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

I am committed to managing the cost of HS2 and ensuring maximum value for the taxpayer. Total expenditure on HS2 in the period from 2009-10 to 2015-16 was £1.4 billion, of which £450 million was spent on land and property. The rest has ensured that HS2 is on track for delivery, and includes money for developing the scheme design, consulting affected communities, bringing the High Speed Rail (London – West Midlands) Bill to Parliament and developing HS2 Ltd. Figures for the current financial year will be available in the summer.

Mrs Gillan: The cost of HS2 is not just to the taxpayer but to those it affects. The House of Lords Select Committee on the HS2 Bill has recommended amending it to ensure that HS2 Ltd does not have a blanket power to compulsorily purchase land for regeneration or development, and to provide that it must limit its land acquisitions to what is needed for the scheme, particularly in relation to clause 48. As you know only too well, Mr Speaker, farmers, landowners and communities have been blighted for years by the scheme, and the threat of further compulsory purchase orders is truly worrying. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that he will accept the Committee's important and very welcome recommendation on clause 48 and alleviate the anxiety of those affected by this project?

Chris Grayling: First, on behalf of the Government, I thank all members of the House of Lords Select Committee for their work over the past few months. Indeed, I thank those who served on the equivalent Committee in this House, for whom this was a long and arduous task. We are carefully considering the Lords recommendations and we will publish our response shortly. If my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will save my detailed response for that publication, but I am looking extremely carefully at the recommendation to which she referred.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am sure the Secretary of State is aware that, with regard to the option to have a station in the centre of Sheffield, there is currently no money to get trains out of the station and north to Leeds, and there is no money to increase the station's capacity at the southern end to get better connectivity to trans-Pennine trains. There is even no money to electrify the line between Sheffield station and the main HS2 route. Does this not increasingly look like a cut-price option? Will he agree to meet local MPs and councillors, and other interested parties, to discuss these matters?

Chris Grayling: May I start by wishing the hon. Gentleman a happy birthday? [HON. MEMBERS: "For tomorrow."] For tomorrow. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), has indeed been involved in such discussions, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that the original proposal for a station at Meadowhall was opposed by the city council, which wanted the route to pass through the city centre. It is in response to pressure from within Sheffield that we have revisited those original plans, but I assure him that those discussions will continue.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that although the costs of the project need to be kept under control, the economic benefits it will

bring to areas such as Long Eaton in my constituency will far outweigh some of the costs that we are talking about today?

Chris Grayling: This is one of the key aspects of the development of this project, so my hon. Friend makes an important point. What is happening in the area around Long Eaton, and the new development of a station and surrounding facilities at Toton, will make a huge difference to her area. As she knows, we have been discussing how best to make sure that we get the right solution for Long Eaton, but we will continue to work for her constituents to reflect in the final design what works best for them.

Robert Ffello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Given what will be the eye-wateringly huge final costs of HS2, surely it makes sense to maximise the use of this asset, so will the Secretary of State tell us whether the line will be used 24 hours a day, seven days a week? If not, will the otherwise wasted capacity be used for freight—and if not, why not?

Chris Grayling: Of course the whole point about HS2 is that it releases capacity on the existing west coast main line for freight. As a result, I see the potential for significant increases in freight across the west coast main line area. As for timetabling, that is a matter for those who decide what is the best commercial proposition for that route, but we expect, and are planning for, very intensive use of the route across a wide variety of destinations, including Stoke-on-Trent.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend's last answer worries me slightly. Lichfield suffers all the disadvantages of having the line go through it and no station, because it is too small. I was hoping that he would say that the freeing up of capacity would mean that the west coast main line could have more trains stopping at Lichfield Trent Valley, but is that now not going to be the case, because the line will be blocked up with freight?

Chris Grayling: No, I think there will be room for both. The benefit of HS2 is that it provides an opportunity for more commuter trains, more intermediate trains and more services to places that do not currently receive them. By taking the fast trains off the west coast main line—trains that go straight up to places such as Manchester and Liverpool—more opportunity is provided for better services in places such as Lichfield and the Trent valley, which the current mix of services makes it difficult to achieve.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, you and the Minister will remember that when I said that the cost of HS2 would soar past £60 billion I was mocked, but it is now past £60 billion and rising. The chief executive has quit and the people in my constituency would like this folly to be stopped now, with the money—£60 billion and rising—put into saving the health service and into our local government, which is going bankrupt.

Chris Grayling: I hate to disappoint the hon. Gentleman but actually the plans for HS2 have been widely welcomed across the north of England. The project will make a

significant difference to the economy of his region. The point I would make to him about cost is that one reason why we are spending more money than is spent on equivalent lines in some other countries is because we are spending money on amelioration measures that minimise the impact on the environment.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): As well as updating the costs of the project, may I urge my right hon. Friend to update the economic benefits to communities such as mine in Milton Keynes, which, as he says, will benefit from a significant increase in commuter and inter-city traffic as a result of the release of capacity on the west coast line?

Chris Grayling: We will continue to provide information about the benefits of this project, but my hon. Friend is right to say that in places such as Milton Keynes—it is one of our most important growth areas, and it will need more commuter services north to south and east to west—the introduction of HS2 will make it possible to deliver a much better service for his constituents and others.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The Adam Smith Institute has warned that HS2 could end up costing up to £80 billion, which would equate to nine times more per mile than comparable high-speed tracks in France. How can the Government assure the public that the already sky-high costs of this project are not going to spiral even further out of control?

Chris Grayling: As I said, this is a choice; we want not only to deliver high-quality infrastructure for the future, but to do so in a way that is environmentally sensitive. That means spending money on tunnels, cuttings and things that other countries would perhaps choose not to do. I want to retain a careful stewardship of Britain's green and pleasant land while delivering what we need for the future, and that is what we are doing.

Access for All

7. **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of progress on delivery of Access for All projects by Network Rail. [908122]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): Since 2014, the Access for All programme has completed accessible routes at 25 stations, with 12 more currently in construction, and a further 52 at various stages of design and development.

Nigel Mills: The Minister will understand the real anger in Alfreton at the further delays in the Access for All programme at the station there, where many passengers still cannot use the southbound platform. Can he at least reassure them that the station will be prioritised in the next block of funding, so that the improvements are done in 2019?

Paul Maynard: We had to delay 26 Access for All projects into control period 6, one of which was, unfortunately, Alfreton, because the project there was less developed than others we were considering. Nevertheless, I can reassure my hon. Friend that I am

making it clear to Network Rail that I expect the improvements to be delivered early in control period 6, after 2019.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister recognise the importance of the maximum number of people being able to use our rail services? Why are schemes such as Access for All seen as expendable?

Paul Maynard: I certainly do not agree that they are regarded as expendable. We have reached a point at which roughly 70% of passenger journeys are from step-free access stations, of which there are roughly 450 throughout the network. The hon. Lady wrote to me regarding a station in her constituency, and I have asked my officials to look into that more closely to make sure we fully understand what has occurred there. I hope to reply to her soon.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The McNulty report said that the rail industry had to do more to operate efficiently and bring down costs. Will the Minister say what he is doing to persuade the rail industry to do that in relation to step-free access, so that it can be extended to more stations, such as New Barnet?

Paul Maynard: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. When we are looking at improving our accessibility projects throughout the network, we need to ensure that the solutions we come up with are cost-effective but not gold-plated. I am sure that when she was in my role she found what I find now, which is that sometimes projects come before us the cost of which can scarcely be justified and that the same outcome can be achieved much more cheaply.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Confusion and frustration abound in the Lawrence Hill area of my constituency, in relation to step-free access and other disability access improvements to the Lawrence Hill station. Local people have been frustrated by the works there, and rumours abound that they are being cancelled, postponed or just stopped. Will the Minister agree to meet me and visit Lawrence Hill station to talk to local residents about the situation? Preferably, he could clear the matter up right now.

Paul Maynard: I am not familiar with the exact details for that station, but I am more than happy to meet the hon. Lady to discover what is occurring there.

Rail: Accessibility

8. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What progress is being made on ensuring that trains and stations are fully accessible to disabled people. [908123]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): We are committed to improving accessibility on the rail network. Roughly 70% of train fleets operating passenger services currently meet modern accessibility standards, with work on the remaining vehicles due to be completed by 2020.

Kerry McCarthy: A moment ago, I was engrossed in the answer to the question asked by my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), as that issue also affects my constituency. I very much hope that we make progress on the Lawrence Hill and Stapleton Road stations.

On accessibility on trains, the Minister will be aware of the recent case of the Team GB Paralympian, Anne Wafula Strike. It was very brave of her to come forward and speak about what must have been a humiliating experience when no disabled-access toilet was available on the train. What is the Minister doing to ensure that situations like that do not occur and that disabled people are treated with respect?

Paul Maynard: I am glad that the hon. Lady brings up that case. I am sure she shared the same sentiments that I am sure every Member felt on reading that story: it was simply unacceptable. We have made it clear to CrossCountry, through officials, that it was not good enough, and I will reiterate that when I next speak to the company. More importantly, I want to ensure that we meet our target of every rail carriage, including the toilets, being fully accessible by 2020. In situations in which the accessible toilet is out of order, for whatever reason, either that carriage must be taken out of service or, if that would have unacceptable service consequences, any individual on the train who might need the accessible toilet must be made aware of the situation before boarding and thereby have the chance to make alternative arrangements.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Money was secured more than three years ago for step-free access, not only for disabled people but for all people, at Garforth train station. Network Rail has been stalling and delaying. I have secured a commitment to the printing of a poster advertising that the work will happen by May, but may I urge my hon. Friend to speak to Network Rail to get the work done as soon as possible? The money has been in place for three years; delays are not necessary.

Paul Maynard: I am more than happy to discuss the matter further with my hon. Friend. My initial understanding at this stage is that the works at Garforth, as indeed with many on the trans-Pennine routes, are interlinked with the upgrades we are planning on the trans-Pennine network. I am happy to have a further discussion with him.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): Last Friday, a disabled wheelchair user, Sandra Nighy, on Southern was left stranded on the train platform in the freezing cold for two hours because there was no one to help her on to the train despite booking assistance 48 hours in advance. She was on an unmanned station, and the trains that passed her by were driver-only with no on-board supervisor. The law is absolutely clear: train operating companies must provide reasonable access for disabled passengers. Does the Minister agree that the failure to do so strips disabled passengers of their dignity and of their right to travel and breaches the Disability Discrimination Act 1995?

Paul Maynard: I am glad that the hon. Lady raises that case. When I heard about it, my interpretation was that, in this case, Southern had not applied the policies that it said were in place for all disabled passengers. The issue

is that the situation was far worse because the lady in question booked through Passenger Assist, so the company had plenty of notice that she was on her way. However, under the unions' proposals, that train would have been cancelled in the first place and unable to depart.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Access for so many disabled and particularly elderly passengers is dependent on advice that can be had from ticket offices. In that respect, can the Minister give me any reassurance about proposals to close the ticket office in God's own town of New Milton?

Paul Maynard: I am not specifically familiar with proposals in New Milton. But I see no reason why we should have fewer people employed in our stations over the coming years, but the roles that they discharge need to be broadened out to involve helping more passengers, not fewer.

Penalty Fares

9. Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the use of the Strategic Rail Authority's penalty fare rules 2002 by train operating companies on staff meeting revenue targets; and if he will make a statement. [908125]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): Train operators are permitted to use penalty fare schemes to deter fare evasion, while allowing inspectors to apply discretion when dealing with passengers. In December 2016, the Department announced planned improvements to the penalty fares regime by including a new third stage independent appeals panel. This and all existing appeals bodies will be independent of train operators and owning groups.

Will Quince: I thank the Minister for that response. Does he agree that train operating companies should not be putting their staff under undue pressure to issue penalty fares? Will he commit to look at the rules to ensure that discretion is always an option where appropriate?

Paul Maynard: I understand the point that my hon. Friend seeks to make. Although revenue protection is very important on our railways, so, too, is proportionality and discretion, hence the changes that I have made not just to the appeals regime, but to the fares and ticketing action plan that I announced last month. For example, those who forget their railcards now have more option to ensure that they are not unfairly penalised. I am more than happy to meet him to discuss his concerns further.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Ticketless travel and fare dodging is one of many issues on the Chase line. I experienced it at first hand when I joined the London Midland revenue protection team last month. The £20 penalty is insufficient to deter fare dodging. Will my hon. Friend agree to review penalty fares, so that they do become an effective deterrent?

Paul Maynard: I am more than aware of the sterling work that my hon. Friend has done to further the cause of revenue protection by checking tickets on the Chase line, on which I congratulate her. She is quite right that

there are concerns within the industry that the penalty fares are set too low. At the moment, I am focusing on reviewing the appeals system to make sure that it is fair and proportionate, and discretion has a role to play. I will keep penalty fares under review.

Wales and Borders: Rail Franchise

10. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What his plans are for the next rail franchise for Wales and Borders; and if he will make a statement. [908126]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): It has been agreed in principle that Welsh Government Ministers will procure and manage the next Wales and Borders rail franchise. My Department is working closely with the Welsh Government to ensure the appropriate transfer of the necessary powers. However, I want to make it absolutely clear that, as part of those arrangements, we are ensuring that the train services and stations used by passengers in England are protected and, importantly, treated consistently with those in Wales, both during this procurement process and across the whole life of the franchise.

Daniel Kawczynski: That is a very welcome answer from the Secretary of State. We have briefed him about the extraordinary overcrowding on Arriva trains over the past few years, particularly in the summer months—with the windows sealed and a lot of people cramming into the carriages, it has been intolerable. Will he ensure that the next franchise accommodates the levels required for passengers to travel safely and more services from Shrewsbury to Birmingham airport?

Chris Grayling: I am aware of the capacity issues on the Wales and the Borders franchise and, indeed, on the CrossCountry franchise. One of the challenges, owing to the rapid growth in recent years, is that there are not enough diesel trains to go around at the moment. I had the great pleasure of being at Newton Aycliffe in County Durham for the launch of the first new hybrid train to be manufactured there. That will open up the opportunity for us to deliver significant change to rolling stock across our network, and will enable us to address many of the overcrowding challenges to which my hon. Friend refers.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will be aware that he decided last October to devolve the cross-border franchise to the Welsh Government, but current legislation does not allow a public sector organisation to bid for the new franchise. Will he think again and allow public sector organisations the ability to bid for the franchise, to allow the public the best possible service when it begins?

Chris Grayling: The Labour party is keen on renationalising our railways. What I would remind it is that if its policies were implemented we would lose the ability to deliver the new trains that are being delivered right across this country, paid for by private sector investment. What Labour Members are calling for is turning back the clock and having older trains on our network. I am afraid that that is not my view.

Rail Franchising: Public Sector

11. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): What plans he has for the future role of the public sector as a result of the development of rail franchising policy. [908128]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Franchising has been instrumental in improving the railways for passengers and as part of the enormous growth in rail usage since privatisation 20 years ago. Our approach to rail reform is about delivering an improved service for passengers through better teamwork between Network Rail and passenger rail franchises, and making Network Rail more customer focused by giving more power to its local route managers.

Clive Efford: We now know that the Secretary of State is putting politics before the interests of passengers, and he is taking a dogmatic approach by ignoring what could improve our railway system. He has refused to allow the Mayor of London to take over suburban services, in spite of the fact that his predecessor thought that that was a good idea. The public are in favour of public ownership: 58% of people polled by Transport for London are in favour of the Mayor having greater control over suburban services and only 14% support his position. Is it not time that public ownership of our railways was considered by the Government, and are not the public in favour of it?

Chris Grayling: It is hardly a surprise that Conservative Members for constituencies outside London have doubts about a Labour Mayor inside London running local services, particularly when the Mayor delivered a business plan that did not offer improved capacity and was founded on a lot of uncashed promises. So far from this Mayor, we have seen a fare freeze that was not a fare freeze and a London of no rail strikes with a rail strike last Monday. I do not take the Mayor's promises at face value, I am afraid. We have taken a partnership approach that also listens to the people of Kent, who are equally important in this franchise and said they should be equal partners with the people of London in designing it.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): In 1993, the public sector British Rail withdrew services on the Cleethorpes to Sheffield line, making it a Saturdays-only service, which means that people in Gainsborough, Brigg and such towns cannot get to Cleethorpes to enjoy all that it has to offer. As yet, the private sector has not seen fit to restore that service to six days a week. Will the Secretary of State or one of his Ministers meet me and Members for neighbouring constituencies to discuss the issue?

Chris Grayling: We are always happy to talk to my hon. Friend, who remains a doughty champion of his constituency, but he is right to make the point that if we turned the clock back 30 or 40 years to the days of British Rail, the debate in the House today would be about line closures, station closures and a reduction in services. Today, the issues are overcrowding due to numbers rising so fast, new stations, improved facilities and new trains. That is the difference between the policies we have followed and the policies Labour Members want to follow.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The Government's franchising policy lies in tatters, with desperate attempts to retrofit contracts to protect operators' profits and, as revealed yesterday, National Express taking the money and running, selling the c2c franchise to the Italian state. The Secretary of State's director of passenger services awarded the disastrous Southern franchise, while owning shares in the company and advising the winner bidder. The country has had enough of these sleazy deals. Is it not way past time for franchising to be scrapped and the UK rail industry to be revitalised through public ownership?

Chris Grayling: The clock ticks ever backwards. The Opposition do not want inward investment or private sector investment in our railways, but, of course, we still do not hear from them any words on behalf of passengers about the strikes. The Labour party takes money from the rail unions and defends them when they are on strike, no matter what the inconvenience to passengers is. The Opposition are a disgrace. They should stand up and say that these strikes should stop. I will say one thing about the Mayor of London: at least he had the wit and wisdom this week to say that the strikes are wrong. I hear nothing from the hon. Gentleman about the strikes being wrong.

Ultra-low Emission Vehicles

12. **Craig Whittaker** (Calder Valley) (Con): What progress has been made in encouraging the use of ultra-low emission vehicles. [908129]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah, we are blessed.

Mr Hayes: Mr Speaker, I waited to rise to build excited anticipation. We want the UK to be the world leader in the take-up and manufacture of ultra-low emission vehicles. Last year, more ultra-low emission vehicles were sold in the UK than in any other country in Europe.

Craig Whittaker: The British built Nissan Leaf continues to be one of the most popular electric cars in the world, but what are the Government doing to support the uptake of other types of vehicles?

Mr Hayes: Like Cicero, we believe that the good of the people is the chief law, so it is for public wellbeing that we want to see low emissions from all types of vehicles. Just yesterday, I announced the results of the low emission freight and logistics trial, which will see the Government providing no less than £24 million to help place about 300 low and zero-emission vehicles into commercial fleets across the UK.

Mr Speaker: One rather wonders whether the results of the trial were communicated to the right hon. Gentleman's hero, Cicero.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The Minister says that he wants to see emissions reduced in all types of vehicles, so will he explain to the House why just 160,000 of the polluting cheat devices in Volkswagen

cars have been remediated out of the 1.2 million cheat devices that are currently on the roads in the UK? At this rate of reparation, it will take three years to clean up Volkswagen's dirty diesel cheat devices.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady is right. Volkswagen needs to do more, which is why I am going to meet its representatives at the beginning of next week to tell them exactly that. I insisted that the company paid £1.1 million, which we received on Christmas eve—I demanded it as a Christmas present—because that was the money that taxpayers had to spend as a result of the emissions scandal.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I am sorry to say that, since Transport questions began, news broke in my constituency that another person has lost their life as a result of a fatal car accident. I hope that the Minister and the House will join me in offering condolences to the family and friends of the victim.

I welcome the fact that the Government will be doing an awful lot more to encourage the use of ultra-low emission vehicles. However, councils such as mine want to introduce a low emission zone, and they will struggle to introduce electric car charging points and new enforcement cameras without planning and regulatory changes. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that these issues will be at the top of his agenda with the Department for Communities and Local Government?

Mr Hayes: To start with—road safety is a concern of the whole House. My hon. Friend was right to mention the tragedy that he did.

Charging points are vital. One of the great challenges for industry and Government is to ensure that there are adequate numbers of charging points across the whole country. That particularly applies in rural areas such as the one I represent. There may be a need for legislative change to that effect, and we are considering that. We are introducing a modern transport Bill, in which we will address the issue of charging points.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will any Volkswagen executives face criminal damages here for the diesel emissions scandal?

Mr Hayes: I hold no candle for those businesses that do not do right by consumers or, by the way, by their workers. The actions that have taken place in the United States, which I guess is what the hon. Gentleman is referring to and the actions that are being considered by Volkswagen customers oblige the Government to think again about what further steps we can take, and we are doing so. I have not ruled out a further investigation. I will discuss that with the Secretary of State and raise it with Volkswagen at the meeting I described.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Constituents tell me that one of the barriers to their buying electric vehicles is the complexity and variety of public charging facilities, which require them to carry numerous cards and forms of payment. Does the Minister have any plans to bring some regulation to this market to simplify it and make it more accessible and to encourage more people to purchase electric cars?

Mr Hayes: Indeed. Was it not Ronald Reagan who said that the future does not belong to the fainthearted? We must be big-hearted and far-sighted in respect of electric vehicles, and that does mean more charging points. We will create a regulatory regime sufficient to provide those charging points and, therefore, to assuage the public doubts to which my hon. Friend has drawn the House's attention.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): Despite all the inducements, only 3% of new car sales are of electric cars. Should the Minister be doing more to encourage liquefied petroleum gas switching or hydrogen fuel cell cars?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman will know about our Go Ultra Low campaign, which is match funded by industry, and which is designed to encourage the kind of learning he described. We need to persuade people that that switching is desirable. It is partly about charging points, partly about battery reliability and partly about people simply knowing that electric vehicles can be good for them. We will continue that campaign in exactly the spirit he recommends.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): The VW emissions defeat device cynically deceived 1.2 million vehicle owners in the UK, and I declare that I am one of them. I am delighted that the Minister is going to have VW in next week, because drivers in the UK are being treated unfairly compared with VW drivers in the US. In the absence of any action by the Government so far, UK motorists are having to pursue private group litigation against VW. I want the Minister to understand how badly let down UK VW drivers feel because it appears that the Government are letting VW off the hook, although I hope that that is not the case. Will he, even at this late stage, offer support to the motorists in the UK pursuing their own action?

Mr Hayes: Yes. I am actually on the same page as the hon. Lady. By the way, I am glad we have moved on from the belligerent bombast of earlier—I do not think it did the Opposition any favours—and she makes her case reasonably. There is a case for further steps. That is partly about the retrofit described earlier by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), it is partly about the payment of taxpayer money I described, and it is partly about the consumer. We should consider further steps and, having considered them, take them as and when necessary.

Road Infrastructure and Capacity: North-West

14. **Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab):** What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of road infrastructure and capacity in the north-west.

[908131]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): The Government recently published three strategic studies into long-standing transport challenges in the north-west and have committed to major investment based on the findings. Highways England's route strategies—by the way, I set up Highways England on my last visit to the Department—have assessed the performance of the strategic roads network and the pressures it faces. Three strategic studies relate to the north-west. Refreshed

versions, drawing on the evidence submitted by local stakeholders last year, will be published, and I think they should be published soon, so let us make it March—we will publish them then.

Conor McGinn: In 2014, the roads investment strategy proposed nine new projects in the north-west, but, to date, the plans for just one of them have been announced, while the Government spend six times more on transport infrastructure in London than in the north. How does the Minister think the whole northern powerhouse thing is going, because, when it comes to transport, like much of the traffic in St Helens, it seems to be going nowhere and not very fast?

Mr Hayes: I do not think that is typical of the hon. Gentleman—at least, I hope it is not—because he is being ungenerous and, to some degree, might I say, not admitting all he knows. For surely he will know of the A570 linkway, valued at £3.2 million—that is in St Helens, by the way. He will know of the Windle Island junction improvements, valued at £3.2 million—again in St Helens. He will also know of the Newton-le-Willows interchange, valued at £14.4 million. We are not only acting in the north-west but in his constituency, and he does not want to tell us about it.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. This question is about the north-west of England. I am not a geographer, but I say to the hon. Lady that last time I looked, it seemed to me that Taunton Deane was rather a long way from the north-west of England.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): It is the surface of the roads in the north-west within the existing infrastructure that worries me; it is a bit like driving on the surface of the moon at times. Where county councils fail to tackle the problem of the plague of potholes that besets motorists in the north-west, will the Minister be imaginative and look at ways whereby district councils could bid for the money that the Government make available so that they can tackle this problem?

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend is right that the noise and disturbance from poor road surfaces has a significant effect on the journeys of those who use cars and trucks. As he knows, I have been in the north-west in a vehicle with him—an open-top vehicle, I hasten to add—waving to his constituents. I know how important road surfaces are, so I will certainly look at his suggestion, not only for the north-west but across the whole nation.

Topical Questions

T1. [908105] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): As you will be aware, Mr Speaker, I have said in this House and elsewhere that I am very committed to improving the transport situation in the south-west, and I am pleased today to announce a new phase in our £7 billion plan for that region. We are launching the next stage of the formal consultation on a major upgrade to the A303—the main A road into Devon and Cornwall. This involves the development of the 1.8-mile tunnel past Stonehenge, which will protect that world heritage

site from traffic, reduce local congestion, and speed up journeys to and from the region. We will now be talking to local people to the west of that tunnel about precisely which route it should take around the village immediately to the left. In addition, we are committed to upgrading the remaining sections of the A303 between the M3 and the M5 to dual carriageway. The next step will be public consultations on the A303 Sparkford to Ilchester and A358 Taunton to Southfields schemes that will come very shortly.

Tom Pursglove: A 79-year-old constituent has been repeatedly refused car hire contracts by leading rental companies. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of any restrictions that are being placed on OAPs by these rental companies?

Chris Grayling: I understand my hon. Friend's concern. This is a very difficult issue. The Equality Act 2010 provides general protection against age discrimination for people of all ages, but there is an exemption for a person conducting an assessment of risk for the purposes of providing a financial service to another person. My Department has not made the assessment that my hon. Friend describes, but I encourage his constituent to contact the British Vehicle Rental and Leasing Association, which should be able to help him in identifying a suitable provider.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): An icy chill is about to descend on parts of the country. That is not an impending DFT ministerial visit, I hasten to add—it is of course the impending weather front. Will the Secretary of State tell us about the state of preparations for gritting our roads in the coming days? What discussions has he had with his colleagues and those in local government to ensure that at least our roads run more smoothly than our railways?

Chris Grayling: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that there was no icy chill last time I visited Cambridge, when he and I were there for the first bit of work, albeit a rather small bit of work with a spade, on the A14 project, which will make a big difference to Cambridge. My ministerial team and I have had detailed discussions about this in recent weeks, and the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), has been in regular contact with local authorities. We have in this country, if not a salt mountain, plenty of salt and plenty of grit. We estimate that we have what is necessary to cope with the winter ahead, but we will obviously keep that under review.

Daniel Zeichner: I thank the Secretary of State; let us hope that we are well prepared. Taking him back to the time just before Christmas, given that soon after his visit to Cambridge he told the *Evening Standard* that cycle lanes cause problems for road users, will he clarify exactly who he thinks road users are? While he is thinking about cyclists—a helpful clue—could he explain why it is taking such an extraordinarily long time to produce a cycling and walking investment strategy?

Chris Grayling: Cyclists use cycle lanes, and motorists and other road users use the roads alongside them. That is fairly straightforward, to be honest. If the hon. Gentleman is eagerly anticipating our cycling and walking strategy, he does not have long to wait.

T2. [908106] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Will the Minister of State's inspirational words about beauty be matched by the deeds of Highways England?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): It does not surprise me that my right hon. Friend has drawn attention to my rapturously received and beautifully articulated speech on beauty. He is right to say that we now need action. We have established a design panel at Highways England, and in a few weeks' time we will produce a new design guide. It will dismay all the crass modernists and harsh brutalists, but it will delight all those who believe that our public infrastructure can be stylish and elegant as well as deliver the necessary utility. My role is only this: to rediscover the age-old golden thread with which all of that will be woven.

Mr Speaker: Almost as stylish and elegant as the right hon. Gentleman, I do not doubt.

T3. [908107] **Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), is as frustrated as I am by the constant delays to the tram-train project between Sheffield and Rotherham. Will he confirm that passenger services will start next year? Will he also give a date by which lessons can be learned from that project and rolled out across the country? Will he give particular consideration to the availability of hybrid tram-trains, which would mean that the vehicles could run on non-electrified heavy rail routes?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about hybrid tram-trains and I will look into it. As far as I am aware, the project is on track and on schedule, but I am particularly keen to understand the lessons that can be learned from it, to make sure that any projects elsewhere are done properly and to time the first time around.

T6. [908111] **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): The excellent report "The Free Ports Opportunity", written by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), sets out the possibilities for UK ports to become free ports, post-Brexit. It estimates that that could create 86,000 jobs in the UK. Will the Minister of State outline the possibilities for ports such as that in Newhaven in my constituency to become free ports, post-Brexit?

Mr John Hayes: I have with me the report to which my hon. Friend refers. It is an excellent piece of work, and I have already arranged to meet its author. I initiated the maritime growth study when I was last in the Department, but it is time to refresh that. It must be a living document. As part of that exercise, we will consider the role of ports now that we are freed from the clutches of the European Union. My ambitions are, as ever, measured and modest: I seek nothing more than for Britannia to rule the waves.

T4. [908108] **Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): Ministers will be aware of the comments in Public Health England's recent alcohol evidence review that drinking alcohol up to England's drink-drive limit increases

the risks of fatal accidents by 13 times. We have the highest drink-drive limit of any country in Europe except for Malta, so will the Government look again at reducing the limit as a matter of urgency, in line with the views of the Police Federation, the RAC, the House of Lords, the Fire Brigades Union and 77% of the public?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): We have no plans to review the drink-drive limit. The level of 80 mg per 100 ml of blood is one of the higher ones, but no country has a better record than us on road safety and improving performance in tackling drink-driving. Taken together, it is the combination of the right limit and enforcement and the cultural belief that drink-driving is wrong that makes progress.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Before Christmas, a parent at Morley Primary School in my constituency was badly injured when driving in the school's vicinity, because another car was going too fast, which is a regular occurrence. I have consistently requested that the county council change the speed limit and move the signs—only move them—but it consistently refuses to do so because, it says, nobody has been killed yet. I do not want a child, parent or anybody else to be killed. Is there any way that the Minister can change the criteria by which councils decide to change such speed limits?

Mr Speaker: Let's hear from the fella.

Andrew Jones: Local authorities already have the powers to introduce lower speed limits where they think it is appropriate. I think that that should apply especially around schools. The decision does not have to be a reactive one—waiting until something happens—and it is inappropriate to think in such a way. I suggest that I write to the Highways Authority in Derbyshire to highlight the powers that it already has. My right hon. Friend the Minister responsible for roads will visit my hon. Friend's constituency in a fortnight or so to discuss roads, so perhaps she could pick the matter up with him then.

T7. [908113] **George Kerevan** (East Lothian) (SNP): Brexit will cause a dangerous free-for-all in cabotage. Will the Minister agree to meet the Scottish Government to consider how to avoid that?

Chris Grayling: I think we are some way away from that. Discussions have to take place between our Government and the European Union on arrangements post-Brexit. They will take place, and we will inform the House of progress on the matter in due course.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): A start has been made in the first road investment strategy on upgrading the A47 from Lowestoft to the A1. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm that he will work with me and other East Anglian colleagues on the second road investment strategy to ensure that this good work continues.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend will know that we managed to achieve what he wanted in respect of the bridge in his constituency, but he is right that we need to do more in respect of RIS2. To his customary eloquence and commitment he has added prophetic powers, because

just this morning I am writing to all the colleagues he describes inviting them to participate in that process. This will be for the people and shaped by the people's representatives.

T8. [908114] **Richard Arkless** (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): The A75 in my constituency benefits from Euro-route designation. Will the Secretary of State assure my constituents that he will support the continued designation of Euro-routes after the UK leaves the European Union?

Chris Grayling: I have to confess that I have never heard anyone in this country, north or south of the border, refer to an A road in the United Kingdom as a Euro-route. If they cease to be Euro-routes after we leave the European Union, I suspect that we will be able to count the number of people who miss that on the fingers of one hand.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I declare an interest as a daily commuter on the east coast main line, which is a very well run strategic route. Service outages, infrequent as they are, can be very disruptive. May I ask the Minister to prevail on train operating companies and Network Rail to improve communications with passengers in real time, to ensure that passengers are made aware of these problems and can make alternative arrangements as necessary?

Paul Maynard: It is entirely right to say that passenger information during disruption is something that all train operating companies and Network Rail need to improve. Not only do we need a single source of information that is consistent, but it needs to provide the most up-to-date information. It is not acceptable for people who have checked their phones on leaving home and thought that their train was on time to find, by the time they get to the station, that the train has been cancelled. That is not good enough.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State reject the new proposal of a spur line from HS2 in the constituency of Bolsover between Hilcote and Morton? Not only will it cut the Blackwell council in two, but it will destroy scores of houses in the village of Newton. Will he have a look at the letter I have sent him, in order to pacify the people of Blackwell about this mad idea?

Chris Grayling: Of course I will. I have taken a close interest in the eastern leg, and I have been up and down most of the route myself. I am very keen that we deliver the economic benefits, but that we do so in the way that works best for local communities. I am happy to take a look at the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It has been yet another week of misery for hundreds of thousands of passengers on Southern rail. Given that the unions have received guarantees on jobs, on pay and—from the independent rail safety regulator—on safety, would the Government now support Conservative proposals to limit strikes, or at least the impact of strikes, via legislation?

Chris Grayling: There is a lot of interest in the matter, and a lot of calls have been made for such measures to be taken. We are considering carefully how we approach future issues. Of course, nothing in legislative terms

would solve the current dispute. I think my hon. Friend will join me in expressing the disappointment of Conservative Members about the fact that we have not heard from the Opposition today one word of regret or condemnation, and not one call for the unions to go back to work. They just do not care.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The RAC has estimated that drivers have been over-charged by hundreds of millions of pounds owing to over-zealous enforcement by private car parks. Requiring operators to sign up to accredited trade associations would help to stop that type of behaviour. Does the Secretary of State agree that having all companies sign up would ensure that their business models were based on fair treatment of the motorist?

Andrew Jones: I will happily look into the matter that the hon. Lady raises. It is actually the responsibility of the Department for Communities and Local Government, but I will take it up with my ministerial colleagues.

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): In view of the increasing number of passengers and employees using Stansted airport, the growth of the Cambridge biomedical campus, the prospect of Crossrail 2, the announcement of major housing developments and the welcome prospect of new, high-performance trains, what plans has my hon. Friend for increasing track capacity on the West Anglia line to take advantage of those factors?

Paul Maynard: My right hon. Friend is right to raise all those factors. He will know of the important work that the taskforce has done. We are also looking at timetabling, to which I hope he can make substantial contribution. He is right to raise the matter and we are looking at it very closely. Control period 6 announcements are on the way and I hope that his concerns will be reflected in them.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): This time two years ago, when the Blackpool North electrification scheme faced delays and the rail Minister was a Back Bencher, he rightly demanded answers from Ministers. There is now real concern that the electrification of the midland main line will be further postponed or even cancelled north of Corby and Kettering. Will the Minister provide the House with the clarity that he sought for his constituency and give an unequivocal assurance that this key Conservative manifesto promise will not be broken?

Paul Maynard: We are continuing to work towards the key outputs that matter most to passengers. I recognise the importance of the network, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) will work on a cross-party basis to identify the key regional priorities that we want to be reflected in the new franchise. I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood).

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): In Broxtowe, there is widespread and cross-party support for HS2. Of course, we get the east midlands hub at Towton, but there is still concern about the route. Will my right hon. Friend assure residents in Trowell, Strelley Village and Nuthall

that their voices will be listened to and that, if necessary, changes to the route will be made without affecting the timetable for delivery?

Chris Grayling: I can absolutely give my right hon. Friend that commitment, as I did to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) a moment ago. The route will bring huge benefits to the east midlands and to Yorkshire, including the areas around Sheffield, but I want to make it clear that we will be as thoughtful and careful as we can about the detail of the route. The reason for the consultation is that it gives us a chance to listen to those views, and we will.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Mr Speaker, you will be aware of the Vauxhall car fire scandal. Last month, I hosted in the House of Commons around 25 people who had been affected, and heard about traumatised children and how the incidents led to increases in insurance excesses and cost families thousands of pounds. Will a Minister agree to meet not me—I am not interested in meeting Ministers myself—but the families of those affected?

Andrew Jones: I am aware of the issue and the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency is taking action with Vauxhall to remedy the situation. I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and some of the families affected.

Mr Speaker: Finally, Mr Nuttall.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend provide an update on the progress of plans for a new cross-Pennine road link?

Chris Grayling: As my hon. Friend will know, we have recently announced plans to dual the A66. We are currently waiting for the conclusion of the work on the potential for a trans-Pennine tunnel. I give my hon. Friend an absolute assurance that whether or not it is recommended that that work go ahead, our commitment to delivering trans-Pennine improvements will not be affected in any way by the outcome of that study.

Business of the House

10.39 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The business for the next week is as follows:

MONDAY 16 JANUARY—Second Reading of the National Citizen Service Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 17 JANUARY—Opposition day (18th allotted day). There will be a debate entitled “Impact of leaving the EU on the rural economy”, followed by a debate entitled “Impact of Department for Work and Pensions policies on low income households”. Both debates will arise on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party.

WEDNESDAY 18 JANUARY—General debate on exiting the EU and security, law enforcement and criminal justice.

THURSDAY 19 JANUARY—Debate on a motion relating to Kashmir, followed by a general debate on Holocaust Memorial Day 2017. Both debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 20 JANUARY—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 23 January will include:

MONDAY 23 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Local Government Finance Bill.

TUESDAY 24 JANUARY—Consideration of Lords amendments followed by a motion relating to the charter for budget responsibility.

WEDNESDAY 25 JANUARY—Opposition day (19th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 26 JANUARY—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 27 JANUARY—Private Members’ Bills.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 19 January will be:

THURSDAY 19 JANUARY—General debate on decommissioning of in vitro fertilisation and other NHS fertility services.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business, although I am concerned that it appears we are not going to rise for the summer recess. We still do not have a date. I warn everyone to be prepared to work through the summer. I wish Members and staff a very happy new year. We are going to need all the wisdom and strength we can get for the task ahead.

Following on from your remarks, Mr Speaker, hon. Members have raised with me the issue of extending the time for Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions. Never before has the reasonable voice of Britain been so needed in international affairs. Questions could just be extended by an hour. We have excellent diplomats with institutional memory who can make a big difference in the world.

May I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to two reports from the Procedure Committee that may have got lost in the Christmas revelry? The press release for the report published on 18 October had the headline:

“Procedure Committee rails ‘against handouts and talked out’ Private Member’s Bill”. Sadly, there was a further incident on Friday 16 December, in relation to a private Member’s Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford), when one speech took one hour and 17 minutes. The vote, with 133 Ayes to 2 Noes, showed the will of the House to be clearly in favour of the Bill. It cannot be right, therefore, that Members who wanted to speak in favour of the Bill could not do so.

One of the report’s recommendations is that you, Mr Speaker, invoke Standing Order 47, which would put a time limit on the consideration of private Members’ Bills. Since I have been in the House, this Standing Order has been used in every single debate apart from on Fridays. In a letter to the Clerk of the House, the Chair of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), indicates that this change may need a resolution of the House. A further report of the Procedure Committee, on 14 December 2016, recommended the use of Welsh at Westminster in the Welsh Grand Committee. This was suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), who indicated to me that it is cheaper to do that here. The Official Reporters say there would be no problem with that. Rather than eat into Back-Bench time, could those two resolutions be taken together in Government time?

We need clarification on the waiting time target. Is it for urgent or non-urgent cases? Earlier this week on a radio programme, the Secretary of State for Health said that Simons Stevens is running the NHS. May we have confirmation that it is the Secretary of State who is running the NHS? We had the bizarre scene of the Secretary of State running down the road. I thought he was doing his 30 minutes’ activity as required by the Health Department, but he then jumped into his car. Having served on the Health Committee for five years, I know about the chaos of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. In an unprecedented move, the passage of the Bill was paused by the then Prime Minister. The shadow Secretary of State for Health has written to the Secretary of State for Health with 25 questions. Will the Leader of the House provide those answers within the target time?

Returning to Brexit, a report before Christmas from the other place, “Brexit: financial services”, confirmed that London was ranked as the leading financial services sector in the world and called for a transition period to protect jobs. Page 3, paragraph 2, in the summary of a report by the Environmental Audit Committee, states:

“The Prime Minister has indicated that the UK is likely to leave the single European market and the Customs Union.”

I had not understood that to be settled Government policy. That is why we need these proper debates. The EAC calls for a new environmental protection Act while negotiations are ongoing and a list of zombie legislation—legislation transposed into British law but not updated. It is possible that the confusion has arisen because the Departments have proliferated like amoebae. It cannot be right that, according to figures from the House of Commons Library in December 2016, the Department for Exiting the European Union has only 300 staff, while the Department for International Trade has 2,709 staff. DEXEU is getting £94 million a year, while £26 million

[Valerie Vaz]

is going to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and DIT, but DIT has taken staff from the FCO. We need clarity.

We, Her Majesty's Opposition, have a proposal. In view of the judgment about to be handed down by the Supreme Court on the triggering of article 50 at the end of March, the Leader of the House should consider a review of what each Department does, because the British public will never forgive this Government if they see people dying on trolleys while vanity Departments are set up to keep hon. Members inside the tent rather than outside it. The task before us is enormous, but we need to remember the reasons we joined the EU and why there was a vote to leave. That way, all views can be respected and we can negotiate from a position that protects jobs, workers' rights, the environment and our security. We need to do what is best for the UK, not base our approach on the rhetoric of the campaign and a clueless Government.

Mr Lidington: I join the hon. Lady in wishing you, Mr Speaker, and House of Commons staff a happy new year.

The hon. Lady mentioned the duration of Foreign Office questions. I accept that there is a great deal of demand from Members across the House to put questions to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and his team, but in fairness I think she will acknowledge that there have also been several opportunities to question Foreign Office Ministers when they have volunteered oral statements, responded to urgent questions, spoken at Backbench Business Committee debates here, as is happening again later today and next week, on Kashmir, and in Westminster Hall. It has always been the case, since I have been in the House, that the allocation of time for questions between different Departments has been a matter for discussion within the usual channels. If the Opposition want to put forward ideas, obviously the Government will look at them, but in fairness one has to say that if time were added to Foreign Office questions, it would have to be subtracted from some other House business, and that needs to be weighed in the balance too.

On the Procedure Committee, the very last thing I would accuse my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) of is ranting. Whether I have agreed with him or not on particular issues, he has always expressed his views in a civilised manner, and the Government will respond to the Committee's report in the way we do to other Select Committee reports.

The hon. Lady made various points about exiting the EU. On article 50 and the changes within Whitehall, we must not underestimate the reality that the decision the electorate took in the referendum represented a profound and far-reaching change to the policies pursued by successive Governments and to the character of the UK's international relationships, which for half a century have been built very much around our membership—whether aspiring to it or operating within it—of the EU. It seems perfectly reasonable that, in those circumstances, there should be a reconfiguration of resources and Departments in Whitehall to deal with the complex task of handling the negotiations that lie before us. It is not just the Department for Exiting the

European Union that is involved. Many Departments throughout the Government are also involved, at ministerial and official level. On the question of the single market and the customs union, let me repeat what the Prime Minister has often said: one of the core objectives of our negotiation will be to achieve the best possible freedom for British companies to continue to operate within, and trade with, the single European market.

The hon. Lady's request for an early reply to the questions asked by her hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) will obviously have been noted by the Ministers concerned, and I will ensure that it is properly reported to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. As for waiting time targets, the Secretary of State made very clear during yesterday's debate that we continued to be committed to the four-hour target, and that we took pride in it.

It is worth noting that despite the pressures being experienced this winter, NHS staff, through their immense professionalism and hard work, have been treating record numbers of patients at A&E departments in hospitals throughout the United Kingdom. It is also the case, however, that NHS England's director of acute care has estimated that about 30% of the people who currently present themselves at A&E departments really ought to be seen elsewhere in the NHS, or might even benefit from self-treatment at home. It seems sensible for us to think actively—in terms of national policy but also, critically, in terms of local NHS organisations—about how we can provide alternative sources of advice and routes to treatment for people who do not actually need specific A&E services.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Government must be applauded for making it a manifesto promise to leave the environment in a better state than the one in which we found it. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the environment, on the potential opportunities presented to us to become world leaders on the issue, and on the technologies related to it—for example, the tidal lagoon technology that is mentioned in the press this morning? If we are to deliver more for less, increasing productivity and resilience in line with our industrial strategy, the environment must become a cornerstone of our social and economic thinking.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I cannot offer an early debate in Government time, although she may find that this is a subject in which the Backbench Business Committee takes an interest; alternatively, there may be an opportunity for a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall. However, I think that the Government will want to pay close attention to the report that has been published today by our former colleague Charles Hendry. I hope the House will welcome the news that last year was the first year on record in which more electricity in this country was generated from renewables than from coal: that was a good step forward.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week's business.

I wish you, Mr Speaker, all hon. Members, and all the staff who serve us so well a happy new year. It is a new year in which there is now a maximum of 10 weeks before the Government trigger article 50, as is their

intention, but we still do not have a Scooby about what type of article 50 and Brexit plan they have in mind for us. The only Government who have attempted to come up with any Brexit solution are the Scottish Government, who are endeavouring to stay in line with the views of the people of Scotland. Will the Leader of the House tell us what type of debates we shall have on the triggering of article 50, and will he confirm that, regardless of what happens in the Supreme Court, the House will have a vote and a say on what will be the biggest single decision that the country will undertake?

After yesterday's extraordinary press conference in the United States and what might or might not have happened in that Russian hotel room—I do not want to focus on that—may we have a debate on fake news in this country? I remember the days before fake news was cool, when we were told weapons of mass destruction could reach the United Kingdom within 45 minutes. We are also told by some news organisations that this Government are competent and know what they are going to be doing in terms of Brexit. So may we have a debate about fake news in this country?

Can the Leader of the House tell us what exactly is going on with English votes for English laws, because it seems that nobody wants it anymore? We had another English Legislative Grand Committee on Monday. The bells went on, the House was adjourned, the bells went on again, the House was back in session—the mace went down, the mace went up—and not one word was said. This is now beginning to embarrass this House; this is now beginning to make this House look extremely foolish. When will this bizarre and unnecessary practice end?

Mr Lidington: On the hon. Gentleman's final point, if the EVEL rules are operating in an uncontroversial and consensual manner, that is something the entire House ought to welcome. If that means the Scottish National party is accommodating itself to the need for English Members to have the final say on laws relating to England which in Scotland relate to policies devolved to the Scottish Parliament, that is a good thing.

The hon. Gentleman asked about article 50. The Prime Minister has said that the Government will publish a document setting out our negotiating objectives before we come to trigger article 50 later this year. As the hon. Gentleman will know, it has been widely reported that the Prime Minister also intends to make a speech on this subject in the next few weeks. Clearly the character of any parliamentary proceedings on article 50 will depend to some extent on the Supreme Court judgment.

On the hon. Gentleman's comments about the media, clearly what is said in the United States is a matter for the people of the United States. While all of us from time to time have reasons to complain about the character or accuracy of various news reports or articles in the press, that is a fact of life in a free society, and I would always want to err on the side of saying that there should be many and discordant voices without the state interfering in what is said by either broadcast or written media. That is the better way to proceed, and the sort of attempts we sometimes have to intimidate individual journalists, as we saw shamefully in the closing weeks of the referendum campaign in Scotland in 2014, when individual journalists were singled out for attack, is not something in which any Member of the House should take pride.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary recently raised the prospect of the European Court of Justice requiring everyone who uses a vehicle to have insurance, including, for example, householders who mow their lawns on ride-on mowers. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on how we can prevent this absurd requirement from being brought into UK legislation?

Mr Lidington: As I am sure my hon. Friend knows, this issue derives from the Vnuk judgment by the Court of Justice of the European Union. The Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Transport are actively involved in the negotiations about the response to this, and I encourage my hon. Friend to make his representations in particular to Transport Ministers, who will be in the frontline of trying to make sure that that judgment is implemented in a way that causes as few difficulties as possible for the users of those vehicles.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): On behalf of the Backbench Business Committee I should like to wish you, Mr Speaker, and the Leader of the House a very happy new year.

I thank the Leader of the House for advertising the wares of the Committee when he advises right hon. and hon. Members of their opportunity to apply to us for debates. May I also remind Members to look at the calendar and think ahead? Time-sensitive debates can be very important. For example, we have a debate next week on Holocaust Memorial Day, in the week before the memorial day itself. If anyone would like a debate on a particular time-sensitive subject, will they please make an application to the Committee in good time?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his new year wishes and his kind remarks. It is good news that there is now greater awareness across the House of the role of the Backbench Business Committee, and if that can lead to more timely debates and debates on subjects in which electors are interested but which might not be the subject of legislation, that can only be a good thing.

Mr Speaker: I call Mims Davies.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate—

Mr Speaker: Order. I said “Mims” rather than “Philip”.

Philip Davies: I am sorry, Mr Speaker. I heard “Davies”.

Mr Speaker: I know that the hon. Gentleman has secured election to the Women and Equalities Committee—although he was the only candidate, so his election was not very burdensome. But he should not worry; he will never be overlooked. We will get to him.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) did take my place on that Committee, so there is obviously something going on here.

Air pollution, standing traffic and unpredictable journey times cause stress and have an impact on productivity, on jobs and on the good health of UK plc as well as on us humans. Will the Leader of the House find time for a

[Mims Davies]

debate on critical infrastructure that can benefit business and communities? An example is the Chickenhall link road, which will be a game-changer for the Solent area and for Southampton airport. We should look at business and communities in a holistic way.

Mr Lidington: I think pretty well every Member of the House would agree with the points that my hon. Friend makes. That is why the Chancellor's inclusion in his autumn statement of £23 billion of expenditure on infrastructure, including transport infrastructure and broadband, is so important.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): When may we have a debate on early-day motion 852?

[That this House congratulates the Welsh Government on the introduction of presumed consent for organ donation in Wales; notes that 39 lives have been saved in the past year; is concerned that the UK has one of the lowest rates of organ donation consent in Europe; notes the UK target to increase organ donation consent rates to 80 per cent by 2020; and further notes the model successes of presumed consent in Wales which could be replicated across the UK to increase numbers of organs available for donation.]

The motion draws attention to the huge success of the presumed consent to organ transplant in Wales. May I also urge the Government to support the private Member's Bill that will be presented on Monday that calls for the advantages of presumed consent to be spread to the rest of the United Kingdom? We now know that this is a practical law that is popular with the public and saves many lives.

Mr Lidington: I cannot promise a debate in Government time, but the private Member's Bill to which the hon. Gentleman refers will provide an opportunity for further debate on the subject. There might also be opportunities for a debate through the Backbench Business Committee or in Westminster Hall.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): In considering its budgets for next year, Labour-led North East Lincolnshire Council is considering the closure of Cleethorpes library, a much-loved local facility. Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate on the value of libraries to local communities?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend might like to seek an Adjournment debate on the issue of Cleethorpes library. I am sure that he and his constituents will be urging the council to look seriously at its priorities and at how to ensure that library services can continue to be provided to the people of Cleethorpes. The provision of library services is clearly the objective that must be sustained.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I hope the Leader of the House agrees that future generations of British people will be very unforgiving if this generation of politicians allows a catastrophic failure to damage or destroy this House in any way, in the knowledge that we did nothing about it now. Will he update the House on when he intends to timetable a debate on the Joint Committee's recommendations for refurbishment of the Palace of Westminster?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman served on the Joint Committee that made that recommendation. I hope that we can bring this to a debate and get a decision as soon as possible.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I simply do not wish to wait any longer. The voice of Shipley must be heard.

Philip Davies: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for highlighting the fact that my nomination for membership of the Women and Equalities Committee was so popular that nobody wanted to oppose me.

May we have a debate on the outrageous plans of Jockey Club Racecourses to close Kempton Park racecourse? If Jockey Club Racecourses is not about the protection of racecourses and the heritage of British racing, Lord knows what on earth it is about. If the closure had been proposed by Arena Racing Company, members of the Jockey Club would have been the first to complain, particularly given that Kempton Park is a profitable racecourse. May we have a debate to find out what this House can do to stop these outrageous plans, which will be a hammer blow to national hunt racing in this country and will concrete over a huge swathe of the area's greenbelt, too?

Mr Lidington: As my hon. Friend will understand, this site is ultimately a matter for the Jockey Club, on the one hand—the Jockey Club has a royal charter that obliges it to act for the long-term good of British racing—and the local planning authorities, on the other, but I completely understand his point. I understand not only the importance of Kempton Park to the horseracing industry but the importance of horseracing both as a source of great pleasure to millions of British people but as an industry for this country. Whatever decisions are ultimately taken about Kempton Park, I hope that we will continue to ensure that the horseracing industry thrives, generates jobs and continues to bring great enjoyment and pleasure to so many people.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I will endeavour to behave on this occasion, Mr Speaker. Well over a year ago I told the House that there is not a single NHS dentist available in my constituency and that the incidence of child tooth decay is five times the national average. Indeed, I understand that my constituency is one of the worst in the country, if not the worst, for dentist provision. I further raised the issue in a meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), on 7 November 2016, and I have heard absolutely nothing, despite his promises. Can the Leader of the House advise the House on why the Government do not appear to care about the teeth of people in the Dewsbury constituency?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady says that she had a meeting a few weeks ago, before Christmas, with the Minister concerned, but I will ask the Department of Health to follow up in writing on the outcome of the meeting.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): As we all know, our country is about to go into its most important negotiations in decades, with consequences for generations to come,

yet the three big issues—these issues divide within parties, not just across the House—of the single market, free movement and the customs union have still not been debated in this place. Some think that that verges on being disgraceful. Will the Leader of the House please now assure the House that we will debate those issues, and not only for the obvious reasons but in order to bring together everybody in this country, however they voted in the referendum—as the Prime Minister quite properly said in her new year’s message that she seeks to do—so that we get the very best deal for everybody and for as long as we possibly can?

Mr Lidington: There will of course be further debates, both general debates on exiting the European Union and others on that matter, as we approach the decision on article 50 and, I am very confident, in the months that follow that. My hon. Friend might also like to know, although this will not satisfy her demand for a debate, that in the next fortnight we will have both Home Office questions, which would cover the free movement issue, and questions to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, on 26 January.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): May we have a debate on what constitutes a crisis in accident and emergency in the national health service? The Prime Minister and the Health Secretary refuse to accept that there is a crisis, but the Welsh Tories say that there is a crisis in A&E in Wales, and the Health Secretary says that the English figures are better than those for Wales but fails to point out that, on the basis of what was released this morning, the Scottish figures are 5% better than those in England. May we have that debate on the definition of what represents “a crisis” before the Government fiddle the figures in their response to patients suffering?

Mr Lidington: We have had both a statement and a lengthy exchange of questions to and answers from the Health Secretary on Monday, and then we had a full day’s debate in the Labour party’s time yesterday on this subject, when all these issues were thoroughly aired. I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that he ought not to be too complacent about the situation in Scotland, given that the latest figures I have seen show that NHS Scotland was meeting only one of eight key targets and that one in 12 hospital bed days in Scotland were being lost because of delayed discharges.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): In wishing happy new year to the Leader of the House, may I say that I hope 2017 is as good for the United Kingdom as 2016 was? In relation to business next week or perhaps the week after—or perhaps even the week after that—will he guarantee that when the Supreme Court makes its decision a Minister will come to the House to give a statement? Will he also agree that no prior comment will be made to the media before this House is informed of what the Government are thinking?

Mr Lidington: We do not yet know the timing of the Supreme Court decision, which makes it slightly difficult for me to give the firm assurance that my hon. Friend wants. Let there be no doubt: the Government will want to come—and I suspect, Mr Speaker, that you will insist that the Government come—to Parliament at the earliest opportunity to explain their response to the judgment.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): First, may I wish you a happy Kiss a Ginger Day, Mr Speaker? [*Laughter.*] I am sure you can look it up!

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) rightly raised a serious question about the Committee report, which was produced 18 weeks ago, on the future of the Palace of Westminster. It is now becoming irresponsible that we have not yet had a debate, because a fire in one of the 98 risers in this building would spread very rapidly; if asbestos in any part of this building were discovered it could lead to the closing of this building immediately and indefinitely; and any problem with the 1880s sewerage at the bottom of the building could also close it immediately. Will the Leader of the House therefore make sure that we get on with this immediately, because we are running unnecessary costs and unnecessary risks?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman summarises the points that were made at much greater length in the Committee’s report about the very real challenges in managing risks that there are with the Palace of Westminster building. As I said to the hon. Member for North Antrim, I would hope that we can have a debate as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: This Kiss a Ginger activity is probably perfectly lawful but I have no plans to partake of it myself. It strikes me as a very rum business altogether; as colleagues can probably tell, I have not the slightest idea about what the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) was prating, so the matter had to be Googled for me.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Yesterday, the European Commission took the retrograde decision to restore GSP plus—generalised system of preferences plus—trade status to Sri Lanka. The Commission withdrew that status in 2010 because of concerns about human rights abuses by the Sri Lankan Government. Despite that Government not yet complying with United Nations Human Rights Council resolution 31, and a damning report from the UN Committee Against Torture, the decision has been made. It has still to go through the European Parliament, but may we have a debate in this House to consider the European Commission’s bad decision, which I know is a matter of concern to Members from both sides of the House?

Mr Lidington: I encourage my hon. Friend to apply to the Backbench Business Committee for that debate. I am sure he will acknowledge that the British Government have always been in the front rank of those pressing not only for an end to human rights abuses under the previous Sri Lankan Government, but subsequently for reconciliation and peace-building in Sri Lanka. That was symbolised by the visit by the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, to Jaffna and the north of Sri Lanka during the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference a year or so ago. The British Government’s support for reconciliation and respect for human rights in Sri Lanka is real and continuing.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to all those who contribute to and work in food banks—such as The Gate in Alloa and Broke Not

[*Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh*]

Broken in Kinross in my constituency—throughout the country, particularly over the Christmas period when demand was so high? May we please have a debate in Government time about the worrying and increasing rise in the use of food banks, which all evidence suggests is a direct result of the Government's attitude to and policies in respect of social security?

Mr Lidington: I agree that we should pay tribute to those who organise and work in food banks. Only since 2010 have Department for Work and Pensions offices been formally encouraged to refer to food banks people in a family crisis and in urgent need; previously, that was forbidden. People use food banks for complex reasons. First, if the hon. Lady looks at the figures she will see that the number of people receiving the key benefits who are subject to a sanction in any one month is very small, and there is not a neat relationship between that and the use of food banks. Secondly, I wish she would acknowledge that the Government's decision to establish and then increase the national living wage has led to the biggest pay rise for the lowest-paid workers in this country on record.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I gently point out to the House that a further 33 right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye? Colleagues know that my normal practice is to facilitate everyone who wishes to take part in the business question, and I am keen to sustain that record, but they should be aware that the debate on Yemen is heavily subscribed and some priority has also to be attached to that. In short, we need short questions and short answers if I am not to leave colleagues disappointed.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May we have a debate on Government support for UK businesses to export? There has been a welcome increase in UK export finance facilities, but we lag behind other competitors on further support to get companies into markets and support for them when they are already there.

Mr Lidington: It is particularly important that we encourage more small and medium-sized businesses to take part in exports—they often do so through supply chains, rather than exporting directly. I shall flag up my hon. Friend's focus on the subject to the Secretary of State for International Trade, although I suspect the Backbench Business Committee is the best way forward for him.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): Greater Manchester police are losing control of Rochdale town centre. Not enough priority is being given to policing begging, street drinking, antisocial behaviour and shoplifting. Surely that warrants a debate in Parliament.

Mr Lidington: Those are clearly matters primarily for the area commander, the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner in the hon. Gentleman's area, but he might be lucky in securing a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate to make his points in more detail.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): In Labour's la-la land, nuclear energy has no part to play in the UK's nuclear energy mix. In fact, the Labour leader said:

"I say no nuclear power, decommission the stations we've got".

May we have a debate sometime soon to establish which is the party of nuclear energy, as nuclear energy creates wealth, jobs and prosperity in Weaver Vale and elsewhere in the north-west of England?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that nuclear energy plays a critical role in ensuring that we have the right energy mix in the future. We have a key area for the nuclear sector in the north-west. Places such as Sellafield and Springfields provide high-quality, well-paid jobs in areas where they are much needed.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Can we have a debate in Government time on the cost of telephone calls to UK Government Departments, particularly in relation to yesterday's revelation that the Home Office spousal visa helpline is £1.37 a minute over and above network charges? Is it not time that this telephone tax is ended by this Government?

Mr Lidington: I am not aware of the details, but I will ask the relevant Home Office Minister to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Next week, I will be speaking at an event about energy switching, or should I say lack of energy switching because the majority of consumers do not switch their energy supplier and get a poor deal. May we have a debate about what can be done to engage consumers, such as those in Cannock Chase, in this market?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Record numbers of people have been switching suppliers, but she is right to say that most people stick with the one that they happen to have. It is something that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is looking at very closely indeed to see what more can be done.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Women face intimidation on a daily basis as they enter the Mattock Lane Marie Stopes pregnancy clinic from protesters who weaponise rosary beads and use gruesome images of fetuses. The police say that existing public order legislation is insufficient to keep the pavement a safe space. Can we have a statement from the Government on establishing buffer zones so that women can be protected in their hour of need, as the group Sister Supporter advocates?

Mr Lidington: Any situation that involves balancing the right of people to assemble and demonstrate peacefully and the right of other people to go about their lawful business will, inevitably, require local police judgment of some sort. There are questions to the Home Secretary on Monday 23 January, which will give the hon. Lady the opportunity to put that point directly to Ministers.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I am saddened to have to inform the House that my constituent, Rolf Noskwith, passed away last week. Not only was Mr Noskwith a distinguished businessman and generous

community benefactor, but he worked alongside Alan Turing as a cryptographer at Bletchley Park. His death reminds us that we are rapidly losing the last of this heroic generation. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in expressing our condolences to his widow and family. Will my right hon. Friend investigate the possibility of establishing a permanent memorial here in Parliament to commemorate the pioneering work of the men and women of Bletchley, whose vital contribution undoubtedly shortened the war by at least two years?

Mr Lidington: I join my hon. Friend in expressing condolences to Mr Noskwith's family and friends and to salute the vital and secret work that he and so many other men and women did at Bletchley Park during the second world war. They really are the unsung heroes of that period. My hon. Friend may wish to write formally to the House of Commons Commission about a memorial. She will be reassured to know that the Bletchley Park Trust has reconfigured the museum at Bletchley Park so that it is much more of a memorial than it has sometimes been in the past to the heroic work of those men and women.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): I understand that my private Member's Bill is mentioned regularly in the House in business questions and that the Leader of the House's response is that he is waiting for me to come forward with some costs. We are talking about a private Member's Bill, which means that there is only me. The Leader of the House has an array of civil servants who are willing and able to provide those figures for him. However, if he wants to let me know in detail what exactly he wants, he can write to me, and I will be happy to provide it—I will try on my own—for him and his civil servants. He must accept that this is the will of this House and that Members, from every part of this country and from right across this House, gave up their Friday surgeries to be in the Chamber when the Bill was debated. Will he stop trying to prevent the passage of this Bill and let me know when he will put it into Committee and come forward with a money resolution?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady is sincere, as always, in speaking up for her private Member's Bill, but it is also the case that the Bill was published, I think, only two or three days before it was introduced, and there was no memorandum of costs associated with it. Frankly, it is also the case—*[Interruption.]* She is sincere in her championship. The Bill is not exactly a disinterested initiative, but a deliberate effort to try to ensure that we have very unequal-sized constituencies. As I have said before, the Government are continuing to consider the financial implications of her Bill.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): May we please have a debate on immigration policy? That would give the Government the opportunity to explain what progress they are making on meeting the immigration target. Of course, it would give Her Majesty's loyal Opposition an opportunity to explain what their policy is.

Mr Lidington: Yes; my hon. Friend will have an opportunity to pursue Home Office Ministers on Monday 23 January. I fear that, even during a whole day's debate, getting a reliable policy out of the Leader of the Opposition might be beyond us.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): First, I wish the Leader of the House a happy new year and welcome the Hendry report on tidal energy.

May we have a debate in Government time on transmission lines? Low-carbon 21st-century energy comes from wind, civil nuclear and tidal power situated in coastal areas, which are sensitive. However, National Grid proposes only one system: pylons, which are 1950s technology. We want 21st-century technology for 21st-century low-carbon energy. May we have a debate on National Grid and its role in disregarding the will of many communities?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point that I know matters to a lot of people living in rural areas in particular, and coastal areas too. I would encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate. There are also questions next week to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which might give him an additional peg on which to hang those arguments.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): On Saturday, I took part in the Corby park run, which is brilliantly organised week in, week out by Paul Humphreys and his brilliant team. They are also fundraising for a new defibrillator in West Glebe Park. May we have a debate next week to recognise the enormous community contribution that park runs make across the country, and also to say a huge thank you to all those who give up their free time to organise them?

Mr Lidington: I cannot offer a debate in Government time. My hon. Friend is right to salute the importance of the park run movement as an entirely voluntary body that has energised, in more than one sense, thousands of people around the country to get more active and fitter in the way that every doctor would recommend. Also, as he says of Corby, it has helped to raise significant sums of money for charities.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Teachers at Whitehaven Academy in west Cumbria have been striking over the crumbling buildings and meagre resources. In 2010, the Government scrapped the Building Schools for the Future programme, under which Whitehaven Academy was to get significant funding. Netherhall and Millom schools are also waiting for funding. Will the Secretary of State for Education make a statement to the House about exactly how the Government are going to sort out this mess so that Cumbrian children can have the education they deserve?

Mr Lidington: I will ask the Education Secretary or one of her team to write to the hon. Lady about that particular issue. I am sure that the hon. Lady would welcome the fact that the national funding formula for schools will ensure a fairer distribution of available resources than has been the case in the past.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. In order to try to accommodate everybody, might I suggest that we now move to single-sentence questions and, of course, pithy replies?

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Mr Speaker, may I use your good offices to remind colleagues that we debate Holocaust Memorial Day next week? The book of commitment is open from Monday for two

[*Bob Blackman*]

weeks, thanks to your good offices, Mr Speaker, in the corridor between the Members' Staircase and the Members' Cloakroom.

I also ask that we have a statement following Sunday's conference on the middle east in Paris. Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions went on far longer this week because the Government did not give a statement or respond to an urgent question on the subject. It would be far better to have a statement in Government time on the outcome of that conference.

Mr Lidington: It will be for Foreign Office Ministers to hear my hon. Friend's comments and to decide whether they can offer a statement. I am sure that, as in previous years, many hon. Members from all parties will want to sign the Holocaust remembrance book.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Can we have a further debate on the crisis in social care? Today, Nottingham University hospitals have more than 200 patients who are medically safe to be discharged, but cannot be. Is it any wonder that Nottingham University hospital is on black alert yet again and that Nottinghamshire County Council is calling on the Government to take some action? When are the Government going to wake up to this crisis?

Mr Lidington: While it is undoubtedly true that there are pressures on the national health service and on social care at this time, the Government have acted through the better care fund and the social care precept and, most recently, by bringing forward £900 million of additional spending to give local authorities additional resources. It is also the case that there is a lot of local variation. More than half of the delayed discharges in our hospitals relate to just 24 local authorities, so it is also a case of disseminating best practice and embedding that everywhere in the country.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Late last year, the Government confirmed that this House would be presented with a plan on how the Government will begin their process of exiting the European Union. Will my right hon. Friend outline the potential processes by which this House will be engaged on that plan?

Mr Lidington: I am sure that there will be opportunities for that plan to be debated here. I am sure, too, that when that is published, the relevant Select Committees will probably want to take a look at it. I do not think my hon. Friend will be disappointed regarding parliamentary scrutiny.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): A Government reason for the closure of Dungavel immigration removal centre is that it will lessen the use of police cells, yet it turns out that the Home Office does not hold information on how many times police cells are used. Can we have a debate in Government time about the farcical ongoing estate management reviews?

Mr Lidington: The current state of affairs regarding Dungavel is that the planning application for the new facility that would replace it was refused by Renfrewshire

planning committee in November last year. Dungavel will remain open. Its future is dependent on a successful planning application for the new short-term holding facility.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Can we have a statement from the Foreign Secretary on his assessment of the credibility of the allegations made in the dossier about President-elect Trump? It is clear that the UK Government have a great deal of knowledge about these things. The dossier was written in the UK, and the UK Government have placed and lifted a D notice on the former MI6 officer who wrote the allegations. We had a warning before Christmas from the head of MI6 about hostile states attempting to subvert western democratic processes. Can we have a statement from the Foreign Secretary on what action he is taking to prevent us and our NATO allies from being subject to cyber-attacks and propaganda attacks from hostile states?

Mr Lidington: The Foreign Secretary and, indeed, the Prime Minister have repeatedly made clear their concerns about the cyber-capacity and cyber-tactics of Russia and other countries with regard to the interests of the United Kingdom. The hon. Lady will understand that I cannot go into details about these matters, but the issues are considered regularly by the National Security Council.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Can we have a statement from the Government about the increased role of the Ministry of Defence police in undertaking duties in civilian areas outside Faslane and Coulport, to establish who took the decision, why it was made, whether these officers are armed and under what chain of command they operate?

Mr Lidington: I was checking whether Defence questions were coming up next week, and since they are not, I will ask the relevant Defence Minister to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The Leader of the House is in denial. We need a debate, which needs to be led by the Prime Minister, so that we can ask her very pertinent questions about what she is doing about the NHS. For instance, Simon Stevens yesterday said that it was obviously "stretching" the truth to say that the NHS had got more than it had asked for, and we are spending less than other developed countries. Those are the types of issues we need to ask questions about, and that is why the Prime Minister needs to be here. The NHS is in crisis, and the Government are doing nothing about it.

Mr Lidington: The Government are actually meeting the spending commitment that the NHS wanted to support its plan. Yes, there are pressures—nobody denies that—but since 2010 we have seen significant increases in the number of doctors, nurses, diagnostic tests and A&E attendances and treatments. There is real improvement, and we should pay tribute to the NHS staff who are delivering that.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Can we have a debate about how the Government could take a more proactive role to preserve banking and post

office services on our local high streets? In the space of two years, the Bank of Scotland has closed one branch in my constituency, and the Royal Bank of Scotland will have closed three. We have had announcements this week that four post offices are under threat across Scotland, and I am very conscious, given the experience in my constituency, of the burden falling on small convenience store managers and shop owners and of the lack of service to customers and small business.

Mr Lidington: My understanding is that the Post Office proposes that the Crown post offices that it closes will instead become sub-post offices, or sub-post offices on a franchise basis will continue in those communities. It is the provision of the service that seems to me to be important. It is right that there should be full consultation with local communities about any of these proposed closures, but it is also a reality that more and more of our constituents are using online banking services, and that is bound to have an impact on the economic viability of branch networks.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Can we have an urgent statement from the energy Minister on the forthcoming industrial action in the nuclear industry, which is a direct result of the Government's betrayal of workers in that industry, despite the amendments that the Opposition put down to the Enterprise Bill and despite the promises that were made at the time of privatisation?

Mr Lidington: I cannot offer the promise of a statement, but this may be something the hon. Gentleman wishes to seek an Adjournment debate on.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Following on from the question asked by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), can the postal services Minister give a statement on the Government's role in the Post Office and its future? I received a letter this week saying that Morningside post office would be closed and franchised. It is a very profitable and well-used post office, and that closure should be stopped. Can we have a statement about what the Government are going to do about these closures?

Mr Lidington: There is, as with all such proposals, a process that the Post Office operates for consultation and decision. I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to use that opportunity on behalf of his constituents. However, it is also the case that the vast majority, some 97%, of the Post Office's branches around the country are already operated on the basis that they are sub-post offices—independent businesses with a post office franchise.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Can we have a statement on the unlawful implementation of various provisions of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, including its use regarding internet connection records and bulk personal data sets, following the ruling by the European Court of Justice that general and indiscriminate retention of emails and communications by Governments is illegal—a point made frequently and at length by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) and I during the Act's progress through the House?

Mr Lidington: The Government are considering their response to that judgment, but it is certainly the view of those who serve us in the security and intelligence agencies that the ability to collect bulk data is of vital importance in the continuing battle against terrorism.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): May we have a debate on the excellent report by the Defence Committee on decision making in defence policy? In particular, it notes the lack of understanding of military strategy among key decision makers. May we have a debate on military strategy that will allow us to look at issues such as whether forward deployment of personnel represents deterrence or provocation?

Mr Lidington: We would welcome the possibility of a debate, perhaps through the Backbench Business Committee. The forward deployment of UK forces as part of NATO contingents in Estonia and in Poland is all about deterrence and solidarity with a NATO ally. NATO is an organisation that Clem Attlee and Ernie Bevin helped to create. I look forward to the day when we have a Labour leadership that again gives full-hearted support to NATO.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Government have talked out three out of four SNP private Members' Bills, their treatment of the private Member's Bill introduced by the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) is completely appalling, and their response to the Procedure Committee's report is as inadequate as the system itself. They did accept, however, that there should be a change to Standing Orders to require private Members' Bills to be published slightly earlier than currently. When will they give us time to debate that proposal?

Mr Lidington: We are looking at a number of proposed changes to Standing Orders, many of which have come from the Procedure Committee and some from other Committees of the House. It will probably be for the convenience of the House if we can find an opportunity to deal with all those as a block rather than considering them piecemeal, so that is the kind of arrangement I am hoping to secure.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I am very sorry to be called so late on Kiss a Ginger Day, Mr Speaker. We only get one day a year, after all—I am wondering whether you might be colour-blind.

May we have a debate on the future of our parks funding? Graves park in my constituency receives EU higher-level stewardship funding because of its high value regarding nature conservation, and the park's budget has already been under serious pressure because of slashed local authority funding. I would be grateful if we could have a debate on this in Government time.

Mr Lidington: Questions to Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers next Thursday or questions to Communities and Local Government Ministers next Monday might provide an opportunity to raise that matter. Clearly the future of stewardship funding is one of the matters that the Government are considering in the context of the negotiations overall.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Dozens of my constituents in Blantyre have complained to me about being mis-sold solar panels by Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems under the Government's green deal programme. By way of an answer to a written parliamentary question, I have learned that that company, which has since gone into liquidation, was sanctioned by the Government in November 2015 for breaches of the green deal code of practice. May we have a statement from the Government on what support they will offer to my constituents who have been left struggling to pay their electricity bills which, in some cases, have tripled?

Mr Lidington: There is a risk in any system that somebody might seek to abuse it. I suggest that the hon. Lady writes either to me or directly to the Minister responsible for these matters setting out the detail of what has happened to her constituents to try to secure a more detailed response to their concerns.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): As a brown-haired Member of the House, I am delighted to be the last Labour Member to be called.

The Leader of the House has already heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) about her Bill. She has offered support in relation to whatever problems he has, and he is now saying that it is an issue of time. By anyone's maths, if the Bill was published only three days before it was supported in this House, that is eight weeks and two days ago. Will he clearly explain what the problem is with bringing this Bill into Committee, or is it that there are problems on his own Back Benches because it had too much support from Conservative Members?

Mr Lidington: As I said earlier, the Government continue to consider the financial implications of the Bill.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The Leader of the House has been asked twice for an important debate about the Post Office. The Government cannot simply wash their hands of the matter. The general post office in my Dundee constituency has been in the centre of town for almost a century but is set to close, and arguments for a sub-post office are simply not good enough. Furthermore, many pensioners do not go online to do their banking or to check their pensions, so may I ask the Leader of the House, for the third time, for an urgent debate on the very serious matter of closing post offices?

Mr Lidington: I think that the key concern of pensioners and others in the hon. Gentleman's Dundee constituency would surely be whether they continue to have access to the post office services that they need. Whether those are provided via a Crown post office or through a

franchised sub-post office is a separate issue; it is the quality and accessibility of the service that should surely come first.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on the future and current performance of UK Border Force at airports? According to the Tourism Industry Council, if the 23 million EU nationals who visit every year are subject to full border checks, staffing would have to increase by 200%—and that is on top of current failures. What are the Government's plans?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman will be able to make that point to the Home Secretary during Home Office questions on 23 January.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The plight of religious minorities such as the Yazidi people, who are subject to terrible conditions under Daesh, including sexual slavery, should be a primary consideration for us all. Will the Government make a statement on what more we will do and on whether we will institute programmes such as that operating in Baden-Württemberg in Germany to support those people at their time of terrible need?

Mr Lidington: We are providing an enormous amount of support—almost £2.5 billion—to ease the humanitarian crisis in Syria and neighbouring countries. That is helping people in the region, including Yazidi refugees. Our resettlement schemes are also giving as much priority as possible to people who have been victims or who are at risk of sexual abuse, and to women and children who are particularly vulnerable. Clearly we always look actively at other ways in which we can help those people. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who has responsibility for the middle east, is sitting alongside me on the Front Bench and he will have heard the points made by the hon. Lady.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): There cannot be much that cheapens the honours system more than dishing out gongs to people who have been found by a UN committee to have breached human rights, including those of disabled people. I am talking not of a despotic regime, but of two senior civil servants at the Department for Work and Pensions. With that in mind, will the Leader of the House facilitate a debate on how we can reform the honours system?

Mr Lidington: No. The Government have already made it clear that we regard the report from that particular UN committee as a grotesque misrepresentation of the state of affairs in the United Kingdom. For one thing, it took no account of our very successful record in getting a record number of disabled people into work, or of the support programmes for disabled people who are in work.

Women in the House of Commons

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Select Committee statement. The Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and, of course, call Mrs Maria Miller to respond to them in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Those on the Front Bench may take part in questioning. I remind the House that ordinarily such a statement, and the questioning on it, can be expected to take, in total, approximately 20 minutes.

11.49 am

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to make a statement to the House on the fifth report of the Women and Equalities Committee on women in the House of Commons after the next general election, in 2020. The successful preparation of all our reports depends on the hard work of the Committee's Clerks and staff, the diligence of hon. Members who make up our Committee—I am glad to see my hon. Friends the Members for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) and for Bath (Ben Howlett) in the Chamber—and the generosity of our witnesses, who give up their time to prepare for and take part in our sessions. I particularly thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), the right hon. Members for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and for Moray (Angus Robertson), and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), all of whom enthusiastically shared their views with the Committee and told us about the work of their respective parties.

If, 100 years ago, the suffragettes who fought for women's rights—for our right to be elected and to sit in this place—had been told that just 455 women would be elected to this place over the next 10 decades, I am not sure whether they would have laughed or cried. I think they would be proud of the fact that the United Kingdom has had two female Prime Ministers, but the fact is that there are as many men sitting in this place today as there have ever been women elected to be Members of Parliament.

At the moment, we have 195 women MPs and 455 men. I am yet to see any evidence to suggest that women are less qualified than men to represent their communities, or that women do not want the opportunity to be a Member of Parliament and to improve the lives of those who live in their community. Therefore, this startling imbalance should cause us all a great deal of concern. At best we are failing to reach out; at worst the parties, which are, for the most part, responsible for selecting candidates, are failing in their duty. The Committee's report provides an evidence-based set of recommendations to change that, to help to ensure that Britain does not slip further down the global rankings for female parliamentary participation, to promote a more representative Parliament and to make this place stronger.

Our report has consciously focused on female representation, but our recommendations should, we feel, also open up discussions about how to secure improved diversity in other areas so that we have a Parliament with more black and minority ethnic representation and more disabled members. All that will help to ensure that the debates that we have and the laws that we make are better. Of course, the report builds on significant work that has already been done on representation in Parliament, such as the 2010 report of the Speaker's Conference on parliamentary representation—convened by you, Mr Speaker—and the comprehensive work done by Professor Sarah Childs, who produced "The Good Parliament".

The trigger for the Committee's new report was the Boundary Commission's initial proposals about reducing the size of Parliament to 600 constituencies. There is no reason why that process should adversely impact women or any particular group, but the proposals mean that the seats of more than 20 women MPs would, to all intents and purposes, disappear. If political parties do not take action, it could mean that there is a smaller proportion of women MPs after the next general election.

The Committee's recommendations are for the Government, political parties and, indeed, Parliament, because we all have to take responsibility. The first of our key recommendations is for more transparency from parties about the work that they are doing to improve candidate selection. We feel that the Government should immediately bring into force the statutory requirement for political parties to publish their parliamentary candidate diversity data for general elections, as set out in section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, so that we can properly scrutinise parties' records of selecting a diverse slate of parliamentary candidates.

Secondly, we recommend that the Government should seek to introduce in legislation in this Parliament a statutory minimum proportion of female parliamentary candidates in general elections for each political party. We have proposed a minimum of 45% of women. This measure would be brought into force only if the number and proportion of women MPs failed to increase significantly after the next general election.

Thirdly, we have set out in our recommendations a domestic target of 45% for the representation of women in Parliament and local government by 2030. That is to inform the work being done by the Office for National Statistics to establish domestic indicators for the UN sustainable development goals—particularly goal 5, an indicator for which my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) and David Cameron fought hard when these goals, which apply to the UK as well as to other members of the UN, were established. To make progress, the measures need to have teeth, so the Committee has recommended the extension of the Electoral Commission's remit to introduce fines for non-compliance.

In our evidence sessions with the chairman and leaders of the political parties, it was evident that there is enormous support for a more representative Parliament. Indeed, each of them agreed that Parliament would be a better place if 50% of MPs were women. However, we need to turn those warm sentiments into bums on seats—I hope that that is not unparliamentary language. The parties lack clear and comprehensive plans to turn those important warm words into clear action.

[Mrs Maria Miller]

This Parliament is the mother of all Parliaments, but at the moment, on our watch, we are letting ourselves down on the global stage. Since 1999, Britain has fallen from 25th to 48th in the world for female representation. Parliament should have a clear aspiration to be the global leader for female representation and diversity more generally. The recommendations in the report can help us to achieve that.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the Women and Equalities Committee for this important report. The Labour party is committed to increasing the representation of women in Parliament and at every level of politics. As the report recognises, more than half of women Members of Parliament are Labour Members—women make up 43.7% of the parliamentary Labour party. Much of that is to do with Labour's commitment to all-women shortlists. Does the right hon. Lady think that other parties should introduce all-women shortlists for their parliamentary selections? Does she agree that parties that are not already taking direct positive action to tackle the under-representation of women in Parliament should do so as a matter of urgency?

Mrs Miller: The parties should look at the evidence of what works. Our report clearly states that there is a body of evidence that parties can look at. It is not for a Select Committee to dictate to parliamentary parties how they run their selection procedures. That is for them, but they should also consider the evidence.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Recalling that the Labour party lost one of its safest seats—Blaenau Gwent—in 2005 over the imposition of a women-only shortlist, what role does my right hon. Friend see for local associations in choosing the candidate who is best for the area, or for voters in deciding to vote for the person they think is the best to represent that area, irrespective of gender?

Mrs Miller: I thank my hon. Friend and fellow Select Committee member for that question. He is right that associations or local parties have a huge role to play in ensuring that they get the right person for the job in their area. However, it is surprising that just one in four candidates at the last general election was female. Perhaps we need to ensure that the right training and support are in place so that there is a diversity of candidates for associations and parties to choose from.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Scottish National party welcomes the publication of the report and we are grateful for being able to contribute in the Select Committee. We firmly believe that all political parties should be held to account for their action to tackle this democratic deficit. It is simply not acceptable in 2017 for women to be discriminated against or under-represented in the boardroom, in politics or anywhere else.

The SNP is committed to increasing the number of female elected representatives. For example, we have increased the number of women Members of Parliament and Members of the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish

Government's gender-balanced Cabinet is one of the few in the world. The SNP Scottish Government are also taking decisive action to ensure that women are represented in senior and decision-making roles, including in the boardroom. Our "Programme for Government" contains many ambitious commitments that support women's equality. Are the UK Government considering similar measures? When will they bring them to fruition?

Mrs Miller: The recommendations in our report are for the Government to consider. It is important that significant progress is made at the next general election, at which 45% of candidates should be female. The hon. Lady mentioned equal representation in Cabinets. I was heartened that Justin Trudeau had a gender-balanced Cabinet when he became premier in Canada and that he said, "What do you expect in 2016?" I think that we should ask, "What do we expect in 2017?"

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned the excellent report by Professor Sarah Childs. Does she agree that some of its recommendations would also help to bring more women into Parliament?

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are building on firm foundations. Parliament has to look carefully at its operation to ensure that it is doing everything it can to encourage more women to come forward. Historically, we have looked very closely at childcare and family-friendly working. We should also be looking very carefully at how the dissuading effects—the violence and online abuse that female Members experience—can put people off. They are just as important and the House needs to take them very seriously.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When John Bright first coined the term "the mother of Parliaments" he was saying that even England, the mother of Parliaments, had still not brought full democracy to the country because the vast majority of its people were not able to vote. We are coming up to the 100th anniversary of some women, in 1918, being allowed to vote. Is not one of the biggest problems finance? Many women are still paid less than men, and working-class candidates still find it difficult to get selected, because it is a very expensive business.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This came out in relation to fairer child support. The cost of becoming a Member of Parliament can be very steep indeed and is therefore out of the reach of some people, whether they are male or female. The parties need to think carefully about whether they can lessen the obstacles that they put in the way of candidates, whether through financial support or other measures. I know that my own party, the Conservative party, has looked at that very carefully and provided practical help.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I basically back what my right hon. Friend is aiming for, but with caution on one or two issues. Does she accept that at some stage the number of women MPs had to match the number of men still in Parliament? It was only some 30 years ago, when my wife was elected, that fewer than

5% of MPs were female. To reach nearly 30% is quite some progress, and I am glad we have met the equality my right hon. Friend has spoken about.

It is important not to think that the Government should require parties and Parliament to do things; Parliament and parties should require the Government to do things. One of those things is not putting people into Parliament, but giving people the opportunities and experience so that they can, with the necessary luck, be chosen on merit.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend makes some interesting points. His wife, of course, was one of my role models when I looked at Parliament and saw the effective nature of women and the work they did here. The University of London only started to admit women in 1878, but now more than 50% of its students are female. Other institutions have made the journey more successfully than we have, so it is right that we ask questions about why progress has not been made more quickly.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): As national secretary of the Scottish National party until the end of the last year, I saw the successes but also the struggles that come with implementing all-women shortlists. In some cases, despite having the requirement, we struggled to find women candidates. What more does the right hon. Lady think can be done at that formative point at which people might become candidates, for example in terms of work experience with local politicians, standing for a local council or taking on responsibilities at a local party level?

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the work needs to go in early. I applaud 50:50 Parliament's work and its current campaign #AskHerToStand. Many hon. Ladies here today will know that it often takes asking women to stand for Parliament before they

do so. Such early work, particularly standing for local government, can be an effective way of building people's confidence to take this on as a career choice.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend have any concerns that a man from a working-class background could be discriminated against if all the proposals and recommendations contained in her report are accepted?

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Speaking as someone who was born in a council house and went to a comprehensive school, I do not want to see this place becoming populated by an unrepresentative group of people, but it is unrepresentative at the moment. We have to take some tough decisions, rather than failing to take action because of the threat that some groups might feel discriminated against, to put right what is a real injustice in terms of female representation.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for her statement and the hard work she does in leading our Committee. The UK has signed up to the universal UN sustainable development goals, in which the international community vowed to leave no one behind. While African nations have achieved over 50% female representation, it is embarrassing that in our Parliament that figure is only 30%. Will she join me in calling on the Department for International Development to focus on parliamentary representation as it publishes its SDG implementation plan?

Mrs Miller: I thank my hon. Friend and fellow Committee member for his comment. As he knows, we heard yesterday in our evidence session on the SDGs that the credibility of our country will be in jeopardy if we do not do more to implement those goals, particularly goal 5, which was fought for so hard by my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney and David Cameron. Part of that is about ensuring that we make significant improvements in parliamentary representation.

Points of Order

12.5 pm

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have heard you on occasion, Sir, advise Ministers at the Dispatch Box to address the House, not their own Back Benchers. I wonder whether you have noticed that the Leader of the House has developed an unfortunate habit of staring either at the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) or vacantly into space when answering questions from the quarter of the House where Scottish National party Members sit. There is an issue here not only of audibility but of non-verbal communication. For example, when the Leader of the House was unable to distinguish between a 94% performance in accident and emergency in Scotland, compared with 88% in England, had he been looking our way, he would have seen SNP Members shaking their heads. When he made an unfounded allegation about the conduct of the Scottish referendum campaign, which was impeccable, he would have seen us laughing at him. I do not want to pick out the Leader of the House in particular, but perhaps you could encourage all Ministers to do Members the courtesy of responding to them when being asked questions in debates and statements.

Mr Speaker: My first point is that statements made in the Chamber should always be communicated through the Chair. The second is that people speaking from the Dispatch Box should address and, in so doing, look at the House, rather than behind them at the Member to whom they might be responding. Beyond that I will not venture. If I were uncharitable, I would imagine that the right hon. Gentleman was seeking, against all precedent and expectation of him, to propagandise, but because I am not uncharitable, I cannot imagine that he was seeking to do anything of the kind.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I know that you are a staunch defender of Back-Bench Members' rights, so may I ask your advice? A Government proposal to site an asylum hostel in my constituency has caused great angst and concern there. It is an inappropriate place. It is the wrong decision. In connection with that, I have been pursuing questions with the Minister for Immigration. The Government seem to have taken a decision to put these hostels in mostly Labour areas. I have been trying to ascertain in which constituencies the hostels are being sited. The Minister has replied several times, but his last reply said that he could not give me the individual locations for the safety of the asylum seekers. That is odd because on Monday night Halton Borough Council will be considering the planning application for the asylum hostel, which

has gone through full public consultation. I cannot see, therefore, how the Minister can give such an answer. I have tabled a further question to the Minister. If he still refuses to answer, given the information I have put before the House today, what advice would you give me, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: Off the top of my head, my advice is as follows. My principal suggestion is that the hon. Gentleman go to the Table Office and seek its advice on the nature and terms of the questions to be tabled. *[Interruption.]* He mutters, I think, that he has already done that.

Derek Twigg *indicated assent.*

Mr Speaker: If that has not availed him, I am disappointed to hear it. Having had no prior notification of this matter, and therefore off the top of my head, I have two further thoughts. One is that the hon. Gentleman can, without delay, seek an Adjournment debate with the relevant Minister, in which he would have a face-to-face opportunity, over a decent period, to probe the Minister with the relentlessness and tenacity for which he is renowned in all parts of the House. Secondly, he can use freedom of information opportunities to try to ascertain the facts that he wants to ascertain. I have a hunch that, if neither of those approaches helps, he will be raising his concern with me on the Floor again.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Momentarily, I felt moved to be charitable. I always thought that when I addressed the Chair, I was addressing the House—and, if I may say so, my pleasure in so doing is magnified when I address the Chair and you, Sir, are occupying it. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Well! My cup runneth over. To be complimented by a parliamentarian of the repute of the right hon. Gentleman really does cause me, for the rest of the day, to go about my business with an additional glint in my eye and a spring in my step.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): And two inches taller.

Mr Speaker: And possibly two inches taller. I am a happy man indeed. I have always liked the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), in the 20 years I have known him, and I like him even more now.

Chris Bryant: Eleanor is not going to call him. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Gentleman had better watch himself a little bit with the Deputy Speakers in the coming days.

Backbench Business

Yemen

[Relevant Document: First Joint Report of the Business, Innovation and Skills and International Development Committees, The use of UK-manufactured arms in Yemen, HC 679.]

12.11 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House notes the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen and the impact of the conflict on civilians; condemns any breach of international humanitarian law; and calls for an urgent independent investigation into reports of breaches of international humanitarian law on both sides of the conflict.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this very important and timely debate. It is good to see members of all parties in the Chamber. I pay tribute to those who have worked on Yemen for much longer than I have; my interest has arisen over the past year or so, as a result of my role as Chair of the International Development Committee.

I shall focus first on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen and then on the specific issue raised in the motion: the alleged violations of international humanitarian law by those on all sides. I shall not address the specific matter of arms sales to Saudi Arabia, as I know that my friend and co-sponsor of the motion, the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White)—who chairs the Committees on Arms Export Controls—will address that important issue if he catches your eye, Mr Speaker.

The Yemen conflict began early in 2015, less than two years ago, but it has its roots in the Arab spring of 2011. When Ali Abdullah Saleh was succeeded by President Hadi, the Houthi movement took advantage of the new President's weakness, took control of parts of northern Yemen and later took the capital, Sana'a. From there the conflict intensified, with the intervention in 2015 of the Saudi Arabian-led coalition, backed by United States, United Kingdom and French intelligence, and on the other side the Houthi rebels, backed by Iran.

Yemen has been called the forgotten crisis—for example, by Amnesty International—but it is a crisis that we surely cannot ignore. The president of the International Committee of the Red Cross has said that the intensity and severity of the fighting in Yemen has left the country looking as Syria did after five years of conflict. It is estimated that since the conflict began nearly 10,000 people have been killed, roughly 4,000 civilians have lost their lives and 37,000 have been injured, which amounts to an average of 75 deaths or injuries on each day of the conflict. Surely, we cannot allow that to continue.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and his Committee for the work that they have done on Yemen, and, indeed, to the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White),

The issue here is not just the scorecard of shame to which my hon. Friend has referred, but the granting of access to those amazing aid organisations. Does he agree that the most important aspect of what we are discussing today is the need for a ceasefire, which will allow the aid to get through?

Stephen Twigg: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend's own long-standing work on the issue and to the work of the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen. He is absolutely right to say that a ceasefire is crucial, and I shall come on to access for humanitarian organisations.

At the end of 2015, the International Development Committee decided to conduct an inquiry into the crisis. Last year, we published two reports on Yemen. The first, which we produced on our own, related specifically to the humanitarian crisis, and the second was produced in conjunction with the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, through the work of the Committees on Arms Export Controls. One of the recommendations in our first report was that the UK Government should put pressure on all parties to the conflict to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. That includes, very importantly, measures to protect civilians and, as we have been reminded by my right hon. Friend, to allow humanitarian agencies a safe space in which to operate.

The humanitarian situation is grave. Our own Government have described the crisis in Yemen as one of the most serious humanitarian crises in the world. The United Nations estimates that more than 80% of the population—more than 20 million people—are in immediate need of humanitarian assistance. Fourteen million people face food shortages, 19 million have no access to safe drinking water, and more than 3 million have had to flee their homes because of the conflict. The situation is particularly dire for children: the United Nations has estimated that eight children are killed or maimed every day in Yemen and that nearly 50% of school-age children are not at school.

The situation is exacerbated by the difficulty of gaining access for imports of essential supplies such as energy, food and medicine. That fuels the humanitarian crisis. Supplies are filtering through to the country more quickly than they were six months ago, and that progress is obviously welcome, but levels remain significantly below those of March 2015. Not only is that damaging the economy, but any further changes in the availability of food will pose a risk of famine. It is to DFID's credit—I am pleased to see that the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), is present—that it is putting more than £100 million into Yemen to help to relieve some of the most pressing humanitarian challenges. The UK is the fourth largest donor to Yemen, and we are leading the way in many respects, as we so often do in humanitarian crises, but we need to do more to press other countries to fund relief.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): If DFID is giving £100 million to Yemen—I totally support that—what is happening to the money? Presumably, it is blocked, because we cannot get through to the people who really need it. I suppose that it is in some bank or food store somewhere.

Stephen Twigg: The situation varies in different parts of the country, but I remember that when the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne)—who is sitting next to the hon. Gentleman—was a DFID Minister, we discussed this issue when he appeared before the Select Committee nearly a year ago to give evidence. One of the challenges is precisely the one of which the hon. Gentleman has reminded us: securing

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access within the country, so that the aid can get through. The UK does not necessarily need to spend more money, but we should do our utmost to get the aid through. That brings us on to the challenges of achieving a ceasefire but also political progress in Yemen.

Even in the present challenging circumstances, DFID is working to improve food and water security and to provide emergency resilience for those who are most at risk. Unfortunately, the organisations that have been, and in some cases still are, on the ground helping to alleviate the humanitarian situation have told the Select Committee that their work has been threatened by the conflict. Since March 2015, 13 health workers have died and 31 have been injured. The World Health Organisation tells us that more than 70 health centres have been damaged or destroyed completely and that more than 600 have closed owing to damage or shortage of supplies or staff. Last year, the non-governmental organisation, Doctors of the World, withdrew from Yemen because it simply could not guarantee the safety of its volunteers on the ground. A number of non-governmental organisations have told us that the humanitarian space in Yemen is shrinking, making it even more difficult for them to carry out their work. All sides in the conflict need to comply with international humanitarian law, and one of the ways they should do so is to ensure humanitarian organisations can work unimpeded in Yemen.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that attacks on humanitarian operations have occurred on both sides, including by the Saudi-led coalition sometimes even when co-ordinates have been provided? On 27 October 2015 it was reported that there had been an attack on a Médecins sans Frontières hospital, even though the co-ordinates had been provided to the coalition two weeks before.

Stephen Twigg: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he has done on this issue and agree entirely with what he says, which brings me to the second part of my speech.

The second major recommendation that came out of both reports—it was also recommended by the Foreign Affairs Committee report, which disagreed with us on the question of arms sales but agreed with us on this issue—is that there must be an independent, United Nations-led investigation of alleged violations of international humanitarian law by both sides in this conflict.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I just want to make the point that not all Foreign Affairs Committee members disagreed with the report; a minority agreed with it.

Stephen Twigg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and pay tribute to her for her long-standing interest in, and activity on, these issues, not least her active participation in the Committees on Arms Export Controls, which I believe perform a vital function and should continue.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I had not intended to intervene at this point, but as the FAC report has been mentioned, is it not a fact that all three

reports—those of the Business, Innovation and Skills, the International Development and the Foreign Affairs Committees—were agreed by majority votes?

Stephen Twigg: I believe that is the case; certainly ours was agreed by a majority vote. I thought that my hon. Friend was going to make the different point that all three reports are in support of this motion. I am not aware of any of those voting in the minority in any of those three Committees doing so because they disagreed with this recommendation. I hope that the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington and I have framed a motion that can enjoy support across the House, because it focuses on the issue of an independent investigation.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The Chairman of our Select Committee will recall that when we took that vote—my decision is on record—it was my particular concern that the independent investigation take place. I feel strongly about that and want to put it on record today.

Stephen Twigg: I thank the hon. Lady, who is an assiduous member of the International Development Committee. I do indeed recall that her focus was very much on needing to see the independent investigation first, and that was why she voted in the way she did. However, we all agreed across the Committee that there should be an independent international investigation, and that, indeed, featured in our first report as well as the second.

Let me now focus on the proposal for an investigation that is independent and international. In May 2015, at the beginning of the conflict, Human Rights Watch accused the Houthi rebels of violations of international law in the southern seaport city of Aden; the crimes highlighted included the killing of civilians and the arrest of aid workers at gunpoint. Since then the Houthis have been accused of a range of other violations of international humanitarian law, such as the prevention of the import of basic commodities, as well as medicine, propane, and oxygen cylinders, into the besieged city of Taiz.

A United Nations expert panel has documented 185 alleged abuses. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) reminded us, Médecins sans Frontières, which often works in the most difficult and challenging humanitarian situations, suffered attacks on three hospitals in three months. In September 2016, the Yemen Data Project reported that one third of all Saudi-led raids on Yemen have hit civilian sites, and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has estimated that 66% of all civilian deaths in Yemen have been caused by Saudi-led air strikes.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend and concur with his point, but the UN panel also said that the problem facing the Saudi coalition and the Gulf Co-operation Council countries was that the Houthi rebels are operating in urban areas and against international law; they are effectively using civilians as human shields. There are problems with Saudi air strikes—they are killing civilians—but that point helps provide a more balanced picture of how this is occurring.

Stephen Twigg: Yes, indeed. I was seeking to be absolutely balanced in making the point that very serious allegations have been made against the Houthis, and I

gave just two examples—one from Aden and one from Taiz—but I reiterate the point of the UN panel that there have been 185 alleged abuses. I very deliberately say alleged abuses; that is why this motion argues for an independent investigation into all of those alleged abuses.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am concerned that, as usual in these debates, I will not have enough time to answer all the questions asked, although I will do my best. I did not wish to interrupt the hon. Gentleman's speech, from which the House is learning a lot, and I hope he will concede that we take every report seriously, but the panel of experts that put the report together did not actually visit the country. We need to take account of that context when monitoring and understanding what is going on. I am not saying that we should ignore the report, but it is being used here today as if somehow we should add value to it. They did not enter the country; they were not able to provide the necessary intelligence that we would expect from a panel of UN experts.

Stephen Twigg: Surely they did not enter the country because of the challenges that I have been describing; they did not wilfully decide, "We're not going to bother going", and just come up with the figure of 185. This was based on serious research and work done by the United Nations and I am disappointed that the Minister is so dismissive of that.

Mr Ellwood: This is important, because the lines "There are 105" or "There are over 100" do get used. The Ministry of Defence has looked at every single one of the allegations, and we have asked for more information on a number of them. I am sorry to labour the point, but to offer clarification and give information to the House, the assessment was made by aerial photography with months in between, and therefore we cannot ascertain what has happened unless we have more information as to whether these acts of atrocity were caused by the Houthis or the coalition. That is the point I am trying to make.

Stephen Twigg: I agree with that, and that is precisely why the motion says we should have a fully independent international investigation into all allegations against "both sides". It may well be that some of these violations have been committed by the Houthis. I did not say that there were 105 alleged abuses by the Saudi-led coalition; there are alleged abuses by it, and there are alleged abuses by the Houthis as well.

Graham Jones: I should say in support of my hon. Friend that the UN panel was blocked from entering the country by the Houthis. The panel explains that in the report and points out that it tried everything to get in. Furthermore, the Houthis also blocked the peace negotiators from leaving Sana'a to go to Geneva for the peace talks. So the Houthis have been complicit in creating this problem of evidence.

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have heard nobody in all the debates in the International Development Committee and other Committees of the House in any sense suggest that the Houthis are not to

blame, and that is why the proposal is that we should have an investigation into abuses by both sides in this conflict.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Perhaps my hon. Friend is going to come on to this, but our discussion seems to be being conducted on the basis of the Saudi-led coalition versus the Houthis. Does this not miss the very unhelpful, and indeed sinister, role played by the Iranians, particularly in providing conventional weaponry? Without going into all the data, I would suspect that many more people have been killed, injured and dispossessed by the use of conventional weaponry, of which there is a steady pipeline coming into Yemen from Iran, than they have by air action.

Stephen Twigg: I have already mentioned the role of Iran in supporting the Houthis, and any independent international UN-led investigation would certainly address the issue of Iranian involvement, but I reiterate the point that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has estimated that two thirds of all the civilian deaths in Yemen have been caused by the Saudi-led coalition.

Stephen Doughty: Surely one of the reasons that we need a full and independent investigation is that we are not clear about what has been assessed, and by whom. The Saudis have not produced reports through the joint incidents assessment team on the vast majority of the allegations, whether they are correct or not, and we are not clear about what this Government have assessed. Indeed, they have changed their position a number of times on the question of whether they have made an assessment or not. This has involved providing corrections to the House, in which it was revealed that they made mistakes in the evidence that they provided to us.

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank him for his comments because they enable me to move on to the question of the timeline—

Graham Jones: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stephen Twigg: I will not give way now, because I want to move on to talk about the timeline of the Government's response on this matter.

The United Nations Human Rights Council discussed Yemen in September 2015. The Government of the Netherlands tabled a motion to the Human Rights Council that would have mandated what today's motion is proposing. That motion, tabled 16 months ago, would have set up a UN mission to document violations by all sides in the conflict since it began. The Netherlands withdrew the draft on 30 September 2015, and instead the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution tabled by Arab states which deleted calls for an independent inquiry.

On 24 November 2015, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who is in his place today, told this House that Saudi Arabia was investigating reported allegations of violation of international humanitarian law. He said:

"These investigations must be concluded...The situation on the ground is very difficult and, in many cases, we are unable to have access to verify what has happened...We have been wanting to encourage Saudi Arabia and other parties that are involved...and

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we want these cases looked into efficiently and properly by the country itself.”—[*Official Report*, 24 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1184-5.]

That was 14 months ago.

On 3 February last year—almost a year ago—during Department for International Development questions, the former DFID Minister, the right hon. Member for New Forest West, said:

“We have supported the UN Human Rights Council resolution that requires the Government of Yemen to investigate those matters”.—[*Official Report*, 3 February 2016; Vol. 605, c. 907.]

He said that the Government of Yemen should investigate alleged violations of international humanitarian law that were happening during the conflict. The following day, during a Back-Bench business debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East said again that he had raised the issue of an investigation directly with the Government of Saudi Arabia. That was almost a year ago.

Then the International Development Committee conducted its first inquiry, and on 8 July last year, the Government published their response to our report. Their response stated:

“The UK Government is not opposing calls for an international independent investigation into the alleged breaches of IHL but, first and foremost, we want to see the Saudi Arabian Government investigate allegations of breaches of IHL which are attributed to them”.

That was six months ago. In August last year, following the ministerial corrections to which my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth referred, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary regarding the corrections to parliamentary questions and Westminster Hall debates relating to allegations of violations of IHL. The Foreign Office’s response in August reiterated what had been said in response to our inquiry—namely, that the Saudis should be the ones to investigate first and foremost.

Last September, during a debate on an urgent question tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East said that Saudi Arabia had to conduct thorough and conclusive investigations into incidents where breaches of IHL had been alleged. He praised the fact that Saudi Arabia had released the results of eight reports in the previous month. That was four months ago. Then in October, during an Adjournment debate led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border, who is in his place today, reiterated that Saudi Arabia needed to be the party that investigated violations. He stated that the Government were

“very clear that the investigation needs to be led, in the first instance, by the Saudi Government”.—[*Official Report*, 18 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 782.]

So, over the past 14 months, the Government have repeatedly been asked about Saudi Arabia’s own investigations. To my knowledge—the Minister might be able to update us today—Saudi Arabia has produced nine reports on violations, even though there have been many more allegations made. Progress on this matter

has been glacial, and I find it remarkable that the Government are still holding the line that Saudi Arabia must take responsibility for investigating its own alleged violations.

Mr Ellwood: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for interrupting him again, but I think it will be helpful if I provide further clarity as he develops his argument. First, on the Human Rights Council and the formation of texts, there is the question of consensus, as we have seen more recently in relation to UN Security Council resolution 2334. He knows this from his own experience: it is consensus that eventually leads to the creation of a text that is agreed by everyone so that it can actually pass. I hope that he recognises that fact. My second point—just to test your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker—is that I agree absolutely that the production of these reports has been far too slow. The reason for that is that we are dealing with a country that has never written a report like this in its life and it is having to learn the hard way how to show the transparency that the international community expects.

Stephen Twigg: I thank the Minister for those points of clarification, which I understand and appreciate. Of course I recognise the way in which United Nations bodies, including the Human Rights Council and the Security Council, operate. The point that I was seeking to make is that the original text from the Netherlands would have enabled the independent investigation to begin more than a year ago. Because of the diplomacy involved—I accept some of the realities of that—that did not happen. My argument today is that that has been a missed opportunity and that we could have started on this path at a much earlier stage.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): The process is slow because Saudi Arabia is a fledgling state. It is still a very young state that is not used to this level of scrutiny and transparency, and it will therefore take a long time for these reports to come out.

Stephen Twigg: The hon. Lady anticipates my final remarks. She used the word “slow”, as did the Minister. I have used the word “glacial”. The process is too slow, and I look forward to hearing the Minister tell us at what point the British Government will take the view that we need to move to an independent inquiry. I quoted the Government saying six months ago that they were not opposed to calls for an independent international inquiry but that first and foremost they wanted to see the Saudi Arabian Government carry out their own investigation. This situation has pertained for 14 months. How much longer do we have to wait before we can move to an independent investigation?

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the Ministry of Defence has delivered two training sessions in Saudi Arabia on the process of investigating alleged violations of international humanitarian law? I hope, as I am sure he does, that the MOD will have underlined the importance of dealing with these matters in an expedited manner.

Stephen Twigg: Absolutely, and I am sure that the Minister will have more to say on that when he speaks later. If it was the purpose of those sessions to remind

all parties concerned that they have obligations under international humanitarian law, it is vital that those obligations should be fulfilled quickly.

The view taken by the International Development Committee and other Select Committees of this House was that we would only get the full investigation that we need if it was completely independent. It is now long overdue for us as a country to move to support a fully independent international investigation. It is simply not acceptable for us to wait indefinitely for the Saudi Arabians to conduct their own investigations while people are still dying in this conflict.

Graham Jones: Morocco has 15 jets, Jordan has 15 jets, Kuwait has 15 jets, Bahrain has 15 jets, Qatar has 10 jets, the United Arab Emirates have 30 jets and Sudan has 15 jets. This is not just about Saudi Arabia; it involves the Gulf Co-operation Council and the Arab League as well. Will all those countries be involved in the inquiry?

Stephen Twigg: As I have made clear throughout every intervention that I have taken, the inquiry would cover all allegations made against any party to the conflict, but it is quite clear that the Saudis lead the coalition and their alleged violations will be investigated. My right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (Mr Spellar), who is no longer in his place, reminded us earlier that the Iranians will also require investigation.

Graham Jones: Who dropped the bombs then? What do the allegations say about who carried out the air strikes and dropped the bombs?

Stephen Twigg: They say it was predominantly Saudi Arabia. There is little doubt that the Saudis have the predominant air power. But of course it is not only about the alleged violations involving air power; it is about all the alleged violations by all sides, including shelling by the Houthis, which must be investigated. That is the purpose of saying today that we want to see an independent international investigation.

I finish by saying that the motion enables the House to come together and to put to one side our different points of view on the question of UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia and others—the motion is not about that. I reiterate that, although the International Development Committee and the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee took one view on arms sales and the Foreign Affairs Committee took another, all three Committees took the view that we should have an independent, UN-led international investigation. This debate provides Members on both sides of the House with an opportunity to send a clear message to the Government and the wider international community that we want to see urgent and immediate progress to enable a fully independent investigation to take place.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Before I call the next speaker, it will be obvious to the House that a great many people wish to speak this afternoon and that there is limited time. I would like to try not to impose a time limit, because the debate flows better if we do not have a time limit. I trust hon. Members to

behave courteously to their colleagues by speaking for around seven minutes. If lots of people speak for considerably longer than that, we will have a time limit, which will be unfair to some people. I know that I can trust Alistair Burt to begin.

12.41 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I much appreciate your introduction, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), the Chair of the International Development Committee, and his colleagues on both Committees for their thorough report. I also thank him for the way he introduced this difficult and complex situation. I also welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), and the Minister of State, Department for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart). We will listen carefully to their responses.

I was Minister with responsibility for the middle east between 2010 and 2013, and I also had departmental responsibility for arms control, so I have some background and feel for these difficult and complex issues. I do not want to spend a huge amount of time on the humanitarian statistics, simply because we are well aware of them—the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby got the statistics into the public domain quite effectively. I thank the Library of the House of Commons for producing yet another excellent background briefing. I am sure we all also want to thank Stephen O'Brien for his remarkable work through the UN relief agencies. To put one quotation in *Hansard*, he said of the recent attack on a funeral:

“This attack took place against the backdrop of a desperately worsening humanitarian situation across Yemen, with four out of every five of Yemen’s 28 million people in real and immediate need of assistance.

I was in Sana’a only last week and saw the relentless heart-breaking situation for myself: medical facilities with no medicines to treat basic conditions; parents struggling to put food in the mouths of their children even once a day; and entire communities terrifyingly affected by conflict and without access to basic services or livelihoods.”

The issue before us, as always, is not simply the relief of humanitarian pressures. We can do more on that, but it does not solve the problem.

I will talk about the elements of the motion that address the conflict, the impact on civilians and how the conflict can be resolved, because that is the most important thing. If the humanitarian crisis is to be ended, it will not be through more aid but through an end to the conflict.

I am exceptionally fond of Yemen. My visits between 2010 and 2013 introduced me to some of the country’s leaders, whose despair as events evolved was obvious. In 2011, I met some of the young people and women in the squares of Sana’a who helped to start changing the country. Things have not gone well, and the people of Yemen have been betrayed once again by those in their country who have responsibility for them, but I hope the spark of reform that was there with the youth and the women is not lost in the Yemen of the future. I hope that the political settlement, which will eventually come, includes those who were not included in the past—those people have a role to play.

[*Alistair Burt*]

We have this conflict because of that past betrayal, because of the manipulation by Ali Abdullah Saleh of all sides in the various conflicts over a lengthy time, because aid money that went into the country was used for the wrong purposes, and because there was a failure of governance and a failure in the process to deal with internal grievances, including those of the Houthis. All that led to a situation where it suits some to continue the conflict internally, but the cost is borne by the people of Yemen. It is essential that we recognise and understand that.

From the outside, it is understandable that we focus on the humanitarian crisis and that, to a degree, we focus overmuch on the role of Saudi Arabia—I will come to that in a second—but it is essential to recognise that, if we want to make a difference, we have to look at and understand why the conflict has persisted as long as it has. The conflict exists on the back of the civil strife that has been going on in Yemen for a long time. It exists because Yemen is genuinely important. Yemen matters, and this should not be a forgotten war in a forgotten country.

First, in a basic human sense, Yemen is a country of art, culture and music. It is a country of gentle people who have given a great deal to the world, and it is terrible that in our time we associate Yemen with conflict. Secondly, Yemen overlooks important sea lanes, and the Houthis have already attacked ships in the area. Thirdly, Yemen is ungoverned space. It matters to us if there is instability in the region. Yemen may be a faraway place of which many people know not very much, but it matters. Accordingly, Yemen's location and the ability of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to exploit that ungoverned space mean that AQAP's ability to direct attacks towards us and others in the west has increasingly become a matter of concern and importance for us. None of us in this House needs further information on the general instability in the region.

Understanding all that gives us an understanding of why the coalition came together, of why there is a UN resolution and of why the United Kingdom has an involvement. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is directly affected by instability in Yemen. It can be, and has been, physically attacked. Between 2015 and 2016, some 37 ballistic missiles were fired by Houthi rebels towards Saudi Arabia, inflicting damage. It is important that that is known, because sometimes the conflict is considered purely to be an internal issue in Yemen. The Houthis are sometimes not considered to be well armed, or anything else, but they are.

Graham Jones: The missiles supplied by North Korea in the 1990s, Scud-Bs, have a range of 300 to 500 km and are being shot down by Patriot defence missile systems procured by Saudi Arabia from the United States.

Alistair Burt: As the hon. Gentleman indicates, there are serious armaments in the area, which causes concern to all sides. That is a reason why the coalition is there, and I maintain that it is in the United Kingdom's interest to continue supporting the coalition, to continue supporting the partners in the coalition and to recognise what is being challenged in Yemen—it is not only the

loss of the democratically supported Government of President Hadi but, as has already been mentioned, the degree of Iranian influence. The Iranians have said publicly that they see Sana'a as yet another capital that they hold, and the risk and danger of that is that Iran is a regime with a clear intent to destabilise the region, to use terrorism to do so and to threaten stability in other areas. The consequence of that, not only in an unstable region but for those outside, is that the degree of risk to the United Kingdom and others has increased. Accordingly, it is not in the United Kingdom's interests if the outcome of the conflict is that the Iranians are successful and terrorism is successful.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): The hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) mentioned the fewer than 20 Scud strikes, which should be deplored, but coalition air forces are engaging in 150 air strikes, and more, a day. There is a disproportionality here that everyone in this House should recognise.

Alistair Burt: It is very easy for us on these comfortable Benches here in Westminster to talk about disproportionality in a conflict far away. My point is that the United Kingdom has focused on the activities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia without truly understanding why it is engaged, why the coalition is there and why the United Kingdom has an interest. I simply want to put that on the record. That is not, in any way, to minimise the reason and need for humanitarian law to be respected and for the activities of those who engage in warfare to conduct it according to the rules, but it does raise the rarely made argument about why on earth we are engaged in this and why the outcome matters to the United Kingdom.

Stephen Twigg: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Alistair Burt: I will just this once, as I am running short of time.

Stephen Twigg: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I have enormous respect for him and his experience, and I am listening carefully to what he has to say. For me, the crucial issue is respect for international humanitarian law. What is his answer to the point I raised: at what point would it be right to look at these matters independently, rather than leaving it to the Saudis to lead the investigation?

Alistair Burt: That point comes when the United Kingdom Government are not satisfied that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can fulfil its obligations, but I do not believe that position has been reached. I am sure the Minister will talk about the nature of our engagement with Saudi Arabia and how, as he says, it affects a group of states, through the Gulf Co-operation Council, that are engaged in a conflict in a manner they have not been before. There is an important point here: if we want and expect people in other parts of the world to be responsible for their own defence and security, they are going to have to get on with it and they are learning some of the processes. That is happening at the moment.

Secondly, on the nature of our engagement, I refer all colleagues to the very good report by the BBC's Frank Gardner just before Christmas that is on the BBC

website. Most of us recognise that Frank Gardner is a pretty independent voice, and he has looked at the nature of engagement. The openness of the Saudi authorities in dealing with him and explaining what they do, and the openness of the Saudi Foreign Minister in coming to this House, with any Member of this Chamber having access to talk about these issues and question in a manner not done before, is an important step forward. We know that everything is by no means perfect or clear, but the steps that have been taken by the British Government to encourage full disclosure have been important.

I must close on this next point, because Madam Deputy Speaker was very generous. We are beginning to learn that the importance of ending a conflict is paramount to the people who are affected by it, but there are good outcomes and less than good outcomes. Sometimes unless we are involved we can see outcomes to conflict that are not in our long-term interest and not in the interest of stability in the area. That is why we should continue to support our allies, who are working through the Gulf coalition. We should continue to be engaged fully with them, but recognise that our interests lie in a situation that does not create a terrorist cell in Sana'a and does not result in a Hezbollah-type operation active in Yemen. We must recognise that those states that oppose such situations are right to consider that their long-term stability and ours is best satisfied by a solution that ends the conflict, and puts in place a democratic Government supported by Yemenis and a Yemeni political process, not the outside interference of Iran.

12.52 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): If anyone should be allowed to exceed their six minutes, it is the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who is worth all the minutes he speaks about this important subject. Those who have been in the all-party group on Yemen, which I have chaired for 26 years—almost as long as President Saleh was President of Yemen—recognise that the right hon. Gentleman has always been, both in government and out of it, very aware of the importance of this beautiful country. We are very aware of his personal concern that it is being hurt and it is suffering every single day.

The right hon. Gentleman describes Yemen as the “forgotten war”. I am extremely proud of being a Member of this House, because what has been clear over the past few months is that Yemen is not the forgotten war in this House. At Foreign Office questions on Tuesday, 48 hours ago, 26 minutes of the 45 available were dedicated to some aspect of the situation in Yemen. Along with members of the all-party group—the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), a fellow Yemeni who was born in Yemen, as I was, and whom I am delighted to see here, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who could not be here today—I recently hosted Yemen day for the first time in a number of years. At that event, we heard excellent speeches from the two Ministers representing the Government here today, the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and

Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), and from Stephen O'Brien.

We were also able to interact with members of the Yemeni community, which is more important, because in all our discussions we must remember that it is the people of Yemen who are suffering. The families of the people of Yemen live in different parts of this country, with some in Liverpool, West Derby—I am not sure whether there are any in Warwick and Leamington, but I am so pleased that the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) has co-sponsored this debate. They are all over the country, but they feel powerless to do what they need to do to bring this matter to the attention of this House and the international community. I am therefore delighted that we are, yet again, having a debate on Yemen and that so many Members are in this House on a Thursday afternoon, when it is not usually this well attended; we probably could have had a much longer debate.

I want to confine my remarks to the urgency and importance of a ceasefire. I welcome what the shadow Foreign Secretary said at Foreign Office questions on Tuesday and the focus of those on the Opposition Front Bench, which is also the focus of the Government. I hate it when we fight over Yemen, be it on party lines, or about the role of Saudi Arabia or what is happening as far as the investigations are concerned. We clearly need investigations, as the motion suggests. I desperately want us to unite behind one concept: the importance of the ceasefire.

A few weeks ago, I was at the UN Security Council. Because of the ability of Matthew Rycroft to get parliamentarians in, I was able, after 30 years in this House, to watch my first live session of the Security Council. Every one of its members wanted to do something in support of a ceasefire—this was unanimous and included all the permanent members. Of course they had little digs at each other and at this country for our role, but the most important thing was that all the countries spoke with one voice. That is why it is so important that the draft resolution, which is really our resolution because we are the penholders, should be tabled before the UN as a matter of urgency. I know that the Minister told the shadow Minister that we table resolutions only when we know they are going to be implemented. I do not have the figures on how many of the UN's resolutions have actually been implemented, but I know it has got up to about 2,500. The fact is that we need that resolution, because the best way to guarantee that people are focusing on the peace process and a ceasefire is if the UN speaks with one voice. That is why I seek a timetable from the Government today: a timetable to ensure that we get that resolution before the Security Council.

I was delighted by the ceasefire brokered on Syria, where the Russians and the Turks were able to make sure that we had peace in Syria. I know it is a bit wobbly, but it was followed by the UN endorsing that ceasefire. If we can get this in Syria, why can we not have it in Yemen? I am very pleased with the role the Foreign Secretary has played and the honesty with which he has spoken about Yemen. If we take him at his word, the British Foreign Secretary will be working with the new US Secretary of State and with the Russians, who are now the friends of the Americans—or will be

[Keith Vaz]

after 20 January. The Chinese will go along with the ceasefire—I met the Chinese ambassador recently and asked whether China would support it and he said it would—and the French are on board. As the five permanent members are going to be on board and the other countries are so supportive, I think we can get this through. Will the Minister therefore tell us when that timetable is going to be achieved?

My final point is about the aid agencies. The Chairman of the International Development Committee read out the scorecard of shame: the 3.3 million women and children who are malnourished; the 370,000 children who are in immediate risk of starvation; the 7 million who do not know where their next meal is coming from; the 10 million who have no access to safe drinking water; and the fact that four fifths of the entire population—21 million, which is equivalent to the populations of London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Glasgow combined—are in desperate need of urgent assistance. These incredible organisations, ranging from Médecins sans Frontières to Islamic Relief, the World Federation of Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities, Oxfam, Save the Children, the Disasters Emergency Committee, are all trying to get the aid in. The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), another person who knows about Yemen so well, from when he served there, was right to ask: where is the aid going? The aid cannot get in effectively unless the planes land at Sana'a airport and unless the ports are able to accept it. We have to have a ceasefire.

If I am to have a new year's resolution, and if the House can have a collective new year's resolution, it should be that by 31 December we will have peace in Yemen and a proper political solution. Until we get that, Members of this House will continue to raise this subject, so that the forgotten war is never forgotten and we can bring peace to what is a beautiful, beautiful country.

1 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) just raised a very good prospect for 2017: peace in Yemen. Would that not be wonderful?

The south-east tip of the Arabian peninsula has been important to us for at least 200 years. The area was crucial to the functioning of the British empire, particularly after 1869, when the Suez canal opened and the route to India was much shortened. When oil came to replace coal, Aden became even more important, and British Petroleum set up refineries there. Time passed and the Aden protectorate became part of our empire. Indeed, the British Government had to rule it through 23 sheikdoms or tribal areas that were not great friends of one another. That remains the case to this day. We cannot just think of them as the Houthis or something; they are all different tribes, which is the problem.

This is where I come in. In the '50s, the right hon. Gentleman and his sister, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), were born when I was in Aden—

Keith Vaz: We are not related to you, by the way.

Bob Stewart: I understand that the right hon. Gentleman was born there, although his sister might not have been. I definitely was not born there: I was a little boy there, as my father was a soldier with the Aden Protectorate Levies.

Keith Vaz: The worst thing about my having intervened from a sedentary position is that the hon. Gentleman did not hear what I said. My sister and I were both born there, it is just that he said that we were born when he arrived in Aden, and I was making the point that the two events were not connected. [Laughter.]

Bob Stewart: Thank God for that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

My interest in Aden comes from my time there as a little boy. I loved the place: it was a great place to grow up between 1954 and 1957. What a fabulous place to be—if one was on the right side, of course. Since 1990, Yemen has gone from bad to worse. It has essentially become some sort of cockpit that some say is an area of fighting between the two branches of Islam. That may well be the case, but do not think that within that each side is homogeneous—they are not.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It does stretch credulity that the Iranian regime has defined the Houthis as part of Twelver Shi'a Islam, which they most certainly are not. That is more an indication of mischief-making than of any orthodox theological position.

Bob Stewart: Into that cockpit comes more mischief-making with the arrival of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and then the latest lot, Daesh. The poor devils who live there have had these people imposed on them. They are not native to Yemen—they are not people like the right hon. Member for Leicester East, who really should be an Adeni, or a Yemeni, if he wants to be—they are people coming in from outside. It is a great tragedy that Security Council resolution 2216, which was passed unanimously, has not had much effect. In a way, that is a disgrace on the world.

Graham Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Stewart: I give way again to a gentleman who talks such sense on this subject.

Graham Jones: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's kind words. He referred to ISIS, which is of course developing in a vacuum. The UN panel of experts identified that where that vacuum exists—with the Houthis threatening from one side and no stabilisation force, United Arab Emirates or otherwise, on the ground—Sunni people, towns and communities are turning to the black flag as a way of getting security against the Houthis, a subset of Shi'a Islam, coming at them. They are turning to ISIS as a defence mechanism. The problem is an absence of any governance at all and people wanting to protect themselves.

Bob Stewart: As ever, it is the little people who are suffering in this war. Apparently, 7,000 people have died. To me, that chimes with the number of people killed at Srebrenica, which I was kind of involved with all those years ago. When Srebrenica occurred, the world suddenly got its backside in gear and sorted

it out. I return to my original point: let us hope that 2017 sorts this situation out. It is clear that a political solution must be had, some way or other.

First, the protagonists from both sides have to meet. They have tried, and it is very difficult, but that is the only way forward. The diplomat from Mauritius, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, seems to be respected on all sides. The first thing we require is a chairman or chairwoman who is respected, and that man is respected. Let us hope he can work it.

My second point about the steps towards resolution is that the people negotiating must be protected, because they should be able to negotiate in safety. They have had some problems in the Gulf, so perhaps they should move to Geneva, the traditional place for negotiations, if necessary.

Thirdly, there must be a ceasefire that will hold. We must recognise that although ceasefires are written down on paper, they inevitably will not hold. They will never be perfect. We should almost expect that if there is a ceasefire, it will be breached. We have to live with that.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Has the hon. Gentleman seen the text of the resolution that the British have drafted but not yet put before the Security Council? Clause 1 of that resolution calls for a ceasefire and references the UN road map. Does he agree that that might be the basis for negotiations?

Bob Stewart: I have not read it, but it sounds very sensible and logical. Everything to do with sorting out problems has to be sensible and logical.

Fourthly, I have already alluded to the fact that AQAP and Daesh are not local to the region. The one thing all the protagonist share is that they hate these people who have come in from outside. AQAP and Daesh are part of the enemy and should not be involved.

Fifthly, there should be a withdrawal of armed forces from Sana'a and other towns. It will be very difficult, and it will probably involve UN peacekeepers of some sort. I always think of the model of the British going into Rhodesia and separating people, which was good. We cannot do it; whoever the peacekeepers are, they should probably be from an Islamic state. Good military officers and good military troops should go in, if there is to be some kind of resolution. The UN will have to grip this one.

Sixthly, a political solution is obviously the objective, and I very much hope that this year we will get one. For goodness' sake, if Yemen is a forgotten war, let us make it not forgotten, and let us then make it a forgotten war by next year because it is over.

1.8 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Unlike several Members who have already spoken, I have never been to Yemen, but last September I went to Oman. What is interesting about Oman—a country that, of course, has a border with Yemen—is that it has managed, in a very difficult situation, to stay out of the conflict. The Iranians are trying to smuggle weaponry into Yemen through Oman. Yemenis fleeing from the conflict are being treated in Omani hospitals, and there is a potential for the issue to take on a wider role. Interestingly, what is probably not widely known is that the Omanis are not

Shi'a or Sunni, but Ibadi. This small group has a distinctive position in the history of Islam, but so, too, does the group that we now call the Houthis. It is quite clear that this is a regional conflict, with Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Co-Operation Council countries and north Africa countries also involved as part of the UN-mandated and UN-supported coalition. On the other side is Iran and Hezbollah, and their commanders have revealed that they, too, have lost people in Yemen.

In a sense, what we are seeing in Syria is an alliance between the Alawites, who belong to a complicated branch that is close to Shi'a-ism, and Iran, Hezbollah, and, of course, Putin's Russia. In Yemen, we have something similar: a coalition of Sunni Governments supporting a weak Government in what has become a failed state and, on the other side, a coalition with former President Saleh meddling and refusing to accept the transition to the new Government. A political solution is probably even more difficult to achieve here than in Syria, because the United States is not in any real position to influence the outcome, whereas Russia has an influence in Syria. Potentially, that has serious ramifications. The Houthis fired missiles at United Arab Emirates' ships. They also fired missiles at United States' naval vessels. There is the potential for this conflict to widen. This is a regional security issue, and it is quite right that the United Nations Security Council has to engage with it.

We cannot simply say that Saudi Arabia and Iran can solve this conflict, because the internal actors are not proxies for Iran or Saudi Arabia. Therefore, crudely to say that we should condemn the British Government's support for the Saudis or that we should condemn Iran's support for the Houthis will not take us anywhere. Sadly, I suspect that even if there were a regional deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia and they agreed a common position on the Israel-Palestine conflict, this conflict in Yemen would still continue because of all those factors I have mentioned. Therefore, this crisis needs to be addressed with urgency and to have big international involvement. We should remember that, above all else, these people are among the very poorest in the world, and they are suffering not just warfare, but terrible poverty, partly because of mismanagement and misgovernment over many years.

1.14 pm

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): I am pleased to have secured this debate along with the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting us this opportunity.

The conflict in Yemen between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi rebels has created grave instability and danger. Amnesty International has stated that the conflict has seen

“violations of international humanitarian law committed by both sides with impunity.”

UN reports suggest that around 60% of airstrikes during the war have been conducted by Saudi-led forces.

The Committees on Arms Export Controls had an inquiry last year into the sale of UK arms to Saudi Arabia. It is clear to me that there is an urgent need for the Government to suspend such licences, pending the

[Chris White]

results of an independent UN-led investigation into potential breaches of international humanitarian law. That was the position taken by the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee and the International Development Committee in the conclusion of their inquiry.

Meanwhile, the Government have repeated their view that the Saudis should be allowed to conduct their own investigations. Almost two years into the conflict, the Saudi-led joint incidents and assessment team has initiated only around 15 investigations. Saferworld estimates that the number of credible allegations to be “well over 100”. Furthermore, feedback by that team is limited to press releases and press conferences, rather than comprehensive reports.

During the Defence Secretary’s statement on 19 December, I asked my right hon. Friend to outline the circumstances under which the Government would pause arms sales to Saudi Arabia, to which the response was:

“If we have evidence that international humanitarian law had been breached”.—[*Official Report*, 19 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 1224.]

I point to the devastating twin attack on a funeral hall in Sana’a in October, killing 140 people and injuring as many as 500. According to UN reports, the attacks were minutes apart, targeting a location where it was known that senior Houthi officials were assembling among families and children.

The US has since launched a review of that attack and cancelled a sale of precision-guided munitions worth around \$350 million to Saudi Arabia, citing “systemic” and “endemic” problems with Saudi targeting in Yemen. For an attack to fail to distinguish between those fighting in a conflict and civilians gives serious weight to the argument that international humanitarian law has been broken.

The UK should be an example to the world in terms of our licensing regime, our commitment to the rule of law and our responsiveness to challenges. Criterion 2(c) of our arms export licensing regime forbids the authorisation of arms sales if there is a “clear risk” of a violation of international humanitarian law. In his response today, will the Minister outline at what point that threshold is met? The evidence that the Committees of Arms Export Controls heard last year was compelling in suggesting that there is very much a “clear risk”.

I have heard arguments that if we do not supply arms, a nation with a weaker licensing regime will do so instead. I pre-empt any such point today and suggest that that is no way to approach any situation, not least the sale of weapons. We must be accountable for our own actions, particularly if we are to be an example in cementing the rule of law into our practices. Such a position does not fulfil our obligations under the criteria and the law. Unless we wish to become one of these other weaker countries, we should maintain that position.

A legal opinion in December 2015 by Matrix Chambers argues that the sale of UK arms constitutes a violation of our obligations under national, EU and international law. I also pre-empt the widely recognised point that our strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia is one that must be maintained. I absolutely agree with that position, but that does not extend to our acting as its proxy defence. We pride ourselves on our relationship with

Saudi Arabia, but it must not be a mechanism to deflect criticism, and our close ties should not be used to support otherwise.

Graham Jones: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. The primary subject of the debate is the people of Yemen who are suffering. That reflects my personal feelings. The objective is clear: a ceasefire, which is the only way to relieve the situation in Yemen. Stopping arms sales to Saudi is a bogus argument.

I put this to the hon. Gentleman: you have seen the arms sales from Putin and Moscow to Assad, and you have seen the devastation in Aleppo, so I find it incredible that you can make the argument about ethical arms sales and our ethical arms sales, and then allow Saudi Arabia, using our petrol pounds, to buy arms from whoever it wants. You see from Aleppo the devastation that could be caused if they bought Russian arms. That is a ridiculous argument.

Chris White: Thank you for the final point, but I suggest that where the hon. Gentleman talks about ethics he is missing my point entirely. This is not necessarily about ethics; it is about the rule of law and the criteria for our arms export licensing.

Seema Kennedy: My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. I would echo the comments made by my Lancashire neighbour, the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones). On the relationship with Saudi, does my hon. Friend not recognise that, through the good offices of Ministers such as the Minister who is in his place the behaviour of Saudi has changed? For example, it now accepts that it will no longer use cluster bombs.

Chris White: I will answer briefly by saying that the Government had already been in discussions with Saudi Arabia regarding cluster munitions—in 2010—but I do not think that the Saudi Arabian Government took a terribly large amount of notice of our Government’s persuasion until after the events when those munitions were identified.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman, the Chair of the Committee, is making a strong speech. Members on both sides of the House and Governments of both parties led the world in arguing for the arms trade treaty, including the previous Labour Government, who put the process in place, and indeed the other arms export control criteria, so that we have a rules-based system for our defence industry to operate within and one that adheres to humanitarian principles. Does he agree that that wider principle will be at stake if we do not adhere to it?

Chris White: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Chris White: I am sorry, but I am probably getting well past the Deputy Speaker’s patience.

To return to the statement made by the Secretary of State for Defence on 19 December and to the specific question raised by the hon. Member for Hyndburn, we learned the Government’s finding that British made cluster munitions had been used by the Saudi-led coalition

in May 2016. That has a number of implications and is a cause for concern, and I challenge the Minister on the responsiveness of our arms exports licensing regime. It is unacceptable that an international ally used a weapon manufactured in Britain with complete disregard for the 2008 convention on cluster munitions, of which the UK is a signatory.

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris White: I will continue; my apologies. We will see. If I get a strange look, I might give way shortly.

We are duty bound by the 2008 convention to prevent the use of cluster munitions, so what steps were taken to convince the Saudis of our opposition to the use of such munitions and to convince them to decommission those weapons? I recognise that the Government have not sold cluster munitions to Saudi Arabia since 1989, but it is important to consider the durability of our munitions.

Dr Monaghan: We know that the UK Government stopped supplying cluster munitions to Saudi Arabia in 1989. However, we also know that the UK Government continued to maintain those horrific weapons until 2010. No doubt, the Minister will tell us why that contract was in place for 21 years, but does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the crucial point is that accountability should extend beyond simply sales to maintenance contracts?

Chris White: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it will be interesting to hear the Minister's response to that intervention.

The humanitarian crisis requires an urgent and comprehensive response from the international community. Everyone in the Chamber agrees with that. As each month goes by and casualties grow, the case for an independent, UN-led investigation of potential breaches becomes all the more compelling. From a UK perspective, and to protect our reputation as an example to the world in arms export licensing, it is right that we suspend our sale of arms to Saudi Arabia until such an investigation is completed.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I should remind the House of something. A few hon. Gentleman this afternoon have used the word “you” when, really, they meant “one”, or they should have said “the hon. Gentleman” or “the hon. Lady”. I have not interrupted people because I do not wish to spoil the flow of their arguments, but it must be noted that that is inappropriate use of language, and the debate works much better if we keep it in the third person.

1.25 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Yemen is one of the oldest civilisations in the Gulf, yet a unified Yemeni state was not formed until 1990. The BBC gives an excellent timeline on that, and I urge Members to look at it. Yemen has a history of war, assassinations, and political, civil and internal conflict, with earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and landslides thrown in. Its history is a toll of misery in many respects.

In 1992, along came al-Qaeda. We heard little of al-Qaeda initially, but following the attack in 2000 on the USS Cole, violence grew from al-Qaeda. In 2009, Saudi and Yemeni branches merged to form al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and the death toll has risen yearly. The northern-based Houthi, or Partisans of God, insurgency against the majority Sunni Yemeni Government started to grow in 2004. Houthis adhere to a branch of Shi'a Islam, and I appreciate that it is a branch.

Ex-President Saleh became President of North Yemen in 1978, and President of Yemen, following unification with the south, in 1990. He was forced to leave office in 2012, since when he has fought alongside the Houthi insurgents to control Yemen. In February 2015, a panel of UN experts released a report alleging that, during his time in power, Saleh amassed a fortune worth between \$30 billion and \$62 billion. The report claims that the assets—including gold, cash, property and other commodities—are held under various names in at least 20 countries.

In 2012, President Hadi was inaugurated, but he fled to Aden in 2015, as the Houthis took over large parts of the country. President Hadi is supported by the Gulf Co-operation Council—the military alliance that is often referred to as being led by Saudi Arabia.

In April 2015, the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo on Yemen's Houthi rebels and allies, including former President Ali Saleh and his son. That arms embargo has been broken many times by the Iranians.

The 2016 global terrorism index lists Yemen as the country facing the sixth highest level of terrorism in the world. Of the 20 most fatal terrorist attacks in 2015, two were in Yemen—carried out by Houthi extremists. In 2015, 1,591 Yemenis were killed in terrorist attacks. Three groups carried out 90% of the attacks: the Houthis, AQAP and a new group, the IS affiliates. The Houthi still claimed responsibility for 63% of deaths and 62% of the attacks, the majority of which were against private citizens and property.

There is no doubt that violence has engulfed Yemen. That country has a history of conflict and tensions between its regions, and its ethnic and religious groups. Its leadership has a history of failing the ordinary people of Yemen. It is naive to suggest that Yemen is not also a proxy battle for dominance between Sunni and Shi'a powers drawing in wealthier and more powerful regional countries. The Houthis have also launched attacks on their neighbour, Saudi Arabia. I will not repeat all the information we have heard about the famine, disease and death tolls that result from the conflict, but this disastrous situation has reached a stalemate. Ceasefires and peace deals have been made and broken, and no side seems to see a real interest in reaching and maintaining a settlement.

In a region where the headlines so often include the horrific barrel bombing of civilians in Aleppo, a rising tide of refugees, murder, rape, and the torture of followers of differing religious groups, the warring parties in the Yemeni conflict have no real impetus in getting behind peace initiatives. I appreciate that the UN special envoy has worked hard. There is little in the motion before us that I think anyone in this House would not support, but I will talk about where we should be going because I am not going to get into a tit-for-tat argument about

[Mrs Madeleine Moon]

whether the Saudis are the main problem or whether the coalition is the problem. The problem is that we do not have a clear road map to resolve the conflict.

I have looked at what I think is a very good report from Chatham House, which is one of the UK's best independent think-tanks and can be trusted to take an impartial view. Its report points out that

"the conflict is in fact multipolar, fuelled by regional and international support for the various parties involved in the fighting. There is broad consensus among international policy-makers that the only way the conflict can be brought to a sustainable end is through political mediation."

Tensions are rife not only between the two warring factions—the two ex-Presidents—and we need to tackle those because the groups are also deeply divided. Whether we come down on the side of the Houthis or on the other side, an ongoing civil war will still ultimately emerge. We need a peace process that is more inclusive. I wish we would all listen much more to the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who happens to be, in my view, one of the great experts on the region. We need to move away from prioritising elite-level mediation and security concerns, particularly counter-terrorism initiatives, to look at the economic needs of the population.

The Chatham House report also states:

"The new political process will need to give equal weight to bottom-up, grassroots local approaches to peacebuilding alongside top-down, national and elite-level interests; and ensure that the political, security and economic tracks of the transition are interlinked rather than dealt with separately. Failure to expand representation and to focus on local governance will...lead to renewed hostilities at a local level that could push Yemen a step closer to becoming a 'chaos state'".

There are many reasons why we in the UK need to pay great attention to what is happening in Yemen. Yemen sits on the Bab al-Mandab strait, a narrow waterway linking the Red sea with the Gulf of Aden, through which most of the world's oil and trade traverse on a daily basis. Security and stability in the straits is vital to the whole world's economies and whoever controls the straits has a potential stranglehold on those economies.

The situation is a matter of urgent attention for the world. In my view, it is only the United Nations that can speak on behalf of the world, so it is to the UN that we must turn. It is the UN's responsibility to take that bottom-up, rather than top-down, approach. A coalition of support for the people of Yemen is where we must give our support. Rather than dividing the issue into attacks on Saudi Arabia or attacks on Iran, let us focus on the peace needs of the people of Yemen.

1.35 pm

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Colleagues have used the phrase "forgotten war" a number of times during the debate, so I pay tribute to many hon. Members on both sides of the House who keep bringing the issue of Yemen back to the Chamber to ensure that it is not forgotten.

There is an acute humanitarian crisis. I do not want to go over those details again, as many hon. and right hon. Members who have spent time in Yemen have detailed that. However, I would like to put on the record my thanks—and, I think, the thanks of us all—for the

Government's great contribution to helping the Yemenis, including the £100 million of Department for International Development money that has been spent. [Interruption.] I cannot, unfortunately, hear the sedentary interventions. I am proud that we have made our 0.7% commitment. It says a lot about this Government, the previous coalition Government and our commitment to being an outward-looking global nation, which is very important, particularly after the referendum result.

We are all here to discuss stability and peace in Yemen. That is our aim and it is what is right for the people of Yemen. However, I would argue that it is greatly in the interests of all our constituents as well. We have seen that terrorist organisations thrive in war zones and failed states. There was Afghanistan. Then it was Syria, where Daesh grew. Now that it cannot get a foothold in Syria, it is moving over into Turkey. We are providing people who want to kill our constituents with a training ground, so the stability of the state of Yemen can only be in the best interests of our constituents.

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady. She is making a very important point. Does she share my disappointment that there continues to be a small—I am glad to say that it is only small—number of Members in the House who continue to say that we should scrap all the aid budgets and scrap DFID? It is actually very much in our national security interests and in the interests of the people who are suffering in those countries that we continue to provide funding.

Seema Kennedy: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman and I can see a little bit of cross-party love coming through. I do not think he will agree with the rest of my speech, but we totally agree on this point.

The conflict is having a profound effect, of course, on the people of Yemen, but it is having a wider effect on Saudi Arabia, which is suffering from the effects of migration, disease and terrorism on its borders. As I said in my intervention, Saudi Arabia is a state that has existed only for decades, to which its people might say, "Well, as a Persian, of course you'd say that." It is in a state of transition. We have heard that some of its leaders are starting projects to think about how it will move towards further democracy and have more representation from women and other groups. As an ally, we should support the state in that and we should support its Government.

I was heartened when the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister came to speak to hon. Members before Christmas. He was open about recognising that there is a great challenge for his country, because we do not want a situation where Jeddah and Riyadh are controlled by Daesh or al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

The war is legal, but we can argue about how effective President Hadi is as the leader in Yemen. My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) and I differ on the role of selling armaments to Saudi Arabia, and I would echo some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) on that. One must understand that relationships take a long time to build up in the middle east and they are reliant on trust, so we must keep talking to people. Historical relationships through trade and diplomacy take an awfully long time to build.

Graham Jones: Has the hon. Lady seen that the European Council on Foreign Relations has said that it is absolutely vital that Europe and the EU post-Trump keep a good relationship with the GCC and the Arab League in relation to Security Council resolution 2216 and the intervention in Yemen? If we are to resolve this problem, we have to see that it is about building relationships, not destroying relationships, as the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) wants to do.

Seema Kennedy: I agree: it is about relationships, and it is about influence and guidance.

What is written in the law about arms export control—my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) was instrumental in overseeing that when he was the Minister responsible—is very important. We need to do those things, and all arms exported to anybody go through a rigorous process. The coalition fighting in Yemen, which is led by Saudi Arabia but includes other Arab countries, is defending its borders and its interests.

Since what happened in the early 2000s, we have heard that we want to get out of the middle east and that countries there need to be self-sustaining, independent and more democratic.

Mrs Moon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Seema Kennedy: I just need to finish this point before I lose my train of thought.

We need to allow those countries to do that, with the guidance that one would expect from an ally and a friend. Having our personnel there explaining compliance with international humanitarian law and explaining targeting is very important. I do not really like saying what my Labour neighbour, the hon. Member for Hyndburn, is saying, but if we are not in there, who do we really think will be there doing these things? This relationship is fundamental in terms of trade, security and the intelligence and co-operation we get.

George Kerevan: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Seema Kennedy: I am not going to speak for longer, because there are more expert voices in this House. I thank the hon. Members who are here today to speak in the debate, but all of us must really think about what we are talking about and whether it will actually protect Yemenis in the long run.

1.41 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Brexit aside, I feel as though this House has spent more time on Yemen than on most other issues. That is not a complaint—I would spend as long as I could debating the disastrous situation facing people in Yemen. Sadly, the evidence is that this Government are not entirely listening.

The misleading of the British people and the international community over Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen and its use of cluster weapons, in particular, is a blot on the record of current and former members of the Government. Ministers stuck to their stock phrases of denial, denial, denial, before the Defence Secretary was

chosen to open the worst possible Christmas present and reveal that Ministers had, indeed, misled the House on a number of occasions. I wonder what the likelihood is of any such Minister facing sanctions for their part in that cover-up. Call me cynical, but I am not holding my breath. Perhaps the Ministers concerned were, to quote something the Minister said earlier this week, "inadvertently disingenuously" misleading the House, although I am sure that was not the case.

At least none of the Ministers was quite so misleading as the spokesman for the Saudi coalition, Major General Asseri, who claimed that Saudi Arabia's British cluster bombs were obsolete and had been destroyed. In fact, he went further and declared that Saudi Arabia's Tornado strike aircraft were not configured to drop the weapons. Now that our Defence Secretary has admitted that British cluster bombs were used, it is interesting to wonder how that happened if the Saudis had no aircraft configured to deliver them.

If we ever get to the truth of this matter, we may find that the Government's denial lasted for only as long as Saudi Arabia still had a number of British-made cluster bombs left to use. In other words, someone somewhere appears to have made a calculation that the use of these weapons may just have been enough to deliver a kind of victory and that the Saudi and UK Governments should deny their use until that had been achieved. Given the continuing situation in Yemen, I have to conclude that the code of denial was broken simply because Saudi Arabia now has no or few cluster bombs left to deploy.

However, if it is not the case that the stocks have been exhausted, and there is evidence that the Saudis still hold such weapons, will the Government commit to doing all they can to have them withdrawn from service and destroyed and to get Saudi Arabia to sign the convention on cluster munitions? That is what the Government are committed to doing under the convention: article 21 expressly obliges parties to the treaty to encourage non-members to ratify it. So I ask the Government to commit to coming back to the House to report on progress in securing Saudi agreement to withdrawing any remaining cluster munitions from use and to signing up to the convention.

Interestingly, the convention, perhaps uniquely, allows signatories to co-operate militarily with states that have not signed it, but it does not require them to do so. Surely, if we believe that cluster bombs should not be used, and especially not indiscriminately against civilian targets, it is clear that we should not be working in a coalition doing exactly that.

In addition to cluster bombs, the people of Yemen face another threat—from the increasing use of armed drones, especially in targeting so-called high-value al-Qaeda figures. While such strikes have been part of US operations in other countries, those carried out in Yemen have been criticised for having far fewer safeguards than those in other countries. If that is the case, will the Government use their bilateral discussions with the Americans to press for a change in their approach?

As the incoming Administration in Washington take shape, many fear that events are moving in an unhelpful direction. Some of the views placed on the record by senior members of the President-elect's team are frankly astounding. Comments I have seen attributed to General Mike Flynn, the incoming National Security Adviser, would appear better suited to a fake news site.

[Kirsten Oswald]

Unfortunately, it seems they are true reflections of his views—for instance, that fear of Muslims is rational. The most concerning aspect of that was not just the horrible nature of the statement, but the shallow, hate-mongering video he was promoting to the world. Well, I have some news for General Flynn: President Hadi is a Muslim, and so, too, are the leaders of Saudi Arabia. Appointing someone to play a key role in a conflict such as that in Yemen who states that it is rational to hate all those involved defies belief.

In an earlier debate in Westminster Hall, the Minister for Europe and the Americas chided those of us expressing concern about the Saudi coalition's tactics and behaviour, and he suggested the situation was too complex for us to understand. He is, of course, entirely right that the situation is hugely complex, which means there is all the more need for an independent investigation, but some issues are very clear, and so are some of the actions we must take, because the UK's involvement in this situation is deeply regrettable. We must investigate, and we must suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia. We must clarify exactly what the role of UK military personnel has been, and we must do everything we can to build a consensus around individuals and institutions that can build a new future for Yemen. In that respect, I am pleased that the United Nations special envoy to Yemen has called a new round of talks in Tunis at the end of the month to advance Yemen's constitutional process, and I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing the participants well in their endeavours.

1.47 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): I cannot say that it is a pleasure to take part in this debate on Yemen today. Almost a year ago, we discussed this very subject in this Chamber. Yesterday, I reviewed what was said in that debate, and it is a source of great sadness that I could simply read out my speech of 12 months ago because nothing has changed, except for one thing: the suffering of the people of Yemen has got worse—much worse—and there is unimaginable suffering.

Another thing has changed: many more Members of Parliament are taking a keen interest in this forgotten conflict. Members of the public, including my constituents, are now becoming aware of the atrocities that are taking place. The BBC report by Fergal Keane was terrifying in showing what is going on. It is so easy to put these parts of the world out of the public eye, especially when there is another crisis nearby in Syria.

My own interest results from the fact that I was born in Aden, so I have always felt a special affinity for the country, and I would like to return. I know that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) feels the same, and I hope we will be some of the first MPs to visit when the devastating civil war is at an end.

The situation continues to disintegrate, and even though we have a United Nations road map, it continues to be nowhere near implementation. I continue to be hopeful that this conflict can be resolved through diplomatic means, but that depends on the willingness of external powers to make it happen, just as it does on the willingness of the two sides in Yemen itself.

The transfer of power from President Saleh to President Hadi in 2011 could have been a fresh start. It was brokered by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Co-operation Council. Hundreds of thousands of Yemeni men and women peacefully demonstrated for democracy, but, sadly, the internal situation deteriorated—a process led by ex-President Saleh and the Houthis—so Yemen is now in a desperate state.

These events started as an attempt to put the democratically elected Government back in place, but Yemen has now become a failed state, with many different actors, including Iran, Russia, al-Qaeda and Daesh, all creating chaos. Even worse, there is a humanitarian crisis, with millions of people displaced and thousands dying.

Will the Minister comment on what is going to happen following the inauguration of the United States President, who appears to have a shaky grasp of issues in the region? Secretary of State John Kerry spent much time working on the road map, but I feel that the UK may now have to take the lead if we want to get a quick resolution to this humanitarian crisis. There is a real groundswell of support in this House, and beyond, for us to do exactly that.

We have a very close relationships with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries that are part of the coalition. As a critical friend, we have already pushed Saudi Arabia to be more transparent and to investigate each violation and publish the result.

Mrs Moon: Will the hon. Lady join me in particularly commending the work of the RAF personnel who have been guiding the Saudis in relation to rules of engagement? It is absolutely crucial that we are there, changing the nature of the conflict, and that is possible because of this long-standing commitment. If we just criticise the Saudis, the conflict will get worse.

Mrs Drummond: Absolutely—I totally agree. We have a very long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, and long may it continue. We can work side by side with them to create peace in the region.

We will need an independent investigation into reports of breaches of international humanitarian law, not least because of the violations by the Houthis, but let us concentrate on getting the road map back on track first. Can the Minister confirm that there are people on the ground who can verify each violation, as I am concerned that there are difficulties in getting international experts into Yemen? We have all heard in other speeches about the humanitarian crisis. I am very grateful to all the charities who work so hard in Yemen and who update us regularly in the all-party parliamentary group. I am pleased that the news channels have started to alert the public on this neglected civil war.

Unfortunately, people in Yemen cannot escape. They are either too poor or cannot cross borders because the only border is that of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Co-operation Council, or Oman—or the sea. Yemen has always been one of the poorest areas in the world. Before the conflict, 90% of food was imported. With the closure of ports and lack of cranes, 14 million people are now food-insecure and half of them are classified as severely food-insecure—that is 7 million people. I am sure we have all read about families scavenging on rubbish dumps just to survive.

I am pleased that because of the pressure that the Government have put on the Saudi coalition, the blockade of ports has eased, but imports are still significantly below pre-conflict levels. Bureaucratic obstacles, restrictions on access, and insecurity are not helping. I urge the Government to continue the pressure on the coalition and the Houthis to allow aid to move quickly through the country. The aid is available, but until flights are resumed into Sana'a international airport and food aid is allowed to move freely from the ports and around the country, the humanitarian crisis will continue.

I am confident that Yemen has the capacity to thrive again, as it has done so in the short time in which there has been peace. Although it is not a major producer of oil or gas compared with other states in Arabia, oil was responsible for three quarters of Government income before the crisis, and there may be possibilities of exploiting other wells. Agriculture in Yemen depends on fuel to drive irrigation pumps to produce cereal. It is estimated by Famine Early Warning Systems Network that the planting of staple foodstuffs in Yemen is now down by around 30% on previous years. This is not influenced by climatic conditions, since rainfall has been at healthy levels in the main cultivated regions; it is simply because the war and its consequences are destroying agriculture.

I know that the international community will want to help Yemen to get back on its feet once peace has been established, but that will not happen until we show leadership. I hope that the UK Government will take on that role immediately, as too many people depend on it. It is also in our national interest, as al-Qaeda and, particularly, Daesh will use it as a base once they have been evicted from Syria and Iraq. There is no time to waste. I hope that the House will continue to push for further action to save what could be a thriving country like some of its neighbours, inshallah.

1.54 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The scale of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is unimaginable. A number of Members have referred to some of the statistics involved. I would refer only to the fact that 19 million people in Yemen—70% of the population—need humanitarian or protection assistance. This is clearly a huge crisis that the international community is responding to, or at least partly responding to. I hope that the Minister will be able to update the House on the progress being made on the United Nations appeal, which currently, according to the latest figures I have seen, is just under 60% funded.

I want to focus my comments, I am afraid—some Members will feel that this is not the appropriate focus—on the Saudi actions. I do so because the military action that is taken by the Houthis and the Saudis is a major driver of the humanitarian crisis that we see in Yemen. There is no doubt whatsoever that the Houthis are committing serious human rights abuses. The Minister was right to point out to me in a written answer about the attacks on Saudi Arabia that 90 Saudi deaths have been caused by the Houthis through cross-border attacks, with more than 500 people injured. However, it is also right that we in this place focus our attention on the Saudis, because they are our allies and they are using the weapons that we are providing them with.

I will limit my remarks to a few questions on which I hope the Minister will receive some inspiration in responding to the debate. First, do the UK Government know

whether UK planes were used in the delivery of cluster munitions? This question has been posed before, but I do not believe that an answer has been given. I take that to mean that they probably have been used, in specific operations. Have the Government looked at whether UK-supplied aircraft have been used to deliver cluster munitions, whether there are any legal obligations under the Cluster Munitions (Prohibition) Act 2010 that would pertain to those activities, and whether the use of UK aircraft in that way would be covered by the UK's cluster munitions prohibition?

A number of Members have mentioned that cluster munitions have been sold to the Saudis only up to a certain period. We know that 500 cluster munitions were delivered over a three-year period, and that they were safe and suitable for service only until 2008. I hope the Minister can clarify what that means in terms of the increased risk of civilian casualties. Presumably, if they are safe and suitable for service only until 2008, more recent use would increase the risk of civilian casualties because the ordnance would not explode on impact.

Mr Ellwood: Leaning on my previous military experience, as a general rule I would not want to go anywhere near any munition that has passed its sell-by date. I will write to the right hon. Gentleman with a more detailed answer, but I understand that these munitions did not fully blow up as they should have done. The fact that they were so old meant that they failed to work. This serves as advice to any country that has such stocks in their armouries: once the sell-by date has gone, they should clearly be removed. In this particular case, the country is not a signatory to the cluster munitions convention. From that perspective, it is not illegal to use cluster munitions, although we obviously advise against it.

Tom Brake: I understand that, but some Opposition Members would challenge the Minister on whether their use, in any circumstances, can be deemed legal. It is regrettable that he is arguing, in effect, that their use can be considered legal in some circumstances, because most people would consider their impact to be indiscriminate.

Graham Jones: I am following the right hon. Gentleman's argument and he knows that I am going to make a counter-point. The state of Qatar is involved in the Gulf Co-operation Council mission in Yemen, so does he think that we should suspend our sales of coastal defence systems to it?

Tom Brake: I had anticipated the hon. Gentleman's line of inquiry, but the focus of my remarks is on what the Saudis are doing, the use of cluster munitions and whether there is sufficient evidence to call for a suspension of arms sales and sufficient support for an independent inquiry, which the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) called for in his opening remarks. I believe that there is.

Will the Minister explain the basis on which the Saudi Arabians refused in 2010 to swap their cluster munitions for the more precise Paveway III bombs? I understand that the Ministry of Defence offered a free

[Tom Brake]

swap with no cost implications, so what is the Government's understanding of why the Saudis refused to take up that offer?

My final point relates to the joint incidents assessment team, to which, as I made clear in an earlier intervention, the Government have provided advice on how to investigate matters of international humanitarian law. One of the JIAT members is Mansour al-Mansour, a Bahraini judge who played a significant and unfortunate role in a series of trials in Bahrain about which it has been said:

"A pattern of due process violations occurred at the pre-trial and trial levels that denied most defendants elementary fair trial guarantees."

Does the Minister think that that person and, possibly, other members of the JIAT are suitably qualified to adjudicate on the issue of civilian casualties in Yemen? Clearly, the credibility of the JIAT must depend on the credibility of its individual members.

Emily Thornberry: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that Mansour al-Mansour is known in Bahrain as "the butcher"?

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Lady for putting that on the record. Clearly, there are significant concerns about his role and, therefore, his suitability for sitting on the JIAT.

In conclusion, there is a huge amount of evidence that suggests that the UK should suspend arms sales. I want to finish on the first point that was made in this debate, which is that there is now an overwhelming case for an independent inquiry into Saudi activities in Yemen. I fail to understand why the Government do not show the same enthusiasm as they did when they rightly made a very strong case for a similar independent inquiry in Sri Lanka.

2.3 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) for securing this debate. Although I do not entirely agree with their views on the matter—I think they know that—this gives us an opportunity to debate and bring the issue of Yemen back into the public domain. Sadly, neither the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) nor my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) are in their places, but it was interesting to hear their thoughtful contributions.

It may come as no surprise that I want to focus on the humanitarian aid aspect of the situation in Yemen, given that I serve on the International Development Committee. This debate takes place in a week when the term "humanitarian crisis" has been used. For me, it is what is happening in Yemen that is a humanitarian crisis, not some of the other issues that have been raised in the Chamber today.

It is two years since hostilities began to escalate in Yemen. The suffering of children and their families continues. Today more than 18 million people are estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance, many of whom, very sadly, are children. Some have described

the situation as a children's emergency. The United Nations estimates that more than 4,000 civilians have been killed and more than 7,000 injured. It has also been estimated that more than 3 million Yemenis are internally displaced. They and many others suffer from food insecurity. Close to half of Yemen's health facilities are either closed or able to function only partially. Nearly 2,000 schools remain closed due to damage and destruction.

The International Development Committee often talks about the need for education for children. The sustainable development goals use the term, "Leave no one behind", and concerns in Syria have led to the No Lost Generation initiative. I fear that Yemen may have another lost generation of children whose long-term futures will suffer because of a lack of education as a result of the conflict.

Last year, the Committee heard evidence from a number of non-governmental organisations and members of the Yemeni diaspora. Some of their stories, particularly those of the diaspora, were really striking and incredibly moving, including those about the need for water, food and urgent medical supplies—things that we take for granted in our own country. Low levels of imports of commercial supplies, such as fuel and medicines, simply add to the humanitarian crisis, as do the problems at Yemeni ports. Even so, the conflict continues to be described as the "forgotten war", so debates such as this are helpful in raising awareness.

Graham Jones: The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech on behalf of young people who are severely affected by the forgotten war in Yemen. I hope that she will go on to talk about the outrageous and disgusting use of child soldiers in Yemen. The UN and the UNICEF report identify two particular groups: the resistance groups—not the United Arab Emirates and Saudi armies—and the Houthis. The predominant age of those child soldiers running around with Kalashnikovs and getting killed is between six and eight. That is absolutely outrageous and I hope that she will comment on it.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. That specific point is not in my speech, but it is very important. Not only does war have an impact on children's education, livelihoods and health; some get dragged into war and become part of it.

Graham Jones: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and she makes a powerful point. The UNICEF report has evidence that the Houthis in particular are purchasing young people from foreign countries and bringing them into Yemen to fight as child soldiers.

Wendy Morton: Again, I thank the hon. Gentleman, who makes his point eloquently. I hope that he will speak later in the debate and elaborate on it.

Debates such as this help to raise awareness, including in this Chamber on a number of occasions over the past year to 18 months. They also help to raise awareness beyond the Chamber, including among our constituents and the media. I fear that it is often overshadowed, understandably, by other events in the middle east region. Of course, by that I am referring to Syria; and yet, according to Save the Children, Yemen is the country with the largest number of people in need of humanitarian

assistance. Conflict drives food emergencies, and it is clearly impacting on the broader humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Such conflict also makes it extremely difficult for DFID, NGOs and other aid agencies to deliver aid safely and effectively. That is why safe humanitarian corridors are absolutely vital, and we must continue to press for them.

At this point in my speech, it would be fair for me to recognise the tremendous work and commitment of DFID staff and the work that they do in delivering UK aid to those who need it in Yemen, with more than £100 million in aid being delivered through schemes such as the Social Fund for Development, the Yemen humanitarian resilience programme, the programme to address malnutrition in Yemen and protection support through the UNHCR. The UK is one of the leading donors to Yemen; in fact, it is the fourth largest. Surely this is a good indication of the good work that our 0.7% commitment on international development can do, and how that aid goes out to help some of the world's poorest and those most in need. We must continue to use our leadership role to influence other donors as much as possible to encourage them to step up to the plate.

That brings me to the wider point of seeking a political settlement and a cessation of hostilities. The UK has strong relationships in the region, and I urge us to continue to use our influence there to help to bring about the lasting peace settlement for people in Yemen that we are all desperately searching for. Today we have debated the security situation, and we know from what we have heard and seen that this is a brutal conflict. We should recognise that the allegations about violations of international humanitarian law are exactly that—allegations. They must be investigated, but surely we must not let that overshadow the real answer to the crisis, which is a ceasefire, peace and long-lasting stability, not just in Yemen but in the region. In bringing that about, we should make sure that we avoid creating a vacuum that could be filled by those whom we would not wish to enter it.

2.12 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): There have been some powerful contributions to the debate, and I welcome the chance to discuss Yemen in further detail. This has been talked about as a forgotten crisis, although not in the House and certainly not in my constituency. I am delighted to say that the Yemeni community in Cardiff has a long history, and it has long expressed its concerns to me about the situation.

That community is also willing to reach out to Yemen. Before Christmas, I was delighted to support the Disasters Emergency Committee campaign in raising funds for Yemen. The campaign had already been very publicly supported by Grangetown Primary School in my constituency, by TramShed and by the Cardiff Devils ice hockey team. That unusual coalition came together to make it clear that they did not want the scenes that we saw on TV over Christmas of people suffering and starving—those horrific scenes that the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) and other Conservative Members referred to—to continue.

I agree with the comments made by many Members across the House about the need for an absolute focus on securing a ceasefire and a peace settlement. Only through

that can we truly address the horrors that we see in Yemen and the situation that Stephen O'Brien rightly described as a humanitarian catastrophe. Oxfam International states that 7 million people do not know where their next meal will come from, and we have all seen those horrible images on our screens. The UN and World Health Organisation estimate that 18.8 million Yemeni citizens—almost two thirds of the population—are in dire need of assistance and protection. As of 25 October last year, health facilities reported that there had been almost 44,000 casualties, which is an average of 75 people killed or injured every day. There are 3.15 million internally displaced people.

We have heard about the import restrictions at ports and the crisis in accessing food that has been caused by food shortages. Oxfam reports that almost half a million infants and young people are in need of immediate treatment for severe acute malnutrition. The war has led to the collapse of food imports. Yemen imported 90% of its food supplies before the escalation of the conflict. In November 2015, the country imported enough food supplies to meet demands, but in October 2016 imported food covered only 40% of the demand. Many aid agencies are warning that if the plunging trends in food imports continue unabated, they may come to a complete halt in four months.

There is a risk of a cholera outbreak, because the restrictions on fuel imports are having a catastrophic effect on Yemen's water and sanitation infrastructure. There has been an extremely worrying rise in gender-based violence, especially sexual violence, domestic violence and early marriage. Reports indicate an increase of 70% in reported incidents today compared with March 2015, and 8,000 or more incidents were recorded between January and September 2016, with 64% of the cases defined as emotional and psychological abuse or physical assault.

The psychological impact of the conflict on children, let alone the physical impact, is absolutely appalling. I will read out the words of 13-year-old Wahiha:

"I see the damage everywhere and I see how many people are affected by the bombs. I feel scared when I see weapons and especially when I hear the sound of planes up in the sky. When you hear that sound it means a big explosion will follow and that people will be killed... Hospitals and schools are damaged too. For children there is no education any more. Life is very difficult in Yemen right now."

That is a powerful testimony from one of the young people living through the conflict. The UN tells us that 3,000 children have been killed or injured since March 2015.

I pay tribute, as others have done, to the DFID team working in Yemen. Our Committee's report found that DFID had been instrumental in supporting and facilitating the humanitarian relief effort through its timely and flexible response, and we commended the Department for that. DFID has more than doubled its humanitarian commitment to Yemen, making the UK the fourth largest donor last year. DFID's work is crucial evidence of why we need to adhere to our 0.7% aid commitment. To do so is not only morally right, but in our national and global interest.

I believe, as I have done for a long time, that such excellent work risks being undermined by the continued sale to Saudi Arabia of arms that are being used in Yemen. Let me be clear from the outset that I accept the

[Stephen Doughty]

very serious concerns that have been raised about the wider regional nature of the conflict. I do not have an agenda against Saudi Arabia, nor do I have an agenda against our defence industry. I believe in a regulated defence industry that adheres to the rule of law. The reality is that the UN estimates that more than 60% of civilian casualties were the result of attacks by the Saudi-led coalition. We might as well look at the current evidence: we have heard in the last few days about a Saudi-led coalition airstrike that was reported to have killed five people, including two children, near a primary school in the north of Yemen. That is just in recent days.

We have heard about the atrocities committed by the Houthis, and I want to be clear that I recognise and condemn them. We heard some absolutely disgusting stories about the use of child soldiers. The Houthis are blockading humanitarian access and using landmines and other indiscriminate weapons—just as cluster munitions are—against civilians. They have carried out appalling, indiscriminate artillery attacks at Taiz and along the borders, in which they have killed civilians.

We are not selling arms to the Houthis, however; we are selling arms to the Saudi-led coalition. Human Rights Watch reports that 61 allegedly unlawful coalition actions and airstrikes have resulted in the death of 900 civilians, and there have been attacks on markets, schools and hospitals. My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) asked who was dropping these bombs, and where they were coming from. Human Rights Watch suggests that US-supplied munitions were used at 23 of those locations. UK-made weapons, including one produced as recently as 2015, have also been found there.

Let us be absolutely clear. The UK is a signatory to the arms trade treaty, and we led the fight for it internationally. I am proud of the fact that there was cross-party support for it, and that successive Governments have driven it forward. We have signed up to the EU consolidated criteria and we have our own regulations, which are very clear. A legal opinion has been produced which states that the UK is potentially in breach of article 6.3 of the arms trade treaty because the Government ought to have had the necessary knowledge that serious violations of international law were taking place; that the UK may be in breach of article 7 because there is a clear risk that future weapons supplies could be used to commit or facilitate serious breaches of international law; and that in such an ongoing crisis, no feasible mitigation measures were deemed possible.

The position is clear: we are signed up to those restrictions. Unfortunately, we have had a series of obfuscations and confusions not only from the Saudis, but from the UK Government, who changed their position several times on whether they conducted assessments, the nature of those assessments and the date on which they were conducted. The Minister and others admitted that progress has been glacial. That is simply not acceptable. As the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), a former Foreign Minister, pointed out, the Saudi Foreign Minister visited twice. That was a great opportunity to question him. He gave us assurances that there would be responses to the investigations, yet we have not seen them.

There are more than 180 documented incidents. Clearly, some will prove not to be true, but that is why we need a thorough investigation, and progress to date has been slow, whether from the Saudi Government and the Joint Incident Assessment Team, or the UK Government, who I believe know full well what is going on and have conducted assessments and possess information to show whether atrocities have been committed against civilians. We need independent verification of what has gone on. Until we get that, I support the calls for a temporary suspension of arms sales because of the principles that the arms trade treaty sets out.

I hope that the Minister will give us some clear assurances about what assessments and investigations are happening and whether he is convinced that the UK is adhering to its legal obligations. We know that legal proceedings are ongoing and due to be in the courts soon. It is crucial that, before those proceedings, the UK Government are clear about what they knew and when they knew it because we need assurances that we are adhering to our international obligations.

The crisis in Yemen will be resolved only through a peace settlement and a negotiated solution. All our efforts must be focused on that. There is a great deal of unity on that in the House, on the need for a humanitarian and development response, and, indeed, on the need for an independent investigation. We have a part to play in that; we are selling arms to one of the parties. Until we have clear answers, I will remain unsatisfied.

2.21 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Many Members have used the phrase “the forgotten war” this afternoon, but as my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) made clear, the House has been doing everything it can to ensure that that war is not forgotten. Although he is not in his place, I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for all he has done over many years to highlight Yemen’s plight.

I know the country and the region well, having travelled there. I have been to and around Yemen on several occasions, and I therefore regard the situation there with particular sadness. As my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) said about her own speech, I could be making the same remarks as those I made a year ago in the same debate in which she spoke.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) set out with brilliance and insight, as always, the background to the situation. He did that in a measured and balanced tone, which is crucial.

The pre-war position in Yemen was always complex. I think that it was Ali Abdullah Saleh who described governing Yemen as like dancing on the heads of snakes, so complex is the tribal, political and religious make-up of that country. It is the most populous country in the middle east with a population of around 30 million, yet it has the lowest annual income per head—pre-war, it was \$1,500. It has significant economic challenges and a young, male population with limited opportunities, even pre-war, to prosper. Yemen also relies heavily on foreign imports and was heavily armed, again, even pre-war. All that created a challenge for that country before the conflict broke out.

The position is even more challenging now. The geopolitical context is that Yemen is surrounded by a complex power network of different states and alliances, which make it all the more important to focus on it.

Possibly uniquely in this House, I do not intend to repeat the important points that other hon. Members have made—they have been very well made—but I will briefly touch on two things: the background and Saudi Arabia's involvement, and the future.

It is right, as all hon. Members who have spoken said, that we remember that there is fault on both sides. Simply attempting to apportion blame does not advance the cause of peace. Of course, like all other hon. Members, I condemn any deaths of innocent civilians. It is right that, when they occur, they are properly investigated.

I cannot express the background more effectively, eloquently or eruditely than my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt). The conflict came about through the Houthi attempt to take over the country some years ago, the march on Sana'a and the request by President Hadi, leading the legitimate Government of Yemen, for aid to stop that advance. The Saudi-led international coalition responded. We must remember that, just as there are consequences of action, on which we are focusing today, there would have been significant consequences to inaction had the Houthis been allowed to continue their advance and take over the country. I would argue that the consequences would have been much worse for the people of Yemen. There would also have been greater regional instability and a risk to our national interest.

We should also not forget that Saudi Arabia is regularly attacked across its border in the context of the conflict and that it has the right to defend itself. I therefore believe that it was right for the coalition to step in and act in defence of a legitimate Government and regional stability. It is also right to remember the vital role that Saudi Arabia plays in the region to our national interest and the partnership that we have with them in intelligence matters and in taking on terrorism. That engagement and relationship are vital to our national interest. It is not an uncritical relationship—as with all our relationships with our friends, we will be critical in a measured way when appropriate—but not engaging and not participating constructively in that relationship would be detrimental to our national interest, the interests of the people of Yemen and to regional stability.

I conclude by focusing on three key elements as we look to the future. First, a ceasefire to allow aid to get into the country and talks to take place is vital. I do not believe that any hon. Member would disagree with that. I particularly pay tribute to DFID for its work, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) for his work in his previous role in pressing the case for a ceasefire and to the Minister for his tireless work. The people of Yemen could have no better friend in this country than the Minister for the middle east.

Secondly, there must be a long-term political settlement that will hold. That settlement must emerge from within Yemen and its people and not be imposed from outside, although of course countries and friends of ours, such as Oman, have a significant role to play in facilitating such a settlement. It must ensure that all tribes and groups in Yemen are represented and that none are excluded.

Thirdly, it is important to focus on rebuilding Yemen and giving the people hope. That will involve investment from outside and security. I believe that it will also have to involve a clear focus on fuel because so much of what goes on in Yemen—electricity generation and the provision of water—relies on diesel fuel.

Mrs Moon: Is this not a prime example of when UN resolution 1325 could come into play? It involves the engagement of women in rebuilding a society after conflict and in setting out the peace conditions. Women and children have been many of the victims in this war. Is this not a wonderful example of how women can be involved in rebuilding Yemen?

Edward Argar: I cannot disagree with the hon. Lady. She makes her point well and effectively. She is right about the role that women can play in rebuilding a country after conflict. Of course, everyone in that country needs to play a role in helping to rebuild it. I hope that when we next debate this matter, significant progress will have occurred. The Minister, the British Government and the people of Yemen desire that. I hope that 2017 will bring peace to that troubled country.

2.29 pm

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): There is a hidden element running through this debate. This House and the UK Government can hope to influence the conduct of Saudi Arabia and the other states of the Gulf Co-operation Council. We have less hope and opportunity of influencing the Houthi and the various elements active in Yemen, including Iran. No Opposition Member who wishes to be critical of Saudi is blind to the crimes committed against humanity, against their own people, by the Houthi leadership and other elements of the coalition Government. So if we are talking with emphasis about Saudi, it is not because we ignore the other side and its crimes, but if we are to move the debate on, all we can do—as a major ally, weapons supplier and market—is to influence Saudi. That is why we are doing it. Some Members have tried to present the discussion in terms of some people being anti-Saudi or forgetting about the Houthis, but that is not where we are going. We can influence Saudi. The argument from Opposition Members is that Her Majesty's Government have been niggardly in how they have tried to influence Saudi. I will provide some evidence.

On 13 December, the United States Government vetoed the sale of 16,000 guidance systems for munitions that were going to be sold by US companies to Saudi Arabia. That tells me a couple of things. Why does Saudi need 16,000 guidance systems for bombs? It is something to do with the disproportionality of the air offensive that Saudi and several other air forces in the Arab world have been conducting. That disproportionality is getting in the way of a settlement. What began as a civil war—yes, there were some implications around the Saudi border—has been turned into a humanitarian disaster by the sheer scale of the action the Saudis have undertaken.

The fact that the Saudis are continuing after there is very little left to bomb suggests an unwillingness by the Saudi regime to come to a compromise before it is able to impose the political settlement it wants. It is therefore incumbent upon the UK to try to put pressure on the Saudis to reduce the scale of the bombing and say that

[George Kerevan]

they have to do something else. If the United States can do it, so can we. The US spokesman, when announcing the veto of the weapons sales in December, said, “We will not give a blank cheque to the Saudi regime.” My criticism of HM Government is precisely that they are trying to give a blank cheque to the Saudi Government.

Edward Agar: The hon. Gentleman makes his point well, but does he recall that the Secretary of State for Defence, in a statement to this House on 19 December, made it clear that the United States Government had suspended a particular licence but had continued to supply military jets, helicopters and other ammunition to Saudi Arabia? It was not a blank cheque.

George Kerevan: I am well aware of that. Politics is politics in the western world, so while the US was banning the guidance systems, it was simultaneously agreeing a major contract to supply battle tanks to Saudi Arabia, but that just makes my point. If we presume, as HM Government do, that Saudi Arabia is an ally, the way we should deal with it is not to give it a blank cheque but to give it a choice. It is carrot and stick. The British Government have not done that. They spent a long time pretending or arguing that British cluster weapons had not been used. Once that was definitively proved, they moved back to saying that Saudi should conduct its own inquiries.

We have been training the Saudi air force. For the past 40 years, we have been helping to set up the command and control system for the Saudi air force. If it is not getting it right now, it is for political reasons, not because of any defectiveness in its command and control system. Waiting on the Saudis to investigate is a subterfuge. We have to put political pressure on the Saudis to come to the negotiating table to reduce the scale of the bombing and move towards some kind of ceasefire, and to do it properly. If we do not do that, we let them off the hook. As long as the British Government are being so soft—I use the word advisedly—on the Saudis in this context, we will never get the international inquiry, which is the start of the process.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) crystallised the debate right at the very beginning by asking at what point do the British Government move on from demanding the Saudis investigate the failures in the bombing war to having an independent inquiry. That is the simplest thing. It is an even more modest request of HM Government than suspending arms sales temporarily, yet they will not even do that. That is the issue.

My final point is that as long as the British Government continue to underwrite the excessive Saudi bombing offensive, it becomes more and more likely that British personnel, in the military and in the Government, could be culpable legally.

Graham Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the Saudis can purchase arms from abroad from whoever by selling petrol to nations like the United Kingdom? Perhaps he has been to a local petrol station near him and filled his car up with Saudi Arabian petrol. Did he ask at the petrol station whether it was ethical petrol or whether it was funding arms purchased by Saudi Arabia?

George Kerevan: Fortunately, I can safely say that I do not possess and have never possessed a driving licence. I make the point again that I am not trying to identify Saudi as the only culprit in this difficult situation. I am saying that the only people we can influence is the Saudi regime. That is why I am trying to get the British Government to underwrite and support an independent inquiry.

My final point relates to the possible legal culpability of British service personnel, whom I greatly applaud. The Cluster Munitions (Prohibitions) Act 2010 makes it clear that it is an offence to “assist, encourage or induce” other persons to make use of cluster bombs. That is a pretty wide definition. As long as the British Government go on underwriting the Saudi air offensive, the more it becomes a possibility that British personnel could fall under that heading.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about legal culpability, but does he agree that that relates not just to cluster munitions but to the wider sales and compliance with the arms trade treaty? I do not know whether he has had the chance to look at the freedom of information request, but officials in the Foreign Office were clearly very exercised. They say that, owing to the high-profile nature of this subject and the attention it is getting from Parliament, the media and the courts, they have been advised that they have to correct answers. They are clearly worried about their legal position. Is that why we are seeing such obfuscation from them?

George Kerevan: I totally accept what the hon. Gentleman says. In his contribution, he made the wider legal case very well.

My worry is for British personnel if a legal case begins to develop. The Minister alluded to section 9 of the 2010 Act, which gives a defence for British personnel involved in an international conflict with allies who might not be party to the UN cluster convention, but the problem is that it is only a technical, theoretical defence. I do not think that section 9 could be interpreted beyond a point where we know a non-compliant state is deliberately using British cluster weapons over a long time, causing great civilian casualties. The position under the 2010 Act then becomes more opaque. Will the Minister comment on what legal advice the British Government have taken on those grounds?

2.39 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I thank the hon. Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) for securing today’s important debate through the Backbench Business Committee.

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen continues to worsen, despite all the parliamentary time we have spent over the past months discussing it. The situation is continually deteriorating, despite all the reassurances from our Government that millions of pounds is being spent on aid. There seem to be no end in sight for the suffering of the Yemeni people in the near future. Meanwhile, according to figures from Oxfam, some 14 million are food insecure, with about 7.5 million on the brink of famine. Unless something changes radically, the situation is set only to worsen in 2017. Yemen was heavily dependent on food

imports prior to the conflict, and the war has had a devastating effect on food security. Not enough is making its way into the country to meet daily demand.

The country's decimated infrastructure is making it impossible to get food to all who need it. It is not just roads that have been destroyed; ports have been targeted by the Saudi-led coalition. As a result of air strikes on the port of Hodeidah, only one of the six loading cranes remains functional. Prior to that, aid groups had complained that the coalition naval blockade prevented relief supplies from entering Yemen. There is further evidence to suggest that aid agencies are not being given proper opportunity to deliver aid.

About a year ago, Oxfam and other NGOs were sent a diplomatic note stating that if they were delivering aid anywhere remotely close to where Houthis were operating, they were doing so at their own risk. In effect, the Saudis were saying that they would not take responsibility for bombing aid workers if they were near Houthis. That diktat, which was surely a breach of international humanitarian law, has meant that civilians in need of aid are unable to receive it. Hunger should not be used as a weapon of war. Famine Early Warning Systems Network warns:

"To mitigate severe, ongoing food insecurity and prevent Famine over the coming year, the international community and local actors must protect the ability of private traders to import staple food", that

"more resources are needed to support the continuation and expansion of humanitarian response"

and that traders and humanitarian actors must have access to conflict zones.

The UK needs to play its part and heed these recommendations. The Saudis are a key ally of the UK, and we should be working to ensure that it is acting responsibly in the conflict. Such responsibility includes military operations—actions should be proportionate to the military threat—yet we continue to hear reports that would suggest that this is not the case. Serious questions need to be asked of the Saudis about their targeting. There are too many documented cases of indiscriminate bombings leading to thousands of needless civilian death and injuries, including of many children, as we have heard.

As we have also heard, the conflict is certainly not one-sided, but the fact remains that we are a key ally of the Saudis and have licensed £3.3 billion-worth of arms sales since their intervention in Yemen. We cannot shirk responsibility. That is particularly the case where UK-supplied weapons are being used in the conflict. Too many questions remain improperly answered around the use of BL755 cluster munitions. I have pursued the Government on this issue since last June, and I am sick of their cluster bluster. Members deserve nothing less than full transparency and disclosure.

Last June, I asked the MOD, by way of written question, when the UK had last maintained cluster munitions held by Saudi Arabia. The Secretary of State delivered a succinct and blunt response, saying:

"The UK has never maintained cluster munitions held by Saudi Arabia."

Yesterday, I got sight of a response to a freedom of information request submitted to the MOD by Amnesty International. Contained within is confirmation that up until 2008 there was contracted manpower support in

place for the maintenance, handling and storage of these cluster bombs. I will be seeking urgent clarification from the MOD on this. I seriously hope that I have not been misled by the Department.

Furthermore, it is revealed in the freedom of information response that the MOD offered to replace all of the Saudi stocks of BL755s with Paveway III precision-guided bombs as recently as 2010 but that the Saudis continually refused this offer. The MOD must provide answers to the House urgently as to why this offer was allowed to be declined without repercussion. Why have subsequent arms export licences been issued without question when the Saudis have so resolutely refused to give up their stockpile of UK-produced cluster munitions?

We also need concrete answers from the Saudis on how many of the BL755 bombs have been dropped on Yemen and absolute transparency on the targeting data of such air strikes. Furthermore, will the UK Government take sole responsibility for ensuring that any and all UK-produced cluster munitions dropped in Yemen are cleared, working alongside national de-mining institutions, including the Yemen Executive Mine Action Centre, and increasing the direct funding it receives from the UK as necessary? In short, I am asking the Government for an undertaking to clean up their own mess and show an appropriate level of responsibility. Our foreign policy needs to put the innocent civilians of Yemen first and foremost, now more than ever. Our efforts can help to avert a full-scale famine, but the time to act and help secure a ceasefire is now.

2.46 pm

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) for securing this debate and pay tribute, like my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), to the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), each and every minute of whose speech was a valuable contribution to this debate.

The primary purpose of this debate is to end the killing and suffering, to secure a ceasefire and to stop the humanitarian crisis. It is not just the primary purpose; it is pretty much the sole purpose. There are some other ancillary issues, but that is what we are here to do. This is a humanitarian crisis and a forgotten war—it has been under-reported and under-considered. I therefore welcome this debate. We must elevate it not only for those living in Yemen but for others in the region who will suffer and perhaps also for the people of western Europe, given some of the extreme Islamist elements within Yemen.

The country has a history of problems. To the members of the Labour club in Accrington, I say, "The problem is we have this despotic leader, Saleh, who has now returned. He was once fought by the Houthis, but now he's joined them. He milked the nation, and after robbing it and leaving impoverished, he is now involved in a war." This is a very simple view, but it is the view that the United Nations takes in UN Security Council resolution 2216: that there has been—dare I use the word?—a coup. A coup has been carried out by some very terrible people, including Houthis and the Saleh alliance, and the resistance on the other side has become involved in committing some atrocious acts. A vacuum has been created by the former President, who is now causing trouble again.

[Graham Jones]

If we do not stop the conflict in 2017—if we do not resolve the situation and bring about a ceasefire—there is a risk that the situation will become intractable. It will not be in the interests of Iran or Saudi Arabia to achieve a peaceful settlement, and they will continue the middle east proxy war. We must not allow the conflict to reach that stage, which is one of the reasons why resolution 2216 refers to an arms embargo, a blockade, and the need to stop the transfer of assets that is bringing illegal weapons such as guns and munitions into Yemen and exacerbating the situation.

Let us consider the scale of what is happening. The United Nations has reported that children aged between six and eight are carrying Kalashnikovs, and are being killed. This is the war that we face.

George Kerevan: I fully accept what my hon. Friend is saying about the use of child soldiers by the Houthis. Does he not recall, however, that the United Nations found Saudi Arabia to be culpable of being the biggest killer of children in the war in Yemen through its bombing, and that the Saudi regime forced the UN to take Saudi Arabia off its list of states with the worst records of dealing badly with children?

Graham Jones: That is a valid point. The United Nations has had trouble, and no one in the Chamber thinks that either side of the conflict is right. Both sides are killing people. That is what needs to end, and that is we need to focus on rather than blaming individual nations.

Let me set the record straight. I come to this debate frustrated, because 2016 was the year of false truth, false fact and fake news. It was a terrible year for Britain and for the world, in which moderate people in a democracy lost arguments to extremists—Breitbart on one side and The Canary on the other, or the alt-right versus the hard left of the Labour party. Yemen is being used as the next vehicle for the advocating of some lunacy, rather than the principled position of those who ask, “How can we help these people?” It is about time that moderate Britain fought back against some of those who pursue such extremist views.

We must not allow this to become an Iran versus Saudi conflict, because if we do, the situation will indeed become intractable. I accept, however, that all the reports show that there is a mass of complications on the ground. It is not simply Iran versus Saudi, because we have not reached that stage yet, but we ought to be exceedingly mindful of the possibility. We have Saleh, the guy who robbed Yemen. According to the UN, when he was President and also an arms dealer, he was buying bullets for 50 cents as an arms dealer and selling them to himself as President at a dollar a time. He was buying Kalashnikovs and other guns for \$150 as an arms dealer, and selling them to himself as President for \$600. The UN describes this man as creaming off the whole Yemeni state. At one depot, there were 1,500 troops; he had an invoice for 80,000. There are nine teachers for every child in Yemen, if we believe ex-President Saleh. Of course, he wants his old position back, and he wants to use all the money and assets that the United Nations is trying to freeze to fund a war in which ordinary people are being mercilessly killed.

Let us face some truths. The biggest donors to Yemen over the years, which have, in the past, prevented the humanitarian crisis from being what it is today, have been the Gulf Co-operation Council and Saudi Arabia. Because of the Houthis, the aid tap has been turned off. Worse than that, however, because the Houthis want to fight Saudi Arabia on the border, foreign workers from Yemen can no longer work in Saudi Arabia, which is logical, so all the remittances have dried up. No wonder the country is in poverty—and we are allowing these people to get away with it. It is obvious why Security Council resolution 2216 pins it all on the Houthis, the people who started this in an alliance with the person whom they were formerly fighting, President Saleh. Therein lies the problem, and the reason for resolution 2216.

We must try to deal with the situation, but that will mean building bridges. According to the UN reports, the GCC has tried—twice in Geneva, and also through the Muscat principles—to bring the two parties together for a peaceful settlement. Which party is resisting the peace talks? It is the Houthis, who will not allow a peace delegation to fly to Geneva, and will not allow the UN panel of experts to go in and observe the situation on the ground. This is a group of people who to my mind—I say this to the people in the Labour club in Accrington—are just trying to rob the state. They are not interested in a peaceful settlement, and that makes things very difficult, but we should never abandon the principle of trying to build bridges, and that includes trying not to upset or destabilise the GCC or the Arab League.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am enjoying listening to the hon. Gentleman's speech. Does he agree that one of the things that shows these people's intent is that the coup disrupted a constitutional process that was in place in Yemen to try to bring in a lasting and stable Government?

Graham Jones: I wish this debate were longer, as I could speak for two hours on this issue. [Interruption.] My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby is right; I have had a good go at going for three hours. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) is right, however. The proposal in that constitutional settlement was for a six-state federated Yemen, and President Saleh walked away from that; he walked away from the talks at Geneva because he did not want a federated state. He wanted to do what he was doing before: milk the state for himself. That is the problem, and all the while the people are suffering.

The Saudis are trying to get aid in. We have donated £100 million, which I am pleased about, but that is a fraction of what Saudi Arabia donates, yet we are trying to castigate the Saudis.

This conflict has been presented as Saudi Arabia against the people of Yemen: what an absolute load of garbage. The Saudis are operating under a UN mandate; five members of the GCC and four members of the Arab League are operating under that mandate, and Saudi is one component of that. It is the biggest component; I do not deny that. The Saudis are also guilty, it appears, of doing some awful things, and they should be held to account; nobody is saying anybody should be exempt from the law. But we must never take our eye off the ball: people are suffering in Yemen, and we must try to get to the end result of relieving that suffering. That is

the primary purpose, and I am never going to slip away from that. I am not going to be taken on to some hard-left, loony left or right-wing bandwagon about arms sales to Saudi Arabia if that impacts negatively on the people in the region. I stand here unequivocal: I am here to help the people of Yemen, and I want to see the best outcome for them.

Tom Brake: Is the hon. Gentleman aware, however, that after the strike on the funeral in which I think 140 people died, even the UK Government were quoted as saying they were going to review their policy towards arms exports to Saudi Arabia? I wonder whether he has had any feedback on what that review has stated.

Graham Jones: There is an issue there; there is a concern—a well-meaning and genuine concern—that the speed and efficacy of Saudi's investigations into some of the things they have done is not up to the required standard. However, as has been explained by many Members, they have attempted at least to come to this place, to speak with foreign powers, and to allow coalition partners who supply military equipment, as well as the British, to go in and be involved in looking at what is going on and in training. They have tried to a degree—although we do not know to what degree—to be open and transparent.

Mrs Moon: One of the issues that has not been addressed is the risk that, if we take Saudi Arabia out of this and isolate that coalition, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS will fill the gap and flourish in Yemen, making the conflict even worse.

Graham Jones: My hon. Friend takes my next words out of my mouth, and I congratulate her on raising a point that has perhaps not been raised enough. If we read the UN report and all other reports, this is the situation on ground: we have the Houthi-Saleh alliance marching south and, as there are next to no Government forces, they are marching through and they are marching into Sunni areas. We are seeing a repeat of Mosul; we are seeing history repeat itself in Iraq. We are seeing Shi'as marching into Sunni areas and the consequence of that, as in Mosul, is a consolidation of the presence of the black flag over these places.

So when I see 150,000 Saudi troops marching to the south through Aden and Iraq, and when I see the UAE send troops in—if I lived in the area I would prefer that as a force—I am at least satisfied that some degree of civil and military force is moving into place to try to secure the area. Instead, as is happening, as we see from the UN report, towns and communities are becoming fearful. Salafists and extremists then turn to their towns and communities and say, "The only way we can defend ourselves from those Houthis and Saleh supporters is to raise the black flag." It will be terrible, because we will not be able to remove ISIS from those communities for years to come. We are storing up a major problem. So when I see the Saudi and UAE troops moving to south Yemen, it has to be welcomed. Let us not forget that it is not just the Houthis and the Saleh alliance who are using child soldiers; the resistance forces who are fighting them are doing so as well. We need a restoration of civil governance. We cannot support a coup against a legitimate Government, even if that Government are not popular or efficient. We cannot allow that to happen.

I want to talk about arms, because some issues relating to arms have not yet been discussed. Who is supplying arms to Yemen? The UN register of interests gives us a list of the countries that have done so. They are: Russia, Bulgaria, Moldova, France, the USA, Ukraine, Belarus and China. Those armaments have included tanks, attack aircraft, rocket launchers and MiG jets. All those have been provided to the nation of Yemen. But I will tell you one country that has not supplied arms to Yemen: the United Kingdom. We have not supplied arms to Yemen, but all those other countries have done so. That ought to be noted. We have a good, robust system of arms export controls, far better than many others—*[Interruption.]* I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall end my remarks by saying that 2017 will be the year in which we will seek a ceasefire, and that I shall stand up and oppose anyone who wants to jump on the passing bandwagon of using Yemen to stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

3.2 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): As we have heard, the conflict in Yemen has sometimes been labelled a forgotten conflict. I want to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who mentioned earlier that it has not been forgotten in this House. I also want to pay tribute to the hon. Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) for their excellent contributions to the debate, which I have thoroughly enjoyed. It has given all of us here in Parliament a chance to keep the issue at the forefront of the public debate and to remember those killed and injured as a result of the ongoing violence and those who are starving or stricken with illness as a result of the breakdown of civil society.

We must also remember the UK's central role in the middle east, and in particular in this conflict. It is our moral and civic duty—and also in our best pragmatic, strategic self-interest—to do all we can to end the conflict and bring peace to Yemen. I think that there is consensus across the Chamber that that is what must happen, first and foremost because the humanitarian suffering in the country has now reached a horrifying tipping point.

I was grateful this week to have the opportunity to host a presentation by a range of aid organisations, setting out the scale and scope of the human suffering we are now seeing in the Yemeni population. We were warned by Oxfam, Christian Aid and the Yemen Safe Passage Group that the dangers of famine in the country are now very real indeed.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend mentioned Oxfam. I have been contacted by a number of constituents who are supporting Oxfam's Red Line for Yemen campaign. Will she join me in welcoming the campaign and support its call for the Government to uphold the spirit of the arms trade treaty and end any illegal arms sales that could be used to cause further suffering in Yemen?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising awareness of that campaign, and I hope that many more people will now sign up to it.

[*Ms Ahmed-Sheikh*]

Even before this conflict, Yemen was reliant on imports for between 90% and 95% of its food. By October 2016, the combined effect of a blockade of ports by coalition forces and severe damage to roads and port facilities meant that imported food covered only 40% of demand.

Graham Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Ordinarily I would give way, but the hon. Gentleman had 15 minutes to make his speech and I want to make sure that the Minister has time to answer the important questions we have all posed. Please forgive me.

Oxfam has stated that, if the trend of plunging food imports continues unabated, food imports will come to a complete halt in four months' time. Adding to the spiralling economic problems now facing the country—the central bank has stopped salary payments to Government employees, pension payments to the elderly and welfare payments to the vulnerable—a human tragedy on an almost epic scale is upon us. The estimate of the experts is that, by April or May 2017, there is a high likelihood of a “cataclysmic” famine that would condemn millions to suffering and death.

It is important that we bear in mind that those civilian victims are not a by-product of the conflict. They are the targets of military action, with the lack of food being used as a weapon of war. We have a moral responsibility to our fellow human beings to act now to address this crisis, which is why I welcome the work of aid organisations in Yemen. They have ensured, as best as they possibly can, that aid is delivered to those who need it now. I recognise that the UK Government have contributed more than £100 million-worth of aid to the country, and the Scottish Government have donated to the Disasters Emergency Committee's ongoing Yemen crisis appeal, but our charity alone will not avert this tragedy.

What the people of Yemen need now, as much as they need food, is international leadership. I welcome the efforts of the outgoing US Secretary of State, who tried to broker a ceasefire deal at the end of last year, but we know that the incoming Trump Administration are unlikely to take the same view of relations in the region. I fear that the policies of the new White House Administration will instigate a worrying degree of further instability in the middle east, a point also made by the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond).

Keith Vaz: Because of the vacuum that has been created—obviously, with a new Administration—Britain holds the pen, as we are told, at the Security Council. There is nothing to stop us hosting a conference that tries to bring all sides together or tabling a resolution, because it will take several months for the new American Administration to get into the right position. Of course, they might take a different view from the Obama Administration.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: The right hon. Gentleman demonstrates how we can show international leadership on this issue. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), has already been very

active in this area, but we need to build on his efforts. We should do so not just because of the humanitarian crisis but because it also makes strategic sense in helping to combat the bastions of al-Qaeda terrorism on the gulf of Aden while de-escalating the tensions caused by what the Foreign Secretary called the “proxy war” between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Before we take on the role of peace broker, we have to face up to our role in the conflict now. If Saudi Arabia and Iran are, in the Foreign Secretary's words, the “puppeteers” in the conflict, the UK has often acted as the quartermaster. That must end now. The UK has exported £3.3 billion of military equipment to Saudi Arabia since 2015. If we are to be an honest, impartial broker in the conflict, the Government must immediately suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia and facilitate a full, independent, UN-led inquiry into Saudi Arabia's conduct in the war in Yemen. That has to happen because we now know that, after consistently failing to live up to our moral and legal responsibilities on the use of the now-banned cluster munitions manufactured in the UK and exported to Saudi Arabia, the current approach to arms sales has failed in the case of Yemen. The Yemeni people are the innocent victims.

The Government must show the same leadership shown by the Netherlands and Germany in suspending licences for arms exports to Saudi Arabia. More specifically, at the end of last year the US Government, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) has already said, banned the sale of guided munitions kits to Saudi Arabia. Will the Minister clarify whether the UK Government have granted export licences to Saudi Arabia for any similar weapons manufactured here in the UK? Would the Government be happy to do so in the future? In addition, rather than relying on the Saudis to dispose of the weapons themselves, Ministers should demand that they are turned over to our own personnel for disposal. As signatories to the cluster munitions convention, are we not legally obliged to do everything we can to prevent their use? Decommissioning them ourselves would serve that responsibility, so will Ministers pledge to do so today?

To be the honest broker that the region so desperately needs, we need to be clear about the involvement of UK forces on the ground in Saudi Arabia. When it published its report in September, the Foreign Affairs Committee recommended that the UK Government answer the following questions:

“How many UK personnel are assisting the Saudi Arabian armed forces and in what roles, including BAE Systems employees;

What is the extent of the involvement of each group of UK personnel with the Saudis operations in Yemen; and

How are UK personnel advising the Saudi Arabian armed forces on IHL and what level of understanding do they have of the coalition's regard for IHL in its operations in Yemen.”

Those answers should also be forthcoming now.

This Government have an opportunity: to show international leadership; to use our power and influence in the middle east to stop violence, not to sell more weapons; and to end the suffering of millions of Yemeni men, women and children. In order to do that, the Government must come clean, with this House and with the country, about our involvement to date and the actions they have taken to put things right. Then, the Government can begin to play their part in consigning this forgotten conflict to history, where it belongs.

3.11 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Let me start by echoing everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and Members from both sides of the House have said today about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. I congratulate him on securing this important debate. Let me also make it clear at the outset that we agree with the principles behind UN resolution 2216. We all want to see Yemen restored to the control of a legitimate, stable and democratic Government, capable of peacefully leading the whole country, and we all want to see the Houthi rebels held to account, both for their illegal coup and for the atrocities they have committed during this war. But with all due respect to those on the Government Benches and to some Members on my own Benches, may I say that it is possible to agree with the principles of the UN resolution while disagreeing profoundly, first, with the way in which this has been enforced and the way alleged violations of international law are being investigated and, secondly, with the abject failure of the British Government to bring this war to an end?

First, let me deal with the investigation of alleged war crimes. *[Interruption.]* If Government Members will give me a moment, I will be going into details, as I have 10 minutes. First, let me turn to the investigation of alleged war crimes committed by both sides, coalition and Houthi. Labour Members have said many times, just as the UN, all leading human rights groups and a number of Select Committees of this House have, that the only way to ensure the comprehensive, thorough and impartial investigation of those alleged crimes is to commission an independent UN inquiry. In response to our call, the Government have been consistent, saying that the Saudi-led coalition must be left to investigate themselves. Let us see how that is going, shall we?

In October, I revealed at this Dispatch Box that of the 3,158 documented airstrikes against civilian targets up to the end of August 2016, the coalition's joint incidents assessment team had issued reports on just nine—a pathetic 0.002%. How many more reports has it completed since? It has completed just four. Of that total of 13 “investigations”—I use that word advisedly—there are just three in which the JIAT has found any culpability on behalf of the coalition. In the other 10 cases, comprising 241 civilian deaths and the bombing of four food trucks, three medical facilities, one school, one wedding, one cattle market, one food market and one food factory, the JIAT has found—surprise, surprise—that the coalition has done nothing wrong. This is the investigatory body into which the Government have put all their faith to ensure that the coalition is not violating international law.

Let us look at the man in charge of the JIAT, Colonel Mansour al-Mansour—or, as he is known by some in Bahrain, “The Butcher”. In 2011, while Bahrain's popular uprising was being brutally suppressed and martial law was being put in place, Colonel al-Mansour was the military lawyer who presided over the kangaroo court that was set up to jail and execute the protestors, activists, Opposition politicians, teachers, doctors, religious clerics, journalists and human rights campaigners—in fact, anyone seen as a threat to the Bahrain regime. Hundreds were jailed or sentenced to death under his orders, yet this is the man in whom the Government have put all their faith to investigate alleged war crimes

in Yemen. What are we to make of that? The Government are being either extremely naive or extremely negligent, but either way it is not good enough.

I thought it very telling when on Tuesday the Minister said of the Saudi coalition:

“It is having to provide reports when it makes mistakes, and it has never done that before. It has no experience of even writing reports.”—*[Official Report, 10 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 145.]*

That much is obvious, given that it has produced only 13 reports in eight months. What is more telling is the Minister's implication that the JIAT's role is just to identify mistakes.

Mr Ellwood: No, it is not.

Emily Thornberry: The Minister shouts from a sedentary position that that is not its role, but he said on Tuesday—I am simply quoting him—that it is having to provide reports when it has made mistakes. If it has only to identify mistakes, contrary to everything the Government have claimed, the JIAT is not investigating whether international law has been breached; it is just being taken on trust. All the JIAT is doing is looking at a handful of high-profile incidents and in one or two cases saying that a mistake has been made. Again, that is not good enough—*[Interruption.]* If the Minister wants to intervene on me, he is welcome to, but if he is just going to sit there and heckle, I am afraid he is not doing his cause any good. What I have described is not good enough as an investigation and it is certainly not good enough as the basis for confidence that our arms laws are not being breached. It is not good enough for this to be investigated by al-Mansour in the way that it is being investigated. Thirteen reports in eight months is not good enough.

I turn to the role that Britain must play in bringing an end to the conflict and, again, I go back to what the Minister said on Tuesday. The House may remember that I asked why the UK had not presented its resolution to the Security Council, and the Minister explained that “we will not get a Security Council resolution passed until we get the cessation of hostilities in place.”—*[Official Report, 10 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 142.]*

If that is the case, why does clause 1 of the UK's draft resolution demand an immediate cessation of hostilities? Why would the very first line of the resolution demand something that is already in place?

Back in October, the UK's ambassador to the UN said:

“We have decided to put forward a draft security council resolution on Yemen calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities and a resumption of the political process”.

In other words, the resolution was designed to be the driving force behind a ceasefire and peace talks, just as one was with resolution 1860 on Gaza, resolution 2174 on Libya, and resolution 2254 on Syria. For the Minister to claim now that we must have the ceasefire before we can have the resolution makes no sense. So what is the real explanation for the delay?

Mr Ellwood: I do not know where to start with this. Perhaps I should begin by saying that when a draft resolution is put together—when the words are formed and so on—we do not air it in public because it is very likely that the details will change. The hon. Lady needs to hold on until the actual UN resolution comes about, and then we can absolutely debate it. I pose a question

[Mr Ellwood]

to her, as I am supposed to in an intervention: has she read UN Security Council resolution 2216? I ask because it calls for exactly the same thing. She is asking for a ceasefire, but that is already inherent in UN Security Council resolution 2216.

Emily Thornberry: I am very interested to hear what the hon. Gentleman says, and I will listen with some care to his speech. I know that the Government have said on many occasions that the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen is backed by the UN, and that they rely on the same resolution. I would be interested to hear where that is in the resolution, and how it can be claimed that Saudi intervention in Yemen is—[*Interruption.*]

Keith Vaz: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Emily Thornberry: Yes, of course.

Keith Vaz: I do not think that there is a huge gap between what my hon. Friend and the Minister are saying. When I was at the Security Council, what was in the draft resolution was certainly common knowledge, and every member of the Security Council spoke in favour of the ceasefire. Given that everyone knows what is in the draft resolution—it is in the public domain—there is no reason why this cannot be tabled.

Emily Thornberry: I respectfully agree. For 50 days, we have all known what is in the draft resolution, and we wait and wait for the British to put the resolution on the table. There is support for it, and it has a number of elements in it. During the rest of my speech, I wish to explain why the British are not putting it on the table. I will take interventions as necessary if the Minister wishes to explain.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady tempts me. I ask her to join in with the spirit of the debate and try to look at the positives and at what we can actually do. She is focusing deeply on a draft resolution, which, having been involved in the Riyadh talks on 19 December, I can promise Members is now out of date. I will go into more detail in my response, but if she devotes another few minutes to this matter it will be superfluous to the wider debate—the good debate—that we have had in this Chamber.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Before the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) rises, may I remind everyone that we have another debate after this and that it is quite well subscribed? There are perhaps only one-and-a-half minutes remaining.

Emily Thornberry: I will not take any more interventions. I will just go straight through the rest of my speech, because I have some important points to make.

The truth is that Saudi Arabia does not want this resolution to be presented. When asked about the UK's draft resolution in November by an Arab newspaper, the Saudi ambassador to the UN said.

“There is a continuous and joint agreement with Britain concerning the draft resolution, and whether there is a need for it or not.”

The newspaper goes on to say that the Saudi ambassador claimed that the UK draft resolution

“includes an unnecessary text, in addition to having a wrong timing.”

So there we have it in black and white.

Saudi Arabia does not sit on the UN Security Council, but it has been able to veto the UK's draft resolution without so much as a discussion. Why has it done so? Is it because of clause 4, which calls for “full, transparent and timely investigation”

of all alleged war crimes? We know that JIAT's investigations have hardly been full, transparent or timely. Is it because of clause 5, which calls on all sides to negotiate a political solution on the basis of the UN road map? President Hadi has described the road map as “the betrayal of the blood of martyrs.”

Is it because, just like Assad in Syria, Saudi Arabia sees no value in agreeing a ceasefire when it believes that the rebellion can still be crushed—no matter the civilian casualties, and no matter the humanitarian cost? No matter what Saudi Arabia does, it knows that this Tory Government will remain on its side.

The Foreign Secretary was right last month to call Yemen a “proxy war” and he was right to criticise Saudi Arabia's “puppeteering”. Although I am happy to applaud his honesty, it is just his hypocrisy that is all the more disappointing. If he knows what Saudi Arabia is really doing in Yemen, he should follow America's lead and stop selling it arms. If he is worried about the scale of civilian casualties, he should back a proper, independent, UN-led investigation to see whether international laws have been broken. If he wants to see an end to the conflict and get the children of Yemen the humanitarian aid that they need, he should have the guts to stand up to Saudi Arabia and present the UK's resolution to the UN. It is time for the Government to stop the hypocrisy and the delaying tactics and start doing the decent thing: present the draft UN resolution, end the conflict, demand an independent investigation of war crimes, and send a signal of intent to the Saudis today by supporting this motion.

3.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am saddened to hear the comments made from the Opposition Front Bench. I am not sure that they are supported by those who sit behind the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). I am not going to react to anything that she said, other than her final statement: to say that Saudi Arabia is not wanting a ceasefire in the same way that Assad does not want a ceasefire in Syria is absolutely shameful and shows a misunderstanding of what is happening. Let us leave it at that.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg)—let me call him my hon. Friend, as we have known each other for a long time, since the days of being involved in student politics—and my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) on securing the debate. The majority of speeches reflected a growing sense of understanding and expertise, and, without insulting anybody, I would say that we have moved on from the Thursday afternoon armchair generals, who often look at things through a particular prism, to understanding that this is a deeply complicated issue and conflict, and that the solutions are deeply complicated as well.

If I may, I shall start with the causes of the conflict, which many have touched on. In 2014, the Houthi forces and those loyal to former President Saleh overran

the capital, Sana'a, and forced out the legitimate Government of President Hadi. Those forces have subsequently attacked Saudi Arabia, shelled border villages and killed Saudi civilians.

In March 2015, a Saudi-led coalition of 10 countries started a military occupation to restore the Hadi Government, deter further Houthi aggression—which, otherwise, was likely to have reached the port of Aden—and defend the Saudi border. In April 2015, UN Security Council resolution 2216 condemned the Houthi actions. Paragraph 5 of the resolution called for a cessation of violence. In that context, the UK supports the coalition's efforts.

UK diplomatic efforts also play an important role here. The Government believe that a political settlement is the only way to find lasting peace in Yemen, and we have been at the forefront of the international diplomatic effort to make progress towards that goal. In July last year, here in London, we brought together the Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and the US Secretary of State, to discuss a political way forward and to show support for the role of the UN in mediating a solution to the crisis.

Keith Vaz: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: If there is time at the end of my speech, I will give way, but I am under pressure from Madam Deputy Speaker as there is another debate after this.

That informal group of key players is known as the Quad, and subsequent meetings have expanded to include the UN special envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ahmed, and representatives from other Gulf countries.

The last Quad meeting I attended was in Riyadh on 18 December, and we agreed to urge all the Yemeni parties to engage with the UN process and put the needs of Yemen's people first. We will continue to engage directly with the parties and with our partners in the region to support the UN's proposals for peace. I spoke to President Hadi on 6 January—just a week ago—to emphasise the urgent need to find a way forward in the political process. We clearly have a transition, and in America, Rex Tillerson will take over from John Kerry. He is familiar with the area, having lived and worked in Yemen for about three years during his career.

Emily Thornberry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: No. I will give way at the end, as I need to pay tribute and comment on other contributions.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby paid tribute to the humanitarian work that has been done, and I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department for International Development, in his place. He has been very engaged with this matter, and the work that Britain does is recognised across the Floor of the House. The role that we play not only internationally, but in respect of this conflict, marks our place on the Security Council.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I am afraid I will not as I am really under pressure. Like others, I wish we had more time. If there is time later, I shall be delighted to give way.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby touched on the history of the region, and it is worth underlining the fact that there are complex divisions in that country, not simply one between those supporting President Hadi and those supporting the Houthis or Saleh. There have been internal conflicts and power struggles since unification in 1990. There are super-tribes, tribes, militias, family clans, elites, secessionist groups and terrorist organisations—all this leads to instability on a grand scale. Loyalties are not firm. They move and come and go, along with the winds. That is the backdrop against which we are dealing with this matter.

The hon. Gentleman asked the key question as to when we will join calls for an independent inquiry. We have said we will support an independent inquiry, and I shall make the argument to say when that case might come to the fore.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) gave a powerful speech, reflecting his understanding and grasp of what is going on in the region. He paid tribute to the work that the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Stephen O'Brien, is doing at the UN in exposing what is actually happening and what further work needs to be done. I think the whole House would join my right hon. Friend in that tribute. He also talked about the remarkable visit, which I was pleased to be involved in, of the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir. Had we ever before heard of a Foreign Minister from any of the Gulf nations coming to this House, meeting parliamentarians and answering every question as best as he could? I hope that will happen again.

The Saudi Foreign Minister asked the clear question, "Why would we want to bomb farms and schools in Yemen?", putting into context the fact that the two countries have a deep history with one another. There is no long-term interest in Saudi Arabia causing damage right across the piece to Yemen in the way in which some Opposition Front Benchers have described. It is not in the interests of Saudi Arabia, especially because of the international condemnation that that brings about. The Foreign Minister admitted that Saudi Arabia is slow in providing the reporting that everybody in this House has been calling for, and he was willing to ask whether we could help him to provide that.

Saudi Arabia is very much a culturally reserved country. It is unused to the limelight that it now has to adapt to live in, and to the sustained warfare in which it is now having to participate. It is also clearly unused to having to provide the reporting and scrutiny required when sustained warfare takes place, in the same way that we have had to learn to have those mechanisms in place to provide the transparency that is now expected on the battlefield.

Stephen Doughty: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: Very briefly.

Stephen Doughty: On the issue of transparency, the Minister says that Saudi Arabia should learn from us, so will he explain something? He said that his Department had immediately decided to correct the mistakes that it had given to this House in debate and in parliamentary questions, but he has just confirmed to me in a written answer at 3.11 pm that, in fact, the Foreign Secretary

[Stephen Doughty]

knew about it as early as 28 June. Why did it take nearly a month to come to this House with the correct information?

Mr Ellwood: The Defence Secretary made a point about that. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) knows me; I have done my best to be as transparent as possible. Those Opposition Members who have ever been Ministers will know that we have one of the best civil services in the world, dealing with thousands upon thousands of written answers.

Emily Thornberry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: No, I will not. I will finish my point. Occasionally mistakes are made, and we put our hands up and say that they have been made. I am sorry that there was a delay. At the time, I think we were in the middle of the Brexit piece as well. As soon as we realised that one error was made, we did an investigation and found that, out of almost 100 parliamentary questions answered, there was one clerical error, which continued on; I think there was a handful of them.

Stephen Doughty: Six.

Mr Ellwood: Six, yes. In six out of almost 100 the wording was incorrect. We then did an investigation that took some time. I tell the House now, as I did before, that I apologise for that. There is no conspiracy. It was an error that I take on my shoulders. Yet again, I apologise to the House. I will now move on.

Emily Thornberry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not because I want to mention the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who made some important points about the conflict being a forgotten war. Today's debate is doing well to ensure that we have not forgotten about it here. He mentioned the urgency of a ceasefire, which gives me licence to talk about the pending UN Security Council resolution—it has not yet been completely written, but is in the process of being written. It is based on the road map, which was discussed on 19 December, and includes seven steps. I will elaborate a little on those steps so that hon. Members can see how complicated it is to get a consensus on them.

The measures include: the sequence of security steps for the withdrawal of equipment; the agreed roles and appointments of who is going to run a transition process; the resumption of consultations in accordance with the GCC negotiations, the partnership and peace agreement, and UN Security Council resolution 2216; the additional withdrawals; the signing of a detailed agreement; and a potential donor conference, which we need a commitment for. All that leads up to an electoral road map. That is complicated business, and that is why a UN Security Council resolution is not going to be a draft coming straight out, because that one is out of date.

Emily Thornberry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way to the hon. Lady—I have actually made that clear.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) made an important point, which came up at Foreign Affairs—

Emily Thornberry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In your absence, there has been a bit of backwards and forwards between the Front Benches, and I gave way on several occasions to the Minister. He is now making it clear that he will not allow me to intervene at all.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Let us just be clear about this. It is up to the Member, the Minister or the shadow Minister whether they give way or not—those are the rules of the House. The other point is that I understand this debate was meant to finish at 3.30 pm. We are now running over. The fact is the Minister does not wish to give way—that is his choice. It is no use getting uptight about it—that's life.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker. I understand that, with the remaining two minutes—

Emily Thornberry *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This is not a continuation, I hope. Let us get to the end of the debate. There are people who want to go on to the next debate. Please, I want to look after all Members of this House and all Members who wish to speak in the next debate, but they will not do so if we run on a lot longer over time. Please, let us get to the end, because I do want Mr Twigg to come in next.

Emily Thornberry *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. No, I am sorry—I have finished.

Mr Ellwood: In the last two minutes I have, I wanted to make a point to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham, who raised an issue that was mentioned at FCO questions on Tuesday. The fundamental backdrop to this issue is, in essence, a cold war that exists between the Sunni and Shi'ite leaderships. We need to solve that; we need to try to move forward from it. There is actually—technically, theologically—no doctrinal difference between the two faiths. They both believe in the centrality of the Prophet Mohammed; it all actually goes down to the difference in succession in 632—was the successor Ali, the son-in-law and cousin, or was it Abu Bakr, the father-in-law? Since then, there have been varying tensions throughout Islamic history, and peace and prosperity might improve if the two faiths could actually reconcile their political differences. That is at the core of a lot of the challenges we find in the middle east.

Time prevents me from being able to respond to other contributions, although I will do my best, as I have in the past, to write to Members. I will end by clarifying—

Stephen Twigg: Will the Minister give way before he sits down?

Mr Ellwood: I will give way, unless I can answer the hon. Gentleman's question, as I think I am about to, by talking about when we feel it would be inappropriate to have faith any longer in the Saudi system.

The Government are not opposing calls for an international independent investigation, but, first and foremost, we want the Saudis to investigate allegations of breaches of international humanitarian law attributed to them, and we want their investigations to be thorough and conclusive. The Saudis have the best insight into their own military procedures, and will be able to conduct the most thorough and conclusive investigations. That will also allow the country really to understand what went wrong and to apply the lessons in the best possible way.

That is the standard we set ourselves and our allies. For example, when allegations were made against us in Afghanistan and Iraq, we investigated them. When, for example, the US was accused of bombing the Médecins Sans Frontières facility in Kunduz, it investigated that incident and applied the lessons learned to its military procedures to reduce the risk of such things happening again.

Saudi Arabia has publicly stated that it is investigating reports about allegations of violations of IHL and that any lessons learned will be acted on. It is absolutely right that, to date, only 13 have been reported. The machine is slow in putting these things together. The conduct of the investigations is absolutely new, and the Joint Incidents Assessment Team is learning its way. I keep putting pressure on those involved, and I will continue to do so.

To digress, we should remember how long it took for the Chilcot inquiry to come together, and the machine we have in this country is well versed in the legal parameters we have to deal with. For the moment, we need to have faith in Saudi Arabia to say, "Yes, these reports must be forthcoming." For the moment, I remain with that and confident it can produce these reports.

In conclusion, this has been a very good debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee. This is not a forgotten crisis, and we remain fully engaged in securing a political solution. We will continue to lead the way in providing humanitarian support. Ultimately, it is for the Yemenis themselves to reach a compromise, and we stand ready to help them.

3.39 pm

Stephen Twigg: I am very disappointed that the Minister, in his final remarks, gave us no further indication of when the Government would actually move to support a fully independent investigation. I am pleased that he

responded to my point, but we have not been taken further on this issue, and I think that the House will return to it.

I agree with the Minister that we have had a very good debate. There are many areas of agreement. This is a complex country in terms of history and politics. The humanitarian crisis is appalling. We all want to work together to ensure access for humanitarian organisations. We welcome the positive leadership role that DFID has played in getting aid in. We need a ceasefire, we need a political settlement, and we need reconstruction.

This debate was co-sponsored by my friend, the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White), who chairs the Committees on Arms Export Controls. Those Committees play a crucial role in this House in monitoring arms exports. Some are arguing that that system should be abolished and that instead this should all fall under the remit of the International Trade Committee. This debate demonstrates again the importance of effective scrutiny of arms exports controls in terms of development, foreign affairs, and other aspects; it is not simply a question of international trade.

Evidence to my Select Committee from humanitarian organisations said:

"There is a paradox at the heart of the"

UK's

"approach to Yemen."

We are generous on aid but we are also contributing to the conflict through our arms sales. There are different views on arms among those on both sides of the House, and that has been reflected in the debate. However, I hope that we can all come together behind this motion, supported by three Committees of the House, which says that we should have this investigation, because, yes, we want peace, but alongside peace we want justice. A ceasefire is a necessary condition, but not sufficient. We will get justice only when we have a full, independent investigation into all alleged violations by all parties to this conflict.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen and the impact of the conflict on civilians; condemns any breach of international humanitarian law; and calls for an urgent independent investigation into reports of breaches of international humanitarian law on both sides of the conflict.

African Great Lakes Region

3.42 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the security and political situation in the African Great Lakes region.

This is the first opportunity that the House has had since the general election to discuss the great lakes region. I shall curtail my remarks somewhat to allow sufficient time for Back Benchers who wish to speak, as we have already lost 12 minutes or more of the debate.

The first three countries I am going to mention are countries where things have gone better in recent times. I start with Rwanda, which has a booming economy and has moved on from the genocide of 1994 in the most admirable ways. In November 2015, the White House put out a statement saying:

“President Kagame, who in many ways has strengthened and developed Rwanda, now has an historic opportunity to enshrine his legacy by honouring his commitments to respect the term limits set when he entered office...any move to prolong his hold on power would be to the detriment of Kagame’s legacy”.

On 1 December, Samantha Power called for Kagame to step down in 2017. What is the UK Government’s position on this?

Secondly, in relation to the UN rapporteur’s report on freedom of association and freedom of expression, has the UK been making representations—for example, in the Minister’s meeting with the Rwandans in December 2015—to ensure that those in other political parties are not being labelled as enemies of the state and that the plurality of democracy becomes a key part, alongside a booming economy, of building this country as one of the great powerhouses of Africa?

The third issue is the function of non-governmental organisations, which is another big worry in Rwanda, not least in relation to appointments to the leadership of NGOs through the Rwanda Governance Board, whose role should be regulatory—it should not interfere and control. What is our Government’s position on that, and what representations are being made on those three issues?

I will move on from Rwanda. It would have been good to say more, but I am sure that others will do so. I suspect that less will be said about the Central African Republic, which is not mentioned or visited much by anyone. It has been too unsafe to visit, but the Pope has now demonstrated that it is moving on. The turnout at the last election in 2016 was an impressive 79%, and with democracy comes the possibility of stability, peace and development, but that is tempered by this week’s report by Amnesty International. What is the Government’s response to that report?

What assistance are the Government giving to help that country to move out of its dark years, or are we standing on the sidelines? The remnants of the Lord’s Resistance Army are causing turmoil at every opportunity in the east of the country. What assistance are we giving to CAR to help it become a more normalised and stable country that can grow democratically and economically with a significant level of peace?

I wish to turn to the Congo, by which I mean not the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which I will come to and which I am sure will be the main issue of concern

—it is a major country where we have a lot of relationships—but Congo-Brazzaville, which is also hardly mentioned. What are we doing there to ensure that its political stability is acknowledged and strengthened?

As an important aside, given the work of the World Wildlife Fund and Tusk with Prince William and others, it is a significant country in terms of the preservation of forest elephants and lowland gorillas. It seems to me that there is huge potential for boosting tourism; whether one welcomes or regrets that, it is a significant part of maintaining those critically endangered species. The issue is also relevant to CAR, whose national park borders Congo-Brazzaville. What practical assistance are we giving to help that develop? This country has a great interest in that area, not least through Prince William’s exertions. We will host a major conference in 2018. We have great expertise and there are opportunities to do something hugely significant in a country that is rarely mentioned in this House.

The all-party parliamentary group on the African great lakes region intends to make a proposal relating to the delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly—Members may be interested in participating—and both CAR and Congo-Brazzaville may well be part of that. The Foreign Office in Kinshasa would certainly be keen on delegations visiting areas with which we need to build relationships and whose gains we can consolidate. Things have improved significantly in those countries in recent times, which is welcome. We should temper criticism and provide support for improving their democracy. We should continue to press them on that, while acknowledging their progress.

In Burundi, which I visited two years ago, there is a less happy state of affairs. The Department for International Development has pulled out and we do not have an embassy there. I pressed Ministers in the last Government on that issue. It was a mistake for us to withdraw from Burundi—and that has proven to be the case—because it is becoming increasingly anglicised in its approach to the world, as part of the east African community. It has followed many others by going its own way. Some Presidents seem to think that they ought to be there for life. In this case, there has been significant turmoil and a lot of violence, not least from the acolytes of President Nkurunziza and his entourage. There are huge dangers in the country, but what are we doing to assist and intervene? Do we support the use of chapter 7 of the UN charter to deploy a police force, in accordance with UN resolution 2303 of July 2016? What will it take for the UN Security Council to make that decision, and are we working to that end? What other leverage are we using on the President to ensure that the country moves on?

Burundi is hardly spoken about, but its genocide compares with the worst in Africa in recent and historic times. An extraordinary level of genocide was hidden away in the ’70s and ’80s. From 1972 onwards, the country experienced the biggest single proportionate dislocation of people anywhere in the world. The displaced population moved across the border to Tanzania in dramatically large numbers, and they have been reassimilated extraordinarily successfully. Yet we stand aside from all that, and from the needs of the country. Its democracy is under threat and violence has broken out repeatedly. The country carries the legacy of the hidden genocide, which has been highlighted by the discovery in the last

24 hours of 1,000 bodies in a mass grave in the Rusaka district. What are we doing, and why are we not properly engaging?

What about the NGO situation? The Iteka league was banned on 3 January. What about malaria? The country—the second-poorest country on the planet—is not really moving forward in tackling malaria. When it comes to human rights, what are we doing in Geneva with the Human Rights Council to ensure that Burundi is not given a soft option and that it is tackled about what it is doing, so that it can become a great success in Africa rather than regressing into dictatorship and the ensuing violence?

The final country I shall mention is the seventh poorest on the planet and the biggest—the DRC. It is a country of extraordinary size, with a population of 60 million, high levels of displacement and wars on its eastern side for a long time. Again, the opportunities are great, but what are we doing? An agreement was reached on 31 December on progression to enable the President to stand down. He has not yet signed the agreement, although most observers seem to think that he will. What are we doing to ensure that democracy prevails in that huge country? We have a significant aid programme in the country. What are we doing to ensure that the move on of Kabila is seen as a starting point for significant change, not a silver bullet?

What are we doing to ensure that our efforts are not concentrated entirely on the conflict areas of the east, but that they reach the whole mass of the country? The largest amount of—I am not sure that illegal is the right term—ad hoc land mining anywhere in the world has taken place across the western borders, and a huge chunk of the country has the most extraordinary health and safety conditions, deaths and lack of regulations. Our expertise could play a significant role.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I understand the plaintive cry of, “What are we doing?” This country can do a lot only through working with others, but we are doing a significant amount in our own right at Foreign Office level, through DFID, and, as the hon. Gentleman knows, even at party level. In my role as vice-chairman of international affairs in the Conservative party, we work, along with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, on democracy building in several of those states. The Conservative party has a project, and I suspect that the Scottish National party and the Labour party have projects too, in the great lakes region. There is one pivotal country to which the hon. Gentleman has not referred—Uganda. The security implications of what is happening in Uganda will be gravely important for the whole region in the years to come.

John Mann: The right hon. Gentleman makes his point eloquently.

I have some practicalities for the Minister. The electoral commission in the DRC has no money and no capacity. Our expertise in elections is huge, so could we provide expertise and support? Are we considering how our aid programme can assist in trying to ameliorate some of the conflicts—for example, that in Katanga with the Bantu and the competition for land? How do we see the MONUSCO force developing? Many perceive it as highly ineffective in recent times. What is our approach to ensuring that that force is effective and that our expertise is brought to bear as part of it?

Alongside our aid programme, we have huge interests, such as mining companies, which are heavily involved in the DRC. The minerals are without question the reason for so much continuous war in the east and the south-east. People are battling for minerals, or groups are funded by minerals. What are we doing to ensure that we, with companies in this country, are not responsible? Indeed, when we consider the bribery and the payments to military groups, how do we know whether we are responsible?

Do the Government not see the importance of the proposals on beneficial ownership in places such as the British Virgin Islands? That directly connects to the conflict in the DRC through mineral companies that are based in offshore locations such as the British Virgin Islands. *The New York Times* recently revealed a series of suspicious bank transfers totalling around \$100 million to Mr Kabila’s adopted brother. That is only one example. It is clear from the way in which the Serious Fraud Office has had to be involved that that is only skimming the surface. We could do a significant amount if we simply clarified and confirmed beneficial ownership of the moneys and the mining interests and held people to account. Some people believe that the various military forces battling illegally in the DRC are using mining money through bribery and direct extraction. We therefore have a huge responsibility to the region as well as to the DRC. What are we doing about that?

I pay tribute to Carole Velasquez and Noreen Kassam—two volunteers who have assisted the all-party group; in Carole’s case, for many years—for their support, and to CAFOD, which has been hugely influential in supporting and assisting the Catholic Church in getting the breakthrough in the DRC. There are many other great players in the aid world in this country, and they should be congratulated on their work. I could say much more but I will not; I hand over to others.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Marvellous. May I say to hon. Members that if they speak for up to seven minutes, everyone will have equal time? I know that Front Benchers do not like their time being squeezed, but they may get squeezed again.

3.59 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) for an extremely good and well-informed speech, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) who has also sponsored this debate.

The UK is increasingly engaged in the great lakes region and rightly so. It is vital that we continue to be so for the long term, and that we do not dip in and out but maintain our presence in a positive way in the many different respects I will come on to. I am more positive about the great lakes than I have been for some time. We have on many occasions in the past year raised huge concerns about the future of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, yet I hope the agreement reached on new year’s eve will be remembered in the same way as we remember the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland: as a time when differences were put aside in the interests of their people. As the hon. Member for Bassetlaw said,

[Jeremy Lefroy]

the agreement talks about elections this year, no third term for President Kabila, and no referendum or constitutional changes.

I pay great tribute to the Catholic Church, which has done so much; to the retiring US envoy Thomas Perriello, who has done a tremendous job; to our own Foreign and Commonwealth Office; to the EU; and to our own great lakes envoy, Danae Dholakia. I also want to pay tribute to the work done by DFID—colleagues and I saw its work on a visit in July—particularly on health in remote regions and access to water. They are some of the best projects I have ever seen. They are done at low cost by people who have been really committed to the DRC for decades. These are not consultants who come and go, but really committed people who put their life's work into helping the poorest.

Burundi is another matter, but we must be as positive as possible. The years 2015 and 2016 have been a tragedy for that country. It is vital that 2017 is better. Every effort must be put into turning the country around, principally by those who have responsibility for it. One lesson we have to remember is to ensure that any agreements made are watertight. The Burundi problem arose from the lack of clarity over how many terms the current President would serve or in what way he would be re-elected. As a result, hundreds if not thousands of people have been killed. Any agreement must look forward to problems that may arise when they are signed.

The former President of Tanzania, Benjamin Mkapa, is negotiating and has done a fine job. We must continue to support him in every way possible. It is disappointing that some organisations have withdrawn their support from the process. We can understand the reasons why, but I believe it is the only game in town and they need to be engaged with it. As President Mkapa said, they need to deal with the situation as it is: to work with President Nkurunziza; to try to persuade the Government of Burundi to turn away from an extremely dangerous path; to see extrajudicial killings stopped; to see paramilitaries and roaming gangs return to lawful activity; to restore law and order and human rights; and above all to not let the blight of ethnic hatred, to which the hon. Member for Bassetlaw referred, come back. Burundi has suffered as grievously from genocide as Rwanda, but it was a rolling genocide over decades and not a genocide in 100 days in 1994.

I will not say much about Rwanda, because other Members possibly will do so. It has been a success story, but with problems along the way. There is an election this year. This is a time for the country to come together. It is also a time to look to the future. If as seems likely President Kagame, who in many ways has been an outstanding if flawed leader, stands again, he needs to look beyond the next term as to who his successor will be. He has the interests of his country at heart. He will want it to prosper in the future. He knows that he will not be around forever—none of us are.

Tanzania is probably the country in this region that is closest to my heart, having lived there for so many years. It has generally managed the transition to free and fair elections extremely well, except, sadly, in the case of Zanzibar. There was progress in Zanzibar from 2010 to 2015, but the elections in that year were flawed and pulled in a way about which our Government made

their view quite clear. The elections were re-held in 2016 without the presence of the main Opposition party. It is vital that the island of Zanzibar comes together with the Union Government and resolves this problem. The people of Zanzibar deserve nothing less. They are a peaceful and wonderful people.

At the same time, Tanzania has respected the two-term limit for presidents impeccably, for which we should give that country great credit. The CCM, the major ruling party, has achieved a great deal, but it needs to go further. The Government need to bring in an independent electoral commission in Tanzania. In my opinion, that is the biggest flaw in Tanzanian democracy at the moment. At the same time, the Opposition need to use Parliament and the parliamentary process to deal with the understandable questions it has for the Government, rather than just taking to the streets every time. I pay tribute to the Opposition for keeping calm and not going ahead with the major demonstrations proposed in September, which I believe would have resulted in unnecessary violence and possibly deaths.

On Uganda, the examples of former Presidents Benjamin Mkapa and Ali Hassan Mwinyi in Tanzania, as well John Kufuor in Ghana, show the benefit of presidents who recognise the importance of term limits. Those who stay on forever rarely go gracefully. That is surely a lesson for Uganda. The peace and stability since 1985 has been a huge relief for the people of Uganda, but proper open and democratic transition is also a sign of wisdom and maturity.

Finally, I wish to refer to development in all these countries. In our debate on the sustainable development goals last November in Westminster Hall, I referred to the five levers of development that I believe are crucial, including to all the countries of the great lakes region: jobs and livelihoods, health and health research, education, gender equality and infrastructure. DFID and the UK are involved in pretty much all these countries, including in Burundi—not directly but through multilateral means—and it is vital that this continues. As I said at the beginning, we must remain committed for the long term to ensuring the future prosperity of this wonderful and very important part of the world.

4.7 pm

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) for securing this important debate.

I want to focus on eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, because it is an area that has been overlooked by this place, the west and the whole world. Obviously, stability and security in the great lakes region of Africa is too often overlooked by the international community. That applies particularly to the eastern DRC but throughout the region. Violence, rape and displacement have become normalised, while several of the region's countries have become bywords for conflict and human rights abuses. Over 1,000 Congolese women are raped every day. It seems uniquely shocking when we talk about it, but then there seems to be a transformation in our minds, and we think, "Well, it is tragically commonplace", and we just seem to accept it. That is a really sad reflection.

The result is a relative lack of awareness of and action against the political instability that has beset these countries for decades. Worse still, there is a tendency to regard the violence as perpetual and inevitable, in contrast

to conflicts in other parts of the world, which seem more immediately redeemable and on which we seem to be more focused. The ongoing refugee crisis in Europe and the Mediterranean is testament to this trend, as is Syria. The Calais “Jungle”, for example, received a huge amount of coverage and activism, compared to the refugees of eastern DRC and Burundi, and yet the Calais refugees, as tragic as their plight was, numbered just 7,000, compared with the millions of internally displaced persons in Burundi, eastern DRC and DRC more widely who have been displaced for decades—not months or a year but decades. Worse still, millions of refugees torn from their families, homes and communities have been forced to live in east African refugee camps for about 20 years. It is a shame that so little attention is paid to this issue.

Having visited Rwanda twice in the past few years and spoken to Congolese refugees who have been accommodated there, I have some tentative reflections on the issue. Rwanda seems to be a developed country and a relatively stable and increasingly prosperous democracy, whereas the DRC continues to be plagued by anarchic and systemic violence. According to recent UN statistics, there are currently 2.7 million internally displaced people, as well as 430,000 refugees displaced from the eastern DRC, spread in camps across Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania—nearly half a million people whom we seem to ignore when we talk about human rights and helping people.

On my first visit to one of the camps at Byumba, I witnessed at first hand the conditions in which families, often spanning three generations—can Members believe that?—have had to live. Located at the very top of a lowly mountain range, isolated from the attention of the world, the Gihembe refugee camp houses some 15,000 people. It has been there since the 1990s. It is overcrowded, lacking in resources and cramped. The shacks and primitive accommodation are crowded together on the steep slopes, and inside the camp there is an inadequate supply of water, electricity and food. Children aged under 18 represent a staggering 51.2% of the camp’s population, and because they have grown up in these camps, they know nothing else. This is the world in which they live, which our world does not seem to understand or even care about. Poor education and insufficient public amenities abound.

The situation in the DRC makes it almost impossible for refugees to return home. More than 100 armed militia groups camped out in its impenetrable jungles continue to kill and terrorise families daily, and rape continues to be used as a weapon of war. I hope that the issue will be raised in the Chamber again and again in the future, because we should not turn our back on it. When the conflict worsens, more than 400,000 women can be raped in a year.

The eastern DRC is plagued by murderous militia groups, from the Ugandan Allied Democratic Forces to the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, which exploit the country’s mineral wealth and use its proceeds to terrorise communities into subordination. The state is at best ineffectual, and at worst complicit. Congolese politicians enable the groups to control and compete for vast swathes of the DRC in order to maintain their cut and their hold on power. They are allowed to descend into mindless violence in pursuit of an industry worth \$27 trillion in untapped mineral resources in the DRC, fighting for control over coltan

production and the DRC’s vast gold, tin and tungsten reserves. Fighting frequently breaks out to determine which groups control the lucrative mines in the eastern areas of the country, and the situation shows little sign of improving.

With little or no hope of return, Congolese refugees are trapped in the camps, as they have been for a long time. Unlike those in Calais, they are not provided with comprehensive rights in their new country. Tanzania and Uganda have restricted the legal right of refugees to work, while Burundi and Malawi have restricted access to citizenship. Zambia has even restricted access to education.

We in this place need to ask why this situation continues with no end in sight. The Minister will undoubtedly point to the efforts of the Catholic Church, the African Union and MONUSCO to broker a lasting peace, but we need to ask why the actions of MONUSCO, the largest UN peacekeeping force to be sent to the eastern DRC, have failed to stabilise the area—and now that force is being withdrawn. No inquiry seems to be taking place into the failure and the ongoing violence. Stabilisation would enable the refugees to return home and conduct their lives without the constant fear of violence and unending poverty.

An attitudes survey carried out by the South African Sonke Gender Justice Network in 2012 showed a shocking prevalence of the acceptance of rape among Congolese men. One in three men in the eastern DRC admitted to committing sexual assault, while 61% of interviewees stated that women sometimes deserved to be beaten. The DRC has been branded the “rape capital of the world”, and I hope that we will address that in future debates.

4.14 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on securing this debate and making a wide-ranging and comprehensive speech on the region.

There can be few areas of the world where the real legacy of colonialism remains so apparent as the great lakes region of Africa. Few areas have such outstanding resources—natural resources and resilient people—but few areas also have a greater burden to bear due to the horrific history of western greed and appropriation among other reasons.

I have a particular interest in, and many friends from, the DRC and I wish to focus on it today. This is a country that has never had a peaceful transition to democratic power, and that is tragic. The fact that the Church has brokered a deal at least puts the democratic transition back on the table in the coming year and that is to be welcomed, although only cautiously as it remains to be seen whether President Kabila will sign up to the transition; his record, as we know, is not a good one.

This is how Amnesty International summed up the last year in the DRC:

“Government repression of protests...intensified. Violations of the rights to freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly increased. Human rights defenders, youth activists and politicians were threatened, harassed, arbitrarily arrested and in some cases convicted for peacefully exercising their rights...numerous armed groups perpetrating serious abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law...high civilian death toll and mass displacements.”

[Anne McLaughlin]

It is understandable, therefore, that people are cautious, but, as I said, a deal has been struck and right now the DRC is in a better place than before. I hope that this limited progress will be a call to action for other countries in the region, and those elsewhere with strong links to the DRC, to support the formation of a transitional Government as per the deal and ensure that Kabila does indeed step down and democratic elections do indeed take place later this year.

However, the key structural problems across the region remain and will continue to drive instability unless they are tackled. Many of these stem from the colonial period, as I mentioned at the start of my speech. Good governance of natural resources is a massive issue and is essential, but others have spoken, and will speak, about that.

Unequal distribution of land continues to impact on many of the countries in the region. Those who have been displaced because of internal conflict often return to find their land has been redistributed in their absence. While that is traumatic enough for an individual, it becomes far more destabilising if entire communities or ethnic groups are displaced and return to find their land has been seized or sold off in its entirety in their absence. Instability in one country can quickly spread across state boundaries, and there remain those who are more than willing to exploit this.

There are also very real political and financial difficulties placed on states hosting refugees from neighbouring countries. Some 100,000 displaced Burundians currently reside in Tanzania. We would do well to remember that it is the poorest countries who host the majority of the world's refugees—and I think we will probably find they complain less because they do not see what they do as charity; they see it as their duty to humanity.

As the Scottish National party's civil liberties spokesperson in Westminster, it would be remiss of me not to mention some of the very real dangers facing journalists, civil organisations and opposition leaders in the region. That is something that we in this Parliament can affect; by looking to build links with our parliamentary colleagues in the great lakes region, we can work to strengthen democracy and the rule of law.

I know that a great many colleagues are involved with projects and associations that work across Parliaments to help other countries develop their democratic institutions. In my role as vice-chair of the all-party group on Africa, I recently chaired a meeting here in Westminster looking at how the UK can support the participation of women and the rule of law in the DRC. It was attended by some very impressive and some very courageous women from the DRC—campaigners, activists, refugees, academics, and Eve Bazaiba, a Member of the DRC Parliament since 2006. If we need one reason above all others to do everything in our power to support the people of the DRC, it is these women and all the women and children currently living there, so many of whom have been, or will become, victims of sexual violence. Amnesty International described the rate of sexual violence in the past year as “rampant”. It is out of control. As we have heard, 1,000 women are raped a day—that is 48 per hour, which means that since this debate started not that long ago about 34 women have been raped in the DRC.

When I was a Member of the Scottish Parliament, I attended a meeting with campaigners against sexual violence in the DRC. What I heard from them haunted me for a long time. I rarely allow myself to think about it, far less speak about it, because it was so overwhelming. I cannot begin to imagine what it must have been like for those women to experience it. Today I am choosing not to share those stories that haunted me, but I remain in awe of those women because, while they courageously told their personal stories, I cannot bear to repeat their words. The sexual violence that they experienced in the DRC was savage, and if it is something that I find unspeakable, it must be extreme. We cannot turn our backs on the people in that region, and in the DRC in particular. We cannot merely tick boxes; we must tell the people of the DRC that we in this House really do care. That means that the very least we will do is play our part in ensuring that the people of the DRC are able to participate in free and democratic elections later this year.

4.20 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), and I particularly support what she said at the end of her speech about the horrors of sexual violence in the DRC and the importance of the elections there. I reiterate the point that she and my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) made that it is often the poorest countries in the world that host the largest numbers of displaced people, including refugees. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on securing this debate, and I echo all that he said in his opening remarks.

I congratulate the other Members who have taken part in the debate, particularly the members of the Select Committee who are here. They include my friend the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who is an expert on Tanzania and Burundi. He has been a real champion for Burundi. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), who is unable to take part in the debate but is a great champion of these issues and an expert on the situation in Uganda. My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn made a powerful speech. He talked about displacement and refugees in Africa, and the Select Committee will be addressing that important matter in an inquiry shortly.

I want to focus today on the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The scale of the humanitarian challenge there is enormous, with at least 1.6 million people internally displaced. It is estimated that about 5% of the poorest people in the world live in the DRC, and projections suggest that, unless things change, that figure will more than double over the next 15 years, which is the period for the global goals. That is the challenge that we face. Water Aid tells us that fewer than 30% of the people in the DRC have access to basic sanitation.

As others have said, the humanitarian crisis has been shaped by conflict and political instability. I echo what has been said about the encouraging signs with regard to the political position, and I congratulate the Catholic Church and others on the role that they have played in mediating talks over the Christmas period. Let us hope that we will now see movement towards elections in the DRC this year. As my hon. Friend the Member for

Bassetlaw said, the United Kingdom can and must play a proactive role, not least in supporting electoral registration and the other elements for which the electoral commission in the DRC has responsibility.

The International Development Committee is currently conducting an inquiry on fragility and development in the DRC. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford said, we visited the country last July and saw some of the work that the Department for International Development was doing. I spoke in the debate on Tuesday about the support that the Commonwealth Development Corporation is giving to a very positive hydroelectric power programme in the Virunga region. We also saw some excellent peace-building work being done in the Goma region to bring together members of the community and the police to try to break down the barriers that have inevitably built up between them over the past 20 years. We visited a camp for internally displaced people in South Kivu and heard how cash transfer—an issue that has been in the news recently—is giving back control of their lives to people who have been powerless to do anything but flee from conflict. We also went to the Red Cross hospital in Goma, where a war surgery team run by the Red Cross treats a slow but steady stream of people who have suffered some of the most appalling gunshot and machete wounds. Those are positive examples of UK aid making a real difference to some of the poorest people in the world.

As everyone who addressed the subject of the DRC in this short debate has said, the recent history of that country has been violent and unstable, but there are now some reasons for cautious hope. Let us as a country play a positive and proactive role in supporting a peaceful solution that enables elections to happen, that enables those elections to be free and fair and that puts the focus on human rights, while seeking to bring peace to a country that has been savaged by war.

The humanitarian crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo will not disappear overnight, so it is important that, through DFID, non-governmental organisations and others, we continue the hard work to alleviate the worst aspects of poverty in that country. We who serve on the International Development Committee, on a cross-party basis, have seen at first hand the many good things that are being done to alleviate poverty in the DRC, and we look forward to releasing our report as a result of that inquiry shortly.

4.25 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I welcome the fact that this debate is taking place in the Chamber, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on securing it. He said that this is the first debate in the Chamber on the great lakes since the general election, which might be true, but last January there was a debate on east and central Africa, secured by the former Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham, that touched on a number of similar countries—there was a similar debate about the exact definition of the region. Sadly, very little has changed since then in the overall stability of the region, although we have heard about some glimmers of hope today.

Perhaps the most tragic and depressing aspect of the situation is that the people most affected by conflict, instability, poverty and food insecurity are usually the people who have done the least to cause those situations

and who, almost by definition, are not in a position to do very much about them, at least without appropriate support and encouragement. At the heart of the debate should be basic questions about human dignity and our role in making sure that it is respected.

I will briefly address the various countries that have been mentioned, some of the broader regional issues and the role for the UK Government and international actors. The DRC has probably been the main focus of the debate. I have not yet had the privilege of visiting that country, but, like my hon. Friends, I have met many people visiting from the DRC, not least at the event organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) and during my time with the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund. I have never failed to be moved by those people's optimism and determination to work for a better future, despite the immense challenges—not least the terrible sexual violence that a number of hon. Members spoke about.

I often make the point that the DRC should be one of the richest countries in the world. We all carry around a little bit of the DRC in our pocket—in the coltan in our mobile phones—yet it is one of the poorest countries. I wonder whether, in a way, we are all slightly complicit, because we enjoy cheap access to technology and perhaps do not speak out enough about the instability that suits the extraction companies and the Governments of the countries in which they are based.

I join the tributes paid to the Catholic Church and the civil society organisations that brokered the new year's eve deal. The deal will hopefully see fresh elections and President Kabila standing down, although, as we recently saw in Gambia, it is not beyond Presidents to go back on their word.

Burundi has also been mentioned, and the hon. Member for Bassetlaw made important points about the role of the UN Security Council. Of course, tensions continue with Rwanda, and the displacement has an effect across the whole region. There is displacement into Tanzania and down into Malawi, a country with which I am familiar—the Dzaleka camp has more than 25,000 refugees from Burundi and elsewhere in the region. Yes, there is some stability in Rwanda, but at what price? Kagame will be standing again in 2017, which is why support for civil society and governance is important. The points about the Central African Republic, which Pope Francis visited in 2015, and Congo-Brazzaville are also important.

Africa would have so much to gain from tourism if only there were a little more stability and infrastructure. Very few of the challenges we have heard about are caused by natural causes or force majeure. The behaviour of people and Governments in the region and across the world are responsible. That is particularly true of climate change, which is often more of a driving force than might be immediately obvious. We in the west have done the most to cause climate change through decades of pollution and industrialisation, and people in the great lakes region are among those feeling the effects first and hardest. Indeed, the great lakes themselves are affected by climate change and the increasing demand for water, which threaten biodiversity.

Climate change also has a major impact on food security and the ability of small-scale and subsistence farmers to produce enough food for themselves. Food security, in turn, affects health, educational attainment, gender equality and, ultimately, people's ability to take

[Patrick Grady]

part in society and the economy. That compounds the challenge of a weak civil society and the continuation of “big man” politics throughout the region, which we have heard about.

Investment in civil society and good governance programmes is vital, even if it can be slow-burn—long-term investment is perhaps not as attractive to DFID and other donors as it once was—and, without it, the cycle will continue. Weak governance of course makes it easier for multinational companies to run riot—whether food producers grabbing land or forcing the use of GM crops, or extractive companies dodging taxes and ignoring labour standards. Members who want to reduce our foreign aid budget—we have not heard from them today, but they exist—should be the first in the queue to demand that corporations pay their taxes in developing countries, so that domestic resources are available to invest in food and education. They should be demanding that this Government hold those companies to account, especially when they are based in the City of London or in offshore tax havens.

The African Union has a role to play in all this, and it would be interesting to hear from the Minister about any diplomatic, structural and financial support the UK is prepared to give, so that it can play a full role in promoting peace and stability and in the development of democracy and good governance across the continent. The point about 0.7% is also important, and it would be good to hear the Minister reaffirm the Government's commitment to that in this and future spending periods. I hope he recognises that that commitment is even more important in the context of Brexit, as a signal that the UK intends to play a continued, positive leadership role in the world and wants to continue to engage.

What leadership are the Government showing in tackling the complex supply chain, tax and corporate governance issues that are also wreaking so much of the havoc we have heard about today? What progress is being made to improve the reporting of the beneficial ownership of companies operating from tax havens in UK overseas territories? Again, the impact of Brexit arises here: will the UK demand that the highest standards of country-by-country reporting and supply chain management continue once it is decoupled from existing EU regulations? How will the UK continue to promote efforts to tackle climate change? Will the Foreign and Commonwealth Office be using its trumpeted relationship with the incoming US Administration to ensure that they maintain their commitment to the Paris agreement? Are the UK Government prepared to provide adequate funding to help countries in the great lakes region and across Africa adapt to the impact of climate change, which is already taking place?

If there is a similar debate in a year's time, when I hope this Minister will at least get a break from the Dispatch Box—he has been here all afternoon—I wonder what progress will have been made. Will there have been elections in the DRC? Will the elections in Rwanda take place peacefully? Will there have been any kind of resolution or progress in Burundi? This is about the human dignity of the people who live in those countries, and our dignity is in some way diminished if we do not play our part and step up to the plate to promote a resolution. All the issues and challenges we have heard

about today have been created by people, so it stands to reason that people and political will can overcome them.

4.32 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): First, let me thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) for securing this important debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I acknowledge the excellent contributions made by Members on both sides of the House. My hon. Friend highlighted some of the less mentioned countries of Africa, including the Central African Republic and Congo-Brazzaville, and the work done by Prince William. He then moved on to discuss the more commonly talked about countries in this debate, such as Burundi and the DRC.

I wish to thank the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who highlighted his positivity. I was pleased to hear him say that he felt more positive about the region than he has for a long time. That is encouraging, given his expertise, having lived in Tanzania—I was pleased to hear him share his expertise on that country. I wish to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones), who has moved place again, keeping us on our toes. He highlighted shocking violence, including the widespread acceptance of rape, and human rights abuses in the eastern DRC. He also highlighted the plight of Congolese refugees.

I wish to thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) for sharing her expertise on the DRC. It was my privilege to attend the all-party group meeting that she organised with women from the DRC. This was when I was still fairly new to this role and it was a great education for me, so I thank her for organising that meeting and inviting me along.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg)—like many of us, he has been in the Chamber all afternoon—for highlighting the humanitarian challenge in the DRC and the work done by the Department for International Development and non-governmental organisations. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) highlighted climate change and its effect on the great lakes region—an important aspect that we must not forget about.

As we all know, the African great lakes region is one of great significance, not only to stability in the African continent, but to the UK, because of the humanitarian and developmental aid that we contribute and our future trade and investment. We have heard that the region witnessed abuses of constitutional powers in 2015 and 2016, with the extension of presidential terms and numerous failures to hold fair and free elections, along with state crackdowns on political opposition and discourse.

Like most speakers, I shall focus on the DRC and Burundi. Both countries are at an acute political crossroads. Trouble in the region is no more so apparent than in Burundi, where President Pierre Nkurunziza successfully engineered for himself an illegal third term in office midway through 2015. He has also indicated that he will stand for re-election in 2020. I would be interested to hear the Minister's comments on that situation.

Since President Nkurunziza's decision to run again, political unrest has led to more than 1,000 dead and 8,000 people detained on political grounds, including

the leader of the main Opposition party, Gervais Niyongabo, and many high-ranking army officials. Amnesty International has reported that torture by the Burundian national intelligence service has become systematic. It has shown that secret detention facilities have multiplied and served as torture centres, used for extracting information on all those who are believed to oppose the ruling party.

Sadly, Burundi took another major step backwards by officially withdrawing from the International Criminal Court in October last year. The decision was unprecedented and could lead to other countries in the region following suite. What have the UK Government done, and what can they do, to persuade Burundi to reconsider. On new year's eve, the country awoke to the news that its Environment Minister had been assassinated, adding to further civil unrest. Will the Minister update the House on events following that tragedy?

In 2012, the Government set out their global review of DFID funding, which committed to phasing out the bilateral programme of funding to Burundi, with no plan or commitment from the Government to restart that programme. Is the Minister aware of any additional funding or assistance that could be used to help the people of Burundi?

As we have heard, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is in similar turmoil. During President Kabila's two terms as leader, military forces have executed a widespread crackdown on political dissidents, including through a media blackout in which he has shut down media outlets close to the Opposition, at least six of which remain blocked. At least 40 Opposition leaders and supporters and pro-democracy youth activists remain in detention throughout Congo. Many have formed rebel groups and factions that have dispersed to borders, and insurgency killings have plagued civilians, mainly in the east of the country. What additional support are we giving the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DRC to help to implement Security Council resolution 2277?

President Kabila's failure to hold elections has led to further violence and abuse in the country. Over the Christmas and new year period, DRC security forces killed 40 protestors who were peacefully demonstrating against the refusal of a peaceful and legal transition of power. In the last days of 2016, the Catholic Church managed to broker a deal between the ruling party and the Opposition. That agreement was signed between the political parties on new year's eve, and it stated that President Kabila will step down at the end of 2017. It is clear that all parts of the House welcome that move, and it is hoped that President Kabila himself signs and upholds the agreement to which he has yet to commit.

Sadly, yesterday, we did see the first signs of backtracking on this agreement, as a group of senior MPs, alongside confidantes of President Kabila, outspokenly challenged the deal, calling for it to be scrapped. The signs are beginning to look ominous. Will the Minister outline to the House what will happen if President Kabila fails to sign the agreement or, worse, fails to comply and to leave political office? What changes would materialise between our two countries? Would the Government consider imposing sanctions on the DRC given that the Congo is one of our largest aid recipients, with the Department for International Development projected to grant £168 million in aid in the forthcoming year? If the President does not stand down in the agreed timeframe,

will the UK Government consider imposing sanctions on his family business, which has benefited from his policy reforms, particularly in mining, energy and the banking industry, all of which have gained heavily from foreign investment into the DRC, including from the UK, the US and the EU.

The African great lakes region is seeing an upsurge in political repression, violence and militia recruitment, and heightened cross-border conflicts are on the rise. Much of that is derived from historical warfare, but the suppression of fair and democratic systems and the upholding of human rights are a grave cause for concern.

The world's eyes are currently focused on the devastation of the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, which, of course, we have just debated in this Chamber, but we must not turn a blind eye to this region, which has seen its own horrors of civil war in the 20th and 21st centuries, most notably in Rwanda. I am sure that all of us here in this House will not forget the horrors of the genocide, which claimed the lives of around 800,000 people only 23 years ago.

Rwanda is now seen as an international success, and it has blossomed as an architectural model for rehabilitation and reconciliation. None the less, the political situation in all these regions is fragile, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw and the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) have highlighted current issues with Rwanda, particularly in relation to democracy. The great lakes region will be stable only if all the countries in the region are stable—their politics are integrally linked.

As we have seen only recently in the Gambia, the power of the ballot box is beginning to break the rule of the strongman in Africa, although, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) pointed out, progress is slow. Like the hon. Member for Stafford, I am hopeful that a new era is upon us in the region. We must show our strength and ensure that, where we can, measures can be implemented to support countries across the African continent and in the great lakes region.

4.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate. Although many of the same characters are here from the previous debate, I suspect that the tone will be slightly different. It is a pleasure to respond to a subject on which there is a lot of cross-party agreement. Many of today's questions relate to our international aid commitments, but I will do my best to answer them. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on securing this debate. He asked a series of pertinent questions, and I will endeavour to write to him and to other Members if I do not get the opportunity to answer them or to pay tribute to the work that is being done.

Many important points have been made. Let me begin by saying that the great lakes has long been a troubled region, and that remains the case today. It faces many challenges: challenges to democracy when those in power seek to hold on to it; challenges to livelihoods; challenges to human rights from armed groups and repressive Governments; and challenges to survival from violence and hunger.

[*Mr Tobias Ellwood*]

It is also a region of great potential. The rapid development in Rwanda, which I have visited a number of times, is testimony to that. It also shows what can be achieved when regional Governments and the international community work together.

The UK is a major partner for the region, which is why it was part of my first visit to the continent, following my appointment in July as Minister for Africa. The UK is the second largest donor of humanitarian and development aid. We continue to play a key role in promoting sustainable peace and stability. The people of the great lakes region are resilient, and our aim is to work with Governments and the people of the great lakes countries to achieve a more peaceful, better governed, more democratic and more prosperous region.

Before going into the details of the main countries, I shall respond to some of the points that have been made. The hon. Member for Bassetlaw, who introduced the debate, talked about conflict minerals. I can assure him that we take the matter seriously. The Serious Fraud Office is looking into some investigations that are linked to British companies. Again, I can write to him with further details.

I think the hon. Gentleman was the only Member to refer to the illegal wildlife trade. We place importance on that matter and the Foreign Secretary takes it very seriously indeed. He is working with the Environment Secretary, who attended the illegal wildlife conference in Vietnam in November. We offered to host the next event, which will take place in London, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, in 2018. The Foreign Secretary's father is very engaged in the matter as well.

Mention was also made of the power that the monarchy can bring to bear. Prince William is a huge driver in raising the profile of this matter and in increasing the understanding of the work that we have done. On a visit to Uganda, I was able to see some of the Department for International Development programmes that are in place, which are providing better intelligence to enable us to understand criminal gangs. Those gangs have no regard for borders. They are moving the ivory and so forth across those borders—looking for markets, getting through customs illegally—and on, predominantly, to the far east, which is the biggest market. That is why the hosting of the event in Vietnam was important in respect of people in the region acknowledging that more needs to be done in that neck of the woods.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the Republic of the Congo. I had the experience of crossing the mighty Congo river, in a very small boat, from Kinshasa to Brazzaville. I also had the opportunity to meet the President there, who is absolutely committed to the areas of work that we want to do.

Furthermore, there is more engagement and involvement in honouring the constitution in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: with 80 million people, what happens there can have a spillover effect into Angola and elsewhere, so it is very important that we ensure that there is stability in that part of Africa.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), whom I have long known, is an advocate and supporter of and expert on Africa. He made a powerful speech. He knows that my interest in Africa is personal,

and we have a connection by way of the fact that my sister was headteacher of the international school at the base of Kilimanjaro, in Moshi. Through that, we recognised our mutual interest in Africa.

The fact that my hon. Friend says he is positive about the region, given the amount of knowledge he has, fills me with a sense of promise that we are going in the right direction. I join him in paying tribute to Tom Perriello, although I have no idea what the American envoy to the great lakes region will do next, as changes are taking place.

I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the work done by the Catholic Church to broker the deal, which is so important. I will come to that in a moment. I also pay tribute to the Tanzanians and Ugandans for the work that they have done in looking after so many refugees who have been caught up in the region.

The hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones)—who, I am pleased to say, has remained stationary since he was last referred to—mentioned the refugee crisis. We should not forget that while we discuss refugee issues relating to Libya, the Mediterranean, the shores of Turkey and Greece, and countries right across Europe, the source of many of those problems is the instability in the heart of Africa. Get the source right and those people will not feel the need to make that terrible journey across Africa to seek a life in Europe.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) made a powerful contribution, as she does on such matters. She reminded us, perhaps less delicately than I would have put it, about our historical colonial links to the country. We cannot deny our history. We have to recognise the role that we have played in the vast continent, but we can use that to our advantage by saying that there is a desire for us to continue our engagement, now working with the countries in the region in a positive way to meet some of the challenges faced today.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) mentioned the challenges of the DRC and the number of people that are displaced there. I pay tribute to the work that he and his Committee, which others have mentioned, are doing to focus on the issue. He spoke about the humanitarian crisis there that is shaping the wider conflict. He also touched on something that is so important and that was not yet apparent to me when I visited the DRC. There is vast criminality, particularly in the east of the country, but extremism has yet to set foot there. However, that is exactly where it could go to next, in the same way in which we have seen Boko Haram take advantage of the absence of government in Nigeria and al-Shabaab take advantage of the absence of governance in the southern neck of Somalia. That is why it is so important that we get it right in the east of the DRC.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) made an important point that the many millions of people affected by conflict are those who have not caused it at all. They are in a limited position to influence what is going on, yet they are the ones harmed by the conflict. However, the conflicts and problems are man-made, so they should be solvable. He was the only Member to touch on the issue of climate change. We should not forget that climate change is affecting the ability to grow crops. If it becomes too hot to be able to do so, people will have to move, so migration will be a consequence.

He asked me to reiterate our 0.7% international aid commitment. I absolutely stand by it. I would hate to see a Government of any hue challenging our 0.7% commitment, which allows us to stand up with some authority at the United Nations and to call on other countries to do things, act and follow us. I hope that all parties will continue in that vein. The more we make noises about it, the less anybody at the Treasury can sneak anything through on the quiet. We are all in agreement on that.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), the Labour spokesperson, mentioned the challenge and failure to honour constitutions across Africa. I am afraid this is something that we all need to work on. As the mother of all Parliament and a country that supports the idea of democracy, the programmes that we support with that 0.7% must not simply be about infrastructure, or working with NGOs and groups that need support, although that is important. It is also about improving governance, decision making and democratic processes so that when the terms of people such as President Kabila end, they stand down. There is nothing to stop President Kabila in the DRC from standing again in five years' time, if he wishes to. Such people should not be able to continue on or to tweak and play around with the constitution. We do not want to see that.

The hon. Lady talked about the role of the ICC. I am afraid that there is an issue with a number of African countries choosing to step away from it to protect those who may be up for charge. We are working with our colleagues in the ICC to prevent that from happening further.

I will talk about the countries in a little more detail in the time I have remaining. In the DRC, President Kabila's mandate ended on 19 December, as hon. Members have reflected. No elections have taken place, yet he remains in power. When I visited last year, I made the point that the UK was deeply disappointed that elections did not take place in 2016 as planned. I do not know whether hon. Members are aware of what happened. The opposition in the DRC also did not want elections to take place because the electoral commission had not upgraded the electoral roll, meaning that many 18-year-olds were not on the roll. There was a disjoint in where things would go and who should be in charge. Thankfully, the new electoral roll is being mapped out—it requires a census—so we are finally moving forward.

The unexpected good news came on 31 December, when talks mediated by the Catholic bishops hon. Members have paid tribute to reached a deal between the opposition and the Government. I join others in paying tribute to the bishops' work—the fact that they have done that work there means there may be demand for them in other parts of Africa as well. They have achieved what few thought possible: an inclusive deal that, if implemented, will secure the DRC's first democratic transition of power since independence. I hope to visit the country in the near future to underline Britain's commitment and to enforce the point that that process must continue.

The two key points in the deal were, first, that assurances were given by the Government that Kabila will step down and elections will be held by the end of this year and, secondly, that the current Prime Minister must be replaced by someone from the opposition majority.

As hon. Members have mentioned, armed groups in the eastern DRC are causing problems in terms of the security situation. We need to work with the United Nations to make sure that the commitment to stability in the east continues.

Graham Jones: I want to ask about the situation regarding MONUSCO. There seems to be a failure to resolve the violence. MONUSCO is the biggest UN peacekeeping operation that has ever been undertaken, yet it appears to be a failure.

Mr Ellwood: I raised the point of what more we could do from the international development perspective. Half the problem is actually getting access to remote areas. The roads are extremely poor. A journey from one community to another, which we would normally expect to take 20 minutes, takes seven or eight hours, which is a perfect situation for criminals and insurgents to operate in and perfect for the instability we are seeing. I suggested to the deputy head of the United Nations Development Programme that more effort—this is something the hon. Gentleman may wish to take up—should perhaps be placed within the DFID budget on improving the infrastructure as well, to allow the security forces to get deeper into these areas to provide the security we need. *[Interruption.]*

It looks like I have one minute left. I have made comments on the other countries, but I will write to hon. Members to clarify where we stand and to underline our commitment. However, let me go back to the beginning and say thank you to the hon. Member for Bassetlaw and, indeed, to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place.

The Government share the grave concerns aired by hon. Members about the continuing violence, the human rights violations and the repression of civil and political rights across the various parts of the great lakes region. I wish to assure hon. Members of the UK's unwavering commitment to the people of the region. They want and deserve peace, democracy and hope for the future, and we will continue to work hard with regional Governments and the wider international community to make those aspirations a reality.

4.57 pm

John Mann: I thank the Minister for his response and his kind offer to write to hon. Members present to pick up the myriad detailed issues that were raised—clearly, no one could possibly answer them all within any rational time limit. His offer is appreciated, and it would be very helpful.

Mr Deputy Speaker, inspired by your firm but fair moving-on of the last debate to allow us to have this debate, let me say that this has been a most excellent debate. That is hardly a surprise, given the experience of those on the Back Benches and Front Benches who have participated. Nevertheless, the debate has been of superb quality. We have managed to cover—in important detail and knowledgeably—seven different countries in a short time. That perhaps shows the scale of the issues and the opportunities.

I hope the Minister will take away in particular from the debate the fact that we have huge leverage. We have different kinds of leverage: someone who is forced out of office in disgrace and who has a fortune in Swiss banks has been paid by somebody, and some of those

[John Mann]

people will certainly be British. Therefore, the more we have transparency, the more we can add to that leverage. However, there are many other kinds of leverage—not least from excellent Departments. The Minister has excellent civil servants in the region, as does DFID, and we stand with a competitive advantage if we use our leverage wisely. I trust that the Minister will take from the debate the importance that the House gives to using that leverage. I share with the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and my hon. Friend who represents Middleton—[*Interruption.*] Lancashire somewhere—the other side of the border—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Circle Housing and Orchard Village

Motion made, and Question proposed, that this House do now adjourn.—(Christopher Pincher.)

5 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): This debate is about Circle Housing's Orchard Village development in the South Hornchurch part of my constituency. Circle was a group of nine housing associations formed following a merger in 2005. It now no longer exists, having merged only last month with Affinity Sutton to form Clarion Housing Group, the country's largest housing association with nearly 130,000 homes and half a million tenants, and with plans to build another 50,000 homes.

Orchard Village was formerly known as the Mardyke Estate. Back in 2007, the London Borough of Havering balloted residents to find out whether they agreed to a stock transfer. When more than 60% said yes, the site was taken over by Old Ford housing association—one of the Circle housing associations—in March 2008, and redevelopment work started in late 2009. When finished, over four phases it will contain 555 new homes available by mixed tenure, and all six of the original Mardyke tower blocks, of up to 13 floors, will have been pulled down.

Willmott Dixon was contracted for the first three phases on a design-and-build contract arrangement. This contract was terminated in August last year, as I will explain later. Hill Partnerships has been contracted for phase 4, the final phase. As an aside, the estate has been the setting for two recent award-winning British films—"Made in Dagenham" and "Fish Tank". Unfortunately, the project has been dominated by questions of build quality, estate management, standards of repairs, the performance and costing of heating systems, fire safety, parking, exposure to various hazards, and many other issues.

Before I go on, I want to make it clear that I view housing associations as playing a vital role in any successful resolution of the escalating local and national housing crisis. Housing associations have a proud history of delivering for their tenants. More generally, they are part of a rich tradition of mutualism and co-operation in this country—part of a charitable and non-profit-making commitment to social housing stretching back well into the 19th century on behalf of working people. For decades, they have played a civilising role in our society, and I hope that will continue. Given our local experience, however, I fear that this historic legacy could be threatened if we are not careful, especially if housing associations and the Government increasingly see their role as housing developers rather than as organisations rooted within traditions devoted to the social and economic well-being of their residents.

I suggest that Orchard Village estate should be a test case for the sector and its future direction, given the urgent need for greater independent scrutiny and regulation on behalf of tenants and buyers. To be clear, I am not making a party political point; in fact, the opposite is true. The Orchard Village project began under a Conservative council and Labour Government. When problems have emerged, all political parties have raised concerns. For example, in February last year Roger Evans, a Conservative member of the Greater London

Authority, raised concerns with the then Conservative Mayor of London in Mayor's question time by highlighting the build quality on the estate. Unfortunately, the then Mayor simply said that the homes would be National House Building Council-certified and that Circle would rectify any plumbing defects—as if this reflected the scale of the problems on the estate. This intervention by Mr Evans followed a complaint to Havering Council by the local councillors for the South Hornchurch ward. None of these councillors represents my own party. Indeed, none represents any party represented in the Chamber at present. There is, in short, wide cross-party agreement concerning the quality of the build, and I trust that the Minister appreciates that.

I put on record my appreciation of the work of the three local councillors in South Hornchurch—Michael Deon Burton, Philip Martin and Graham Williamson—on behalf of their residents on the estate, and of the work of the newly formed Orchard Village residents association chaired by the tireless Colin Nickless.

There have been literally hundreds of complaints by residents. I have scores of resident complaints covering all aspects of building and repairs. In every instance there are multiple complaints about each property, and most of them involve long-term problems regarding resolution of the faults.

The main problems include failure to build homes to an adequate standard with regard to damp, mould, noise pollution, fireproofing and adaptations; failure of the maintenance service; unacceptable response times for repairs, with the treatment of vulnerable residents and tenants being of particular concern; homes without adequate insulation in all phases of the development; heating issues whereby homes with vulnerable residents are left for days without heat, as well as excessive heating bills and major concerns about the standing charges on district heating systems. In short, there are serious allegations that homes have been built in breach both of building regulations and of the funding conditions stipulated in grants from the Homes and Communities Agency and the GLA, and that has had a consequent effect on the wellbeing of my constituents.

On 10 November 2016, the newly formed residents association submitted a formal complaint to Havering Council about their treatment by Circle Housing and its agent Willmott Dixon. That is currently being investigated by the council under the corporate complaints procedure. As well as raising the issues with the council, I have been in contact with the Health and Safety Executive and the HCA, met the social housing regulator and the Mayor's office, and corresponded with Public Health England. Residents have lodged their concerns with the relevant ombudsmen throughout.

The issue of the regulator and Circle Housing is particularly important. In 2015, the HCA downgraded Circle Housing from G1 to G3. The HCA increased the rating earlier last year, given the improvements in the repairs service, although that was challenged at the time by residents.

The Department for Communities and Local Government is well aware of all of the issues. On 16 August, I wrote to the Secretary of State about the problems. The Minister for Housing and Planning responded on 12 September, saying that

“the regulatory standards had not been breached in this case”

and that the Department was, therefore, “unable to take regulatory action”,

not least because it does not have a statutory mandate to deal with individual cases. I accept that that is the ombudsman's role. The Minister concluded:

“I appreciate that your constituents will feel disappointed by this decision”.

So disappointed were the residents by the Minister's letter that they actively considered a legal response to the regulator's decision, but that was ruled out when the regulator subsequently informed us that its investigations were ongoing, so it was not possible to make a legal challenge.

On 21 December, just before Christmas and just after the merger was completed, Circle Housing was criticised by the housing regulator for risking “serious harm” to its tenants, given the continuous concerns regarding the repairs service. The HCA issued a regulatory notice saying that Circle had breached the home standard, with a

“large number of outstanding complaints”

affecting vulnerable tenants. Obviously, that decision is welcome, but I have to tell the Minister that the view among residents is that the announcement was delayed until after the merger. They believe that if the announcement had been made earlier in the year, it may have had significant implications for Circle Housing, given its earlier downgrades, and, therefore, the merger.

The important point is that we were disappointed with the Minister's response, particularly in the light of the regulator's findings in December. It is especially disappointing if we compare the Minister's response with that of the newly merged Clarion group since the takeover. In contrast to the Department, it has accepted the significance of all the issues. Arguably, that is the type of response that we might have anticipated from the Department and the regulator, which are supposed to act on behalf of the residents.

Clarion Housing Group has established a new project team to resolve the issues at Orchard Village. In turn, the project team has appointed Pellings to act as an analyst and sort out the full extent of the problems on the estate through internal and external surveys. Pellings has also been instructed to undertake a full survey of building quality compared with the original building specifications on the site. Aaron heating services has also been employed to review the heating systems. We shall see what they uncover over the next few months.

We are awaiting a report from the fire brigade on fireproofing and fire risk on the estate. I, as well as local councillors, now receive a weekly briefing on the progress of the casework. On 19 December I was forced to contact Public Health England about concerns regarding combustible gas exposures on the estate. Clarion has now appointed expert consultants to investigate, and tests began on air quality this week.

Interim compensation payments are being made available for phase 3 residents in particular.

This month's meeting of the Circle housing board is also discussing the question of buying back the shared ownership and freehold properties. The contract with Willmott Dixon was terminated for non-performance in remedying serious defects, and Clarion is considering the legal consequences of that. Most significantly, the full building spec survey will tell us whether Willmott Dixon

[Jon Cruddas]

built the homes to the appropriate standards, and what the legal consequences are if it did not. That is all to be welcomed, and it is a tacit acknowledgement by Clarion of the reputational damage that might affect the new housing association if this is not sorted out, not least because of the major building programmes and opportunities that are likely to open up across Barking and Dagenham and Havering over the next few years.

The point is this: why was none of that fully taken on board by the Department? If there had been no merger, would we just be carrying on as we were with the Department and the regulator—and everyone else, apart from the residents—telling us that nothing was wrong? What recourse do residents have in such cases? Of course, it should be to the Department. The Minister is formally responsible for housing supply policy, home ownership policy, planning policy, planning casework oversight, estate regeneration, the HCA, the Thames Gateway, building regulations and so on. Is the system working? Is the only solution to wait for a merger and for the merged organisation to put its hands up?

Between 2010 and 2016, Circle Housing received more than £250 million of public money. Within the local community, people assume that there have been breaches of public grant compliance in the building standards—we shall wait and see whether that is the case—and we are talking about grants of £31.2 million over the three phases of the development. The outstanding investigations initiated by Clarion and the council will, we hope, get to the bottom of all this.

More generally, legal issues are ongoing, including exposure to mould and damp, which is leaving children hospitalised. Freeholders and shared ownership leaseholders are starting legal proceedings over misrepresentation of their properties and failure to repair, and seeking damages to cover their suffering. There are issues for the Department. Basically, do we need a review of the system of regulation? The HCA found against the residents even when the new merged organisation accepted the legitimacy of some of the residents' concerns and decided to investigate other key parts of the case independently. Should it not have been the investigations of the regulatory system that secured that outcome, on behalf of the residents?

Overall, Orchard Village holds a light up to some of the changes occurring in the housing association sector, aided by Government strategy. The danger is that housing associations are, in effect, turning into housing developers. Consequently, they appear to be in danger of losing their historical role, and, indeed, their historical ethic. Yet the Government are actively committed to deregulating the sector further to ensure that housing associations are not treated as part of the public sector, so as to build more homes. I accept the logic behind their position on deregulation, but what is the cost in terms of oversight and accountability on behalf of residents, such as my constituents in Orchard Village? The Government argue that further deregulation will not change their strong regulatory framework. Well, the experience of Circle Housing and Orchard Village does not bode well in terms of whether that works at present.

More generally, the Government now appear to have redirected attention back toward housing associations to resolve the escalating housing crisis, rather than just relying on the market. That is obviously a good thing,

because the private sector business model for housing supply has, for too long, been built around land banking and rationing. Yet the Government rethink poses dangers for the sector in reconciling housing associations' role as developers with their historic purpose.

My real fear is this. I hope that we do not look back in a few years' time and realise that we missed the warning signs—similar to the experiences of building societies in the financial services sector—as key non-market institutions are swept up in a dash for growth, with the collateral effect being the removal of their original ethical purpose. I hope that the experience of Orchard Village will act as a warning, and that, locally, Clarion can turn the situation around on behalf of residents. Nationally, we must preserve the integrity of housing associations as part of a genuine mixed economy across the housing sector.

5.13 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell):

I congratulate the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) on securing this debate on Circle Housing and Orchard Village. It is an issue that I am familiar with, for two reasons. First, I am sure he is aware that the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) raised in an Adjournment debate at the end of last year issues relating to Old Ford and the impact on her constituents.

The hon. Gentleman referred to Colin Nickless and his role on behalf of residents of the Orchard Village estate. I can tell him that Colin Nickless communicates regularly with me on social media, raising concerns about the quality of development at Orchard Village. I am therefore familiar with the issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised and I am grateful to him for doing so. He speaks powerfully on behalf of his constituents. There have been several developments since the previous Adjournment debate and I look forward to updating hon. Members about those as well as responding to the hon. Gentleman's particular concerns.

If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will start in general terms by setting out the Government's vision for affordable housing and the important role that housing associations play in that. I do not need to remind hon. Members of the chronic housing shortage in this country. It is clear that we need to build more homes and that we have not been building enough homes for 30 or 40 years. The Government are determined to put that right and provide more homes for those who need them. Nowhere in this country is that need more acute than in London in constituencies such as mine and the hon. Gentleman's. We are already making progress: housing supply rose by 11% in 2015-16; the highest level for eight years. However, I accept that much more needs to be done. As the hon. Gentleman said, housing associations have a crucial role to play in that. Let us not forget that, during the financial crisis, housing associations kept on building. The sector is responsible for about a third of all new housing in England each year. That is why we are increasing investment in the housing association sector. Just last week we invited bids to the expanded shared ownership and affordable homes programme. As well as the additional £1.4 billion that the Chancellor announced in the autumn statement, we have introduced greater flexibility into the programme, which will allow housing associations better to respond to local needs and markets.

As I said, the situation is at its most acute in London. We need new homes of all tenures but in particular we need to ensure that there are affordable homes for sale and rent. In November, we announced a £3.15 billion funding package for London, with an ambitious aim to build significantly more affordable homes over this Parliament. The Mayor of London was generous enough to say that that was a record level of funding for City Hall for affordable housing. He has since opened registration to his own affordable housing programme using that money. Bidding will be open from the end of this month to mid-April. We look forward to housing associations building more homes so that more Londoners get a decent and secure place to live.

Before I come on to Circle Housing, I want to respond clearly but gently to the hon. Gentleman's challenge about the changing role of housing associations. He is right to say that their role has changed over time. Many, particularly those that are engaged in large developments, have become increasingly commercial in their practice. Often, they are building market housing and using that to subsidise increased provision of affordable housing. However, I would like to challenge the hon. Gentleman in two regards. First, I have not yet come across a housing association that thinks of itself as equivalent to a private sector developer. All the people I had the privilege of meeting during my six months as Housing Minister are still very conscious of the original purpose behind housing associations.

Generally, housing associations come from three main routes. Some are the old Victorian philanthropic bodies—Peabody is a good example. Many emerged from the “Cathy Come Home” movement and others emerged through local authority stock transfers. At one point in his speech, the hon. Gentleman posited that perhaps there was a tension between the housing associations' role in developing new homes and their historical purpose. I disagree. To me, their historical purpose was to meet housing need in our communities, and at this time, particularly in London, but all around the country, there is a desperate need for more affordable housing. In trying to meet that need, housing associations are fulfilling their historical purpose.

There is common ground between the hon. Gentleman and me on the point that as housing associations engage in increasingly commercial activity to help them provide more affordable housing, they must not lose sight of their historical purpose or their obligations to their existing tenants. I am completely with him on that. He was honest enough in his speech to recognise why the Government are deregulating. Historically, we have viewed the housing association sector as part of the private sector, and that remains the Government's view, but the Office for National Statistics has reclassified them into the public sector. If we allow that situation to continue in the long term, it will have a damaging impact on housing associations' ability to develop new housing, because not only the funding that the Government give them, but the money that they raise through private markets would be counted as Government spending and fall within the Treasury's control. It is therefore very important—I hope there is a political consensus on this across the House—that they are returned to the private sector. That means we need to address the concerns raised by the ONS. Again, there is common ground between us. We need to ensure the funding we give to

housing associations is used in the interests of public policy and for a clear purpose, and that we do not lose sight of that.

The hon. Gentleman raised a whole suite of serious concerns in relation to Circle Housing and Orchard Village. Many of his constituents have been seriously let down by their landlord. I congratulate him on championing their cause. I very much share the concerns he set out.

The regulator received a large number of complaints and referrals regarding Circle's repairs service across east London, in particular the quality of new build properties at Orchard Village. The information provided by residents was part of the regulator's wider investigation into Circle and it informed the notice issued in December. The regulator found that Circle had breached consumer standards and risked serious detriment to its tenants in its repairs service across east London. It is worth noting that I believe this is the first time the regulator has made such a finding in relation to an ordinary repairs service. The regulator also concluded that the specific issues at Orchard Village did not, of themselves, constitute a separate breach of standards, but it will continue to examine any new evidence provided by the residents of Orchard Village. This is still a live issue—the regulator is still looking at it.

As the hon. Gentleman said, Circle has merged with Affinity Sutton to form Clarion. It is the responsibility of Clarion to address the issues raised by the regulator. I met the chief executive of Clarion earlier this week, and I believe the hon. Gentleman met him, too. He is committed to resolving these problems quickly. Clarion has a responsibility to protect the needs and welfare of its tenants and leaseholders, and it needs to meet that responsibility. He is clear that Clarion needs to work with the regulator and provide assurance on how the issues are going to be fixed. I am encouraged, although I will continue to pursue to the issue, that Clarion is investigating what has led to the problems. It is making immediate improvements where it can, such as: improving call waiting times at the relevant call centre used by Orchard Village residents, and improving systems to ensure calls are properly logged and actioned. It is also trying to increase engagement with tenants.

Clarion has established a dedicated project team to manage and resolve the issues with Orchard Village specifically. It has put in place new contractors to develop the final phase of regeneration, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned in his speech, and repairs to properties. It has appointed a specialist property consultant to undertake a full survey of build quality. I also understand that Havering's environmental health department is launching an investigation following reports of the presence of methane gas at Orchard Village. Clarion has appointed a specialist consultant to undertake its own investigation and is taking the potential risk to public health very seriously.

There has been some concern regarding the potential impact of Circle's merger on tenants. Having spoken to Clarion's chief executive, I see the merger as presenting an opportunity to sort these problems out—and to sort them out quickly. That is clearly what the hon. Gentleman, in raising these issues in this debate, wants to see. The new organisation should bring the skills and expertise to transform the service that tenants receive, putting matters right and ensuring they do not recur. I am sure that that is what the hon. Gentleman and his constituents want.

[Gavin Barwell]

In a wider context, I welcome Clarion's vision to build 50,000 new homes in the next 10 years. I think the hon. Gentleman and I agree that if the organisation wants the Greater London Authority and London boroughs to work with it, it will need to demonstrate progress on these issues before anyone will want it to be given funding to develop new housing. I welcome its ambition, but it will need to be seen to be putting this matter right before local authorities in this part of the country will want to work with them on further new supply.

The role of the regulator presents the real challenge in both this case and that raised by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow, who wants to know whether the Government are satisfied that the arrangements are working properly. Through its framework, the regulator is meant to support and create the conditions for a flourishing housing association sector and ensure that housing associations are properly managed, provide good-quality homes and serve the needs of their tenants and communities. The Government are committed to upholding a strong and independent system of regulation for social housing, which is why before Christmas we announced we were establishing the regulator as a stand-alone public body, following the recommendation in the HCA's tailored review.

At the moment, the regulator forms part of the HCA, which is also responsible for delivering many of my Department's programmes, but the review recommended that it be set up as a wholly separate body, and we will take forward that recommendation. We are consulting on the legislative process to do that, but I want to make it clear that that change will not diminish the regulator's powers or objectives. The regulator will continue to have a vital role in encouraging and challenging the sector to improve efficiency and asset management and to maintain robust governance so that the sector remains attractive to commercial lenders. If we want private organisations to lend money to housing associations to help them deliver affordable homes, they must have confidence in the quality of the governance.

Finally, and most importantly and relevantly to this case, the meeting of tenants' needs is a vital aspect of housing associations' purpose. While it is commendable that they explore different commercial models, their tenants' needs must not be forgotten. Indeed, they must

have a mechanism in place for tenants to have a say in how the organisation is run and deals with complaints when tenants think that the service they are receiving is not satisfactory.

Finally, I want to explore why the threshold for action was quite high, as the hon. Gentleman would see it. The regulator does not have an active role in monitoring compliance with consumer standards. The ombudsman is the starting point for such complaints. The regulator can intervene only where there is judged to be a risk, or there has been risk, of serious harm to tenants. That is the threshold at which the regulator takes action. As the regulator is independent, I cannot personally intervene in those decisions, but it is my role, when Members or others draw concerns to my attention, to make sure the regulator is aware of them. I am confident that the regulator takes all complaints it receives from tenants seriously and investigates where necessary. I have undertaken to the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow, however, to look at the interaction between the ombudsman and the regulator to make sure that those processes work well so that when the ombudsman spots a spike in complaints about a particular association or element of an association's work, it is drawn to the regulator's attention speedily so that these situations can be resolved as quickly as possible.

Tonight's debate serves as a reminder of the importance of robust governance, accountability and transparency within the housing association sector. As the sector evolves and becomes more complex in its diversification and commercialisation, it is vital that housing associations continue to uphold their responsibilities to their existing tenants. The regulator has a crucial role in maintaining standards in the sector and upholding both financial viability and management. In the case of Orchard Village, there is a clear expectation from me, as the Minister, from the hon. Gentleman, as the constituency MP, and from residents that Clarion will follow through with its assurances and address the issues he has raised tonight. It will be held to account by him, me and its tenants if it does not do that. I thank him for securing this debate on such an important and timely issue.

Question put and agreed to.

5.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 12 January 2017

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

Restorative Justice

1.30 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Justice Committee, *Restorative justice*, HC 164, and the Government response, Cm 9343.

It is a particular pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and to move the motion on behalf of the Justice Committee. I am grateful to my Committee colleagues who are here to take part in the debate. We believe that this topic is important and look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the issues we raised.

Restorative justice is defined by the Ministry of Justice as

"the process that brings those harmed by crime, and those responsible for the harm, into communication, enabling everyone affected by a particular incident to play a part in repairing the harm and finding a positive way forward."

We heard evidence during our inquiry that restorative justice had been largely offender-led, aimed at the tangible measure of reducing reoffending, but that everyone involved recognised that it was crucial for restorative justice to be initiated by victims and focused on their needs, even if increased victim satisfaction does not have an easily measurable financial benefit. We are now much more alert to issues affecting victims. It is particularly sad that Jill Saward, who did so much to highlight the plight of victims, died only recently; I am sure that every one of us would want to pay tribute to her courage and bravery in this area.

The Committee thinks that refocusing restorative justice to put victims at the heart of the process has been a welcome development. Any reduction in reoffending is of benefit to society and achieving that is a good thing, in any event. Restorative justice can be delivered in various ways, the most well known of which is through a conference or meeting between the victim of a crime, and any of their supporters, and the offender. That can be directly—face-to-face—or sometimes by telephone or video conferencing.

It is worth stressing that victims and offenders are not simply brought together and left to get on with it. A lot of people do not understand how the process works. In reality, expert facilitation and preparation are essential parts of the restorative justice process. That can often involve a lot of work and discussion with victims and offenders in advance of their actual contact with one another in order to explain the process, manage expectations and set out objectives and ground rules. Facilitators are also present during the conference to set the scene and guide the conversation.

According to the Restorative Justice Council, whose work we recognise and pay tribute to, victim and offender conferences can be beneficial both for offenders and

victims. The RJC said that for offenders the experience can be incredibly challenging, because it confronts them with the personal impact of their crime. For victims, meeting the person who has harmed them can be a huge step in moving forward and recovering from the crime. I say in parenthesis that my experience of practising for 30 years at the criminal Bar led me to recognise the truth of both those aspects. Frequently offenders—even repeat offenders—had no concept of the human cost of their offending. It is a powerful means of bringing them up sharp and causing them to think differently, and it is part of a cathartic process for victims as well.

The Ministry of Justice is currently working to its third action plan on restorative justice, which was published in November 2014 and has objectives and information going up to 2018. We were advised during our inquiry that the Government were preparing a progress report on the action plan, but that report appears not to have seen the light of day. We have also heard suggestions informally that the Government have been thinking about producing a new action plan to replace the final year of the current action plan. With just over a year left, not much time is left to report on progress or revise the plan for the rest of its lifetime. I hope that the Minister—I welcome him to the debate—will explain what the Government's intentions are in that respect when he responds.

In the action plan as it stands, the Ministry's vision is for

"good quality, victim-focused restorative justice...to be available at all stages of the criminal justice system...in England and Wales."

Within that vision the Ministry has set itself three broad objectives: first, equal access to restorative justice for victims of crime, wherever they are in England and Wales, whatever the age of the offender, and whatever the offence committed; secondly, raising awareness of restorative justice and its potential benefits among victims, offenders, criminal justice practitioners, the media and the general public; and thirdly, ensuring that restorative justice is of good quality, safe, in line with the European Union directive on victims' rights, focused on the needs of the victim and delivered by a trained facilitator. I hope that even after this country leaves the European Union, we will maintain awareness of that particular directive, which sets out sensible good practice. I am sure that any sensible Government would wish to maintain that, whatever our future relationship with our European neighbours.

We clearly state in our report that we support the aims and objectives of the action plan, welcoming in particular the Ministry's focus on ensuring that restorative justice services are high quality and focused on victims. During the inquiry we discovered that evidence on the effectiveness, and cost-effectiveness, of restorative justice is not as well developed as it might be. We recommend further work by the Ministry, together with stakeholders, to establish criteria for judging the success of restorative justice in relation both to offenders and to victims.

The Government's response to our report states that

"work is already underway to develop an evidence base for the effective delivery of restorative justice services and the outcomes achieved by those services."

I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us a little more about that work, where it is leading and the progress so far.

[Robert Neill]

On restorative justice in general, there is much agreement between the Ministry, other authorities and stakeholders about its use within the criminal justice system. That may mean that there is a higher degree of consensus in this debate than in some other debates we have had on our reports in Westminster Hall—I hope so, because this is an important topic and perhaps an often under-appreciated part of the criminal justice system.

I am conscious that other Members wish to contribute to the debate, so I will briefly touch on four important topics arising from our report, including the restorative justice landscape and funding, and the recent Victims' Commissioner report on victims' experiences and perceptions—I am delighted to see the Victims' Commissioner and the chief executive of her office in the Public Gallery today; they were helpful in their evidence to the Committee. I will touch briefly on restorative justice in domestic abuse and violence cases—my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) will also refer to those matters—and on the potential role of legislation.

I say to the Minister—not simply because he is an old friend and it is still post-Christmas—that we are grateful for, and commend him and the Government for, the comprehensiveness and quality of their response to our report. That is appreciated, and we accept that they have taken the report seriously. However, we still have a number of concerns and might want to push him to be a bit bolder and go a bit further and faster, but we recognise the spirit in which the response was delivered.

Let me touch on the landscape of restorative justice and funding. A range of bodies within the criminal justice system are responsible for the funding and delivery of restorative justice at various points in the system. The primary responsibility for provision lies with police and crime commissioners, within their overall remit for delivering victims' services. Some £29 million was made available to police and crime commissioners over the past three years for restorative justice, although it was not ring-fenced; it was within an overall provision for victims, which stands at £63 million in 2016-17. The Ministry of Justice has provided other funding to the Youth Justice Board to build restorative justice capacity within youth offending teams, and the National Offender Management Service has also spent money to build restorative justice capacity.

We were pleased that the Government accepted the thrust of our recommendation that annual collation and publication of information on spending by police and crime commissioners on restorative justice would be helpful in assessing progress on the action plan and supporting an evidence base to test the effectiveness of restorative justice. However, they did not make a firm commitment to do so. I press the Minister again to make that firm commitment, following what seems to be the spirit and tenor of the Government's response to our recommendations. The Government response states that the overall victim services budget has been protected over the spending review period to 2020-21. Can he confirm how much funding will be provided within that envelope to police and crime commissioners for restorative justice capacity building?

Let me turn to the Victims' Commissioner's report. Shortly after the Government responded to our report, another important report was published, fittingly enough

during International Restorative Justice Week last November. The second part of the commissioner's report on restorative justice examined victims' experiences and perceptions of restorative justice, on the basis of 35 interviews with victims. It is worth saying that the first part of the review examined the subject from the perspective of providers. The second part of the report raised several issues of concern, on which it would be helpful to hear the Minister's views.

First, as I said, the Government allocated £23 million to build capacity for restorative justice between 2013 and 2016, but the crime survey for England and Wales shows that only 4.2% of all victims of crime were offered restorative justice in the year to March 2016, the lowest percentage since 2010. What will be done to ensure that restorative justice is offered to victims in accordance with their entitlement under the victims' code? What do the Government intend to do, or encourage others to do, to raise awareness of restorative justice to meet those objectives?

Our report recommended that the main means of raising awareness should be through criminal justice: effectively, it should be mainstreamed into the system through various agencies. What we discovered, though, was that when restorative justice is offered, it is often during the later stages of the criminal justice process. Nearly half of victims in the Victims' Commissioner's review said that they were informed of restorative justice only after the offender had been sentenced. That is not in line with the vision in the Government's action plan to make restorative justice available at all stages in the criminal justice process, including pre-sentencing or as part of the conditions for an out-of-court disposal. Does the Minister recognise that point, and do the Government plan to address it?

What plans do the Government have to increase the use of restorative justice as part of the conditions attached to community orders or suspended sentences? When we visited north America as part of our inquiry, we were struck by the amount of use made of restorative justice as part of a robust set of out-of-court disposals or, in our language, community types of disposal. We think that more could be done here in the UK as well.

Let me turn to domestic abuse and violence cases. One of the most difficult and sensitive questions to address is the suitability of restorative justice processes in cases of domestic abuse and violence. In our report we set out the concern, expressed to us in evidence by Women's Aid and others, that restorative justice was potentially harmful. It was put to us that it could be

“another way for a perpetrator to continue their control and abuse.”

Again, it is timely to review the topic, because that point is not dissimilar to the one made about cross-examination by litigants in person in family courts, and I am delighted to see the Government taking steps to prevent such abuse. There is a concern that the same sort of risk could arise in the restorative justice process.

Of particular concern to us, and I think to Ministers too, was evidence that restorative justice was being used at level 1—at street level, to put it in everyday language—by police officers in domestic abuse cases, contrary to police guidance. We are pleased that the Government's response stated that they were considering with the police

how to reinforce the message that such unsophisticated level 1 restorative justice is not appropriate in such cases.

More generally, our report expressed the view that, in principle, restorative justice should be available for every type of offence. However, given the clear risks in the use of restorative justice for certain types of offence, we recommended that the Ministry should work with the Restorative Justice Council to create and fund training and promote best practice guidance for restorative justice facilitators. It is an area where care and discretion are needed, particularly in domestic abuse cases. We were pleased that the Government response stated that they were producing a paper setting out the issues that need to be addressed, including any guidance or training, before restorative justice is taken forward in domestic abuse cases. When he replies, will the Minister let us know what progress is being made on that paper and when it is likely to see the light of day?

Finally, I turn to the victims' code and what is sometimes referred to as a potential victim's law. One of the starkest anomalies in relation to restorative justice is that victims' rights are stronger for victims of offenders under the age of 18 than others. In cases where the offender is under 18, victims are entitled to be offered restorative justice by the relevant youth offending team where it is appropriate and available. Victims of adult offenders have a rather weaker right to receive information about restorative justice, including about how they can take part. That anomaly seems to have arisen for historical reasons rather than any other, particularly logic, so we recommended that the code should be strengthened to bring the rights of victims of adult offenders into line with those of victims of young offenders.

On that recommendation, we found the Minister's response disappointing. The Ministry said:

"We continue to keep the Victims' Code under review and will consider the Committee's recommendations the next time we consult on changes."

I urge the Minister to be a bit more specific. I would never accuse my right hon. and learned Friend of sitting on the fence, but the Government need to be more specific about where they stand on the issue. It seems to us that the evidence makes a clear case that that anomaly should not exist. It would not be difficult to rectify, although I grant that it might require legislation. Do the Government acknowledge that in a victim-focused restorative justice system, which is the Government's objective and one that we agree with, there can be no good reason for victims' rights to differ, purely arbitrarily, depending on the age of the offender? I hope that he will give us more detail on that point.

Things have gone quiet since the undertaking in the 2015 Queen's Speech to put key entitlements under the victims' code into a victims' law. A Green Paper on the victims' law was expected before the summer recess last year, but it has not appeared. We noted that a number of amendments concerning victims' rights have been made in the House of Lords to the Policing and Crime Bill. On the question of victims' right to restorative justice, we made what we thought was a nuanced recommendation on introducing a statutory right. We said that due to questions about the capacity to provide restorative justice services, it was probably too soon to bring a statutory right into effect—there is not much point having a statutory right if it cannot be delivered

and used—but we felt that the power to introduce such a right, when appropriate, should be conferred by legislation on Ministers. We know that a significant Ministry of Justice Bill is forthcoming. Without risking overloading it even more, it might be an opportunity to consider that. I would be interested to know what the Minister feels about that.

In their response, the Government were equally guarded, saying merely:

"Careful consideration is being given to suggestions made by the Victims' Commissioner and others about key rights and entitlements that might be set out in a Victims' Law."

Given the wider debate about the desirability of a victims' law and about what it might contain, I must press the Minister to be more forthcoming about the Government's intentions for such a law, which has long been heralded, and what provisions for restorative justice rights it might make.

Those are the issues I wanted to address in opening the debate and the key issues that our report raised. I know that other hon. Members wish to participate, so I will leave my observations there.

1.50 pm

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am grateful for the opportunity to follow my friend—in this context—the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), who as Chair of the Justice Committee has ably steered our report and brought our conclusions to the House. He covered a number of the report's points and I do not wish to go over the same ground; I just want to focus on a couple of issues and perhaps focus the Minister's mind on a couple of the report's key points and recommendations.

It is clear to all members of the Committee—and, in fairness, I think to the Government, too—that restorative justice has a value. It is a useful tool for helping people who have committed crimes to understand the impact on the victims and, through that process, for helping to prevent reoffending. There is general agreement from the Justice Committee, the Opposition—I look forward to hearing from my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) in due course—and the Government that there is a valuable role for restorative justice. Indeed, when I held ministerial roles, I propagated restorative justice both in Northern Ireland and in the United Kingdom as a whole. There is a genuine understanding of it.

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): The right hon. Gentleman may recall that when he and I served on the Crime and Courts Bill Committee, we both made common cause for the restorative justice condition for deferred sentences, so that it had a stronger footing.

Mr Hanson: Indeed. As I say, there is common ground across the House, the various parties, the Justice Committee, this Government and, I believe, the previous Government to ensure that we can facilitate restorative justice. There is evidence—it is anecdotal, so we might not give it too much weight—that every £1 spent on restorative justice can save £8 in further costs down the line. That is important.

[Mr Hanson]

The Government's commitment of £29 million, in their November 2013 plan, to help the development of restorative justice is supportive and indicative of the progress that needs to be made. However, I want to press the Minister on a couple of points, if I may. First, I would welcome some clarity from him on what the £29 million, which we have discussed in the Justice Committee, has been spent on. Has it been spent on restorative justice? I ask because it was not ring-fenced, but was part of a general grant. Has he produced a list of projects that benefit from that £29 million investment? If it is being spent on restorative justice, is it for local decision making? What is the Government's assessment of what works best for restorative justice? Simply pouring £29 million centrally to police and crime commissioners without a ring fence and hoping that it will develop the seedcorn of good, positive, evaluated, determined restorative justice may not be enough; it may need a little more central direction from Government.

That point leads me to recommendation 66 of the Committee's report:

"The Ministry of Justice is well placed to take a leadership role in restorative justice and set out a clear overall vision for how it expects restorative justice services to be delivered."

The Ministry responded to our recommendation—I would be grateful for the Minister's concentration on this—in paragraph 17 of the Government's response:

"The Government agrees it is important that all relevant parties have a common understanding of how restorative justice works within the criminal justice system in England and Wales. We will consider the points raised by the Committee before publishing a progress report."

With due respect, that is civil-service speak for: "We don't know what we're doing at the moment and we'd like to come back to it later."

The test for the Minister is whether he can give some indication today of how he envisages a viable restorative justice scheme that avoids the postcode lottery that our report referred to. That might be through effective use of the £29 million; it might be by picking from operational schemes that the Ministry of Justice thinks are working well, have an output and have proved successful in reducing offending and giving victim satisfaction; or it might be from both those things. It is important that he focuses in his reply on how he envisages ensuring that people in north Wales get the same services and opportunities as people in south Wales, in Hertfordshire, in Bromley and Chislehurst and in every other part of the United Kingdom—perhaps even in Ribbles Valley, Mr Evans.

We need a collective understanding of what is available, so that people do not feel left out because they cannot access a service. I recognise that we cannot deliver everything or concentrate on everything. The Minister's response to paragraph 66 therefore needs to look at the key issues: what works, what is good value for money, what gives best victim satisfaction, what most reduces reoffending and how individuals become aware of the offer in the first place.

Our report refers to the understanding of restorative justice. I have to go back to a point that I know Members will be aware of: someone minding their own business who suddenly becomes a victim of crime may not necessarily know what the courts and the police

service do, what restorative justice is, how it is available, what benefit it might bring to them or what it might do to prevent future victims from going through the same experience. Until the day someone is a victim, they are not focused on the criminal justice system. I therefore ask the Minister not only what is available, whether it is a postcode lottery and how the funding is used, but how victims become aware of the facilities and support available in their local area. If the Government's direction of travel is towards localism, how does someone in north Wales who is minding their own business today, living their life peacefully and not expecting to be a victim of crime, but who wakes up as a victim tomorrow, know that such services are available? How do they know how to access them? How are they helped through at a local level?

Those questions take us back to the postcode lottery. I have no problems with devolving funding to police and crime commissioners or local services through community rehabilitation companies, the voluntary sector or other means, but my test for the Minister on his responsibilities is how he assesses what works, who is doing it and whether it is happening. If he is putting a pot of money in, how does he know that it has been delivered at a local level? I would welcome it if the progress report promised in paragraph 17 of the Government response considered those points.

Finally, I would welcome some information from the Minister on what progress has been made on the victims' law. As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst mentioned, it was promised in the Conservative manifesto and there was promise of a Green Paper and of legislation. However, we will have a Gracious Speech in May and there is still no Green Paper on a victims' law. There may be reasons for that. I understand that this is a five-year Parliament—I believe it is—and if that is the case, it might be helpful to people who are interested in this topic for the Minister to say, without breaching any confidentiality, at what stage in this five-year Parliament he expects to bring forward the Green Paper and at what stage he expects the legislation to be in place, to give some support to the principle of the victims' law, on which, again, I would expect general cross-party co-operation.

With those comments, I hope I can encourage the Minister to respond in a positive way to what is a positive report.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. Just for hon. Members' guidance, I shall be calling the wind-ups at 2.27 pm, which will allow 10 minutes each for the Minister and the Front-Bench spokespeople, and then three minutes for Mr Neill to speak at the end. I am sure that hon. Members can divvy up the remaining time among themselves.

2 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans.

The difficulty of coming after the previous two speakers is that they have said everything about the report, and I am scrabbling around to find things to say. However, I will concentrate on two issues. The first is domestic

abuse and the second is the youth area. On the one hand, domestic abuse is an area where restorative justice perhaps needs to be restricted—or done very well—as opposed to the youth area, where we should use it more and where it should be firmly embedded in the system.

I turn first to the domestic abuse situation. I fully accept the conclusion that we reached as a Committee: that restorative justice should not be excluded from particular types of offence. I do not think that domestic abuse should be outside of the restorative justice area. As my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) will say, in the Thames valley, for example, restorative justice is done very, very well, which is a good example of how things can be brought together. Although some police and crime commissioners do not seem to offer restorative justice in domestic abuse cases, I do not see that as justified, for the reasons I have given.

During the Committee's inquiry, we heard evidence on this point from both sides. We were told about one victim of abuse who talked about how they were "empowered" by restorative justice in a domestic abuse situation. They said:

"When I walked out of that meeting, I felt as if I could knock out Mike Tyson. I could have taken on anything or anyone."

That is a very powerful statement about the liberating effects that restorative justice has for some people.

On the other hand, we heard from organisations such as Refuge, which argued that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) has said, restorative justice simply provided offenders with a means of exerting more control over their victims. That point needs to be taken into consideration and examined very carefully; I will say something about it later, when I consider the context of how the police operate in this area.

It was interesting to hear from the then Justice Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning), who said that

"it is absolutely wrong for anybody, whether it be the police or any other part of the criminal justice system, to push and cajole someone into restorative justice."

I completely agree with that sentiment. It is fine to have restorative justice as part of the domestic abuse landscape, but it is wrong to force people to use it.

However, whichever side one comes down on regarding restorative justice, what we cannot have is restorative justice being applied differently in different areas across the country. That goes back to what the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) said about the postcode lottery, or, as I have said, the possibility of people being pressurised to take part. Again, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst has already mentioned, this comes down to how restorative justice is applied in domestic abuse cases and whether it occurs at the street level—the so-called level 1 area. Whatever the Ministry may think about how things are operating, the evidence we heard was that level 1 was still being used by the police. That is something we completely disagree with. I accept that the Government are going to talk to the police about this, but the Government need to emphasise that that should not take place. Street level is the wrong location for restorative justice and using it there takes away all the subtlety and all the benefits that can come out of it.

A tremendous amount of guidance can be provided by the Ministry of Justice for the police. Also, a greater degree of training on restorative justice can be provided by the Ministry right across the board, but particularly in the domestic abuse area, to take this issue forward. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed exactly what the Ministry is doing to achieve that.

The second area I want to touch on is the youth system, where I think restorative justice could be used more. We were heartened by how extensively it seems to be used in the youth justice system. I think it is already embedded, but more can be done to ensure that it is firmly part of the youth justice system. Restorative justice helps both victims and offenders to understand what has occurred, what the implications are and why the offence should not be committed again.

As we pointed out in our report, Northern Ireland has youth conferences, which can occur both before and after conviction. However, I understand from the ministerial response to our report that the Ministry is not looking at restoring those for the rest of the country outside of Northern Ireland. I would ask the Minister to have another look at that and see whether there was not something in Northern Ireland that we could apply elsewhere in the UK.

2.7 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I am not a member of the Justice Committee, but I thank its members for raising the issue of restorative justice and for calling for more support for it.

I am a long-standing prison volunteer, although in a very modest way, so I know about the benefits of restorative justice programmes from offenders and former offenders I have talked to. Consequently, I endorse the calls that we have heard today for greater support to be given to RJ programmes.

If Members will allow me, I will add to the debate the words of an offender who is still serving a sentence. I talked to him on Christmas day and he has given me permission to tell colleagues about his experience of the RJ course. He said to me on Christmas day, "People here think they're here just out of bad luck, but considering the consequences of your action can make you think." He went on to say, "I was really angry, but the RJ course gave me an opportunity to take responsibility for my actions".

I asked this offender to write to me and he wrote a very long and thoughtful letter; he must have spent a lot of Christmas day writing it, and I thank him for it. He wrote that the RJ course he completed, which was the Sycamore Tree course, was a six-week course for 20 offenders that is staffed by volunteers who give up one afternoon weekly over that six-week period to come into the prison. The ratio of volunteers to offenders is 1:1.

I have attended part of that course myself, particularly the sixth week, when offenders summarise what they have learned and speak about the changes within themselves that have occurred, and it is very moving and quite profound. The young man wrote about

"the stand-out watershed moment when a victim of crime comes in to discuss her/his situation. The power of this...conversation cannot be over-emphasised. Our case dealt with 'Lyn'"—

I do not think that is her real name, because he puts it in inverted commas—

[Fiona Bruce]

“who recounted the tale of how her son was murdered in Liverpool. This tale struck a chord with all in the room. The first-hand experience and a media presentation of holiday photos and photos from this young man’s life rammed home the message of the consequences of crime. The subsequent letters to Lyn from prisoners is a testament to the lasting power of her presentation. All prisoners should be exposed to such raw emotion.”

The young man said that it was such a positive tool for him and others.

The young man’s perspective on restorative justice was that

“it is the mind of the offender we are seeking to change...Many prisoners believe they are only in prison due to bad luck.”

In other words, “I got caught and many others do not.” He said that he was really angry before he did the course, but that it was a way for him to take responsibility for his actions. Early in his letter he says that prisoners “must accept their own culpability. This is the first step in an RJ approach.”

I remember one former offender who was a burglar. He used to burgle houses regularly in the middle of the night. He would go home and by 5 am he was fast asleep, never having a thought about the householder he had burgled. He never once thought about them as a victim.

The young man who wrote to me said that he had been “cynical” about the approach taken in the RJ course, particularly because it was somewhat repetitive and a little childish at times. He said there were

“sketches of a burglar saying, ‘She deserved to be burgled as she left the window open’”,

but, as he said,

“chaps really do think like that.”

By exposing them to their faulty thinking, they see that their actions are wrong. Powerfully, he said:

“The scales falling from my eyes with this method allowed me to release the anger that was dwelling in me.”

In another perceptive comment, the young man said, “RJ allows the offender to recognise their culpability, accept their actions are directly responsible for their circumstances and realise their family are victims of their incarceration...individuals, especially young men, need to be supported...to stop the cycle of shame and rejection”.

He said that through an RJ discussion, the cycle and sense of hostility can be stopped and

“remorse and forgiveness comes into play.”

Profoundly, he said:

“The past cannot be changed, but correct actions in the future can atone for incorrect actions of the past.”

In the letter, he gave a quote—I think it is someone else’s words, but clearly they made great sense to him—which was that the RJ process could

“lift the fog of misunderstanding, intolerance and recrimination that can entirely obscure the offender and victim, but with an RJ meeting a richer perspective may be seen and in time, may even draw them closer.”

In other words, he said that such meetings can change both sides, as the one with “Lyn” obviously did for him.

The young man said that the RJ approach clearly helps to stop reoffending, but that to be as effective as possible, it needs to be linked with other forms of support, whether that is education, drug rehabilitation, employment, training, family contact and what he calls

“engaging in the community”. He described the example of members of the Hallé orchestra, who come into the prison I volunteer in and help young people learn instruments. Indeed, on that Christmas day morning, one of the young men gave us a remarkable performance of six different tunes, including Christmas carols, on a brass instrument that he had been learning with the Hallé for only 20 weeks. The young man who wrote to me said that contact like that can

“act as a lifeline to save them from being drowned by reoffending.”

He very much sees RJ as effective, but said that it must sit with other forms of constructive activity. Finally, he said:

“The first step in getting society to change its opinion of prisoners is in getting prisoners to change their opinion of themselves.”

2.14 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I am in an even worse position than my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) in following superb speeches from all those who have spoken in the debate. They leave me with very little to say, but it is worth summing up by saying that we all know that restorative justice saves money by breaking the cycle of reoffending, and we all know that it plays an important part in victim recovery. What we have to do now is ensure that all those who need to benefit from it can benefit from it. I will try to find a few crumbs that have not yet been touched on.

It is always a great pleasure to speak in Justice Committee debates and to take part in the Justice Committee. Our report was particularly positive, as was the Government’s response, and that has not always been the case with our reports. We welcome that as a Committee, particularly given the importance of the issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke about the prisoner perspective, and I would like to touch on the issue of victims. I draw the attention of those present to an excellent website organised by Why me?, representatives of which are present here today. It is a fantastic website. If people have 10 minutes later today or in the near future, it is worth a look. I will not read out any of the case studies, because Why me? specifically asks that that is not done, but it has excellent studies from victims’ ambassadors on the website. I encourage anyone who is not yet convinced or knowledgeable about restorative justice to look them up. The case studies make it clear that restorative justice helps a wide range of people, all of whom have had their own very different experiences of the criminal justice system. Some lost loved ones, but found that meeting the perpetrator helped them to come to terms with that loss. Other victims have seen their confidence restored from an open dialogue with the offender. That is a plug that I would make again and again; the website is worth while.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) said, the Victims’ Commissioner is with us today. She is a brave lady and an example of the many people in this field who have made something really positive out of their own tragedy. She brought out a report on victims’ perspectives in November. One statistic that I highlight—I do not think it has been mentioned—is that only 4.2% of all victims of crime are

offered restorative justice. That is a very small percentage, and I know that everyone in this room is working hard to increase it. It is clear that much more needs to be done to raise awareness of the benefits of restorative justice. Only with raised awareness will the uptake increase.

Another concern expressed by the Victims' Commissioner that I do not think has been touched on is that restorative justice is often offered far too late. Nearly half of the victims in her review said that they were informed about restorative justice only after the offender had been sentenced, and that brings me to one of the major barriers to the provision of restorative justice, which sadly is the considerable pressures facing our prison service at this time. It is clear that used properly, early and often, restorative justice can help us to reduce the prison population by helping to reduce reoffending. At the moment, with the considerable difficulties experienced with prisons, prison officers have limited time for supervision and building up the relationships that we know aid rehabilitation.

It is even difficult at the moment to find sufficient staff to move prisoners to the rooms they need to go to for restorative justice sessions. The NOMS capacity-building programme that was launched in January 2012 included training delivered by Restorative Solutions. It had limited success because of the organisational changes and difficulties in the Prison Service. It may be unrealistic to expect major advances in restorative justice in prisons until the bigger issues of staff shortages and safety are tackled. Nevertheless, governors should be instructed to facilitate meetings wherever possible and to view that as part of the wider picture in reducing reoffending and the number of people in our prisons.

We are currently half way through the pilot on restorative approaches to conflict resolution in prisons. Would today be a good moment for the Minister to comment on the data that have come in to date? Otherwise, we will not hear for probably another year; I believe that the pilot is ending in the autumn and then responses will have to be collated. If possible, it would be helpful if he could comment on the material that has come in and the response of the Ministry of Justice to it.

There is a widespread lack of understanding of the benefits of restorative justice. We need to ensure that other parts of the criminal justice system, including the police, the probation service and other charitable organisations, play an increasing role in delivering restorative justice. We need to provide consistent solutions across the country, as the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) said.

At the moment, we find pockets of real success. I am glad to say that in my own area, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley mentioned, the Thames Valley restorative justice service has been a leading light in the field. It recently celebrated its 15th anniversary and has worked closely with the Ministry of Justice throughout that time. It was one of the first organisations in the UK to be awarded the Restorative Justice Council's restorative service quality mark and has, at its centre, a belief in a sense of fairness and inclusion. In its written evidence to our inquiry, which I found particularly helpful, it made it clear that a proportion of the service's time is now rightly spent assisting other areas with restorative justice programmes, pointing out that,

"provision of RJ services is patchy and inconsistent across the country and different areas may be resourced to deal with different types and seriousness of crime. For example, some areas will

work with sexual offences and some won't, some prisons will support facilitation in such cases and some will not. Some areas appear not to be resourced to provide any RJ service provision whatsoever."

Sharing best practice is essential. I welcome the Government's commitment to work with police and crime commissioners, who will undoubtedly play a part in that, but I am not sure they can or should remedy the inequalities of provision all on their own. It has been helpful to have information on the spend of individual PCCs for the preparation of the report. I am glad that the Government are considering publishing those figures as we go forward, as well as, more generally, a progress report on the nationwide state of restorative justice. I would be grateful for anything the Minister can tell us about the frequency and detail of such publications.

Data sharing is a persistent problem, and I draw attention to the sections of the report that deal with that in some detail. We welcome the Government's work in preparing a national data-sharing toolkit. That work cannot be done soon enough.

This is a positive report, with a positive response from the Government, but these are still very early days for restorative justice. I look forward to it becoming a fully integrated and properly used part of the criminal justice system.

2.23 pm

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): I see that I am starting four minutes late; with the snow gathering over the Ribble Valley and the west coast main line heading towards Dumfries and Galloway, you will no doubt be pleased, Mr Evans, that I will not be taking my allocated 10 minutes. There is no need for me to reiterate the comments that have been made, the extensive conclusions of the report or the positive response from the Government, but I will sum up, make some comments on the points that have been raised today and add a few brief points of my own.

I add my support to the praise from the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) for the Chair of the Justice Committee and my good friend, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). He steers the Committee very ably and I have been impressed with his work during my time in this place. He started the debate succinctly, describing this as an important issue, and he was right to say that this should always be victim-based, but that victims should never be forced to go through the process. He was also right to say—this was corroborated by other hon. Members—that awareness is absolutely crucial. I would add to his call for the Minister to explain how we can better improve the measure of the effectiveness of restorative justice.

The right hon. Member for Delyn, who brings a wealth of experience, made the point clearly that there is common ground and consensus. It is not often that the Justice Committee produces a report that has that consensus, and I think that the Government's response corroborates that position. He also made the crucial point about awareness. He gave a very vivid description of somebody going about their life, having never been involved in the criminal justice system, who becomes a victim of crime. The prospect of that person being asked to meet the offender of the crime, without knowing anything about restorative justice or understanding what it is that they are going to be doing, could be

[Richard Arkless]

counterproductive and might set things back rather than moving them forward—moving forward is the principle we are all striving towards.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) talked vividly about the effects and reiterated some of the vivid evidence that we heard in Committee, particularly the phrase used by one victim that they felt they could go and “knock out Mike Tyson.” Although that was clearly a liberating experience for the victim and had a tangible confidence-building effect, perhaps that course of action might be counterproductive to what we are trying to achieve, although I think we all understood what she was trying to say. The hon. Gentleman made a point about consistency of approach and the fact that it is more widely used in the youth justice system, which I suppose is for obvious and good reasons.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is not a member of the Justice Committee, put us all to shame by explaining extensively all the constituency work she was doing on Christmas day. I did send a couple of messages but clearly did not work as hard as she did. I was very taken by the letter she received from her constituent who had been incarcerated, and I was struck by her point that the first step to rehabilitation is when an offender starts to understand the consequences of their crime, departs from the position of, “Well, they left their window open so they deserved it” and starts to understand how the victims feel. That is the first step in rehabilitation. It was a powerful point well made—but I urge the hon. Member to take some time off over the next festive season.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) said that, rather peculiarly, she was stuck for words, but clearly she never is. She was right to point out that the Government response was positive, and to criticise the fact that only 14% of victims are offered restorative justice.

Victoria Prentis: It is 4.2%.

Richard Arkless: Only 4.2%, which is a rather shocking figure, when Opposition parties, Government parties, Ministers, stakeholders and interested parties all agree that restorative justice has a crucial role to play. If we do not strive to increase that figure, we surely ought to feel a wee bit ashamed.

I am a progressive social democrat; I believe in rehabilitation and community justice, and I do not believe in short prison sentences. I believe that victims, wherever possible, should have the option of restorative justice across the criminal justice system, although it should never be compulsory. It can provide closure and can be the first step in the rehabilitation of offenders.

In Scotland, we use restorative justice across the criminal justice system. The procurator fiscal can even use it as an alternative to prosecution. It can be used from the point of arrest to the point of release from incarceration. Of course, it is not perfect and we still have much more to do, particularly on the point of raising awareness, and I think that point is the most powerful one to come out of today's debate. It is all very well having a system of restorative justice, but if victims and offenders do not understand the principles and the process and embrace them with open arms and an

open mind, it will fail to work. We have to increase the numbers, but we also have to dramatically increase awareness.

2.28 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), for his customary eloquent delivery. I commend the work of his Committee, of which I used to be a member, and thank all the hon. Members who have given some tremendous contributions today. I will do my very best not to repeat anything that has been said. Overall, I strongly agree with the key issues highlighted in the report as being the most salient to progress restorative justice. It clearly identified the key blockers to restorative justice in England and Wales.

It is excellent that all offences and all points of the criminal justice system are to be treated the same, in terms of victims' access to good-quality services, in line with many countries in mainland Europe and elsewhere, such as New Zealand, Canada and Australia. I am glad that there is the caveat that there needs to be scrutiny of properly trained staff, especially for specialised areas such as domestic abuse and sexual offences. We know that victims can and do benefit when restorative justice is offered and facilitated with supportive systems wide of restorative justice, but there is a danger that it can become a profit-making industry unless quality assurance is built in. I am concerned that, unless a clear timeline is set out soon for progressing local and national developments, with a clear cross-party, long-term action plan, tighter legislation, mandated resourcing and, ideally, milestones in place, there will be a major time gap between the initial pump-priming and the ring-fenced funding, which was introduced three years ago.

Current and emerging projects need to be sustained and grow; they cannot wait for more short-term planning or occasional one-off funds. New systems need three to five-year core budgets to flourish. Many new local services, initially resourced when police and crime commissioner funding began, were not sustained as funds were subsequently diverted when the ring-fencing of funding for restorative justice within the victims service funding was removed.

Restorative justice provision is not joined up, except in a few best-practice areas in England where provision was strong already and where there were restorative justice advocates in police and crime commissioner offices, and in service areas that persevered, so this has been personality-driven. A solution that would lead to more regional best practice would be to mandate the establishment of police and crime commissioner area restorative justice steering groups across sectors, which should definitely include the third sector, to join up knowledge and share and co-fund delivery capacity. That is evidenced in best-practice models such as Cambridgeshire, Avon and Somerset, and the already-mentioned Thames Valley. There needs to be a clear pathway from early intervention restorative approaches and diversionary activities to high-end restorative provision for victims, offenders and communities, with a well advertised and clearly signposted single point of contact for anyone to access on a local and regional basis.

Although the police have an important role to play in engaging with and advocating restorative justice, their core job does not give them the time or the expertise to deliver much more than level 1 or 2 restorative justice, except in specialised roles, so training everyone beyond that level is sometimes a false investment. The focus only on restorative justice conferences is limited for victims, offenders and families, as not everyone can safely meet their offender and many do not want to, although they may want to understand the other side's perspective better to move forward.

We also need to teach restorative skills at an early stage in schools to all pupils and staff working with children, young people and families so that society can benefit from those principles and skills over time. That would empower individuals and communities to act restoratively themselves without depending on agencies, and it would prevent the escalation of problems and allow them to be resolved quickly.

In Wales, the Welsh Government recognise that, for their education reform, a restorative justice approach is best practice for preventing harm and responding in schools. Involving Families First and recognising the whole restorative team around the family and in social services is best practice. Often the same families are known to all agencies and have the greatest needs. They frequently cause the greatest harm to each other and others and are a drain on resources, so targeted and joined-up work is essential.

The Crime and Courts Act 2013, which was welcome, the antisocial behaviour powers, the Ministry of Justice restorative justice capacity building and the victims' code all promised great things and were long-awaited, but they were introduced alongside an unprecedented rapid upheaval and huge cuts across the criminal justice system, so no wonder the situation today is patchy. Access to restorative justice is an inconsistent postcode lottery for victims and offenders, and there is no guarantee of quality. That meant that it was highly unlikely for the brand-new provision to be sustained beyond the initial flurry of political statements and activity. Only pre-existing, long-established restorative services and the larger private or third-sector restorative justice providers have been able to gain or maintain training or delivery contracts.

The report highlights that the third sector might be better placed to increase capacity, so the issue of the growth of local provision is a key point. Restorative justice is suffering in the same way that other innovations have suffered from the concurrent break-up of systems. Probation service and community rehabilitation company delivery of restorative justice is dependent on tendering from private providers. Police and crime commissioners have been introduced, and victims' services have been retendered across several areas with different providers, so the courts and witness services sometimes have different providers from those of the victims' support services.

Cuts to the Ministry of Justice's budget were spread across NOMS and all community and police services, and prison staffing was cut at the same time. Prisons are full beyond capacity, so the capacity of prison offender managers to contribute to restorative justice has been pushed to the limit. Restorative justice is less of a priority when mandatory tasks are hard to complete.

Will the Minister provide details of the Government's timelines? When will they be ready to introduce a legislative right for victims to access restorative justice services?

Will he consider threading restorative justice through any new legislation and victims services across the criminal justice system, so that it is an embedded principle as systems change, rather than a separate, optional add-on, which it risks becoming? Does he agree that there needs to be a more radical rehabilitative and restorative justice mindset? The risk is that the UK will have the highest rate of imprisonment, cycles of family breakdown and inter-generational offending.

Restorative justice is about rehabilitation and relationship building, as well as repairing the harm for all. It is about social justice as well as criminal and community justice.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): You have all been incredibly disciplined on time, so the Minister has plenty of time to respond.

2.37 pm

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): As usual, it is a great pleasure to be in your charge, Mr Evans.

I will start by making some general remarks, and then I will come on to some of the points that have been made in the debate. We have had a good debate, opened by the Chair of the Justice Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), in his customary way. He drew on his experience and made a number of very important points, which I will come to as my speech unveils itself.

We were lucky to hear the wisdom of the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson), who has a lot of experience in this area, both as a Minister and as a very constructive member of the Opposition during, for example, the passage of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which makes provision for restorative justice. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) made some excellent points about domestic abuse and the position of young people. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) came up with a very good way of illustrating the advantages of restorative justice by pointing to the experience of particular prisoners. I must say I am rather impressed by the fact that she was so busy on Christmas day, as I know what a special day of the year it is for her. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) mentioned the charity Why me?, which I intend to mention in a moment. The Front-Bench Members also made some very constructive comments.

It is critically important that victims get the support they need to help them cope with the trauma that crime can cause, and whenever possible to recover from it. I believe that restorative justice can be part of that. I pay tribute to all those involved in providing restorative justice and enabling it to happen, including the Restorative Justice Council. We need the council, which brings together the various bodies that provide such services and which has innovated to tremendous effect in the area, exactly because in restorative justice we have seen a lot of innovation by particular individuals, groups and bodies. In a way, we are on a journey, from the early days when restorative justice tended to be seen as a way of helping young offenders to realise the nature of their actions through to the existing position in which we see it as valuable for victims, so giving it a wider remit than previously. In the code of practice for victims of crime, for example, there is now a substantial section dealing with restorative justice, from page 34 of the document.

[*Sir Oliver Heald*]

In 2013, as I mentioned, the right hon. Member for Delyn and I served on the Public Bill Committee considering what is now the Crime and Courts Act, which I was taking through as a Minister. With all-party support, we introduced the restorative justice condition in the context of deferred sentences. Restorative justice is the process that brings those harmed by crime into communication with those responsible for it. It allows everyone affected by a particular incident to play a part in finding a more positive way forward. A fundamental element is dialogue between offender and victim, although that does not need to be face to face.

Where a person has committed a criminal offence and a criminal justice response is appropriate, it is not right that restorative justice activity should take place on its own; it should be alongside, not instead of a criminal justice response. We know from research in this country and abroad that restorative justice can be a positive experience and empowering for victims, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley—I would not necessarily suggest that they go in for a fight with Mike Tyson. The point that my hon. Friend made was quite right, however, that restorative justice can change the way in which individuals feel about what was a dreadful experience for them.

Restorative justice can also help offenders to reduce their reoffending. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, with his 30 years of experience at the bar—I can probably admit a fair amount myself—my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless), all made it clear that many people simply do not consider their actions—they have no insight into them. Restorative justice can do something about that, so it is important in that way.

As far as victims are concerned, some present may remember reading about Paul Kohler, the well-known law professor who suffered a most brutal attack during a burglary. Photographs published in the media showed the terrible injuries he sustained, in particular to his face. Paul has spoken powerfully about how he and his family accessed the restorative justice process and how it had been important for them. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), who is the victims Minister, recently met Paul through the restorative justice organisation Why me? to learn how his first-hand experience of restorative justice had helped him.

There are therefore reasons to be supportive of restorative justice. As the Justice Committee report makes clear, however, it is important that we develop our understanding of the area and what it can deliver, in particular with its effects on victims. We need to do that through proper research and effort. Our vision is for good-quality, victim-focused restorative justice to be available at all stages of the criminal justice system, which was a point made earlier. It is essential that victims who want restorative justice can access it at the stage that is right for them. Every victim participating should feel safe and in control. I know not every victim will want to participate. Restorative justice should remain voluntary. With domestic violence in particular, which was mentioned by a number of colleagues including my hon. Friend the Member for Henley, we must continue to ensure that no victim feels pressured into taking part. That is key to our approach.

As we highlighted in our response to the Justice Committee report, in recent years a lot of work has been done to make that vision a reality. Police and crime commissioners now receive funding to provide or commission restorative justice services for victims as part of a range of services to support victims of crime. The figure is about £23 million over three years, but it is of concern that the budget has not been spent in full—the money has been spent on victim services, but not all of it on restorative justice services. We need to look into why and at the effectiveness of the spending.

Measures such as the restorative service quality mark and the training provider quality mark, which were developed by the Restorative Justice Council with Government funding, offer assurance to those commissioning services and to victims that services are of a high standard. As is known, the national probation service is working closely with the council to produce guidance on that. We also funded the council to work with a range of criminal justice organisations to develop targeted information packs aimed at helping criminal justice practitioners better understand restorative justice and its benefits.

Robert Neill: The Minister is giving a comprehensive response, for which I am grateful. Does he accept that the need to ensure that the money is properly spent and well spent, as he referred to, is precisely the reason why it is important to press ahead firmly with the annual collation and publication of the spend by PCCs, so that we have genuine transparency and build the evidence base that he is seeking to achieve to make progress?

Sir Oliver Heald: My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell is looking at that at the moment. The other concern, however, is that although much is about gathering information—I fully accept that—this is an area with an absence of objective research. We need to grab the information about what is effective, why the spending is what it is, and the national picture showing the differences between areas.

Mr Hanson: Does the Minister know what the allocated £29 million was spent on?

Sir Oliver Heald: Twenty-three million pounds was allocated, and £11 million was spent on restorative justice, so the concern is the gap, which is where we need to gather and work through the information.

Mr Hanson: The point I made in my contribution was that if the Minister allocated £23 million, he needs to know what it was spent on and what he allocated it for.

Sir Oliver Heald: Of course the money is not ring-fenced, so police and crime commissioners who receive it are able to spend it on other victim services. However, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the amount for restorative justice was £23 million, so questions need to be answered. He asked us to say something in our update report on the action plan, which I will mention in a moment, and I will certainly bring that point to the attention of those who are preparing the response.

As we build on those foundations, we will take account of the Justice Committee's work and the recent review of the Victims' Commissioner, as well as working closely

with police and crime commissioners and their association. It is excellent that the Victims' Commissioner has been able to be in the Public Gallery for our debate. On a personal note, having attended a Crown Prosecution Service conference at which she spoke a couple of years ago, I was very impressed with the personal commitment she made to this area after experiences in her own life. Her role is very important and the way in which she performs it is admirable.

The priority now is to be satisfied by the evidence that the restorative justice services being funded or delivered meet the needs of victims of crime throughout England and Wales. Victims' needs must be met. There is good practice in delivery, which it is important to share. My Department will work with a number of police and crime commissioners and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners to identify and share good practice and to obtain the data I mentioned that will not only help us but help areas to assess how well they are doing compared with other areas. In the long term, we want to introduce consistent outcome measures across all victim services, including restorative justice, which will allow us to take a more detailed and systematic approach to identifying and sharing good practice and driving up performance. It will also provide a firm evidence base on which we can make decisions about the future landscape of victim services. I should have said that we are also looking carefully at the range of proposals made by the Victims' Commissioner and others.

I should perhaps say that if I do not finish dealing with all the points that have been made, we will go through them and write to the Committee.

I was asked about the action plan. The original plan for the period until March 2018 was published in November 2014. Ministers decided to publish a progress report covering that period. However, written evidence to the Committee highlighted the progress so far. We explained, for example, that we had the national conference in 2015, regional workshops to share best practice, and successful awareness-raising campaigns in both years during International Restorative Justice Week. Ministers have decided to continue with the action plan and refresh it. The victims Minister has been engaged in that detailed work since November, and we are not far away from publishing it.

Robert Neill: I am grateful to the Minister for that information. Can we therefore take it that, precisely as he says, the plan will be refreshed but there will not be a fresh plan, as has been suggested at some points?

Sir Oliver Heald: Yes, we aim to publish the update—if I can call it that—or refreshment of the plan as soon as possible. As I say, the victims Minister is working hard on that at the moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury mentioned the national protocol for information sharing. The significant changes in the criminal justice landscape in the last few years—the introduction of community rehabilitation companies, the greater involvement of the private and voluntary sectors, and so on—have changed the information-sharing equation, so we have had to do further work on that. A national protocol may not necessarily be the final outcome from that, but it is certainly an important issue to address.

I have mentioned the position on victims' participation in restorative justice and the need for undue influence not to be imposed. Someone asked about the paper on the use of restorative justice in domestic abuse cases that is mentioned in the ending violence against women and girls strategy for 2016 to 2020. We are working on that with stakeholders, and we certainly intend that paper to go ahead as previously announced.

I was asked about the police's use of what is often described as first-tier restorative justice, among other such names. It is made clear in the victims code, which I referred to, that community resolutions by the police are not restorative justice, but it is clearly wrong that that sort of approach—saying, "There has been a discussion between the parties and therefore nothing else should happen"—should not be taken, particularly in domestic violence cases. It is contrary to guidance, it is not in the victims code, and we continue to press to ensure that that is not the way things happen on the ground. We are certainly not keen to encourage that street-level or level 1 RJ, and it should not really happen.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury asked about pre-sentence restorative justice. Police and crime commissioners are best placed to determine how to meet the needs of victims in their areas. Given that there are innovative bodies in this area that are prepared to try particular approaches to restorative justice, there are advantages in allowing several approaches to be tried, and it is important that we do not make things so restrictive that we lose those advantages. However, we moved to put restorative justice in a legislative context through the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which I have dealt with, and the national probation service is working with the Restorative Justice Council. Those measures, which are designed to ensure that there is a standard approach, but not so standard that there is no innovation, are all moves in the right direction. There is of course a lot of detail about exactly what is going on.

I was asked about the role of probation. I have mentioned the guidance that is being prepared. There has also been a big effort to raise awareness in prisons. The national probation service has positioned itself not so much as a direct provider of restorative justice—although the community rehabilitation companies provide a direct service—but as a referral agent that seeks to ensure that knowledge, experience, capacity and value are maximised and best practice is shared.

I was asked about the differences in the victims code in the availability of restorative justice for offenders of different ages. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, that is a historical matter. Because restorative justice was first provided for young people, it is in some ways more advanced for young people than it is for adults. We are certainly looking at the points that have been made about extending availability to victims on the basis of not so much the age of the offender but merit.

How do victims find out about restorative justice? Several things are happening here. The victims code requires victims to be informed about restorative justice, and PCCs have a duty to advertise it on their websites. We are also taking awareness-raising measures in prisons, which I think have been alluded to, and doing work to encourage professionals to understand the importance of restorative justice.

[Sir Oliver Heald]

I probably have time to mention the ring-fencing of funding, which we used to do. Police and crime commissioners feel that flexibility is helpful, so we are keeping that under review, but it is certainly not acceptable that spending on restorative justice should fall too low. I conclude by saying that the Select Committee produced an extremely valuable report about an extremely important area, and I am glad that our response was acceptable.

2.57 pm

Robert Neill: I thank the Minister for the care with which he has responded to this considered and constructive debate, and right hon. and hon. Members from across the House for their input. People have been kind enough to help me during my time as Chairman of the Select Committee. As we know, Select Committees work best when they work as teams. Fortunately, the Justice Committee is a good team.

I am particularly pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is not a member of the Committee, also made a contribution, which I thought was powerful and underlined the significant point about changes in thinking and behaviour. I suppose that Christmas day is not a bad time to think about redemption. The previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), of course was not afraid to refer to redemption as well as rehabilitation in our criminal justice system. Ultimately, part of our work on restorative justice is to try to change mindsets so that there can be redemption and rehabilitation as well as closure and comfort for victims.

As the person in the room whom the snow will probably reach last, I will not delay matters any longer, other than to say that I, too, was delighted to see Baroness Newlove, the Victims' Commissioner, here. Our Committee is always grateful for her co-operation and her remarkable personal efforts, to which we all pay tribute. I am grateful to all those who have contributed to this constructive and positive debate. I believe that there is a cross-party view on this issue. Progress is being made. There is more to do, but I hope that we will be able to work constructively with the Government to take this important agenda forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Justice Committee, Restorative justice, HC 164, and the Government response, Cm 9343.

UK Maritime Industry

[MR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the UK maritime industry.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us the opportunity to debate this most important industry today, and I am grateful to see so many colleagues from across the House present. We have probably gone beyond the point in the year where we should be wishing each other a happy new year, but given that today we are on the old new year, I can wish you, Mr Walker, and indeed those residents in parts of my constituency such as Foula, where they still keep the old new year, a happy old new year. I say that because the people of Foula—like, indeed, people in island communities throughout the country—can maintain their lifestyle because of the dedication, commitment and professionalism of seafarers. Without seafarers, we who live in island communities simply could not exist in the way we do. Of course, that is true of the nation as a whole because the United Kingdom is an island nation.

The UK maritime industry faces a number of fairly significant challenges. Those are not new. We have been on a track that has taken us mostly down—occasionally up—for some decades. I will start, however, with a rare piece of good news. Hon. Members will have heard me speak before about the situation pertaining to the arrangements involving Seatruck, which provides the freight ferry to the Northern Isles that serves Orkney and Shetland. It was announced yesterday that Serco, which holds the franchise for the service, and Seatruck, which provides the ferries, have been able to do a deal that guarantees that the ratings on the ferries will be paid the minimum wage at the very least. It remains to be seen whether the collective bargaining agreement between the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and NorthLink for the remainder of that franchised public service will be extended to those ferry services, but the guarantee is at least something to welcome.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Does he agree that it would be helpful if the shipping Minister were to announce today that the national minimum wage would be paid to all seafarers across the United Kingdom?

Mr Carmichael: It will not surprise the hon. Gentleman to hear that I will have a fair bit to say about national minimum wage and national living wage enforcement, because that is something that has come very much to the fore this year. It came to my attention in particular through the detention of the *Malaviya Seven* in Aberdeen and its sister ship, the *Malaviya Twenty*, in Great Yarmouth. Those ships have been detained by the International Transport Workers Federation as a result of non-payment of the crew's wages. The ownership of the ships is being contested—the case is winding its way through the courts. I am afraid I have to say that the willingness of

the shipowners in those cases to leave the seafarers they employ effectively destitute does them no credit. Sadly, it does not reflect particularly well on the wider industry, either.

Where we have seen some progress—the Seatruck case—is however perhaps the low-hanging fruit. As I see it, that is just the tip of the iceberg. As we speak here in London, there are non-domiciled seafarers, principally Filipinos, working out of Scottish ports, being paid significantly less than the national minimum wage but still having retained by their employment agents—also domiciled outside the EU and also principally Filipinos, I am told—some 32% of their wages in respect of UK tax and national insurance. In some ways, that illustrates the absurdity and inadequacy of the current enforcement arrangements. If these men are not here working as part of the UK, why are they paying UK taxes? If they are here working as part of the UK, why are they not given the protection offered to other UK employees and workers?

The more I find out, the more it seems that the situation facing many seafarers working on ships that in some cases have not left UK waters effectively for decades is just as bad as the situation that led the previous Labour Government to set up the gangmasters licensing system. It may be that at some point we will have to take a similar approach on the position of seafarers.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): I intervene because it is so often the case that there is not sufficient time at the end to answer all the points made in the debate. The right hon. Gentleman is striking a chord with me, with which I have considerable sympathy, as he will know from our work together in the past. We will do more on this—he can be assured of that—and I hope to say a little more about that at the end.

Mr Carmichael: I am immensely grateful to the Minister for that intervention. I know he has a personal and political commitment in this regard and I am delighted that he was able to offer us that assurance again.

This is not just about the treatment of Filipino seafarers; there is also an effect on UK seafarers. First, because of such employment practices, UK seafarers are excluded from employment opportunities that would otherwise be available to them. That also drives down wages for those who are employed. I am told that Stena Line, the largest UK employer of seafarers, cut the hourly rate of pay for ratings employed seasonally—from June to September—from £8.31 to £7.20, which is the minimum wage rate. That is a graphic illustration of the direct impact on UK seafarers.

The situation has a context. For the Government's purposes, that context is the maritime growth strategy that they commissioned in 2014. That was a good, comprehensive piece of work, and it was welcomed. If anything, it was somewhat overdue, coming the best part of two decades after the previous piece of work had been done. It made a number of recommendations. The most important was that leadership was required from both Government and the industry, including though a more commercial and responsive UK maritime administration within Government and an industry-led promotional body, with more proactive action to replenish

and develop the skills needed to maintain our position as a world-leading maritime sector and effective marketing by the industry and Government of what the UK maritime sector has to offer both domestically and internationally to be strengthened.

I could probably do 90 minutes on the maritime growth strategy alone, but in view of the number of others who wish to take part in the debate, I will concentrate on the one aspect that, to my mind, is probably the most significant: training of seafarers. The Minister will know that since the turn of the century, we have had the SMarT—support for maritime training—scheme, which currently holds something in the region of £15 million. The British Chamber of Shipping tells me that it is looking for a doubling of that. I hope the Minister will look at that, because in terms of Government expenditure that is of course a significant ask, but it could bring significant rewards. I hope, though, that when the Minister engages with the industry in respect of that ask, he will not be shy about attaching some strings to any increase in funding.

I am told that a year's guaranteed employment is on offer for those who are trained as officers under the scheme. That of course would tackle one of the major difficulties that I hear about consistently from constituents who work in the industry: that officers in particular are trained under SMarT scheme funding, but there is no employment for them once they qualify. There has to be a little more detail. We have to do more than simply extend the cliff edge out by one year, so that a situation in which we currently have training followed by no employment does not then become training followed by one year's employment followed by no employment.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I think the right hon. Gentleman is right about the officers being trained under the scheme—15, I think—but only one rating is required to be trained under the deal, and that does not happen either.

Mr Carmichael: Indeed, and the hon. Gentleman anticipates my next point. Currently within SMarT training, a minuscule proportion of the fund is allocated to the training of ratings, and even that portion is not being taken up by the industry. When the Minister comes to look at the question of SMarT funding and the training scheme that comes under it, it should not be all about officers; it also needs to be about the training of ratings as well, otherwise we are again only seizing the low-hanging fruit.

My constituents have significant concerns not only about the lack of availability of jobs when the training is concluded, but very often about the quality of the training provided for them. I have been told of one constituent who in five months as a cadet officer was able to speak English on his ship only once. Given that we are talking about predominantly young men who are away from home for the first time, the significance of that as a living experience should not be overlooked.

The Minister and the Government really need to look at the roles of the Merchant Navy Training Board and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the lack of joined-up administration between them. We might then see people getting quality training that gets the taxpayer value for the money that they are putting into it. I do not believe there is any shortage of people looking for a

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

career at sea, but there are obvious and significant obstacles being put in their way. The head of UK shipping for Maersk said that it had taken on 34 cadets selected from 936 applications, which illustrates the demand out there for careers in this vital sector.

I want to remind the House what the industry brings to the United Kingdom. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers, the maritime services sector directly contributes £4.4 billion and 10,000 jobs to the UK economy. Shipping in general produces £11 billion and 113,000 jobs. The Baltic and International Maritime Council's latest five-yearly report to the International Maritime Organisation states that the worldwide shortage of officers is 16,500, which could rise to 92,000 by 2020. That is the scale of the opportunity ahead of us, as a highly respected maritime nation, if we take the right decisions now for the future of our industry.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. Since so many colleagues want to speak, I shall impose a limit of five minutes.

3.13 pm

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak, Mr Walker. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this Back-Bench debate. Like the right hon. Gentleman, I represent an island. It is well known that the UK is the world's foremost country for shipping and freight. As some Members might know, the Solent is one of the major gateways for ships coming into the UK. The maritime sector is an issue that lies close to me and my constituents on the Isle of Wight.

Brexit means Brexit. I know that many in the port sector can see direct benefits from leaving the European Union. However, the port services regulation has once again reappeared from the deep, dark corners of the EU institutions. Anyone who has any knowledge about the proposed regulation knows what dangers it poses to our open, competitive and efficient ports sector. I know that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland secured this debate because he believes that the employees in the maritime sector are being exploited, but I think it is important to note the risk to the UK of being tied up in regulations that will substantially damage our thriving maritime industry.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): We dealt with this issue when I was a member of the European Scrutiny Committee, as the hon. Gentleman might know. The regulation has been unanimously opposed by all the port employers and all the port unions. Does he agree?

Mr Andrew Turner: I absolutely agree.

The port services regulation is threatening future investment in the sector as well as jobs. It has been opposed by British port owners, trade unions and Government and Opposition Members. It is unwanted, unworkable and, simply put, unacceptable for the UK. The large dark cloud in the sky relates to whether the UK will be affected by the regulation between now and when we leave the EU.

Today the Minister of State for Transport said at Transport questions:

"we are freed from the clutches of the European Union."

Before Christmas, the European Scrutiny Committee, of which I am a member, held an evidence session with the Minister. It was then unclear whether the regulation would enter into force before the UK had formally left the EU. It was also unclear whether—heaven forbid—a transitional agreement between the UK and EU might mean that the regulation could apply to us, even though we had left. Is the Minister now saying that these uncertainties are settled, because that does not seem to be the view of the European Scrutiny Committee? Is it possible that the new regulations can commit us before we leave the European Union, and we will then have to change things back?

Mr Hayes: Disraeli said:

"Taking a new step, uttering a new word, is what people fear most."

So let me utter a few new words. I have opposed the port services regulation since I first heard of it. We will vote against it. We will record our vote against it. When we do so, we will show why. It will take two years, as the hon. Gentleman knows, to come into effect. It is not for me to anticipate when we will leave the European Union, but I want nothing to do with the port services regulation, and I do not want our ports to have anything to do with it either.

Mr Andrew Turner: I absolutely agree. I am pleased to have that promise. Throughout the referendum I argued that there were many opportunities to be found in the uncertainties that leaving the EU could bring. However, I am not willing to accept the uncertainties that the port services regulation brings. It jeopardises our maritime industry on such a great scale that it must be avoided by all available means. I am fully aware that the Government do not intend to provide a running commentary on ongoing negotiations, but there is one thing we must fight for as we negotiate leaving the EU, which is for the UK to be wholly exempted from the EU's port services regulation.

3.18 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I was expecting to sum up as the Front-Bench spokesman.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): You are allowed to have 10 minutes, Mr Hendry.

Drew Hendry: That is fine. I am happy to speak now, so thank you very much, Mr Walker. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate. I agree with the praise that he has given to seafarers and to the contribution that they make not only to island communities, but to coastal communities in Scotland and around the UK.

The Minister said that the right hon. Gentleman's comments struck a chord. I hope some of mine will strike a chord as well, and I hope my questions will be answered, although I must give warning that I have

many questions, so perhaps saving them might be the best thing to do. This is about the future of the UK maritime industry, and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said it was about leadership. He is right: the future needs a vision and a plan—for employment, fair conditions, business and safety, as well as to attract young people and, especially, correct the lack of young women in the industry.

To begin with employment and fair conditions, I join the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland in being delighted that there is now an agreement in principle to end the long-running issue about the freight vessel serving the Northern Isles. The new charter basis will allow the wage issue to be resolved and crew members will be paid the minimum wage. The new arrangements come into effect next month, which is to be welcomed. I shall not go through the details, which he covered.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the important question of the number of women employed in the industry, because there is a significant shortage. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) raised the matter of vacancies, training and how much more effort could go into bringing more women into the industry. I have seen in the Humber ports a number of women playing an important and valuable role in the portside industry.

Drew Hendry: I welcome that comment, and will talk some more about such opportunities.

The wage deal that has been struck adds to the CalMac public sector contractor deal that runs in Scotland; it was named the Living Wage Foundation's Scottish champion in 2016. Let us be straight about it: fair pay and conditions attract people to the industry and we should support that. All seafarers should have the national minimum wage, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) mentioned. However, while the RMT and Nautilus International have welcomed the actions in Scotland, they have sounded a code blue over the health of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in the UK. They say that it is in crisis over current rates of recruitment and retention:

"In the view of the Maritime unions, it is no exaggeration to say that the MCA is in crisis. At current rates of recruitment and retention it will soon reach the stage where maritime safety is compromised because the regulator simply does not have sufficient number of qualified staff to discharge its core statutory duties, particularly vessel safety surveys and inspections."

They also say that they are

"disappointed that the Government rejected the Transport Select Committee's recommendation for 'an independent review of how the Maritime and Coastguard Agency will successfully take on new responsibilities without a proportionate increase in its resources.'"

I join them in that disappointment over those opportunities.

While I am talking about the MCA, I want to mention that at the moment it has the final say over ship-to-ship transfers in the Moray firth. I hope that the Minister will take on board the strength of feeling of the communities around the coast in my constituency and those of my colleagues about the order for ship-to-ship, and that he will consider that we have many times called—and still do—for power over that to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

The UK Government will need to get their act together on employment opportunities. According to their own transport figures—this relates to recruitment—more than half of UK seafarers are over 41 years old. Only 3% are women. Women make up only 28% to 30% of uncertified officers and ratings, and the bulk of those jobs are in catering. Men take up almost 100% of the engineering jobs. Brexit will no doubt pose challenges, but we should also consider that a high number of EU nationals are employed. For example, Polish people alone make up 16% of non-UK holders of certificates of equivalent competency for the UK shipping industry.

Things will not be helped, either, by the approach that is taken to looking after cadets. I was involved in trying to arrange the rescue of cadets from the Hanjin Louisiana, when the ship was moored offshore because the company had gone into administration. Four young cadets from Scotland were trapped on board for well over a month, with supplies scarce and not knowing what was going to happen. They were stuck there with limited communication, through email only. The UK Government were slow to get into action and attempt to look after them.

To move on to the maritime sector plan for business, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland mentioned, a great deal of the economy is affected by shipping. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) mentioned the complexities that we will face in the future. Peter Karlsen of Norbulk Shipping has said:

"The shipping industry in the UK will view the referendum result negatively, as does most business. It is a potential disruption to trade, movement of goods and labour. We are facing years of complex negotiations to divorce ourselves from the EU."

He continues:

"Whether it remains as attractive to foreign investors or entrepreneurs, especially from the EU, to establish and conduct business here is uncertain."

A lot needs to be done to put confidence into the UK maritime industry.

Of course, there are questions: what is to be done about freedom of movement, migrant workers, a customs union, and rights to operate in domestic trades of EU members who maintain flag-based cabotage restrictions? Will there be slower turnarounds that affect volume? I could go on and talk about employment law and contract. There are many questions but no answers yet and the clock is ticking. Of course in Scotland our preference is to stay in the single market and maintain a customs union. That is what we should do.

I want to conclude with some points about the MCA and safety. There is a long-running issue in the west of Scotland in particular as to emergency towing vessels. Two are required in the north of Scotland. One should be berthed in Stornaway to cover the west coast, the Northern Isles and, in particular, the Minches. We have had near things with the MV Parida, the oil rig the Transocean Winner famously coming to ground off the coast, and even HMS Astute, a nuclear submarine, running aground off Skye. We need to make sure that action will be taken, and there will not be another six years of ignoring communities and their representatives.

I want to finish with some questions. As to the towing vessels, when will the UK Government stop ignoring the needs of the people who work and live in, and know, the west of Scotland, and the many warning incidents that have been racked up, each edging closer to the

[Drew Hendry]

possibility of a disaster? What lessons will they learn from the Hanjin Louisiana incident, and will they ensure cadets' rights under the maritime labour convention the next time such an incident occurs? Would they take action or make representations to shipowners and flag states if there was evidence of seafarers being mistreated, or of the contravention of MLC-ILO measures? What plans do they have to tackle the recruitment and retention problem in the MCA? What initiatives are they taking or have they planned with respect to the incredible age and gender imbalance in UK shipping?

3.27 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am very pleased to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Walker. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing the debate. I am pleased to follow the Scottish National party's Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry).

I have a number of shipping connections, although none are required to be included in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. However, it would probably be worth noting that I am a member of the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights and co-chair with Lord Greenway of the all-party maritime and ports group. I was Shipping Minister from 2007 to 2009 and am a younger brother at Trinity House, whose royal charter dates back 500 years and which has a statutory duty as the UK's general lighthouse authority. It is ably led at present by the excellent Captain Ian McNaught, the deputy master.

I know that the Minister is visiting Harwich in February. Trinity House keenly anticipates his visit. The organisation is undertaking a fleet review process at the moment. The Minister knows how important it is to have proper assets around our shores to carry out not only the statutory work but the emergency work of the lighthouse authority, to mitigate the risk of disaster in our waters. The visit will be most welcome. I hope that it is locked into the Minister's diary and that parliamentary business will not get in its way.

My final shipping connection—apart from having been born in the great shipbuilding city of Glasgow—is that my previous constituency of Poplar and Canning Town, as well as my present one of Poplar and Limehouse, contained the first purpose-built docks in London and were a key part of London's docklands for centuries. Much of it is now occupied by the Canary Wharf estate, which is important to our modern economy as the docks used to be.

Apart from the importance of the role and wellbeing of the general lighthouse authority, I will make two points, neither of which will be of any surprise to the Minister. First, the UK Chamber of Shipping has set out in its "Blueprint for Growth" after Brexit—I am sure the Minister has read it—six key points that it believes are necessary to ensure a bright future for the UK's shipping industry: preserving the existing ease of doing business—Dover is one port that has made representations about the problems and disruption that border controls and customs changes could have—ensuring business has access to the world's brightest talent, as already mentioned by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland; reforming domestic maritime policy to

put the UK on the best possible footing; promoting the red ensign, and hence the UK register; ensuing a visa regime that works; and tonnage tax flexibility.

Part of the blueprint is the Chamber of Shipping's campaign to help create thousands of jobs in shipping through the SMarT Plus scheme that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, which is supported by Nautilus UK, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and others. The Minister knows that the industry trains around 800 cadets every year, although the Chamber estimates that that could be 1,200 if shipowners committed to employing cadets after training. Some, such as Shell and Carnival UK, have already done so.

The Chamber of Shipping's figures make positive arguments. First, in the '90s SMarT money covered around 50% of training costs; it is now a third. Secondly, the economic value of a seafarer to the UK economy is about £58,000, which is up to £17,500 higher than the national average. Thirdly, it concludes that the Government's £15 million investment delivers a £70 million annual yield that could be scaled up significantly; we have the candidates and the industry needs good-quality trainees. Increasing that investment would be a win-win for the UK and for shipping, both internationally and domestically.

Last year the former Lord Mayor of London, Lord Jeffrey Mountevans, championed all matters maritime, ports and shipping, given his personal and professional connection to the industry. I know the Minister attended many events with the Lord Mayor, so I need not remind him of those campaigns, but I would be grateful for his comments on them.

The Minister has a good standing within UK shipping. He was previously the Shipping Minister and knows the industry well—and the industry knows him. I know he is also aware of the various welfare organisations, such as Seafarers UK, the Mission to Seafarers, the Apostleship of the Sea and the International Seafarers Welfare and Assistance Network, among others. I hope that he will commit to continuing to work with and support their efforts in looking after seafarers.

If he is still Shipping Minister in September—I certainly hope he will be—it will be great to welcome the Minister to attend the Merchant Navy Day memorial service on 3 September at Tower Hill; I am not an organiser, but it is taking place in my constituency. The national memorial commemorates the tens of thousands of merchant mariners who died in the first and second world wars and the Falklands war. For their families, there are no graves to visit; that is their loved one's resting place.

In conclusion, shipping moves 95% of the country's international trade and supports 250,000 jobs. It is a vital industry that, because it is now mostly conducted at huge container ports on our coastline, is invisible to the majority of the population. That does not mean it is less important, but the opposite. The lack of public awareness means that Government recognition is absolutely essential. I look forward to the Minister confirming that it will continue to receive that recognition.

3.33 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate on such an important subject. I declare an interest as the honorary vice president of the Society of Maritime Industries.

It is not as widely recognised as it should be that maritime industries are a key sector in the United Kingdom. The maritime sector gets less attention and, arguably, less Government support than aerospace, despite being a bigger contributor to the UK economy and a sector that creates high-skilled jobs and employees. The right hon. Gentleman has already given us all of the figures.

I pay tribute to employers, such as BAE Systems in my constituency, whose trade union I meet regularly, and which is taking on a further 50 apprentices in 2017 in its maritime operations in Portsmouth, after taking on 82 last year. There are others nearby, such as Lockheed Martin, which is active in the naval defence sector and recruits from Portsmouth schools and colleges. A university technical college is opening in the area in September, which is heavily supported by leading local businesses and the Royal Navy, and will focus on maritime engineering. I hope that everyone in Portsmouth will back that great initiative and make it a big success.

I welcome the announcement to draw up the national shipbuilding strategy. I read Sir John Parker's report with great interest and I am pleased with the amount of detail in it. He is right to recommend that we use the Type 31 programme to maintain capability away from the Clydeside, and so avoid putting all of our eggs in one basket. That will mean that the Type 31s can be built while the Type 26 programme is ongoing in Glasgow. I called for that in the House last year, and I hope that the Ministry of Defence will follow up on that suggestion. It is vital that we get this right when the Government respond to Sir John in the coming months.

Given the growing uncertainty in the world, it makes sense to get on now with the commitment in the 2015 strategic defence and security review to expand the basic number of ships available beyond the 19 at frigate and destroyer level, which is already a bare minimum. Of course, I would like some of the Type 31 work to come to Portsmouth, but whatever happens, I pay tribute to the staff in our naval base, who still carry out vital skilled work in ship repair. Minehunter refit work is going on in the ship hall, which HMS Quorn and HMS Atherstone have recently entered. Work is being completed on HMS Brocklesby before it returns to service later in the year. That work is less high profile than that which is being done to bring our new aircraft carriers into service, but it is no less important; every part of the Royal Navy, and the industrial sector that supports it, plays a vital role.

Portsmouth is a vital civilian port, too. We import 70% of the UK's bananas, which is no joking matter as it is a trade worth millions to our port. The long and difficult history of banana tariffs ought to be a warning sign of the complexity of trade deals post-Brexit; it might make life easier, but it might not. As a ferry port, we are the second busiest cross-channel port after Dover. When I hear news about disputes causing delays to people getting into Dover, which seems to be frequently, I often think that Portsmouth is open as a port, and that travellers could avoid a lot of heartache by travelling with us. Anyone who wants an easy, reliable and friendly way to the continent should look no further than Portsmouth.

While I am pleased to see initiatives, such as the national shipbuilding strategy and the maritime growth study, we have to make sure that Government support is

sustained. This vital, strategic industry must be protected in the coming uncertain years. I look forward to the Government's committing to that.

3.37 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I note what you said about my having five minutes to speak; I was rather hoping to have a minute for each year that I served as a merchant seafarer, which was 17—but that would be pushing it.

I do not have as illustrious a list as the former Shipping Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), but I want to declare an interest on the record as a vice president of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. I pay tribute to the lifeboats, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and all of the volunteers who keep our seas and coastlines safe. I am also a former member of the National Union of Seamen. I think I am the only Member here who speaks as a former member of both NUSs; I was a member of the students' union and the seafarers' union, which then became part of the RMT. That was a pleasure.

I will concentrate my remarks on some of the issues raised by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) who initiated the debate, of which I am proud to be a co-sponsor. He is right to talk about the pay discrimination that exists in the United Kingdom's coastal waters. On the route to Ireland from my port community of Holyhead, there are Irish shipping companies—members of the European Union—that pay less than the minimum wage. I have an awful lot of respect for the Minister. I will come on to energy issues in a minute; we work together on a number of issues. He will be as disappointed as I am to know that people are paid below the minimum wage in British coastal waters.

I will move on to the value of port communities to United Kingdom plc and our economy. Some 120 commercial ports in the UK deal with 95% of the exports and imports of our island community of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is difficult to quantify the number of related jobs, but I wanted to talk about some joined-up thinking—and I know that the Minister will concentrate on this. We want a transport system in this country that is fully integrated for road, rail, sea and air. Ports provide a huge catalyst for jobs in their communities. They provide more than 100,000 jobs in the port communities of Britain.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): As a red duster man, my hon. Friend knows what it is to go down to the sea in ships. He has my respect for that. He mentioned Northern Ireland. I am keen to ensure that this debate does not exclude the reality of the situation in Northern Ireland, where in ports such as Kilkeel in South Down and Strangford we have a real recruitment problem. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be appropriate for the Minister to liaise with the Administration—which I hope pertains—in Northern Ireland over non-devolved matters relating to maritime training?

Albert Owen: Absolutely. I am sure that the Minister will pass that on to his colleague in the Northern Ireland Office.

My hon. Friend mentions Northern Ireland. Related to the issues I want to talk about is the potential for energy development in our country. The ports are key

[Albert Owen]

to that. In Belfast, for example, there is DONG Energy, which has a big operation with the offshore wind sector. I was pleased to hear the announcement today from the Government about the Swansea bay tidal project. We need to be training highly skilled seafarers to do the support vessel work that is needed around our country. Our coastal communities also depend on growing leisure and tourism, with millions of pounds of revenue and potential future revenue. We need safe training for people to go out in ships, whether on the coast or in the deep water sector.

I want to link ports with not only wind but the potential for tidal energy. We have an opportunity to be pioneers. As an island community, we have regular tides that come in very predictably, and we need to tap into that. When we talk about these projects, it is about not only the location they will be in but the whole maritime industry of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

This industry creates vital jobs in communities. My own port community of Holyhead is the busiest seafaring port on the western seaboard. I will stray slightly into Brexit. I am concerned, as people who live in the communities on the west coast and the gateways into Wales and the United Kingdom from Ireland are, that this issue has not had sufficient attention. We talk about the important land border, but there are sea borders as well. I do not want to see additional barriers on Welsh ports and British ports if we go for full Brexit.

We need a common travel arrangement. We need arrangements between the communities of Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, so that we have a strong maritime industry and so that businesses that are dependent on our ports know there will be no additional costs. We need to continue to generate that revenue for the future.

I know we are short on time; I would have taken 17 minutes if you had allowed me, Mr Walker. British seafarers are the best seafarers in the world. They should have proper training facilities and proper wages that reflect our proud history and the potential for a proud future.

3.43 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Walker. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this timely debate.

Wales exported £11.8 billion-worth of goods last year—an increase of £31 million from the previous year. As a net exporter, Wales's economic, social and security interests depend on a resilient maritime industry. With 53.7 million tonnes of goods passing through Welsh ports annually, a thriving maritime industry is an essential mechanism for the workings of our economy.

A range of concerns need to be addressed to ensure that a healthy maritime industry is able to flourish, but I will focus my comments on two issues. As the proud mother of a female seafarer, I will discuss the current situation for women in the industry. I will then move on to discuss something that is equally important, given that I am the mother of a female seafarer, which is the safety issues faced by those working in the maritime sector.

Like other Members, I had quite a bit prepared about training. Women have been mentioned as an underused resource in the maritime industry. I will concentrate my comments on women. We need to look at barriers holding women back from entering this sector as a career prospect. I propose that we look at what is preventing them from not only looking at this area but gaining the certificates for higher salaried and higher status jobs. I propose that the Minister considers within that issues related to the facilities on board for female crew members; safety for women in seafaring, including internationally; attitudes towards women; and careers advice for women.

I will rush ahead, because time is of the essence, to the issue of safety. The £38 million of cuts faced by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency last year, coupled with pressure from shipowners who demand a more commercially friendly safety regime, risks jeopardising the lives of British seafarers. The International Transport Workers' Federation estimates that 2,000 seafarers lose their lives working at sea every year. I estimate that the number is higher than that, but that is what is recorded.

I would like to highlight the case of six Russian crew members who lost their lives on 27 November 2011 when the 34-year-old general cargo ship the *Swanland* registered in the Cook Islands sank in the Irish sea, 12 miles off Pen Llyn. The 300-hour search and rescue operation demanded that the courageous RNLI volunteer crews of Porthdinllaen, Abersoch, Trearddur bay and Holyhead were called out in atrocious weather conditions. The Marine Accident Investigation Branch's investigation into the wreck of the *Swanland* found that maintenance and repair had lacked focus and oversight, and that the cargo of limestone was loaded dangerously.

There is, of course, a great deal of good practice in the industry too. The RNLI has done excellent work in recent years with the man overboard guardian system for commercial fishermen.

Albert Owen: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Liz Saville Roberts: I will indeed.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I will give everyone five minutes, but Members have to be mindful of interventions—particularly those who have already spoken.

Albert Owen: The hon. Lady talked about women crew members on merchant ships. Will she join me in paying tribute to the RNLI for the increasing number of women who are on our lifeboats, saving lives?

Liz Saville Roberts: Forgive me, but my daughter is also one of the crew at Porthdinllaen, along with three others; they are an increasing number. I pay tribute to Mike Davis, the cox of Porthdinllaen, who has been outstanding in encouraging young women to join the RNLI.

The RNLI's latest campaign, in partnership with the Welsh Fishing Safety Committee, will promote the general use of personal locator beacons on lifejackets, which alert rescue services within one minute of a seafarer going into the sea. That has potential for rescuing people and, of course, in tragic incidents where seafarers die, it enables families to recover the bodies of their loved ones. That is a very important initiative, and we

should support it. That initiative and many like it increase crew safety and save lives, and the RNLI is to be congratulated for the wide-ranging work the charity does.

It is crucial for the safety of the thousands of men and women who dedicate their lives to work at sea that we do not allow UK shipping companies, or indeed others, to erode safety regulations once the UK leaves the European Union. We must ensure that safety standards are not only upheld but updated and strengthened, to ensure that the lives of seafarers are protected. I therefore call on the Minister to review the issues I have outlined and commit to making the UK shipping industry more diverse, safer and fairer for all those who work at sea.

3.48 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, and to follow the excellent speech by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who led the debate. Much of what I was going to say has been said, but perhaps in different words.

I speak as a member of the RMT group of MPs. What I will say is largely informed by what the RMT thinks, with which I agree. I urge the Minister to ensure that he consults on all occasions and on all matters with the trade unions properly, including not only the RMT but Nautilus International—I have its excellent “Charter for Jobs” report with me.

There are serious concerns about the declining number of UK seafarers, which has fallen by 60% since 1982. The number of ratings has fallen by 25% in just the past five years, so there is undoubtedly a problem with not only the seafarers concerned but the young people who we should be recruiting and training to be the next generation of seafarers.

It is a matter of national security to have a substantial and sufficient body of seafarers who are UK nationals, home-grown and home-based, and whose personal loyalties are to the UK. That is not in any way to denigrate foreign workers; nevertheless, it is significant to have a majority and a large body of home-grown seafarers whose primary loyalty is, naturally, to their own country. The major factor in that decline has been the employment of foreign nationals from poorer areas of the world, who are often paid pitifully low wages, which has been driving down wages and terms and conditions across the maritime sector. Employers are effectively discriminating against and exploiting foreign workers, as well as undermining the jobs market for British seafarers.

These concerns were taken up in the independent Carter review, which concluded that such discrimination must be outlawed and that the then Government—the previous Labour Government—should commit to a timetable for achieving that. The RMT remains committed, and rightly so, to the enforcement of the minimum wage for all seafarers, which should be just what it says: a minimum, not the normal pay for all. Properly negotiated pay rights for UK seafarers would be higher than that, but the minimum wage would at least provide a basic wage for all seafarers. The unions are urging the Government to form a working group to look at reform of the visa and work permit system as it applies to the UK shipping industry.

Proper training is necessary for UK ratings, supported by public funding and with proper marine apprenticeships. The new Royal Fleet Auxiliary support ships should be

designed and built in the UK to supply the UK market. Rebuilding a British shipbuilding industry would be a very good idea.

Employers will no doubt complain about the excessive cost of higher pay, safety, security, training and so on, but labour costs for shipping are a small proportion of the total cost and amount to between 2% and 3% of the total cost. Providing good and proper pay with proper training and security for all workers would not add massively to overall shipping costs. It is time to listen to seafarers and their representatives to make sure there are sufficient UK seafarers for our long-term shipping needs and for national security. They should all be properly paid, properly trained and kept safe in their work. Government action is necessary to ensure that happens.

3.51 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate.

I thought I would take only a moment or two to discuss seafarers, but the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) goaded me with her interpretation of the national shipbuilding strategy, so I will say something about that, although I doubt whether I will take five minutes.

On the principal issue of seafarers and the national minimum wage, I welcome the Minister's remark that a chord has been struck. I want to take this opportunity to applaud the actions of the Scottish Government, in particular the Minister for Transport and the Islands, Humza Yousaf, who shares a constituency office with me. He knows that I have been on at him about this issue for a while. It is good that a deal seems to have been secured, or at least an agreement in principle, that will ensure that the services operated by Seatruck, which is contracted by Serco Northlink, will now pay its employees the national minimum wage. Many of us in the House today have been concerned about the ill treatment of workers in the maritime industry.

Representatives from various agencies deserve great credit for working hard to find a solution to a complicated situation, including Transport Scotland. I have not been a fan of Transport Scotland for many years, because I was a trade union activist who had to deal with it when I was employed by Glasgow city council. This is a rare occasion when I applaud it for dealing with the matter.

It was manifestly disgraceful that seafarers were being paid as little as £4 an hour—I think the actual figure was £3.66 an hour. I hope the Minister will announce a legislative timetable for ending pay discrimination in the UK shipping industry, which the RMT union has called for and which the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) emphasised. It is not right that shipowners have been cutting the wage bill because they can discriminate against seafarers by paying them less than the statutory minimum wage.

If practices that we have heard about today took place on dry land, the enforcement agencies would be acting almost immediately. I hope the Minister will tell us what discussions are taking place with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to address the situation and ensure adequate enforcement, because the out-of-sight, out-of-mind attitude must be replaced with action.

[Chris Stephens]

The hon. Member for Portsmouth South goaded me with her comments about the national shipbuilding strategy, which contrasted with the excellent remarks by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who, like me, is proud that he was born in the great city of Glasgow, the home of world shipbuilding.

Sir John Parker's report does not say that shipbuilding should be moved from elsewhere; it caveats that position. There is a flaw in the report where it says that different ships and different Navy ships have been built concurrently on the Clyde. That was the case with the Irish shipbuilders, where my father worked when they were building ships for the Royal Navy and the Malaysian Navy at the same time.

There is shipbuilding on the Clyde because of the tenacious campaigning by the trade union movement over decades to ensure work on the Clyde. I hope we will continue to build ships there because we are the best shipbuilders in the world.

3.56 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is always an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I declare an indirect interest, because if I did not, I suspect my father would be upset with me. For more than 30 years he was a full-time trade union officer for the National Union of Seamen, which is the maritime branch of the RMT. I am a member of the RMT parliamentary group and a very proud member at that.

It is scandalous that we have this problem. The number of UK seafarers has fallen by a whopping 60% since 1982. This is not an issue that has only just come about; it has been an historical issue. However, the number of UK ratings has fallen by a further 25% since 2011 and now stands at about 8,800.

Pay discrimination is outrageous, but before talking about that, I will talk about people coming into the industry without being trained. That is scandalous, especially when we have a deal under the tonnage tax, the SMarT scheme—the support for maritime training scheme—which makes it a requirement for companies to train ratings and officers, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) mentioned. It is scandalous that we are not doing anything about that.

Since coming to this place in 2010, I think I have met every Shipping Minister, along with Steve Todd, the senior assistant general secretary of the RMT, and on one occasion the then general secretary, Bob Crow. Shipping Ministers always say, "Yes, this is an issue. We're going to deal with it," but they do not deal with the problem. It is not even party political. Although the previous Labour Government at least commissioned the independent Carter review, I am ashamed to say that we did not do anything about a timetable to implement its recommendations. That was scandalous. I am not being party political, because we have to be honest. It is time for the Government to act.

The situation in my constituency is just grotesque. P&O North sea ferries run out of my constituency in east Hull, with a hugely declining number of UK ratings. The company is paying £4.70 an hour to Spanish and Portuguese seafarers, more than 300 of whom are employed

on those routes, although the minimum wage is £7.20 an hour. That is scandalous. When I speak to the company about the situation, it tells me that it is not making much profit. Well, as my father always reminds me, we do not see many skint shipowners. [Interruption.] The Minister is wondering what I said: I said "skint". I am told that shipowners do not have much money, but I think that the opposite is true. The reality is that there are an awful lot of unemployed seafarers in my constituency, people who are keen to be employed, but there are not many skint shipowners.

In the short time that I have left, I want to just mention that we are doing great things in Hull. Siemens is investing in offshore wind, and Mick Cash, general secretary of the RMT, has written to the Health and Safety Executive to raise the issue that some employers are looking particularly for seafarers to go into the industry. We therefore have a real opportunity to do something about this now. We hope that a cruise terminal will be opened in 2022. We will need more seafarers to manage that terminal—I nearly said to "man" it, and my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) would have been unimpressed if I had. Let us just get on with it and deal with the issue. The situation is scandalous. It needs sorting out.

4.1 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for initiating the debate. I confess that before my election, I had little real knowledge of the modern industry, but I have been steadily learning from my contacts and visits to Forth Ports Grangemouth. I have also attended trips on to ships with the local seafarers mission, which I cannot praise enough for doing such a fantastic job in supporting workers, and I have had talks with and briefings from the RMT and Nautilus, as well as haulage contractors in my area. I am grateful to all those bodies for assisting me during the past 18 months.

Grangemouth is of course Scotland's largest container port. It is also Scotland's largest port, with the site covering 386 acres. Grangemouth lies at the centre of Scotland's industrial heartland. It is situated midway between the main Scottish cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh and is served by the M9 motorway, with links to the national motorway network, and is also well rail-linked.

Approximately 9 million tonnes of cargo are handled through the dock facilities each year. With about 150,000 containers and as much as 30% of Scotland's GDP going through the port, it is the UK's largest feeder port and the only one that exports more than it imports. Locally, Forth Ports employs some 200 people within the port and supports a further 1,000 jobs within the port estate. Therefore, the industry's significance to my constituency cannot be overstated, although it may often be overlooked by those driving past the gates.

Almost no topic can be debated nowadays without some reference to the issues surrounding Brexit, and this debate is no exception. The maritime industry plays a major role in helping to facilitate the wider freedom of trade in goods. Given the volumes and patterns of freight, leaving the EU will have implications for the shipping sector. One specific concern is about UK flag ships losing their right to operate in the domestic trades of those EU member states that maintain flag-based

cabotage restrictions. The economists Osera have said that changes to the costs of trade with the EU are

“likely to affect the volumes and patterns of freight activity at ports, while the need for new customs checks on imports and exports is likely to cause considerable congestion at UK and mainland European ports.”

Given the nature of the work at Grangemouth, that is a real concern, although any negative impact could clearly be mitigated through European economic area membership or free trade agreements. The industry’s importance to our countries’ ability to trade worldwide and not just with Europe is key, especially with more than 90% of all trade being handled through our ports. Given that we are an island nation, that is not likely to change, but it leads to questions about how it is done and the role of seafarers, without whom that trade just would not be possible.

The role of seafarers is perhaps the most concerning aspect of the maritime industry. Since 2011, the number of UK ratings has declined by 25%, while the number of UK seafarers has decreased by some 13%. That portends a very serious risk of loss of skills and may even threaten the viability of our home-grown industry, unless training and employment rates improve significantly. That skills deficit is set to be compounded further by future retirements of an increasingly ageing workforce. I would like to take this opportunity to commend the work of the RMT and its SOS 2020 campaign to highlight that threat to the UK seafarers skills base.

While we face that decline in skilled seafarers, there is in fact a global surplus of ratings, with many of the ratings in the international shipping industry coming from cheaper-wage economies. That is compounded by exploitative practices by some operators, which abuse the complexities of the national minimum wage regulations and pay scandalous rates of pay to some seafarers. That has been much commented on today, so I will just add my disappointment that many seafarers are not receiving a fair wage. Confusion and complexity surrounding the NMW needs to be addressed by the Government. In particular, the meaning of the term “ordinarily working in the UK” needs to be made crystal clear. I would welcome hearing from the Minister how that can best be achieved and how the situation whereby there are current cases of two people working on the same ship and doing the same job but being paid different amounts based largely on nationality can be addressed.

My trade union contacts have flagged up with me the following issue, which highlights the point succinctly and demonstrates the international dimension. The Norwegian international flag register is the second register for Norway. It is not allowed to cabotage in Norway and does not pay tax there. I am told that these ships are among the worst offenders. The majority of these ships operating from Aberdeen stay in the UK permanently, with some not having left for more than 10 years. They have on board Norwegian nationals who receive Norwegian rates of pay, but non-Norwegians are employed on what has been described to me as “peanuts”. The fact that such issues can be so clearly identified must mean that solutions are not beyond conception. I look forward to the Minister’s summing-up.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Thank you very much, colleagues, for your conciseness and your co-operation. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) could have had two minutes, but she would prefer to ask

the Minister a question. It will obviously be up to the Minister to decide whether to take that intervention, but I know that the hon. Lady would like to ask a question as opposed to making a speech. The Front Benchers will have 11 minutes each, which will allow the mover of the motion to have two minutes at the end.

4.6 pm

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. This has been a very full debate, with many important contributions. I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing the debate. I was going to say that Opposition Members welcome it, but judging by the tone of the debate as a whole, I think it is welcomed right across the House, and I look forward to what the Minister will have to say at the end.

I would like first to give credit where it is due. I very rarely give credit to the Scottish Government, but I will on this occasion. I welcome the announcement by the Scottish Government of changes to the charter agreement for the two Seatruck vessels operating between Aberdeen, Shetland and the Orkneys.

However, I have to be fair: we have heard a lot about maritime companies paying less than the national minimum wage. On Scotland’s only commercial maritime freight link to the continent, the hourly rate paid to Lithuanian seafarers can be as low as £1.64. Justifiably, we get angry when we hear about modern-day slavery on ships in the far east harvesting prawns, but we are prepared to see £1.64 an hour paid within our own waters, so I think that although a great job has been done, there is much more to do.

Drew Hendry: The hon. Lady will of course be aware that that shipping route is in international waters and the Scottish Government have no locus over the pay rates of that company.

Pat Glass: I am simply pointing out that the company is operating in our waters and that we need collectively to do something about it.

We are an island nation, a net importer, and we are now leaving the European Union. We have the largest port sector in Europe in terms of tonnage handled and, as has been said, we have millions of ferry passengers every year. Our economic, social and security interests will depend more than at any time since the second world war on seafarers and a resilient UK maritime skills base. It is probably worth putting this in context. At the time of the Falklands war in 1982, the UK had a strong merchant naval sector; we employed 58,000 UK seafarers. That figure has now shrunk by almost 60% to 23,000. That is the context in which we are working.

Sub-national minimum wages continue to blight the lives of seafarers working on UK domestic and short sea journeys. I have seen figures alleging that at least eight operators along 11 short sea routes to and from the UK are underpaying more than 800 crew. In my own area, on ships crossing from Newcastle to Amsterdam, DFDS pays its staff £2.93 an hour—less than £3. I took a recent weekend trip to Amsterdam, which I really enjoyed, but quite honestly, if I had known that—well, I feel really uncomfortable about it. As a result of this debate, I will be writing to DFDS and other companies to say that it is simply not acceptable.

[Pat Glass]

At present, passengers and businesses are travelling on Condor Ferries to the Channel Islands on vessels crewed by seafarers earning as little as £2.40 an hour. On freight-only ships, the pay is as low as £1.64 an hour. That is not acceptable. Prior to the national living wage increase for over-24s last April, it was estimated that 8,300 ratings were working the UK shipping industry for rates of pay below the national minimum wage. That was in April last year; the figure is now considerably higher than 8,300. Increasingly, companies are recruiting outside the UK to crew their ships with non-UK seafarers, particularly ratings, in order to profit from these sub-national minimum wage rates.

This is not a new problem. It has to be said that this goes well beyond the current Government. Beyond the simple injustices, we can see the cost of not having acted in the past. This legalised exploitation has systematically undermined maritime jobs in the UK, damaged the skill base and driven up unemployment rates in seafarer communities across the UK. Since 2011 alone, the number of UK ratings has fallen by 25%. If we end the pay exploitation in shipping, we can help to reverse the decline of our merchant navy. This need not be a party political issue, but one of sense, fairness and humanity.

There are three points that I would like the Minister to take forward from this debate. First, he has already committed to review the application of pay legislation across the shipping industry imminently. However, as we have already heard, that has already happened—the Carter review did it—so this is just a case of setting a timeframe and getting it implemented. Secondly, can the Minister give a date for when we can expect publication of updated guidance to HMRC on enforcement of the national minimum wage for seafarers? Thirdly, when will he publish the outcomes of the review of the existing protections in part 5 of the Equality Act 2010 against nationality-based pay discrimination for seafarers? That work was completed in April last year, yet 10 months later it has still not been published.

However, as we have heard, pay is only part of the problem and part of the solution. More than 70% of deck and 74% of engine ratings are now aged over 40. We are heading for a shortfall in trained and skilled seafarers. If we take no action, that will be filled by non-UK staff. The Select Committee on Transport warned over two years ago that the Government needed to act on funding, on approved standards for maritime apprenticeships, on the take-up of apprenticeships in the industry, on setting annual statutory targets for seafarer training and on including the number of trainee ratings in annual seafarer statistics. We would like to know from the Minister when we will get some action on that.

One area of maritime growth where the Government have not dragged their feet is on the recommendations to make the UK shipping register more commercially responsive, in the form of a Government corporation. I would gently point out to the Minister some other areas where this and former Governments have rushed to privatise—the rail industry, the energy industry and the water industry come to mind. Recent attitude polls among the electorate now show that the majority of our constituents—in some cases over 90%—want to see those decisions reversed, because they see formerly

Government-owned, privatised industries making massive profits, but customers paying massive bills and getting a poor service. I would gently ask the Minister whether he will properly and carefully consider the costs and benefits of transforming the UK shipping register, fully consider all the options and also promise that this House will be given time to scrutinise those options?

Before closing, I wish to press the Minister on leaving the EU. At the moment we know nothing about the Government's wider maritime priorities, at a time when we need a clear direction on maritime issues that would inform the Brexit negotiations. How will any changes to the single market affect shipping and seafarers? Will there be customs checks? Will there be tariffs? Is his Department feeding into the Brexit negotiations on these matters? If it is, will he tell us how?

In closing, I hope the Minister can elaborate on his Government's plans for Brexit, or at least recognise that maritime is an exceptional issue that needs to take precedence. He must also assure the House about the future of the shipping register, along with the timeframe and process for any reforms. Will he outline his priorities for seafarer training and skills, and say whether he will set targets for recruitment? Finally, I look forward to him addressing the key point to come out of this debate about seafarer pay and conditions.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): We have a lot to get through. Will the Minister be mindful to leave a minute or so at the end for Mr Carmichael to wind up?

4.14 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): With great pleasure, Mr Walker. As I looked around the Chamber during this debate, I felt spoiled for choice because so many of my favourites are here. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) springs to mind, as does the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner), the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and, not least, yourself, Mr Walker.

Among those favourites stands proud today the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who introduced the debate. He worked with me in Government and I know that he cares as passionately as I do about this subject—unsurprisingly, given the people he represents. When he introduced the debate he was right to emphasise the significance of the maritime sector to our economy, as well as to his constituents. The sector contributes £13 billion to the United Kingdom. It supports more than 100,000 jobs in thousands of different businesses. Just as much as that, and perhaps more, it is an area in which Britain—indeed, the United Kingdom—stands proud, because the quality of what we do in the sector is world renowned and widely admired across a range of services.

As has been said repeatedly, this is not the first time that I have done this job; it is my second visit to the Department for Transport as Shipping Minister. By the way, all ministerial jobs are visits—no more than that—as it is very important to recognise. None the less, when I was there the first time I initiated the maritime growth study to which the right hon. Gentleman and others have referred. He was very generous about it too, if I might say so. The reason for the study is that it seemed

really important that we had a stocktake of our maritime circumstances and our maritime future. However, since then we have had the debate on the European Union. I will not digress by saying that the result was, for me, a dream come true, but it certainly changes our maritime future. It is therefore important that we review that growth study. I have put into place a stocktake of the study itself, which is currently taking place, so that we can consider its very helpful recommendations in the context of Brexit.

Melanie Onn: I thank the right hon. Gentleman—my dueting partner on occasions—for giving way.

Mr Hayes: I wasn't going to mention it.

Melanie Onn: I just share it widely. On the point about embracing that opportunity, as he sees it, the Minister will be aware that the Humber is the UK's busiest trading port. That is something that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) will be equally as proud of as I am. It really is critical to hundreds of directly employed jobs and thousands of indirectly employed jobs as well. There is a sense that ports and maritime have been somewhat left behind in the past. Is part of this opportunity about putting ports at the heart of industrial strategy for the UK going forward?

Mr Hayes: Yes, that is a very well made point. The hon. Lady is right to say that we perhaps understated the significance of the maritime sector. This is a point that the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for maritime and ports and former Shipping Minister, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, made in his contribution and has made previously. Part of the role of the Shipping Minister is to champion the sector; to speak loudly and repeatedly about its significance. The hon. Lady is right that it does not just affect the places where our ports are situated; it affects the whole of our economy. Some 95% of the goods that we purchase from abroad, and the things that we send to foreign countries, go through our ports. As the representative for Grimsby, she will know how important that is.

Albert Owen: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I will give way in a second. By the way, I am going to visit Grimsby soon and will have a look at the port. Now I will give way to another of my favourites.

Albert Owen: I was a bit disappointed that I was not listed among the Minister's friends earlier on. There is a serious point that I want him to answer. Now that we have talk of an industrial strategy, will the Minister, who is in the Department for Transport, liaise with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ensure that both Departments know about this so that we have joined-up thinking when we talk about ports being the catalyst?

Mr Hayes: We are already doing that, but these debates must have a purpose, so I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I will personally meet Ministers on exactly the issue he has raised, and in the fashion that he has described. It is important that the industrial strategy takes full account of the significance of the maritime

sector, as has been said. As he spoke earlier I thought to myself for a moment, given our great history, that he has forgotten more about energy than I have ever known, but then I thought, as a former Energy Minister, that was a tad too self-deprecating.

Let me highlight the key issues that have been raised, which fall into the following categories. First, there is the maritime growth study, which I have mentioned. That was a very important piece of work and I am immensely grateful to Lord Mountevans for leading it and to others who took part. It provided a series of recommendations that will inform future policy, but as he and others acknowledged, it must be a living document. The great risk with such exercises is that the document is published, the work is done, there is a great furore around its publication and then a year later people think, "What on earth was that study?" In order to give the document continuing relevance, it needs to be regularly updated, which is precisely what I am doing through the work I just described.

The points made about the flag—as highlighted by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass)—and tonnage tax should be pertinent to that review of the study. We can do more with tonnage tax, particularly on recruitment and training, and we need to do more, as has been acknowledged by the Government and those with whom we work, to make the flag more attractive. There has to be an offer in respect of the register that goes beyond simply raising the flag and includes a range of services that we can provide to make it more attractive. We are committed to that.

Secondly, the issue of ports was raised. We may have emphasised ports insufficiently. At the risk of adding contumely to our affairs, I disagreed to some degree with the Opposition spokesman on this issue; the ports are perhaps the best example of how private organisations investing heavily, being responsive to changing circumstances and being very efficient and competitive, compared with their European counterparts, can make a significant difference to the sector. The fact that we have private organisations—not wholly, but for the most part—running our ports is testament to what can be done when private and public interests coincide.

However, we should not be complacent. The shadow Minister is right that we need to look at the new challenges that our ports face, because they work in an extremely dynamic sector and more can be done to support them. We certainly should not have the port services regulation. As I made perfectly clear to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight, we will not have it as we do not want it and will fight it at every opportunity.

The third issue that was raised was skills and recruitment. I share almost all the views that permeated—indeed coloured—this debate, begun by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. I think that we are doing too little on recruitment and that we need to do more on skills. As Members will know, I was the apprenticeships Minister when the coalition Government first came into office. I am proud of our work on revitalising apprenticeships, but I take the point that was made. More can be done, and in my discussions on the industrial strategy I will raise the continuing importance of training in this sector. We need to recruit and train more British seafarers. It is as simple as that. Throughout this short debate Members have made the point that there has to

[Mr John Hayes]

be a career path for those seafarers. It is not enough simply to recruit people at different levels; there has to be a career path so that people can build their life in seafaring. That is a good thing and something of which we should be proud.

Albert Owen: The Minister made two interventions on earlier speakers, and I am really pleased that he has now taken two interventions from me. Sea cadet units across the United Kingdom were a fertile breeding ground for people for both the merchant navy and the Royal Navy. Will he do more to train youngsters up in those facilities? He will also be aware of early-day motion 516, which has been suggested by the unions. Will he work with the unions and others to ensure that we have a proper campaign for skills and safety at sea?

Mr Hayes: Indeed I will. I recently held a roundtable meeting, which the unions attended, on precisely those matters. I have discussed recruitment with the trade unions, and I welcome the excellent briefing produced by my trade union friends. When I first became a Minister, I said to my officials, “I want to meet the unions regularly,” and they looked slightly nervous about it. During the course of those meetings, a union representative—I will not say who—said, “We never got this much out of Labour.” I can assure the hon. Gentleman—and particularly the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), who called for this specifically in his contribution—that I will continue to work with the trade unions in exactly the way in which he has described. It is vital not only that we recruit people, but that we train them appropriately and allow them the kind of career opportunities that he called for.

Karl Turner: Will the Minister commit to meeting a group of cross-party MPs, along with the RMT representatives, very soon to see what progress he has made following this debate?

Mr Hayes: Yes, I am happy to do that, perhaps under the auspices of the all-party group, which I have already met, but I am happy to meet again. That would be a useful vehicle for precisely that kind of discussion.

The fourth area that the debate touched on—this was referred to by a number of hon. Members—was what might be called the welfare and conditions that prevail in the maritime sector. I am absolutely committed to ensuring that the conditions are appropriate. Some alarming claims have been made today, which I take very seriously indeed, particularly if people are not being paid the appropriate wage and if the circumstances and conditions in which they are working are not adequate. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) about the need to attract more women and getting the conditions right to allow us to do so. I hear what has been said about the importance of safety, and that is a fundamental concern

for all of us who care about the sector. We will take this further. As a direct result of the debate—perhaps it will happen in the discussions that were just described—I am very happy to consider what more the Government must do. The work I am doing on the maritime growth study should fill some gaps and allow us to consider what more can be done on recruitment, as well as how we can approach skills in a fresh way and how the terms and conditions that apply across the industry can be improved.

The debate has served a useful purpose in allowing me not only to be the champion of the maritime sector, but, I hope, to be able to emulate the best of my predecessors, such as the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, and leave some kind of legacy. I want to do that on behalf of our ports and the towns in which they are situated, our ship owners and our shipbuilders—we build ships and boats in this country, and shipbuilding is something of which we should be proud too—and fundamentally and most of all, what is dearest to my heart, on behalf of our seafarers.

4.28 pm

Mr Carmichael: We have had a truly excellent debate. Although we have had contributions from 15 right hon. and hon. Members, including the Minister, we have managed to cover the full range of areas, instead of each of us standing up and piece by piece repeating what has already been said. I hope that we will see the debate as not just an event in itself, but the start of a process, and that the Minister will make good on his undertakings this afternoon, both on the prioritisation of policy work and on his continuing engagement with parliamentarians. It is clear that there is a common and shared interest in all parts of the House. For me, it is a matter of some satisfaction and relief that the debate has been as well attended and productive as it has been.

I confess that this is the first time I have sponsored a Back-Bench business debate. When I was last a Back Bencher, there was no such thing as the Backbench Business Committee. I got a bit of a telling-off from the Committee because apparently I did not fill in the form very well. Those things are important; I took its criticisms to heart. When the opportunity arises for a reprise of this debate, I will be able to pray in aid our excellent proceedings this afternoon to ensure that we can keep the issue on the Floor of the House and at the front of public attention, because that is where it belongs.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I thank all colleagues for their co-operation on time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the UK maritime industry.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 12 January 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Hendry Review (Tidal Lagoons)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): In February 2016, the Government commissioned an independent review into the feasibility and practicality of tidal lagoon energy in the UK. The review has been led by the right hon. Charles Hendry, who was appointed in May. The purpose of the review was to assess:

- whether, and in what circumstances, tidal lagoons could play a cost-effective role as part of the UK energy mix;
- the potential scale of opportunity in the UK and internationally, including supply chain opportunities;
- a range of possible structures for financing tidal lagoons;
- different sizes of projects as the first of a kind;
- whether a competitive framework could be put in place for the delivery of tidal lagoon projects.

Charles Hendry will publish the report today. I am grateful to Charles and his team for the hard work that has gone into the review and for the time and care he has taken over this important commission.

The issues considered by the review are complex, as they relate to an untried technology in the marine environment. As the review notes, tidal lagoons face considerable challenges in relation to their role in the UK's energy mix and their potential environmental impact. The Government will now require a period of time to assess the recommendations set out in the review, and to consider the issues which would arise from a broader lagoon programme. A Government response will be published in due course.

The Government's energy planning is focused on ensuring secure, affordable, low-carbon energy. Any decisions arising from the review will, therefore, need to balance the priorities for security of supply, low-carbon generation and affordability. The Government will consider the review's recommendations and determine what decision is in the best interests of the UK energy consumer in the long term.

It is this Government's job to consider both the advantages and the disadvantages of tidal lagoons, to scrutinise the evidence carefully, and to take measured decisions where there are a wide range of issues to consider and significant uncertainties over what is, in the case of this technology, a long period of time.

The Hendry review report can be found at: <https://hendryreview.wordpress.com/>.

[HCWS404]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

BBC Monitoring

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Following the written statement by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, (HCWS358), on a Royal Charter for the continuance of the BBC, the Government and the BBC have agreed a new BBC monitoring agreement. The agreement took effect on 1 January 2017. BBC Monitoring will continue to be a publicly funded service under the licence fee arrangement.

I have placed a copy of the "BBC Monitoring Agreement" in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS406]

Foreign Affairs Council: 16 January

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council on 16 January. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

The agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) is expected to include Syria, Egypt, Libya and the middle east peace process.

Syria

Ministers will discuss the announcement of a nationwide ceasefire for Syria agreed by Russia, Turkey and Iran on 29 December. The intention is that political talks will follow later this month. UN Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura has welcomed the planned talks, but stresses they should contribute to UN-led negotiations scheduled for 8 February.

Discussions will focus on the EU's humanitarian aid response to the crisis in Syria. More than 700,000 people remain in besieged areas within Syria: humanitarian aid has yet to reach these areas as the Syrian regime and its backers have not allowed the UN immediate full and unhindered humanitarian access across all of Syria, as required by UN Security Council resolutions.

The 2016 UN joint investigative mechanism report concluded that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons—as has Daesh. The UK has been working with France and the rest of the Security Council to draft a resolution which makes clear that there can be no impunity for the use of chemical weapons. The resolution seeks to impose various sanctions designations and ban on exports of helicopters, helicopter parts and certain chemicals. The EU should stand firm should the UNSC vote fail. The UK will call for collective EU support to designate individuals linked to the use of chemical weapons in Syria who are not currently sanctioned by the EU.

Egypt

Ministers will discuss Egypt's bilateral relationship with the EU and Egypt's role in the region. We expect discussions will cover Egypt's political and human rights

situation, including the growing restrictions on civil society. Ministers are also likely to discuss how the EU can best help strengthen Egypt's internal security, co-operate on bringing stability to Libya, and work together on combating illegal migration in the region.

Libya

Discussions will cover the latest developments in the Libyan political process. We will encourage the EU to consider how it can best continue to support the Presidency Council and Government of National Accord.

Middle east peace process

Ministers will discuss progress on the middle east peace process (MEPP) and may reflect on obstacles to peace including incitement, terrorism, demolitions and settlement expansion, as highlighted in the recent UN Security Council resolution 2334. Ministers may also consider the outcomes of the Paris conference on the MEPP which takes place on 15 January.

[HCWS405]

JUSTICE

Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): The optional protocol to the convention against torture (OPCAT), which the UK ratified in December 2003, requires states parties to establish a national preventive mechanism (NPM) to carry out visits to places of detention in order to prevent torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The Government established the UK NPM in March 2009 (*Official Report*, 31 March 2009, column 56WS).

I am informing the House that the following is formally designated as an additional member of the UK NPM:

The Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation (IRTL)

[HCWS408]

Prison Service Pay Review Body

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I am pleased to announce that the Prime Minister has reappointed Peter Knight as the chair to the Prison Service Pay Review Body for 12 months, commencing March 2017. The reappointment has been conducted in accordance with the Commissioner for Public Appointments' code of practice on appointments to public bodies.

[HCWS407]

TRANSPORT

Night Flights

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) has made the following ministerial statement.

In July 2014, the Government announced the current regime for night flight restrictions at the designated airports Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted. These restrictions are due to expire in October this year.

Today this Government have launched a consultation on our proposals for the next night flight regime at these airports. We are proposing to set these restrictions for a period of five years to 2022, so this will not therefore cover

the period in which a proposed new runway at Heathrow would be operational. Any ban on night flights at an expanded Heathrow would be consulted on separately.

We will continue to balance the economic benefits night flights offer with the cost they have on communities. We therefore want the next night flights regime to maintain the status quo in terms of the number of flights, but also give the industry incentives to continue the improvements in noise performance that are already taking place. The Government therefore proposes an environmental objective to encourage the use of quieter aircraft to limit or reduce the number of people significantly affected by aircraft noise at night, while maintaining the existing benefits of night flights.

Our consultation includes proposals on how we intend to deliver this objective, including limits on the number of flights and new noise quotas for each airport and adjustments to the structure of the regime to ensure it keeps up with changes in aircraft technology. This consultation is seeking views and evidence relating to these proposals and is accompanied by an impact assessment exploring the costs and benefits of our proposals.

We will publish a final decision on night flights later this year after we have carefully reviewed the responses to this consultation.

[HCWS403]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Bereavement Support Payment Regulations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): I am pleased to announce that today I intend to lay regulations to provide some of the detail of the new bereavement support payment. These are affirmative regulations which will be debated in Parliament shortly. It is intended that the changes detailed in these regulations will come into force on 6 April this year.

Bereavement support payment is a new benefit which replaces the current suite of bereavement benefits (bereavement payment, bereavement allowance and widowed parent's allowance) for those whose spouse or civil partner dies on or after 6 April this year. These changes will not affect those already in receipt of bereavement benefits. These people will continue to receive their current benefit for the natural lifetime of the award.

The design of bereavement support payment reaffirms the Government's commitment to provide financial support to people whose spouse or civil partner has died. The new benefit modernises and simplifies the current complex system of bereavement benefits.

It shifts the focus of bereavement benefits from replacing the deceased spouse or civil partner's earnings to helping with the additional and more immediate costs of bereavement.

Bereavement support payment will not be taxable, will not be included in the assessment of benefit income which will be subject to the household benefit cap, and will also be subject to a disregard in the calculation of income-based benefits. Additionally, bereavement support payment will not affect the bereaved person's concurrent entitlement to contribution-based jobseeker's allowance or contributory employment and support allowance, where appropriate. Also, unlike the current bereavement benefits, a bereaved person who remarries or re-partners will be able to keep their bereavement support payment.

To allow people to better understand their entitlements and plan accordingly, the new benefit is simpler, introducing a uniform payment structure with a single national insurance contribution condition. There is a higher rate of payment for pregnant women and people with dependent children in recognition of the greater costs borne by these families.

Having considered representations from the Social Security Advisory Committee, the Work and Pensions Select Committee and groups supporting bereaved people,

we have decided to extend the duration of the benefit from 12 months to 18 months.

Recipients with children can receive an initial larger payment of £3,500 and up to 18 subsequent monthly payments of £350, and those without children can receive an initial payment of £2,500 and up to 18 monthly instalments of £100.

[HCWS409]

Petition

Thursday 12 January 2017

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Post Office Closure in Tonbridge

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the proposed closure by Post Office Ltd of the existing stand-alone post office on Tonbridge High Street is unacceptable; and further that the post office should not be relocated within another existing local business.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to note their objections to the proposed closure by Post Office Ltd of the existing stand-alone post office on Tonbridge High Street and its proposed relocation within another existing local business.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tom Tugendhat, *Official Report*, 17 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 491.]

[P001979]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James):

The Post Office operates as an independent business and the Government do not play a role in the day-to-day operational responsibilities of the company, which includes decisions on the provision and location of individual post offices.

The Post Office's proposal to relocate its Tonbridge branch into the local WHSmith store is part of the company's ongoing plans to ensure its branch network is sustainable and profitable in the long term and fits the future needs of the business and its customers. Changes to its Crown network, such as the hosting or franchising of existing branches, have been undertaken previously in many locations across the UK and are a successful way of sustaining Post Office services in these locations and bringing in further investment.

In line with the Post Office's code of practice, Government are aware that the Post Office undertook a six-week local consultation on the planned relocation, to make customers and the community aware of the details of its proposal and to seek feedback. The Post Office considers all feedback carefully before reaching a final decision, which it will do in due course.

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