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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

Thursday 19 January 2017

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 19 January 2017*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Household Food Insecurity

1. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to measure levels of household food insecurity. [908252]

**The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice):** We have a well-established living costs and food survey, which has been running for many years and which informs our “Family Food” publication. It includes questions on household spend on food, including that of the lowest 20% of income households. This figure has remained reasonably stable, at around 16%, for many years.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** May I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, because I believe it is your birthday? Happy birthday, Mr Speaker—I hope you have a good’un!

I thank the Minister for his response, but he knows as well as I do that that is simply not good enough. An estimated 8.4 million people in Britain live in food-insecure households. There have been repeated calls from me, the all-party group on hunger, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, the Food Foundation, Sustain and Oxfam for the Government to adopt a household food-insecurity measurement. Why will the Government not just admit that the fact is that their resistance to introducing such a measurement is because once they have admitted the scale of hunger, they will have to do something about it and admit that it is largely caused by their punitive welfare reform policies?

**George Eustice:** I, too, add the best wishes of Government Members to you on your birthday, Mr Speaker. I understand that it is also the birthday of the House of Commons Chaplain, Rose. I am sure we will all want to add our best wishes to her, too.

I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Lady. This Government have got more people back into work than ever before, and the best way to tackle poverty is to help people off benefits and get them into work. In the LCFS, which has been running for many years, we have an established measure of how much the lowest-income households are spending on food. It is a consistent

measure and we are able to benchmark changes year on year. As I said, that has been very stable: it was 16% when the Labour party was in power and it is 16% now.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Food insecurity is a terrible thing, and it is exacerbated by low-income households spending too much on food that is not good for them. During the war, the wartime generation knew how to manage on a very tight budget, and nutrition actually improved for most households, including the very poorest. Could we learn some lessons from the wartime generation about how best to feed our people?

**George Eustice:** My colleagues in the Department of Health publish lots of very good guidance and run lots of very good campaigns to encourage healthy eating. In addition, we have the school food plan, which aims to improve the nutrition of food in schools so that children learn lifelong good habits. I agree with my hon. Friend that it is possible to eat good, nutritious food, the cost of which has been remarkably stable.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): When I visit my local food banks, I hear that the number of people relying on them is going up. Is it not the truth that the Government do not want to collect data on that because they would have to admit the failure of their policies, not least the fact that getting a job is no longer a route out of poverty because of the levels of in-work poverty they have created?

**George Eustice:** This Government have introduced the concept of a national living wage, which will raise incomes for the lowest paid in our society. I, too, visit my local food bank, and I send my case officers into the food bank to help people who may be having particular problems or crises in their lives. Many complex issues contribute to poverty. I advise all Members to work closely with their local food banks, as my office does.

#### Air Quality

2. **Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve air quality. [908253]

6. **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve air quality. [908257]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** The United Kingdom complies with the EU legislation for nearly all air pollutants, but faces challenges in achieving nitrogen dioxide limits, along with 16 other EU member states. That is why we have committed more than £2 billion since 2011 to reduce transport emissions and the autumn statement provided a further £290 million to support greener transport. We should all recognise that air quality is actually improving, but we recognise that we need to go further and faster and will be consulting on a new national plan by 24 April.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I thank the Minister for her answer, but I believe the Secretary of State is aware of the GB Freight Route rail scheme, which will take up to 5 million lorry journeys off Britain’s roads each year, save thousands of tonnes of emissions, and radically improve air quality. Will she and her Ministers use their good offices to press the case for GB Freight Route in Government?

**Dr Coffey:** With Felixstowe in my constituency, I am fully aware of the advantages of rail freight. I stress to the hon. Gentleman that the Departments for Transport and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs work closely together on these matters. Shifting freight onto rail is a key part of any future strategy.

**Matthew Pennycook:** Is the Minister aware of the controversial proposal for a cruise liner terminal at Enderby Wharf in east Greenwich? With the air quality impact of that proposal in mind, will she tell us when the Government expect the recently promised review into shore-to-ship power and the assumptions that underpin port development to conclude?

**Dr Coffey:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that his own council carried out an environmental impact assessment, which it considered when looking at that particular planning application. As he will also be aware, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department for Transport, is committed to looking further at what can be done, and I am sure that he is making progress with that.

**Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con):** Does the Minister agree that British businesses have made great strides in recent years in producing technologies that enable us to improve air quality, such as the taxis that now run in Birmingham on liquefied petroleum gas and the adaptation of buses that have significantly cleaned up the air in Oxford Street?

**Dr Coffey:** I agree with my right hon. Friend. Her vast experience in this area is added to by her local knowledge of the city of Birmingham and the support going on there. This Government made a substantial transport settlement with the previous Mayor of London, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), and I know that air pollution has improved on Oxford Street over the past year, which is thanks specifically to the grants that were provided.

**Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con):** Camelford in north Cornwall suffers from very high levels of pollution, because of the A39 running straight through its town centre. Will my hon. Friend congratulate Camelford Town Council on the work that it has done to address the air quality? Will she work with the council and me to tackle the problem in the town?

**Dr Coffey:** I have made it clear in this House before that national Government have their part to play in finding solutions to tackle local congestion issues, but so too does local government. Of course we will continue to work with my hon. Friend on that matter.

**David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP):** The Royal College of Physicians has stated that air pollution contributes to approximately 40,000 deaths in the UK every year, and that diesel emissions have been poorly regulated. What progress are the Government making in that field?

**Dr Coffey:** Nitrous oxide levels have been falling, but I recognise that it is not happening quickly enough. The previous Labour Government signed us up to achieve

deadlines by 2010, and failed spectacularly. We are continuing to invest in this area and will continue to do so and work with devolved Administrations on specific issues in other areas.

**Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con):** Does my hon. Friend agree that one way to make real progress on air quality is to forge ahead with ultra-low emission vehicles. Given that 25% of the cars on Norway's roads are either electric or hybrid, does she agree that we need a real turbo-charged boost to get ahead in this area?

**Dr Coffey:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The low-emission vehicle industry is a competitive advantage for this country, which is why the Government are backing it through the Office for Low Emission Vehicles and the many millions of pounds that have been spent on improving the charging infrastructure up and down this country.

**Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab):** Many happy returns, Mr Speaker, to both you and Rev. Rose.

The Government have lost the confidence of this House on air quality. More than 50,000 people are dying prematurely each year because of air pollution, and many more are suffering associated health conditions. With no guarantee from either the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State that last December's strict EU laws will be introduced post-Brexit, how can the country trust the Government to ensure cleaner air in future?

**Dr Coffey:** The hon. Lady refers to a lack of trust in this Government. I think that that is the pot calling the kettle black. It was the Labour Government who introduced fiscal incentives for people to switch to diesel cars, and it was the Labour Government who signed up to these guidelines. Air quality is better now than it was under a Labour Government. That is an uncontrovertible fact.

**Mr Speaker:** Or even an incontrovertible fact.

#### Hill Farmers

3. **Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab):** What assessment she has made of the potential effect on hill farmers of the UK leaving the common agricultural policy. [908254]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom):** Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

Hill farmers play a critical role not just in producing high-quality food, but in delivering environmental benefits for all the public in our beautiful landscapes. Leaving the EU gives us a great opportunity to look again at their contribution to delivering our very clear twin ambitions to have both a world-leading food and farming industry and, at the same time, a better environment for future generations.

**Helen Goodman:** I am grateful for that response from the Secretary of State. Of course, paying for environmental goods will only work as a strategy if the hill farms are financially viable. She knows that some of them are earning £14,000 a year, so income support mechanisms will still be necessary. Can she guarantee that in future trade negotiations she will not allow a flood of cheap New Zealand lamb that will put them out of business?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady will be aware that we have undertaken, from our very first days in the job, to commit to the levels of current support for all pillar one payments until 2020 to give that continuity to farmers and businesses. We have committed to our consultation on the future of the food and farming sector in our 25-year plan, and that will look closely at the level of support that is needed. I absolutely agree that we will need to look at what we do for the future to ensure that hill farmers remain viable and sustainable.

**Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con):** The Secretary of State is right that there is now a real opportunity to create a system of rural support that is bespoke to the United Kingdom and that is an environmental, economic and social policy. In that respect, giving Ministers the opportunity to move the money up the hill to protect those who are clinging on economically is an opportunity that I hope she will grasp.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is extremely knowledgeable in this area and his input will be extremely useful when it comes to our consultation. He is exactly right that this is a unique opportunity to create a policy that works for us, not for 28 EU member states. That is exactly what we will be consulting on and what we will be delivering.

**Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD):** Happy birthday from me, too, Mr Speaker.

I wonder whether the Secretary of State or, indeed, the chairman of the Rural Payments Agency would tolerate waiting 13 and a half months for their salary cheque to arrive, yet that is what 50 hill farmers have had to do as they wait for their December 2015 single farm payments. Hundreds more waited up to a year to get their payments. They have been told that in the 2016-17 year they will be at the back of the queue to receive their payments if they farm on the commons. Will she commit to ensuring that those 50 are paid immediately, and will she also commit that those commoners, those hill farmers, who were at the back of the queue last year will be at the front of the queue this year?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is just not apprised of the facts, which are that there are very few—[*Interruption.*] No. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) shouts 2,000 from the Front Bench, but people have received a payment and there are some challenges to those payments that are awaiting settlement. I would like to say to the hon. Gentleman that the RPA, under Mark Grimshaw, has strived to settle all outstanding claims. There are people challenging them, understandably, but that is what it is. Everybody has received a payment, apart from a very small number where issues such as probate are concerned, or where there are legal or inspection challenges. This year, many commoners have been paid across the board and we are up at 92.8% of payments so far, which is a good achievement compared with last year.

**Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP):** Happy birthday from these Benches, too, Mr Speaker.

Given that lamb as a product is facing large tariffs in its most important market, farm payments will become more important than ever. Long term is not just the three years to 2020. The farming Minister, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), has said that we will get at least the same amount, if not more. Yesterday I challenged the Secretary of State for Scotland and he said:

“There is no suggestion that funding to Scottish agriculture will be cut”—[*Official Report*, 18 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 922.] after 2020. Can the Secretary of State offer the same assurance that payments will not go down after 2020?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The assurance I can give the hon. Gentleman is that we will be looking at how to achieve our twin ambitions of a world-leading food and farming sector while ensuring that we leave the environment in a better state. We will be looking at the facts and then we will decide what level of funding is required to support those ambitions.

### Farming Regulation

4. **Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the regulation of farming. [908255]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom):** One of the great opportunities for farmers as we leave the EU is that of scrapping some of the bureaucratic rules that have limited their ability to maximise productivity and profitability sustainably—for example, the rule that dictates how many crops of what type they must grow, or the excessive number of inspections and farm visits to which they are subject.

**Bob Blackman:** Long life, Mr Speaker.

I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. As we free ourselves from the straitjacket of the common agricultural policy, which has added so many bureaucratic burdens to our farmers, what assessment has she made of the financial burden that our farmers are facing as a result of the common agricultural policy? What extra freedom will that mean for our farmers in the future?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to this issue. It is something that we are determined to address as we develop new policies. Unnecessary rules cost farmers millions of pounds and up to 300,000 man hours each year, which says nothing of the lost opportunities. I will be paying very close attention to these issues in the coming months, as we look for better solutions that work for us rather than 28 EU member states.

**Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** I do not want to be nasty to anyone, especially on this day of all days—your birthday, Mr Speaker—but the fact is that these Government Front Benchers are sleepwalking into Brexit. We have heard so much from the Secretary of State before the Brexit vote; now we hear nothing. Our farmers and our people in the countryside know nothing about what is going to happen. They fear a new agricultural devastation in our countryside. What is she going to do about it?

**Andrea Leadsom:** If that is the hon. Gentleman's definition of not being nasty to anyone, that does not really work very well. I am not sure that Labour has much support in the countryside because it has done nothing for country folk. It is the Government who have ensured that we continue with support until 2020 and with all agri-environment schemes that are signed up before we leave the EU for their lifetime, to ensure that continuity for business confidence. It is the Government who are committed to a world-leading food and farming industry, while at the same time to an environment that is better than we inherited. Those are great ambitions and we will achieve them.

**Bill Wiggin** (North Herefordshire) (Con) *rose*—

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con) *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** What a delicious choice. Mr William Wiggin.

**Bill Wiggin:** Having heard what my right hon. Friend has said, and knowing what sort of Minister she is, I cannot really believe that her team were fully briefed properly when they saw the nitrate vulnerable zones regulation rolled out to new parts of England.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I would be happy to meet and discuss that issue separately with my hon. Friend, but I can absolutely assure him that we looked very carefully at this issue. As ever, there is a balance between successful sustainable farming, food productivity and what is right for our environment.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): May I also wish you a happy birthday, Mr Speaker?

Earlier this month, the Secretary of State told the Oxford farming conference how excited she was about “scrapping the rules that hold us back”, saying that we could all think of at least one EU rule that we would not miss. That may be true, but I am sure that each of us can also think of at least one rule that we would miss and would want to keep. Will the Secretary of State share her choice with us?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I have already shared a few choices—the three-crop rule, farm inspections, some of the rules around billboards and so on. I know that the hon. Lady cares a great deal about this matter, as I do. In the great repeal Bill, we will be bringing all environmental legislation—all EU legislation—into UK law, so that, as the Prime Minister said in her speech, the day after we leave the EU, the rules will be the same as the day before we left the EU. That is really important for continuity. At that point, we will be able to look at and change those rules for the better to suit the needs of the United Kingdom.

**Rachael Maskell:** If only it was that easy. Of course, that was an incredibly vague answer—not a specific EU regulation mentioned. Those of us who value EU regulations, which set high standards for food safety, the environment and animal welfare, will not find the Secretary of State's answer reassuring today. Of course I assume that some kind of objective criteria have to be applied and that rules and regulations are not just going

to be thrown on to the Brexit bonfire on the Secretary of State's whim. If that is correct, can she tell us what those objective criteria are?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am sorry if the hon. Lady perhaps did not hear my previous answer. I made it extremely clear that the day after we leave the EU the rules will be the same as the day before. After that, we will be seeking to meet our twin ambitions of a world-leading food and farming industry and an environment that is better than the one we inherited. To give her one example of a manifesto commitment that Labour did not have in its manifesto, we will push for high animal welfare standards to be incorporated into international trade agreements.

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con) The events of the—

**Mr Speaker:** It is Question 5.

#### Flood Defence Schemes

5. **Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): How many flood defence schemes are planned for construction as a result of Government investment up to 2021. [908256]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** The Government are investing £2.5 billion between 2015 and 2021, delivering at least 1,500 new flood defence schemes and better protecting 300,000 homes. In my hon. Friend's constituency, Government investment of £121 million is being made, delivering 18 schemes, better protecting more than 30,000 homes.

**Matt Warman:** I am afraid that I was overwrought with the excitement of your birthday, Mr Speaker, and forgot parliamentary procedure.

The Minister will know from the events of last week that my constituency is under great threat of flooding. I am sure that she will join the Prime Minister and I in praising the response of the emergency services under the threatening tidal surge. Does she agree, therefore, not only that the Boston barrier cannot come soon enough, but that it offers a huge economic opportunity that will allow Boston to be protected from flooding and to seize a new tourism dawn that could be improved with a lock?

**Dr Coffey:** What a “fantastic” idea. A design for the Boston barrier has been considered by the Environment Agency and is currently subject to a public inquiry under the Transport and Works Act Order. Alongside the famous Boston stump, it could be a compelling reason to ensure that we visit this special part of rural England. I personally extend my thanks to the Environment Agency, councils, emergency services and volunteers who helped to ensure that people were safe last weekend.

**Richard Arkless** (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Happy birthday to you, Mr Speaker. Many small businesses across the UK that operate in flood risk areas are facing enormous flood insurance excesses. Will the Ministers please commit to persuading the Treasury to extend the Flood Re scheme for affordable insurance to small businesses? If there are floods again not only will individual companies go out of business; many high streets in my constituency might actually disappear.

**Dr Coffey:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that flood defences are a matter for his Government. He raised the same point in the Adjournment debate yesterday and if he had waited for my reply, he would have heard my response.

### Tree Planting

7. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What support the Government are making available for tree planting. [908259]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** We all love trees. Woodland planting in England is supported through the countryside stewardship woodland creation grant. To further encourage tree planting we launched the second round of the woodland creation planning grant and the woodland carbon fund. We are committed to planting 1 million trees for schools during this Parliament in partnership with the Woodland Trust and other community trusts.

**Sir David Amess:** Happy birthday from the residents of Southend West, Mr Speaker.

Will the Minister join me in congratulating Southend-on-Sea Borough Council on its memorial tree planting scheme, of which I am about to take advantage? Does she agree that planting a tree in memory of a deceased person is a fitting tribute and makes an excellent contribution to the overall quality of the environment?

**Dr Coffey:** I commend Southend-on-Sea Borough Council for its tree planting scheme, and I personally acknowledge my hon. Friend's recent bereavement with the loss of his mother, Maud. I certainly agree with his tribute because trees can provide a longstanding reminder of the departed and offer bereaved loved ones a special place to visit that is living and growing. I know that from personal experience of the trees planted in Wrexham cemetery.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Having planted some 3,500 trees on my farm back home, I am aware of the incentives given by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Will the Minister indicate what long-term incentives there are for farmers to plant trees, and for the participation of community groups and schools in that process?

**Dr Coffey:** As I have outlined, the countryside stewardship scheme acts as an incentive for tree planting. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is leading by example but, as he understands, the encouragement in Northern Ireland is led by his Government there.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Ah yes, we can learn all about tree planting in Taunton Deane.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): Perhaps planting a birthday tree would be a good idea, Mr Speaker.

Does the Minister agree that planting trees is an important part of keeping the whole environment in balance, and that the environment should be made a

cornerstone of our post-Brexit agenda? There are enormous opportunities to sell our technologies worldwide and to show that we are world leaders. At home, we should weave the environment into everything to do with our economy and our social aims so that we increase productivity and security, benefit everyone and leave the environment in a better state than it was in when we inherited it.

**Dr Coffey:** My hon. Friend is right to point out the importance of the tree, which can have multiple benefits, as she pointed out. Late last year, I visited St Vincent de Paul Primary School in Liverpool to support its tree-planting exercises. I can assure my hon. Friend that the environment is at the heart of the Government today, not just post-Brexit.

### Rural Economy

8. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the effect on the rural economy of the UK's decision to leave the EU. [908260]

9. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the effect on the rural economy of the UK's decision to leave the EU. [908262]

**The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice):** Leaving the EU represents a great opportunity for the rural economy because we will be free to design from first principles policies that really deliver for our own farmers and our own rural communities, without having to accept a centralised, one-size-fits-all policy set by the EU.

**Patricia Gibson:** Happy birthday to you from me, Mr Speaker. President-elect Trump spoke last week of the UK securing a very quick trade deal with the US once it has left the EU, which has led to fears that that could mean harsh compromises on issues such as the environment, animal welfare laws and food safety. Will the Secretary of State today reassure the House and people across the United Kingdom that any trade deal with the US will not involve such compromises, which would jeopardise our food safety and animal welfare laws? Will she reassure us that she understands that a very quick deal is not necessarily the same as a very good deal for the consumer or the producer?

**George Eustice:** The Secretary of State made it clear earlier that the Conservative party is the only party that made a commitment to reflect animal welfare standards in trade negotiations, and that remains a commitment of the Government. There are opportunities for our agricultural sector in the US, particularly in sectors such as dairy, and possibly in sectors such as lamb as well. My colleagues in the Department for International Trade will obviously lead on these matters once we leave the European Union, but there will be potential opportunities for UK industry as well.

**Gavin Newlands:** In his visit on Monday to Gryffe Wraes farm, which I visited last week, the farming Minister will have heard many Brexit concerns, one of which is about the potentially catastrophic impact on Scotland's rural economy of ending free movement. At

the Oxford farming conference, the Secretary of State hinted at some relaxation of that for the agri-sector. Can the Minister elaborate on that and assure the sector that taking on seasonal workers will not be a costly bureaucratic nightmare?

**George Eustice:** I had a very constructive meeting with members of NFU Scotland on Monday. We had a meeting for almost two hours, where we discussed a range of issues that are of concern to the industry, but also some of the opportunities that we have. As we move forward, we will work closely with all the devolved Administrations and with industry throughout the UK. When it comes to labour, we have heard the representations. We will be looking at those issues. It is a Home Office lead, but we are contributing to that debate.

11. [908266] **Andrew Bingham** (High Peak) (Con): Can my hon. Friend assure me that, when he makes his assessment of the impact on farming of leaving the EU, he will actually listen to the farmers and not the so-called experts from bodies such as the National Trust, who seem to be intent on following their own agenda, with scant regard for the farmers who are trying to make a living on the hill farms in High Peak and across the country?

**George Eustice:** I can reassure my hon. Friend that, having grown up on a farm and worked in the farming industry for 10 years, I will be very much listening to farmers and their views, and wanting to learn from their experience. We will be listening to everybody as we develop future policy.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): We hear the reassurances that Ministers give about seasonal agricultural workers, but my hon. Friend will be aware that a great many farms and rural businesses rely on EU workers as part of their regular staffing requirement throughout the year. Will Ministers bear in mind the very real labour shortages that exist in much of the countryside as they discuss with ministerial colleagues how we tighten our immigration controls?

**George Eustice:** One of the things that I ran on my own farm was a very large soft fruit enterprise, where I had experience of employing over 200 people, so I am familiar with the challenges that certain sectors in agriculture bring to me. We are in discussion with a number of the leading players in this area to try to get an understanding of their needs, and it goes without saying that we are in discussion with colleagues in other Departments.

13. [908268] **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): In Tuesday's debate, the Secretary of State mentioned that a Green Paper on the long term for the environment and the rural economy is forthcoming, but given that we have been promised that no powers will be repatriated to Westminster from the EU, does she agree that it is obvious that any new rural framework should be the responsibility of the Scottish Government?

**George Eustice:** These issues are very much a matter that we will be discussing with all the devolved Administrations as we move forward. The Prime Minister made that absolutely clear in her excellent speech earlier this week. We are going to discuss this right across the UK and agree what the right UK approach should be.

## Natural Environment

10. **Oliver Colvile** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): What plans her Department has to increase awareness of the potential benefits of the natural environment. [908263]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** This Government established the Natural Capital Committee, which we re-established in this current Parliament. We will also be publishing our 25-year environment plan in due course. We want to help everyone to understand how a healthy environment improves their lives and how spending time in the natural environment benefits health and wellbeing.

**Oliver Colvile:** Live long and prosper, Mr Speaker.

As my hon. Friend knows, I have been running a national campaign to save the hedgehog. She may also know that 2 February marks National Hedgehog Day. What can she do to ensure that young people are involved in the campaign to save our wildlife, obviously including the hedgehog, in the run-up to 2 February?

**Dr Coffey:** I commend my hon. Friend for his continuing support of the hedgehog. The Government support efforts to make our gardens more hedgehog-friendly through the creation of havens, and the campaigns within local communities to work together to look out for the hedgehog, including that of BBC Suffolk; I encourage him to get BBC Devon to do the same. We do have a proud tradition, and we want to continue that with our next generation.

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab) *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** On hedgehogs and related matters?

**Mary Creagh:** Indeed, Mr Speaker. Many happy returns.

Hedgehogs and other wild mammals, and precious bird species, are currently protected under European Union regulations. The Environmental Audit Committee's report on the effects on the natural environment of leaving the EU recommended a new environmental protection Act. Has the Minister had a chance to read the report, and what is her assessment of our recommendation?

**Dr Coffey:** I read it from cover to cover on the day it came out, as is appropriate for a Minister in serving the needs of the House. I can honestly say that our intention is to bring environmental legislation into law on the day that we leave the European Union. As a consequence, we see no need for any future legislation at this stage.

## Topical Questions

T1. [908270] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom):** I would like to place on record my sincere thanks for the commitment and

hard work of the military, Environment Agency staff, local councils, volunteers and the emergency services during last weekend's tidal surge. While a small number of properties were flooded, more than half a million homes and businesses were protected from flooding along the east coast as a result of their efforts. I am sure the whole House would like to join me in expressing our gratitude.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** The consumer prices index is at the highest it has been for over two and half years, largely driven by rising food prices. Since the Government stubbornly refuse to measure and act on levels of food poverty, what will the Secretary of State do for the millions of people her Government have ignored for years now who cannot afford to eat?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Food prices are steady and have been reducing. There is a very recent small uptick, but generally food inflation has been low. As the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), explained to the hon. Lady earlier, we do monitor the levels of expenditure on food very closely.

T2. [908271] **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): May I endorse what the Secretary of State has said about the superb work done by the emergency services and other voluntary groups along the east coast? What are she and her Department doing to support community interest companies, which can harness both the public and private sectors in finding additional funds for coastal and other defences?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** We as a Government continue to invest in flood defences right around our coasts—a feature that my hon. Friend and I share in our constituencies. I reiterate our thanks to our emergency services and the military who helped people at risk last year. We continue to invest so that fewer homes and businesses will be at risk in future.

**Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): I was originally told that the study by the Small Area Health Statistics Unit investigating the potential link between emissions from municipal waste incinerators and health outcomes would be published in 2014, then 2015. In October last year, through a parliamentary question, I was told that it would be published this year. Is the Minister confident that it will at last be published this year?

**Dr Coffey:** That is a timely reminder from the hon. Gentleman. I will look into the matter straight away and write to him.

T3. [908272] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the Secretary of State agree to visit the "Slowing the Flow" project in Pickering? It is a natural flood alleviation scheme part-funded by DEFRA, which saves the taxpayer about £15 million compared with a similar, traditional scheme. Will she meet the local flood authority and the Yorkshire dales partnership to see what has been done and what could be done with some of the £15 million that the Department has allocated to other, similar projects?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I would, of course, be delighted to visit my hon. Friend's constituency. If we can get our diaries to work, that would be truly delightful. I would particularly like to see the success of the Pickering project, which has been one of the building blocks in securing the £15 million of funding that we announced in November last year, which is dedicated specifically to natural flood management schemes across the UK. This money will let us test new approaches to see how natural flood resources can help us in the future.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We do not have time to waste. Since the Westminster Hall debate in December, 4,007 elephants have been killed for their tusks. With China introducing a total ban on the ivory trade by the end of this year, will the Government reconsider their proposed and unworkable partial ban, which will still result in criminals being able to trade in ivory, and will the Government move immediately to a total ban on ivory, as Labour would?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am sorry to say that the hon. Lady is talking nonsense. The Government are not proposing a partial ban. At the meetings I held in China and Vietnam at the illegal wildlife trade conference last year, we were very clear that we will do everything possible not just to enforce a ban on the trading of post-'47 ivory—enforcement is absolutely key—but to minimise exemptions. The hon. Lady needs to work with us to assure the protection of the species, not make party political points about it.

T5. [908274] **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): My US friends used to say, "Enjoy the dash between the dates on your tombstone," by way of happy birthday wishes. I merely wish you a happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

The Vale of Evesham is proud of its horticultural industry. Many of the local growers and food produce companies are highly reliant on seasonal workers. May I add to the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) by asking: can we please seriously consider bringing back a seasonal agricultural workers scheme?

**The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice):** As I said earlier, I have experience in the soft fruit industry. I know many of the growers in Evesham, and indeed I have had correspondence recently with Angus Davison, from one of the largest growers in the west midlands, on this issue. We understand the concerns and we are in discussions with departmental colleagues on it. We want to get the right approach so that we can control immigration but ensure that we have the labour where it is required.

T4. [908273] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Minister was doubtless reminded by the National Farmers Union Scotland on Monday that 90% of this country's beef and lamb exports are to the EU. For the farmers concerned, the Prime Minister's threat to walk away from the single market with no deal would not be bad; it could leave them facing tariffs of up to 20%, and that would be catastrophic. What assurances

can he give to the farmers and crofters in my constituency that he and the Government will not leave them exposed in that way?

**George Eustice:** The Prime Minister gave the assurance that we seek a good deal, and that no deal is better than a bad deal; I do not think that anybody can disagree with that. I will simply say that in food and drink alone, we have a trade deficit with the EU of some £10 billion, so the EU has a great interest in having tariff-free access to the UK market.

T7. [908276] **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Following the success of the charge for plastic bags in reducing the amount of plastic going into our seas, and the welcome announcement on limiting the use of microbeads, the next big issue we need to address is single-use plastic bottles. Can the Secretary of State update the House on what plans she has to cut the number of plastic bottles polluting our seas and beaches?

**Dr Coffey:** My hon. Friend is right to point out that the consultation on microbeads is out there. It contains a call for wider evidence on the need to tackle other plastics. We are developing a new litter strategy, which may well address this issue. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is personally interested in the matter and intends to set up an innovation fund that may explore new ideas to tackle it.

T6. [908275] **Mr Douglas Carswell** (Clacton) (UKIP): Under the common agricultural policy, an enormous amount of subsidy is used to encourage very intensive farming. Although subsidies to help farmers need to continue, could Ministers also look at some of the ideas for rewilding advocated by George Monbiot and others and see whether, after the common agricultural policy, our subsidies could encourage the restoration of the environment rather than its conservation?

**George Eustice:** We will be looking at representations from all people. If we want to improve the farmed environment, we have to look at the whole farmed environment and not restrict our ambitions to the uplands or, indeed, the moorland areas. We are looking in a range of areas at how we can improve soil management and water quality.

T8. [908277] **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): Will my hon. Friend update the House on the proportion of 2016 single farm payments that have been made and progress on that with our Cornish farmers?

**George Eustice:** As the Secretary of State said earlier, we have now paid 92.8% of basic payment scheme claims for the current year. As a fellow Cornishman, I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that 97% of claims in Cornwall have now been paid.

**Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Hill farmers in my constituency and elsewhere in the country will be concerned that their interests should not be compromised in any free trade deal with New Zealand. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that she will fight for farmers in any free trade deal and ensure that they

are not put out of the market because of cheap imports of New Zealand lamb? Will she fight for farmers in the post-Brexit world?

**Andrea Leadsom:** It will be for us, as a free and sovereign Parliament, to determine the terms of any free trade agreements. I have already read out our manifesto commitment on the highest levels of animal welfare. Our manifesto also commits to food safety and traceability. In our ambition to be a world-leading food and farming sector, we intend to promote those commitments around the world.

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): There is a continuing problem of beam trawling, fly shooting and electronic pulse fishing in UK waters. Not only are those practices environmental vandalism, but they are having a devastating impact on local fishing communities. Will the Minister assure the House that he is doing everything he can to address the problem?

**George Eustice:** I am aware of the concerns, particularly about pulse trawling in the southern North sea. I have asked CEFAS, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, to look at the issue, do a review of current literature and give me a report on what we know about the science. In addition, there is a working group in the EU on the matter.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker. At the time of the negotiations on the now stalled TTIP deal, the US Agriculture Secretary said that the EU needed to rethink its current bans on chlorine-washed chicken and beef from cattle raised with growth hormones. British consumers do not want those products on their shelves, but given that we are now in a much weaker negotiating position, how can the Minister reassure us that the Government will not allow them into the UK?

**George Eustice:** The US represents US interests in negotiations; the UK Government will represent the UK in any future trade negotiations. As I made clear earlier, we will not compromise on issues such as animal welfare and food safety.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

### Occupied Palestinian Territories

1. **Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What support the Church of England is giving to Christians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [908240]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman):** The Bishop of Southwark is currently visiting the west bank and Gaza and the Archbishop of Canterbury also intends to visit later this year. He is very keen that the House should know about the work of Embrace, whereby the Church of England is in partnership with 23 Palestinian Christian organisations to end poverty and bring justice to the Occupied Palestinian Territories—to Muslims, Christians and Jews alike.

**Helen Goodman:** Palestinian Christians are suffering the effects of the settlement. Two weeks ago, I stood on the hills behind Bethlehem and saw how the six-lane motorway and the wall carve through Palestinian farmland. Their houses are being demolished and I met a young man whose family had lost 18 trees, which are now being sold on the internet for £30,000. When the Archbishop and the Bishop go to the occupied territories, please could they make vocal their witness to the injustice that is happening?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** Speaking out about injustice is precisely what Church leaders do, and they do it well. When the Archbishop visits, I am sure that he will look closely at the injustice that the hon. Lady described. It is scandalous that infant mortality is increasing in the occupied territories when, on the whole, it is in decline around the world. The Church supports the Anglican Al Ahli hospital, where 1,000 children and more than 15,000 adults are treated, so we give practical support to the territories.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): There is an increasingly militant settler movement that treats Palestine like its own biblical theme park. To what does my right hon. Friend attribute the radical decline in the numbers of Palestinian Christians living in the west bank?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** Both my right hon. Friend and the hon. Lady have the advantage over me in having actually been to the occupied territories. I have not been there. Sadly, there is a huge pressure on Christians in the middle east. About 8% of the population of the middle east is Christian, with 80% concentrated in Egypt. As we saw at the Open Doors launch in Parliament last week, religious persecution is one of the main drivers of out-migration.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Best wishes, Mr Speaker. Will the right hon. Lady consider visiting Christians and others in the Palestinian west bank very soon? Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), I too saw the land owned by 53 Christian families near Beit Jala, and the monastery and the convent. Despite protests and support from Christian leaders around the world, the wall proposal is going ahead through those lands. I hope the right hon. Lady will visit very soon.

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** I would love to have the opportunity to visit this very troubled part of our world and to see for myself the impressions gained by several hon. Members. The Church actively encourages its members to go and see the reality of life for Palestinian Christians. About 750,000 parishioners have taken advantage of this opportunity. I hope to add to their number.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest, as I was on the same visit as the hon. Members for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). It might surprise people to know that there are Christians in the Palestinian Cabinet. The Palestinian Authority are responsible for both Jesus's birthplace and his family home. May I encourage my right hon. Friend to encourage the Church to develop as close relationships as possible between the Church in this country and Christian communities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** That is exactly the purpose of Embrace the Middle East. We are in partnership with 23 Palestinian Christian organisations. The value of the support we give through this scheme is equivalent to £1.25 million.

### Human Trafficking/Vulnerable Women

2. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to (a) tackle human trafficking and (b) support vulnerable women. [908241]

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** The Church of England has launched a new project specifically to equip and resource Church of England dioceses to tackle modern slavery and human trafficking. The Lord Bishop of Derby has pioneered this practical support to tackling trafficking. Working together with local charities and the Mothers' Union, the Church seeks to support vulnerable women alongside those who suffer domestic violence.

**Chi Onwurah:** Happy birthday, Mr Speaker. I pay tribute to the work of the Church and to the many generous Geordies who help to support vulnerable and trafficked women in Newcastle, which is proud to call itself a city of sanctuary. Unfortunately, it is not enough and not every woman has the support they need. What is the Church doing to work more effectively with local authorities and police forces, which are suffering extreme cuts, to ensure that every vulnerable woman has someone to turn to?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** The Lord Bishop of Derby's initiative I referred to is known as the Clewer Initiative. The objective of the Church is to share best practice in Derby with different dioceses. For example, Portsmouth diocese has expressed an interest in taking up what has been learned in Derby. Tackling trafficking and violence is about spotting the signs. Training will be given to parishioners and to members of the public, so that we all have our eyes opened to what is going on around us.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): Adult victims of human trafficking are looked after by the most excellent Government scheme, which is administered on an umbrella basis by the Salvation Army. Many of the people who actually look after the victims are Christian groups. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is exactly how it should work?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** I am sure we all remember the work of Sir Anthony Steen in raising our awareness of the terrible blight of trafficking. It is often down to local voluntary groups to provide that arm of practical support to the victims of trafficking, who are all around us in our society.

### Prisoners and Prison Chaplains

3. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): How the Church of England plans to support prisoners and prison chaplains across the prison estate. [908242]

6. **Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): How the Church of England plans to support prisoners and prison chaplains across the prison estate. [908245]

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** The work of prison chaplains is especially important given the current pressures in the prison system. The Bishop to Prisons, the Lord Bishop of Rochester, will shortly be bringing Church of England chaplains together for a training and support event.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. My private Member's Bill combating homelessness is currently proceeding through the House. One aspect of the Bill is to help ex-offenders leaving prison to find a proper place in society. What further action can the Church take to prepare ex-offenders for a life outside prison so that they do not reoffend in the future?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** I commend my hon. Friend for his private Member's Bill. We are all keen to see it become law and for action to flow from it. The Bishop of Rochester is sponsoring a new national initiative called "Prison Hope" designed to increase the level of volunteering around prisons, and I have seen it working in practice in my own constituency. A charity called Yellow Ribbon provides prisons with mentors from the parish to help offenders prepare for life outside and for going straight, with a job, a place to live, clothes to wear and some money to live on.

**Mr Nuttall:** Will my right hon. Friend explain what measures are in place to monitor prisoners' commitment to the Christian faith after their release from prison? It is sometimes suggested that prisoners only start attending church services in the belief and hope that it will help them gain parole. If prisoners at least know that their continued adherence to the Christian faith is being monitored, they might think twice before trying to take advantage of the genuine support offered by prison chaplains.

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** Prison chaplains are highly experienced and welcome all those who show an interest in matters of faith, but they have become reasonably expert at spotting those for whom it is perhaps a means to a short-term end. It is important to remember that the primary aim is not to check ex-offenders—there is a statutory process for that, not a Church process—but to encourage whatever degree of personal faith, however small or doubtful, might possibly provide a resource to help an offender go straight.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** Many prisoners are veterans who have served in the Army and other armed forces. What deliberations has the right hon. Lady had with veterans charities and Army charities to ensure that specific help is given to veterans in prisons to support their spiritual or physical health?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** I have not had any specific conversations with the Army charities, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We have seen from the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), whose Bill is focused on homelessness, that there is a worrying nexus or correlation in relation to veterans leaving the Army and sometimes ending up homeless or getting caught up in a life of crime. All institutions, including the Church of England, need to work together to stop that happening.

## Social and Digital Media

4. **Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con):** What steps the Church of England has taken to reach new audiences through social and digital media. [908243]

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** In the last year, the Church of England has been promoting a range of new social media projects. For example, 750,000 people watched the "Joy to the World" videos—among them, Mr Speaker, was your chaplain, which is perhaps cause alone to share a piece of birthday cake with her today. The Church is also engaging over other social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook.

**Oliver Colville:** What is the Church of England doing to promote the Book of Common Prayer, especially traditional evensong, online?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** It is merely four years since the 350th anniversary of the Book of Common Prayer, and I am delighted to be able to reassure my hon. Friend that the service of evensong is showing significant growth, including, interestingly enough, among students and young professionals. Obviously, every church can now easily broadcast its services over the internet, and clearly evensong and the Book of Common Prayer find a place in our society today.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab):** Many constituents have written to me concerned about religious persecution around the world. Does the right hon. Lady agree that digital and social media, through their very interconnectedness, offer an opportunity to promote interfaith tolerance?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** I could not agree more. The digital world opens the world to our own eyes, and we become aware of the suffering of those who are being persecuted for their faith, which is something that our country stands up to combat. The Church will play its role in making more of us aware of religious persecution and seeing what we can do in action and prayer to combat it.

## Lead Theft

5. **Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con):** What assessment the Church of England has made of recent trends in the level of theft of lead from church buildings. [908244]

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** The Cathedral and Church Buildings Division works closely with Historic England to monitor lead theft occurrences. The Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013 has substantially reduced the instances of churches having their lead roofs stolen, but I know that in the diocese of Southwell and Nottingham, lead theft remains a persistent problem.

**Tom Pursglove:** Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

St John's church in Corby Old Village has suffered a significant number of lead thefts in recent years, which has resulted in very high repair bills. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning those who are responsible

for those thefts, and will she also congratulate the congregation on their spirited efforts to put things right?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** I am sure that we all condemn thieves who steal lead from church buildings, not least because communities face very big bills for its replacement. My own parish church is in the same position. After such thefts, it becomes difficult to insure churches again.

I commend the congregation at my hon. Friend's local church. I point them to the ChurchCare website, which shows that there are now ways of fixing lead, and marking systems for signature materials to help to deter thieves.

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

*The hon. Member for Gainsborough, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—*

### National Audit Office Expenditure

7. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What progress the Commission has made in reducing the expenditure of the NAO. [908247]

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): My Committee approves the NAO's future plans and resource requirements. The Commission is conscious of the need for the NAO to practise what it preaches in terms of value for money, and also to have the right capability to perform its duties.

Since 2010-11, the NAO has, under our direction, reduced the cost of its work by 26% in real terms, excluding new local government work. The NAO's budget is set to ensure that it has the resources that it needs to discharge its statutory functions to Parliament, while also meeting the external quality standards that govern its audit work.

**Henry Smith:** Now that this country is leaving the European Union with the clear vision set out the other day by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, can my hon. Friend say what impact he believes that that will have on the NAO and the auditing of its accounts?

**Sir Edward Leigh:** It is obviously too early to say what the full impact of Brexit will be, but I can say that the NAO's scrutiny will focus initially on the capacity and capability of Departments to deliver an effective and efficient exit process. The NAO is now the auditor of the new Department for Exiting the European Union, and will work with that Department and with the Treasury to ensure that disclosures in annual reports and accounts provide a transparent and balanced view of the impact on individual Departments. In my view, the whole point of this process is, indeed, to increase transparency and parliamentary accountability as we take back control of our own money.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): More than 60% of the existing NAO reports and investigations cover matters that exclude Scotland. Does the Chairman agree that Barnett consequentials should arise from that expenditure?

**Sir Edward Leigh:** I serve on the Procedure Committee, and we do discuss such matters. This is more a matter for the Committee than for the commission, but I can say that it is undoubtedly true that there will be Barnett consequentials.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

### Low-carbon Economy

8. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): In what way Church of England asset investments support a low-carbon economy. [908248]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman):** I am delighted to be able to announce that last month the Church of England received three awards at the Investment & Pensions Europe awards ceremony, including the award for climate-related risk management, which recognised, among other things, the Church of England's comprehensive climate policy and commitment to ensuring the reduction carbon in its own portfolio.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I welcome the Church of England's moves in this regard, but how does commitment to a low-carbon future sit with reports today that the Church has given the go-ahead for fracking on Church land?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** It is not a question of a Church of England go-ahead. This is part of Government policy. On Tuesday, the Church released an updated briefing paper on shale gas and fracking. It does not endorse or reject the outright prospect of fracking, but fracking is acceptable to the Church only if it turns on three points: the place of the shale gas in the low-carbon economy, the adequacy and robustness of regulation, and the robustness of local planning. Of course the Church sympathises with the concerns of individuals and communities that are directly affected by it.

## HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

*The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—*

### Northern Estate

9. **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): What the timetable is for work on the northern estate to be completed. [908249]

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): The target date for completion of work on the Northern Estate is November 2023, which is the date by which the buildings will have been reoccupied.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Chris Bryant.

**Chris Bryant:** Happy birthday, Mr Speaker—although I recall that you did not wish me a happy birthday, or even call me, on my birthday last week.

**Mr Speaker:** Inexplicably, I was not aware of that great matter at the time.

**Chris Bryant:** I am grateful for that answer from the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), but the key thing about the date is that that is when the decant from this building is meant to have started, and there is a series of decisions that knock on one from another. If the Government do not bring forward the motion so we can start debating what is going to happen to the Palace of Westminster, is there not a real danger we will put that project and the public finances at risk?

**Tom Brake:** I certainly agree that it is important that we have a debate on this matter very soon, and I hope that is going to happen, but although there are linkages between the Northern Estate and the restoration and renewal project, it is my understanding that any delay on R and R would have an insignificant impact on the Northern Estate programme itself.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

### Tourism

10. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What steps the Church of England has taken to promote churches and cathedrals as tourist destinations. [908251]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman):** The Church of England actively promotes its 42 cathedrals as visitor centres, and together they contribute

£220 million to the national economy. There are 10 million visitors to them annually, and 7,000 people are employed by them, supported by 15,000 dedicated volunteers.

**Christian Matheson:** Is the right hon. Lady aware of the excellent work of the clergy at Chester cathedral in increasing visitor numbers through tourist attractions, which of course has the added bonus of getting people into the cathedral for its original purpose of worship, and is there a lesson for other cathedrals to learn from this?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** Yes, and I encourage all Members to visit Chester cathedral. Last year I invited the vice dean, Canon Peter Howell-Jones, to come and talk to us about how he had turned the fortunes of Chester cathedral around, making it a very attractive visitor attraction, and introducing a brewery and a falconry centre, opening the tower for tours and, intriguingly, removing the entry charge for all of that. He has now moved on to a new appointment and I wish him every success in that new cathedral.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

Torbay as a tourist destination is blessed with places like Cockington parish church and the historic Paignton parish church. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that those who go to a church find the Holy Spirit, particularly if they are in distress, and an easy way of finding a place for prayer, rather than a ticket desk?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** Yes. I have just been talking about Chester cathedral, where visitor numbers significantly increased with the removal of the entry charge. A church has always got to be a place where we can all go to find our spiritual base and recharge our spiritual batteries and, as my hon. Friend says, meet with the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

## Speaker's Statement

10.37 am

**Mr Speaker:** I should like to make a brief statement to the House.

The House of Commons Service has participated in Stonewall's workplace equality index for the past five years. Stonewall is the largest charity in Europe in support of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights. This year, Stonewall has announced that we have achieved a place in its index of the top 100 LGBT-friendly employers, ranking 28th with a score of 155 out of 200 points. Colleagues, this is an impressive rise of 88 places on last year's index ranking of 116th, and the first time that we have been named in the published top 100. In addition to this score, ParliOUT, the parliamentary workplace equality network for LGBT equality, has been named one of Stonewall's "highly commended network groups". Among its achievements in 2016, ParliOUT members raised money to buy the rainbow flag that flew over Parliament for the first time during London Pride weekend in June.

I should like to thank stakeholders from across Parliament for their support in this achievement, led by the redoubtable Anne Foster and her colleagues in the House of Commons Diversity and Inclusion team, and an achievement which I confess I have been passionately championing as Speaker. I hope that this news demonstrates our commitment to being an inclusive employer and institution.

We are pleased with the progress and we shall now redouble our efforts in the coming years to improve further upon it.

## 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 next week is as follows:

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

TUESDAY 24 JANUARY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Wales Bill followed by motion relating to the charter for budget responsibility followed by motion relating to the appointment of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

WEDNESDAY 25 JANUARY—Opposition day (19th allotted day). There will be a debate on prisons followed by a debate entitled "The detrimental effects on disabled people of Government plans on employment and support allowance and universal credit". Both debates will arise on an Opposition motion.

THURSDAY 26 JANUARY—Debate on a motion relating to statutory pubs code and the pubs code adjudicator followed by debate on a motion relating to access to Kadcycla and other breast cancer drugs. Both debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 27 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 30 January will include:

MONDAY 30 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Pension Schemes Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 31 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Bus Services Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 1 FEBRUARY—Opposition day (20th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 2 FEBRUARY—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 3 FEBRUARY—Private Members' Bills.

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

MONDAY 23 JANUARY—Debate on an e-petition relating to the banning of non-recyclable and non-compostable packaging.

THURSDAY 26 JANUARY—General debate on protecting civil society space across the world.

MONDAY 30 JANUARY—Debate on an e-petition relating to pay restraint for "Agenda for Change" NHS staff.

**Valerie Vaz:** I thank the Leader of the House for his statement, but we still do not appear to have a date for the summer recess. I ask him to think carefully about that and perhaps come back with it next week, possibly with dates for Prorogation and the state opening as well.

Mr Speaker, may I wish you a very happy birthday? I am afraid that the House cannot sing to you. As a tennis fan, I do not know whether your presents included new balls, but we all know how well you handle a racquet—both outside and inside the Chamber. I also wish a happy birthday to Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin. She was an inspired choice as Speaker's Chaplain and

[Valerie Vaz]

provides great pastoral support for MPs. Perhaps the Leader of the House will join me in challenging you both to a doubles match for charity.

Sadly, this House is losing MPs, including a former Prime Minister, but I point out that many hon. Members have made an incredible contribution and that things can be done from the Back Benches. My hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) amended the Finance Bill, highlighting gender-based pricing. The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on stalking, and, with the help of the other place and the Government, has extended the maximum sentence for stalking to 10 years. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), when speaking about the loss of her baby, reminded us that we should allow coroners in England to investigate stillbirths so that errors in care can be addressed.

Many other hon. Members from across the House do great work, which is why many of us cannot understand why the Prime Minister refused to come and tell the House and its elected representatives about a major policy announcement that affects the whole country. The 12 points of principle are Government policy initiatives and should have been 12 paragraphs in a White Paper. The right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) said last week that his pleasure

“is magnified when I address the Chair and you, Sir, are occupying it.”—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 488.]

I wish he would say that to the Prime Minister. The 12 objectives should have been set out in a White Paper last September, which would have ended the speculation and uncertainty that have engulfed us for the past six months. However, we still need clarity on several issues, so I can see why the Prime Minister did not want to be questioned about them.

I welcome objective 4, which is about maintaining the common travel area with Ireland. The Prime Minister said that the devolved Administrations will be consulted, but, given the elections in Northern Ireland, will the Leader of the House confirm who from Northern Ireland will be sitting on the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations)? Gibraltar voted 96% to remain. What consultation do the Government intend to have with Gibraltar, and how, before Spain plants its flag? Spain has already threatened to plant its flag in Gibraltar.

The Prime Minister talks of a global Britain, yet principle 5 sets out the Government's proposals to keep the world out. She said:

“And because we will no longer be members of the Single Market, we will not be required to contribute huge sums to the EU budget.”

In principle 10 she wants the UK to continue to be the best place for science and innovation, forgetting that in 2013 the UK received €8.8 billion, the fourth largest share in the EU, for research and development, with the private sector receiving £1.4 billion. And that is just one sector. We give but we get something back.

As we await the Supreme Court judgment on a point of law on 24 January—next Tuesday—let us remind the people that the judges are on their side, upholding the rule of law and holding the Executive to account. Can the Leader of the House confirm that, whatever Bill comes out after the judgment, it will not be a cynical,

one-line Bill, as suggested by Government counsel? The Prime Minister wants to do this for our children and grandchildren, but our children between the ages of 18 and 24 voted overwhelmingly, 75%, to remain in the EU. They already feel let down.

As we remember Martin Luther King Day this week and Holocaust Memorial Day next week, let us remember the words of Martin Luther King and Elie Wiesel, a holocaust survivor who sadly died last year. And let us remember that the European Union was formed for nations to come together in peace, not hatred. We must remember that we are interdependent: we do not live in isolation, whether as individuals, countries or nations. Our constituents want justice—economic and social justice—both here and in Europe. In the months and years ahead, let those, too, be our guiding principles.

**Mr Lidington:** On the dates for the summer recess and Prorogation, although I hope to oblige the House as soon as I am able, the hon. Lady and others will understand that there are uncertainties about how long it will take to transact the business before the House in the weeks to come, so I am not yet able to give firm dates.

The hon. Lady made a number of criticisms and asked a number of questions about the Government's handling of the forthcoming EU negotiations. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union gave an oral statement to the House and answered Members' questions for about two hours. In the hon. Lady's strictures on the Prime Minister, I detect a sense of the frustration that I know is widely shared on the Labour Benches at the inability of the Leader of the Opposition to lay a glove on the Prime Minister every Wednesday on this or other matters.

The Ministers who have not resigned from the Northern Ireland Executive, in the way that Mr McGuinness stepped down as Deputy First Minister, remain as acting Ministers until the new Executive can be appointed, so the Government are able to talk to them. Of course, officials from the Northern Ireland Executive continue to attend meetings. I used to chair Joint Ministerial Committees on Europe, and I remember that after the previous Stormont elections it took a while for the Executive to be formed. During that period, Northern Ireland officials did attend the joint meetings to make sure that Northern Ireland was represented.

In line with the Prime Minister's undertaking following the referendum, Ministers and officials are in regular contact with the Government of Gibraltar, from the Chief Minister down. More broadly, on the question of the European Union and the hon. Lady's concluding words, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it very clear during her speech that the last thing she and the Government are seeking is a weakening or dismantling of the European Union. The Prime Minister said in terms that she wanted the European Union to succeed. My right hon. Friend and the entire Government are very aware of the fact that for much of Europe the mid-20th century was an utterly scarring experience, and that many Governments and many people in those countries still look to European institutions as a safeguard against anything like that happening again. We respect that outlook, which stems from their historical experience in the last century. We will go forward respecting and determined to implement the democratic verdict of the

British people last June, but in a way that seeks to achieve a future relationship with our closest neighbours that is based on mutual trust, friendship, and continued alliance and co-operation on a range of policy measures.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I join the hon. Lady in wishing all the best to you and to the Speaker's Chaplain on your birthdays today. I would be happy to accept the hon. Lady's challenge, but I have to say that, knowing your prowess on the tennis court, I would regard the outcome of the encounter as something of a forgone conclusion.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a bit rich of the shadow Leader of the House to complain about parliamentary scrutiny of the matters announced to the media. I lived through the Blair and Brown years, when they never even bothered to turn up to answer anything, whereas this Government have been absolutely splendid—better than the coalition Government. Although the Opposition claim they want to discuss and bang on about Europe, yesterday's debate on Europe finished early, as they did not have enough speakers, so will the excellent Minister continue to schedule general debates? Could they be themed debates, with one on each of the 12 points the Prime Minister mentioned, so that the Opposition could have as much time as they like to discuss this?

Finally, with your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I would just like to put to rest a lie. The leader of the Liberal Democrats claimed that I might have written the Prime Minister's speech, but I had nothing to do with it; it was her own words.

**Mr Lidington:** I do not know whether that last comment was a bid to join the ministerial speechwriting teams in the future. On the point about debates, there will be ample opportunities for the House to continue to debate all aspects of the forthcoming negotiation on the European Union.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I, too, wish you a happy birthday, Mr Speaker? Lang may yer lum reek, as we say in these parts. May I also thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week?

This week has quite simply been a bad week for Parliament, and the Leader of the House, as this House's champion, should be thoroughly ashamed of himself. The Prime Minister made perhaps the most important statement about the future of this country—not in here, where the elected Members are, but in an assembly full of the press and diplomats. We know now that it is almost certain that a Bill will be required in order to trigger article 50, so will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that this Bill will be subject to the maximum scrutiny, thoroughly amendable and properly debated in this House?

May we have a debate on how to win friends and influence people? The Foreign Secretary's is currently touring Europe like a dodgy character out of "Allo 'Allo!", doing his utmost to upset the very people that global Britain needs to negotiate with to get a good deal on exiting the EU. We now know that this Government's predominant obsessions—everything that underpins this approach to leaving the EU—are immigration and freedom of movement, so perhaps they could start by confining the Foreign Secretary to barracks here.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Pete Wishart:** Steady on! Over-eagerness there from those on the Labour Benches.

Will the Leader of the House do what the Prime Minister failed to do yesterday and confirm that the English votes for English laws procedure will not be applied to the great repeal Bill? That Bill will cut across many devolved competences, it will be a very complicated Bill and there will be many jurisdictions involved in it, so will he do what the Prime Minister failed to do yesterday and rule out EVEL today?

Lastly, through no fault of our own, we lost about half our Opposition day on Tuesday. Obviously, it was very necessary that people had an opportunity to question Ministers on the two important statements, but will the Leader of the House pledge to give us that half day back in the future?

**Mr Lidington:** On the hon. Gentleman's last point, I cannot promise to give the Scottish National party that additional day. I do, though, recognise that there was pressure on the party's limited time because of what he himself acknowledged were, by anybody's count, two important statements. I shall reflect on that request, but he will understand that there are other pressures on the parliamentary timetable.

The hon. Gentleman asked two questions about European Union legislation. On the first, it is clear that until the Supreme Court has ruled, we do not know whether any Bill is going to be required. Nevertheless, if it is to become law, any Bill has to go through the full parliamentary process in this Chamber and in the other place—that is the only route available to change primary law in this country. I hope that gives him some reassurance. The extent to which amendments are in order clearly depends on the rules of the House and, ultimately, on the interpretation of the Chair.

On his question about the EVEL arrangements, it might be helpful if I remind the House that for any matter to be subject to those arrangements it has to meet three tests. First, it must refer to a matter that is devolved to Scotland; secondly, the legislation must refer only to England, or only to England and Wales; and, thirdly, there must be a certification from Mr Speaker that the clause, Bill or statutory instrument meets those tests. We have not yet published or determined the final shape of the Bill that will give effect to our exit from the EU—the repeal Bill—but those tests continue to be the ones that would have to be met in any case. A measure that repeals the European Communities Act 1972 clearly has UK-wide implications and would not apply only to one part of the United Kingdom.

**Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): May I, too, wish you a very happy birthday, Mr Speaker?

Yesterday, the all-party group on youth employment heard from several youth employment ambassadors. These young people were inspirational, but their achievements were not down to the careers advice they had received but because of their self-belief and determination. May we have a debate about how careers advice can be improved, because currently there are examples of where we are potentially letting young people down?

**Mr Lidington:** That sounds to me like an important issue that might well merit an airing in one of the Backbench Business Committee debates. It is an issue to which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education is giving close attention.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): Many happy returns, Mr Speaker. Forty is a difficult age, so beware. [*Laughter.*]

I thank the Leader of the House for notifying us of the Backbench Business on 26 January, and for confirming that there will be Backbench Business on 2 February—we have provisionally tabled a six-hour debate on the armed forces covenant for that day.

On Monday, the House adjourned at 7.40 pm, which I think was rather predictable, given the business on the day. Will the Leader of the House please consider, yet again, working with the Backbench Business Committee to schedule Backbench Business debates on such days in future? Those debates would, of course, take second place should Government business run its full course.

Will the Leader of the House also resolve a little thorny problem? We have had an application for a debate on International Women's Day, which I am sure Members will know is on 8 March, which is when the spring statement is scheduled. Will he work with us to get a debate on International Women's Day as close as possible to 8 March—probably beforehand, if at all possible?

**Mr Lidington:** I will do my best to meet the hon. Gentleman's request on his last point.

I take seriously the problem he identifies apropos last Monday, and will see whether we can do more to accommodate it. The difficulty for Government business managers is that they are never certain until the day whether there will be urgent questions, which will take up time, or how many Members from all parts of the House will want to participate in a debate and for how long they will wish to speak. I can remember previous occasions when Backbench Business came under enormous pressure, resulting in a debate having to be abandoned or drastically curtailed, which was, understandably, immensely frustrating for Back Benchers who had altered their arrangements so that they were in their places and able to participate in the debate. The challenge is to try to strike that right balance.

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the national schools funding formula, because if the proposals go ahead every single school in Southend will be worse off and Southend will be the 84th worst affected constituency out of 533?

**Mr Lidington:** I can understand my hon. Friend's concern. I know that he is always a formidable and active champion of his constituents' interests. The consultation run by the Department for Education is live now—it does not end until 22 March—so I urge him to ensure that he, on behalf of his constituents, and his constituents individually make strong representations to the consultation.

**Mr David Winnick** (Walsall North) (Lab): I am always willing to offer birthday congratulations to young people, Mr Speaker, be it to you or your chaplain.

Why is there constant delay and evasion in the Government bringing a motion before the House on the renewal of the parliamentary building? I know about the debate in Westminster Hall next Wednesday, but why is there the delay? Is it not essential for a decision to be reached so that, if a general election is to take place in 2020, those elected will know that they will not be sitting in this building and that the work will be carried out without Members or staff being present, which, hopefully, will mean that it will be completed in a much shorter time than if evacuation does not take place?

**Mr Speaker:** I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be in his place on his birthday, which, if memory serves, is 26 June. We look forward to that and to his undertaking his usual interrogation at that time.

**Mr Lidington:** I understand and share the hon. Gentleman's wish to get on with this. As some have already said, there is the possibility of additional legislation being needed after a court ruling next week—we do not yet know whether that will be the case—but there is pressure on Government time. I hope that we can come forward with a clear date as soon as possible.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): In addition to your birthday today, Mr Speaker, there was, last week, the slightly less illustrious 70th anniversary of Crawley being declared a new town. I appreciate that it is obviously for Her Majesty to confer city status, but will the Leader of the House speak to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to see what process Crawley can initiate to explore that possibility?

**Mr Lidington:** I am happy to pass that request on to the Secretary of State, and I think that the whole House will congratulate the people and the civic leaders of Crawley on that achievement and their work over the decades in building a thriving and successful community.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am sure that the Leader of the House will agree that community pharmacies are a very important part of taking the pressure off over-stretched A&Es at the moment, despite them seeing cuts to their funding just last month. The Government have introduced a pharmacy access scheme to help deal with some of the cuts in communities. I was really surprised to see that, in the Prime Minister's constituency, 37% of pharmacies will be able to apply for that additional funding. In the three Hull constituencies, only 1% of pharmacies will be able to apply. May we please have a debate about why the most disadvantaged communities still suffer the biggest cuts from this Government?

**Mr Lidington:** I clearly do not know the details of the situation in Hull, but I am happy to ask the relevant Health Minister—I think it is my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat)—to write to the hon. Lady. The principle is that there are now 15% more pharmacies than there were just a decade ago, two fifths of pharmacies are within 10 minutes' walk of two or more other pharmacies, the average pharmacy receives roughly £220,000 a year in NHS funding and, even after the recently announced changes, the community pharmacy budget will be 30% more than it was a decade ago, so I think that the Government have demonstrated that they remain committed to community pharmacies and their importance.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): For disabled people, achieving a job can be a life-changing experience. Last Friday, I was privileged to promote a This-Ability event in Cleethorpes to encourage local employers to take on more disabled people. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Lorraine Alexander and her team from Grimsby jobcentre, who did a great deal of work to stage the event, as well as all the voluntary and charitable groups? Can we find time to debate the role of and opportunities for disabled people in the workplace?

**Mr Lidington:** I am very happy to congratulate my hon. Friend's constituents on this successful event. It has been an important step forward that we now have a record number of people with disabilities in work. I am the first to acknowledge that more still needs to be done, but I am heartened by the fact that we are making progress and that local enthusiasm, such as that which my hon. Friend describes, is helping to highlight those opportunities for people with disabilities.

**Alex Salmond** (Gordon) (SNP): In contrast to just about every one of his predecessors for the past 30 years, the Leader of the House shows no inclination to defend the wider interests of the House as opposed merely to progressing Government business; his disgraceful treatment of the Bill on parliamentary boundaries is a case in point. A parliamentary Committee—a Select Committee—has unanimously recommended a White Paper before the invocation of article 50, so what representations did he make to secure that in the wider interests of the House, as opposed to a prime ministerial statement that was not even made in this place, motionless debates or a one-clause Bill that will be rammed through like some sort of thief in the night? Will he indicate to the House that he sees his job as securing effective parliamentary scrutiny of a major constitutional decision, however long it might take?

**Mr Lidington:** I am absolutely committed to full parliamentary scrutiny of this matter. Indeed, I had the delight of appearing for the first time in my current role before the European Scrutiny Committee yesterday to give evidence on one aspect of that subject. The right hon. Gentleman makes some incorrect assumptions about the role of the Leader of the House apropos individual Select Committee reports. It is for Select Committees individually to come to their view and make recommendations to Government, and it is then primarily for the Department to which those recommendations are addressed to recommend to Government colleagues what the response should be. There is a collectively approved Government response to that Select Committee report and if the right hon. Gentleman believes that any Government of any political colour is likely to agree with absolutely ever recommendation of every Select Committee, I do not think that he has read many Select Committee reports or Government responses to them over the years. It is a perfectly fair and transparent way of conducting business and of Governments responding to Select Committee recommendations.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): With the decision of the Backbench Business Committee not to schedule a debate on settlements and the destruction

yesterday of Umm al-Hiran, is there a possibility of a Government statement on what appears to be a significant shift in Government policy over recent days as we cosy up to the incoming American Administration in granting complete impunity to Israel?

**Mr Lidington:** The Government's policy on Israel and Palestine has not changed. We remain committed to a two-state solution, involving a sovereign, independent viable Palestinian state living alongside Israel, with mutually agreed land swaps where appropriate and with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states. Our view on the settlements remains that they are illegal in international law, and that is at the heart of the United Kingdom's policy.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for putting me right earlier. I should have realised, on reflection, that he would never write such an extreme speech as that which came out of the Prime Minister's mouth the other day.

On the matter of flood-hit communities, not least mine in Cumbria after the devastating floods in December 2015, will there be time for a debate on Government financial support for those communities, in particular in the light of the Government's decision in recent days to spend the entire amount of the £15 million we have now got for the December floodings from the European solidarity fund not on giving support to the communities that it was for, but on paying off a historical fine incurred in 2007 by a previous Government? Whoever's fault it was that that fine was incurred, for certain it was not the fault of communities such as mine in Cumbria. Will the Leader of the House commit to all that money coming to those communities or at the very least to hold a debate on the matter?

**Mr Lidington:** An Adjournment debate is probably the best way forward on that issue, as it affects the right hon. Gentleman's constituency. In fairness, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers have worked with Department for Communities and Local Government Ministers to make sure that the Bellwin money has been made available more rapidly than has sometimes been the case in the past when communities have been badly hit by floods. I will look into his particular point about the European solidarity fund money, since I am not sighted on that, and I or one of the DEFRA Ministers will write to him about it.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): Nene Park was once the home of Rushden and Diamonds football club and is still a fully usable football stadium, but the demolition notices have been issued. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging the owners to sit down with the local authority, AFC Rushden and Diamonds football club and the community to have one last look at whether a solution can be found that retains all or part of the stadium, because once it is gone, it is gone? May we have a statement next week on those matters?

**Mr Lidington:** That strikes me as a natural Adjournment debate opportunity, but I very much hope that the sporting and other organisations locally in Corby can come together and find a way in which to maintain a clearly much-loved community sports facility.

**Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Notwithstanding that many of us were disappointed with the result of the referendum, we recognise that the people have spoken. Nevertheless, it is not just for the Government to decide the detail; it is very important that this House gets a proper say. In response to the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and other Members, the Leader of the House indicated that there will be ample opportunity for debate. Will he be more specific about how many days this House will get to debate and influence the Government's thinking on how we progress the negotiations, so that businesses and our constituents who are very concerned have their views aired in this House, and we can reflect the views of the people about how this will go ahead?

**Mr Lidington:** As the hon. Lady knows, there have been a number of debates already on particular aspects of our leaving the European Union. I fully expect that there will be other such debates related to additional specific topics in the months to come. Whatever does or does not happen next week, we will have a Bill in the new parliamentary Session to repeal the European Communities Act 1972. That will provide plenty of opportunities as well. At my last count, more than 30 different Select Committee inquiries into different aspects of our leaving the EU were being conducted by Committees either of this place or of the House of Lords. Of course, mechanisms exist to bring those Select Committee reports to the Floor of the House for debate as well.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): In this week, of all weeks, it is absolutely right that we say in the House of Commons that we want to proceed with the building of a Holocaust memorial museum. As the Leader of the House is responsible, at least in part, for the environs of the Palace of Westminster, does he accept that there may be merit in a debate on the siting of the museum? There is a view among many people that the best place for the museum would be within or outside the Imperial War Museum, so that its many visitors can see the link between the Holocaust and war and hatred, rather than siting it in Victoria Tower Gardens, which is one of the last green spaces around this Palace and visited by many hundreds of thousands of people each year. As the museum will be two storeys underground, there might also be a flood risk. There is a need for a debate on the siting of the museum.

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend may well want to seek a Westminster Hall debate on the subject. The previous Prime Minister gave a commitment to the Victoria Tower Gardens site, and that has been reiterated by the current Prime Minister. Ultimately, the planning matters to which my hon. Friend alluded will be the responsibility of Westminster City Council.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): Warm congratulations, Mr Speaker, as you approach the prime of life and the halfway point of your Speakership. You may be surprised to know that for all but two of your 54 years, Severn bridge users have been ripped off by the bridges being used as a cash cow. They have suffered double taxation, paying for the national road system and the local tolls. Can that rip-off now be ended as the bridges come into

public control? It would be an immense benefit for accessibility on both sides of the Severn.

**Mr Lidington:** I have sometimes heard Welsh people say, "You have to pay to come to Wales, because it is such a privilege to visit, whereas everybody wants to get back to England in a hurry."

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House want to start again?

**Mr Lidington:** No, no—they say it in the nicest possible way—[*Interruption.*] The point that perhaps I did not make clearly enough is that my interlocutors say to me, "If you tried to charge people to get back into England, they would want to stay in Wales and never leave."

The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) made a serious point, which I will take up with Transport Ministers. The tolls help to pay for the cost of the crossings and that is important, but I will get the relevant Transport Minister to write to the hon. Gentleman on the subject.

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give careful consideration to the time allocated to questions to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for International Trade and the Department for Exiting the European Union? We have only 30 minutes for oral questions and 10 minutes for topical questions to those Departments. Given the current relevance of them and their Select Committees, more time needs to be allocated. Will the Leader of the House give that consideration?

**Mr Lidington:** I am happy to give consideration to that proposal and to discuss it through the usual channels, because such matters are agreed by consensus if possible. However, if we add time to questions to those Departments, one of two things has to happen. Either we take time off other Departments or we extend the cycle of departmental Question Times to six weeks, rather than five, which leaves a longer gap before hon. Members have the opportunity to question the Secretary of State from any one Department.

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): This week saw the release of the damning National Audit Office report on the Concentrix scandal that demonstrated institutional incompetence and neglect at the heart of all the agencies involved. The vast majority of victims have not received compensation. I have written to the Prime Minister, asking her urgently to intervene in the matter, and I hope that the Leader of the House will support me in that endeavour.

We really must have a debate in the House about the scandal, because people who are receiving money that they should have had in the first place are getting it in instalments, as opposed to in one lump sum, which affects their ability to claim other benefits to which they are rightly entitled. We would like an opportunity to tell Ministers how much our constituents are being affected, so that justice can be done. This is an embarrassing situation for the Government which requires immediate rectification.

**Mr Lidington:** We are very clear that the service provided by Concentrix was poor, and it was right

that the contract was scrapped. HMRC has apologised, and it knows that it has to learn some lessons from that contract and what happened there. When it became clear that Concentrix's customer service issues could not be rectified by Concentrix, HMRC took back 181,000 incomplete cases, and rightly redeployed hundreds of its own staff to deal with this work. All those cases were finalised by 3 November. HMRC has then also had to deal with mandatory reconsideration requests, of which 36,000 have been received, and it has allocated additional staff to that work so that requests can be dealt with quickly and payments restored where claimants are entitled to them. There may be an opportunity for a Back-Bench or Westminster Hall debate on this issue, further to the airing it has already had in this Chamber, but I think HMRC was right to give priority to the incomplete cases and to deal with those first. It is now proceeding as rapidly as it can to sort out the remaining mandatory reconsideration requests.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Can we have a debate on dementia? I am sure the Leader of the House will join me in congratulating Incommunities—the social housing provider for Bradford, which is based in my constituency—on training its staff to support residents with dementia. In such a debate, we could encourage other organisations to do the same. We could also find out what more the Government could do to help people who suffer from dementia—an estimated 6,500 people in the Bradford district are affected by it—and what further support could be given to their families, who have the difficult job of caring for them.

**Mr Lidington:** I hope my hon. Friend will have that opportunity, perhaps in Westminster Hall. I add my salute to those groups and individuals in his constituency, and in many others, who have highlighted the challenges posed by dementia and worked not only to encourage more people to become dementia friends but to ensure that we treat people living with dementia with the respect and dignity to which they are entitled and that they get the solidarity and support from their fellow citizens that they are entitled to expect.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Can we have a debate on bravery? In March 1936, a young gay Conservative Member of Parliament, Captain Jack Macnamara, visited the Rhineland to celebrate its remilitarisation, because he was then a supporter of Hitler. But while he was there, he visited the first concentration camp, Dachau, and he saw such horrific violence to Jews and homosexuals that, when he came back here, he campaigned relentlessly against anti-Semitism and appeasement. He raised those matters in this Chamber, but he was spat at when he went to the Carlton Club that night. He was killed in action in the second world war, on 22 December 1944, and his shield is on the wall of this Chamber. Do we not owe a debt of gratitude to such people, and should we not be doing everything in our power to put an end to anti-Semitism and prejudice in our era? [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

**Mr Lidington:** I agree with every word the hon. Gentleman said. The tribute he has just paid was a most appropriate one as we come towards Holocaust Memorial Day.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I hesitate to spoil your good humour on such a day, Mr Speaker, but

you will be aware that Tottenham Hotspur is rebuilding White Hart Lane, and, as a result, we have to find a new home. The current proposal is that Tottenham will use Wembley stadium for a season, which will increase the use of our national stadium by 60%. There is an important issue for my constituency, which becomes the car park for Wembley stadium on event days. Worse still, Chelsea football club intends to come to Wembley for three years thereafter. May we have a debate in Government time on the uses to which our national stadium can be put, so that we can put on record our concerns about the potential abuse of our national treasure?

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend has put his constituents' concerns on the record most effectively, but there may be an Adjournment debate opportunity if he wishes to pursue the matter further.

**Mr Speaker:** I gently make the point that the Emirates is a very, very, very special place in London.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It seems appropriate, Mr Speaker, that today we have not only an amazing exhibition of photographs in the Attlee Room on Syria and Aleppo by William Wintercross, a brilliant photographer—I hope people will be able to see it—but a debate on Holocaust Memorial Day. May we also, on this special day, think about having a debate on a report that came out, I believe, in July 2008—it was called the Bercow report—on children and young people? Owing to cuts to local government up and down this country, young people are in dreadful danger, because child protection is becoming very difficult to maintain. May we have a debate on the Bercow report so that we can see what progress has been made since those good recommendations?

**Mr Lidington:** I cannot promise a debate in Government time, but the hon. Gentleman can make a submission to the Backbench Committee.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): As it is a double birthday today, Mr Speaker, may we have a pair of statements: one on the long-term future of HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, two of the most versatile and essential ships in the Royal Navy, whose future is threatened by a shortfall in the defence budget; and another on offering at least the same level of legislative protection to our veterans who served in Northern Ireland as is currently offered to the terrorists who fought against the welfare of the community that the veterans fought to defend?

**Mr Lidington:** On my right hon. Friend's second point, the Northern Ireland Secretary has already said that he feels considerable disquiet at some of the reports of proposed prosecutions, and he is working very actively to try to secure agreement within Northern Ireland to legislate on the legacy of the troubles in a way that settles that issue as well as a number of others. On his point about the two naval vessels, I will ask the relevant Defence Minister to contact him about the detail.

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Airdrie Savings Bank, the UK's last independent savings bank, is to end all business activities after 182 years, with the loss of 70 jobs. Secured loans and mortgages

[*Marion Fellows*]

will be transferred to the TSB, and customers will be helped to find alternative banking providers. As Unite the union has said,

“Airdrie Savings Bank has become yet another innocent victim of casino bankers.”

May we have a debate in Government time to discuss the state of UK banking?

**Mr Lidington:** Although I completely understand the concerns of the hon. Lady and those of her constituents who have accounts at the bank about the loss of this historic institution, the most important thing is that their savings are protected and that a banking service that is accessible to them remains in being. We have seen over the years a number of mergers of different banks and building societies. We have also seen a shift towards many, many more customers making use of online banking. Those factors are going to drive change, but having the service available is the key thing that we need to make sure is preserved.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Ah yes—Mr Bernard Jenkin.

**Mr Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Happy birthday, Sir.

May I thank my right hon. Friend for providing time quickly for the approval of the name of the candidate for the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, which was approved by the Health Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee yesterday?

As we have already heard, Tuesday 24 January is the day on which the Supreme Court is delivering its judgment. May I suggest to my right hon. Friend that it would be expedient for the Government to plan to make a statement immediately on the future implications for business, even if a substantive statement on the longer-term implications of such a judgment will need to be made at a later date?

**Mr Lidington:** Clearly, I and other Ministers will want to brief Parliament fully on the substance and implications of the judgment once we know what it is. We do not yet know either its content or its complexity, and we are unlikely to get any prior knowledge—at most, it would be very brief—of what that judgment contains. I cannot make a promise today about the specific timing, but the principle at the heart of my hon. Friend’s question is one that I completely endorse.

**John Woodcock** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Can we have a debate on the future of the Crown post office network? Crown post offices break even, unlike the post office network as a whole, and yet the Government are forcing through a change programme that puts at risk of closure scores of post offices across the country, including the one in Ulverston in my constituency. We need a guarantee that those services will stay. Can we have a debate about it, please?

**Mr Lidington:** The key point is that the services remain, whether they are carried out in a Crown post office or whether they are continued in a sub-post

office. The sub-post office network provides post office services to the overwhelming majority of our constituents throughout the country. I certainly hope that the hon. Gentleman’s constituents in Ulverston will continue to get that service. The experience in my constituency, where the Crown post office closed, is that those services continued but at a different location. That surely has to be the objective.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Many happy returns for today, Mr Speaker.

As chair of the all-party disability group, I am extremely concerned by reports that disabled people are much less likely to be able to access affordable credit, and that they are therefore being plunged into the hands of payday lenders and loan sharks. Can we have a debate on equitable access to affordable credit, so that we can ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are not left open to financial exploitation?

**Mr Lidington:** I cannot offer an immediate debate. The hon. Lady makes a reasonable point, and I think that the banking industry has a social responsibility to ensure that its services are accessible to people with disabilities, to people on low incomes and to others who often find it quite difficult to get access to conventional banking. That perhaps needs something of a cultural shift.

**Vernon Coaker** (Gedling) (Lab): Can the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent debate, before the Budget, on school funding? Across the country, many schools face a real crisis in their budgets over the next few years. Teachers are going to be sacked and per-pupil spending is going to go down. By 2019, Nottinghamshire County Council will lose £40 million. It is not good enough. Schools deserve better, and so do the children of this country.

**Mr Lidington:** Of course, the Government have had to take some very difficult spending decisions as a result of the need to continue to reduce the inherited deficit. I am pleased that the Government have, despite that difficult fiscal environment, been able to protect the core schools budget. The money that is going to be paid to schools, coupled with the rise in pupil numbers that we are expecting, should ensure that for most schools—depending on whether they are gaining or losing pupils—the overall core schools budget is protected in cash terms.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I declare an interest as a crofter on the Isle of Skye? On 23 November last year, the Minister with responsibility for farming stated during Question Time that we would have a review of the allocations of the convergence uplift funding before the end of the year. I tabled a written question, to which I had a reply yesterday indicating that an update will be provided shortly. This is unacceptable. Can the Leader of the House make sure that the Minister makes a statement on the urgent review of the convergence funding? This is an important matter for crofters and farmers throughout the highlands and islands. Some €223 million euros of funding was given to this Government on the understanding that it would go to those in most need of it, and that has not happened.

**Mr Lidington:** The hon. Gentleman raised exactly that point during the debate on the rural economy on Tuesday. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs replied to him that she recognised his point, that she continues to look closely at the issue and that,

“I will keep him up to date with progress on it.”—[*Official Report*, 17 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 835.]

He has had a clear undertaking from the Secretary of State and he has reinforced his point.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): Twice this week, I have raised my constituents’ concerns about cuts to council services and Ministers have simply swatted them aside. Will the Leader of the House take the opportunity to address those concerns and demonstrate that the Government are taking seriously the impact of Tory cuts on local people?

**Mr Lidington:** I accept that we have confirmed a settlement for local councils that is flat in cash terms, but we have also delivered what local authorities were asking for in certainty over a four-year funding period. We are planning legislation, which will be before Parliament soon, that will enable local government to keep all the business rates that it collects by the end of the Parliament. We have provided the power for local councils to levy a social care precept to help them with the challenges that they undoubtedly face in dealing with social care.

**Mark Durkan** (Foyle) (SDLP): The terms of your earlier statement, Mr Speaker, mean that “happy birthday” is not a mere wish but an observation of fact. In passing, may I mention yesterday’s landmark 80th birthday of landmark statesman, John Hume, the pathfinder for our peace process?

Will the Leader of the House talk to Northern Ireland Office and Treasury Ministers to clarify that there is legitimate locus for the House, its Ministers and Committees in the renewable heat incentive debacle in Northern Ireland? There is no basis for pretending that the dimensions of abuse in the uptake of that scheme are confined to devolved expenditure and do not involve the annually managed expenditure from the Treasury. There is also a question about a period when the regulations for the scheme had run out, spending continued and it was not covered by the Northern Ireland budget. Did Treasury funding cover it in the period when there was no regulatory basis for that spending?

**Mr Lidington:** First, I join the hon. Gentleman in sending belated birthday wishes to John Hume. We all salute the heroic role that he played in helping to start and drive through the peace process in Northern Ireland.

On the renewable heat incentive scheme, the Northern Ireland scheme is fully devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive and is now the subject of an open inquiry by the Northern Ireland Public Accounts Committee. It is therefore in their remit to investigate it. The scheme in Great Britain has budget management mechanisms in place to stop the sort of overspending that was experienced in Northern Ireland. If the hon. Gentleman has evidence that Treasury money was in some way involved in supporting the Northern Ireland scheme and that money was misplaced, I urge him to write with the details to Treasury Ministers and I am sure that they will respond.

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): Like many Members—and, I am sure, the Leader of the House—I have been appalled by the Foreign Secretary’s crass comments. It seems to me that the Prime Minister has three options: she can sack him, gag him or educate him. If she decides to educate him, can the whole House have a role in that process?

**Mr Lidington:** When I think of our relationship with France, I think about how we stood with the free French forces and the resistance fighters against Nazism; how we and France stood together against Soviet tyranny; and the very active work that we carry out with France today against international terrorism. We look for a relationship after we leave the European Union that enables us to build on those historical strengths and to continue to work as active, complementary partners on a whole range of issues.

**Steven Paterson** (Stirling) (SNP): Yesterday in Scottish questions, I counted 13 non-Scottish-based MPs asking questions of the Scottish Secretary and only 10 Scottish-based MPs. Was that not a rather humiliating exercise in circling the wagons to save the Scottish Secretary from being scalped? May we have a debate on how to make the Secretary of State for Scotland answer to Scotland?

**Mr Lidington:** The Secretary of State for Scotland, like every other Secretary of State, answers to the House of Commons. It has always been the case that it is open to Members from any part of the United Kingdom to participate in questions to any Secretary of State. The hon. Gentleman’s party frequently complains about arrangements for English votes for English laws. It strikes me as a wee bit odd for him now to complain if Members from other parts of the UK want to ask questions of the Scottish Secretary of State.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On 16 December, Elton post office in my constituency closed without warning. Elton is a rural village and it is not easy for its residents to travel elsewhere. I understand that the closure was unavoidable, but we have no clear timetable for the reopening of the post office. May we have a debate on what more can be done to speed up the reopening of post offices in such situations?

**Mr Lidington:** This may be an Adjournment debate opportunity for the hon. Gentleman. I know from my own experience that the reasons for delay are various. Sometimes it is not easy to get a new manager to take over a franchise and operate the sub-post office. I hope very much for his constituents’ sake that the sub-post office is able to reopen as swiftly as possible.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Samir Chamek, a Christian convert from Islam, was accused of insulting the Prophet by republishing pictures and comments on Facebook, and arrested by the cybercrime unit in Algeria. He was given the maximum punishment for blasphemy under the Algerian penal code of five years’ imprisonment and a fine of 100,000 dinars. On 8 January, a court of appeal upheld his conviction and sentenced him to one year’s imprisonment. May we have a statement on how we can encourage Algeria and other nations to repeal their blasphemy laws?

**Mr Lidington:** I do not know the details of this particular case, but my view and the Government's view is that we should champion religious freedom everywhere in the world. We pride ourselves on being a plural society that respects people of different faiths and no faith. That view of the world and those values influence our foreign policy, and will continue to do so.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab):** Every weekend, parkrun volunteers make it possible for thousands of people across the country to take part in 5 km runs. I myself completed the Cwmbran parkrun on Christmas eve. May we have a debate on the contribution parkrun makes to our communities, and to health and wellbeing all over the country?

**Mr Lidington:** I am happy to join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to those who organise parkrun. I myself completed the Aylesbury run. Parkrun is remarkable as a demonstration of how a voluntary grassroots initiative can help not just to get people more active, but to change attitudes towards activity by making people, who have perhaps been very shy of getting involved in organised sports, feel that they are welcome to come along and participate.

**Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** Debating with this Government, who have forsaken all reason on Brexit, is proving to be a bit like administering medicine to the dead. None the less, may we have a debate in Government time on Scotland's place in Europe?

**Mr Lidington:** I think Scotland's place in Europe is going to be prosperous and secure through its continued membership of a United Kingdom which, while it leaves the European Union, will be forging a new partnership on trade, security and co-operation against crime that will work to the benefit of everybody in Scotland, as well as everybody else in the United Kingdom.

**Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab):** The Leader of the House has previously told me and the House that the reason the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass), which deals with constituency boundaries, could not proceed to Committee was that it did not have a money resolution attached. I have just finished serving on the Homelessness Reduction Bill Committee, and that Bill went to Committee without such a resolution—in fact, we did not get one until the last week of the Committee. Why is it one rule for one Bill and another rule for another, and when will the boundaries Bill go into Committee?

**Mr Lidington:** I am not in a position to announce anything further about that Bill.

**Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP):** Clydesdale bank's latest tranche of bank closures includes the one in Giffnock, in my constituency, which has already been

disproportionately affected by bank closures. As well as causing difficulties for our high streets, it is particularly problematic for people less able to get about, and the bank's wilful disregard for any form of consultation is frankly shameful. Can we have a debate in Government time on the latest Clydesdale bank closures and on the role and responsibilities of high street banks?

**Mr Lidington:** It is right that the banks stick to their own code, which requires that particular attention be paid when the last banking outlet in a community is scheduled for closure, but these are independent businesses facing a future in which many of their customers are choosing to bank online rather than in person at a local branch. It is a challenge for them to get the balance right and to ensure that everybody in the hon. Lady's constituency has the access to banking services that they need.

**Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

The Government have commissioned a report on electoral fraud, but what we actually need is a review of the behaviour of political parties during election periods and the punishments available. The Lib Dems were fined £20,000 for non-declaration of £200,000 of spending—money down the drain, by the way—Labour was also fined £20,000 and there are investigations into the Leader of the House's own party. The Electoral Commission has said that a fine of £20,000 is no longer a strong enough deterrent to ensure that the rules are properly followed. Can we have a debate on that in Government time and take a serious look at the punishments available?

**Mr Lidington:** We have an independent, investigative and legal system that can look into political parties and ensure that expenses are checked, but I have to say that for Members of the Scottish National party to give lectures about good practice during election campaigning is a bit rich. There are plenty of independent-minded journalists who very much resented the bullying to which they were subjected during the last Scottish election campaign and referendum.

**Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP):** Just before the Christmas recess, I served on a European Committee on asylum that had two glaring problems: first, all the deadlines involved had already passed, and secondly, the House had decided on the motion before the Committee the previous week. What steps is the Leader of the House taking to ensure that nothing like this happens again?

**Mr Lidington:** I dealt with this matter in some detail in my evidence to the European Scrutiny Committee yesterday. There was an error on the Government's part in the handling of that business, for which an apology was given to you, Mr Speaker, and to the Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, and steps have now been taken to ensure that there is no repetition.

## Point of Order

11.48 am

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance regarding the response I got from the Leader of the House earlier. On 23 November, the farming Minister, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), said,

“we will provide an update on the review of CAP allocations before the end of this year.”—[*Official Report*, 23 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 884.]

We have had no such announcement from the Government. If these remarks are to mean anything, what powers do Back Benchers have to compel the Minister to give a fair and honest response regarding his promise of an update on the review of the convergence uplift money? These are important matters. We are talking about money that should be in the pockets of crofters and farmers in Scotland, but once again we have not got it. On behalf of my constituents, I say that this is not good enough.

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer is that the recourse available to him—and, I am afraid, the only recourse available to him—is his own quality of persistence. The hon. Gentleman must use the opportunities afforded by the Order Paper, and, indeed, those that he is able to create for himself through the tabling of further questions.

As the hon. Gentleman says, those matters are extremely important. However, I have no reason to believe that, at the time when the Minister said that an update would be provided by the end of the year, he intended anything other than to meet that deadline. It has not been uncommon, under successive Governments of all colours, in this country and around the world, for there to be slippage. Where there is slippage, it is not a matter of order for the Chair; it is a matter for a perspicacious Back-Bench Member to continue to raise. The hon. Gentleman has many qualities, one of which is his perspicacity.

## Backbench Business

### Kashmir

11.51 am

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes the escalation in violence and breaches of international human rights on the Indian side of the Line of Control in Kashmir; calls on the Government to raise the matter at the United Nations; and further calls on the Government to encourage Pakistan and India to commence peace negotiations to establish a long-term solution on the future governance of Kashmir based on the right of the Kashmiri people to determine their own future in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council resolutions.

Let me start by thanking my fellow members of the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to stand down from the Committee briefly in order to apply for the debate, and for agreeing that it could take place today. I should also declare that I am the current chairman of the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group.

I thank all the groups who have campaigned so steadfastly on this issue for so many years. I particularly thank Raja Najabat Hussain of the Jammu and Kashmir Self Determination Movement, who works tirelessly to keep up the profile of the issue of Kashmir with MPs, but I also thank Fahim Kayani and the Kashmir Movement UK, Sabiya Khan and the British Muslim Women's Forum, Azmat Khan of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front, Najib Afsar and the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Council, and Dr Syed Nazir Gilani and the Jammu and Kashmir Council for Human Rights.

**Robert Ffello** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. May I ask him also to put on record his thanks to all the ordinary Kashmiris, in this country and back in Kashmir, who fight time and again, in a peaceful manner, to ensure that this issue is high on the agenda so that we take some action?

**Mr Nuttall:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. I certainly put my thanks to those people on record.

Let me explain why the motion was tabled. Essentially, it was tabled because this issue matters to thousands of my constituents who are of Pakistani and Kashmiri heritage, and I know that it matters to the constituents of a number of other Members who are present today. Many of my constituents have families in Kashmir, and in some cases they have personally lost loved ones, or seen loved ones scarred for life as a result of violence.

Some Members may not be familiar with Kashmir. It is an area of territory that runs across the border between Pakistan and India. The root causes of the conflict can be traced back to 1947, when the colony of India was granted independence by Britain and was partitioned into two separate entities, India and Pakistan. The state of Jammu and Kashmir, with a predominantly Muslim population but a Hindu leader, shared borders with both India and West Pakistan.

The area has a long and complex history. Obviously there is not enough time for me to go into all of it, but suffice it to say that the argument over which nation would incorporate the state led to the first India-Pakistan

[Mr Nuttall]

war, in 1947-48, and there have been several further upsurges in the conflict since then. I do not need to remind the House that both countries are now nuclear powers. Just to complicate matters further, some of the historic territory of Kashmir is now under the control of China.

I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), the Minister for south Asia, in his place and I am grateful to him for taking the time recently to meet members of the all-party group on Kashmir. I know he will be aware that the fact that Britain was responsible for the partition leads many in the Kashmiri community to believe this country could and should be doing more to try and help resolve this matter. The fact that partition was 70 years ago demonstrates the intransigence of this problem, and I am under no illusion that there are any easy solutions.

I wish to cover two areas: the recent increase in violence and human rights abuses, and the longer-term issue of trying to resolve this long-running conflict. The most recent increase in violence began last year when, on 8 July, 22-year-old Burhan Wani was killed by the security forces in Indian-administered Kashmir. Tens of thousands attended his funeral, at which clashes broke out between the security forces and protestors. Security forces fired live ammunition into the crowd, killing several people and a police officer was also killed.

Since then the authorities have declared a succession of curfews and closed down mobile phone services and media outlets. Attendance at mosques and adherence to religious practices has been restricted. Protestors have organised a series of general strikes and there have been regular public rallies. Schools, colleges and universities have also been closed. The economy has been badly hit. Funerals have often led to further clashes between protestors and the security forces. Critically, scores of Kashmiris have been killed and many thousands of civilians have been seriously injured.

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. He rightly points out the recent escalation in human rights violations, but does he agree this is a much longer-term problem and that human rights violations have happened in that region for decades?

**Mr Nuttall:** As I have said, there is a long and complex history to this issue and, as the hon. Gentleman says, there have been many upsurges in violence over the years and many human rights abuses that have been catalogued and recorded.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is imperative that an international investigation into those human rights abuses is carried out as soon as possible?

**Mr Nuttall:** Yes, I do agree, and that is something I will mention briefly later in my speech.

The use of pellet guns has left thousands of people, including children, injured and in many cases blind. Armed militants have increased their attacks on the security forces. In September 2016 an attack on an army base killed 19 Indian soldiers, the army's worst loss of

life for well over a decade. There has also been a serious flaring up of tension between India and Pakistan, with regular exchanges between their forces along the line of control. These have led to significant military casualties. Senior figures on both sides have been ratcheting up the hostile rhetoric, leading to growing fears of another major escalation in the conflict between the two countries.

I know the Government are concerned about any allegation of human rights abuses—Ministers have said so many times in answer to both oral and written questions—but I urge the Minister to condemn the attacks and the use of pellet guns. The fundamental human rights that are enshrined in the Indian constitution must be adhered to. There must be an end to the use of pellet guns on innocent civilians. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other interested parties must be allowed free and complete access so that they can make an objective assessment.

I turn now to the role of the United Nations in securing a long-term settlement. There has been 70 years of inaction since the original resolutions requiring the conflict to be resolved by peaceful democratic means were passed, so it is easy to see why so many in the Kashmiri community think that the United Nations has lost interest in their problem. I have often said that the dispute is all too frequently ignored by the media. There is always some other conflict elsewhere in the world that grabs the headlines. I know that the United Kingdom, as a member of the United Nations, supports all UN bodies and wants to help them to fulfil their mandate, but there has surely been a failure on Kashmir if the resolutions have gone unfulfilled for so long. I appreciate that the Government have to tread a careful path and that we want to be friends with both India and Pakistan, but a candid and true friend is one who sometimes says things that the other friend may find unpalatable.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): I support my hon. Friend's motion. This is not a question of supporting either the Indian Government or the Pakistani Government; it is about supporting the people of Kashmir. He and I campaigned for many years for a referendum to decide whether our country should be part of and governed by the European Union, and the people of Kashmir should be afforded the same liberty of deciding how they want to be governed in future.

**Mr Nuttall:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In a few lines' time, I will mention the historic decision that this country took on 23 June last year.

**Mr Khalid Mahmood** (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I concur with the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) that this issue is about Kashmir, but it involves not just India and Pakistan, but China, so we have to concentrate on all of them to ensure that the civil and human rights of the Kashmiri are the priority in this debate.

**Mr Nuttall:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the matter involves more than one nation and, crucially, is about the rights of the Kashmiri people.

We have to make it clear to both India and Pakistan that we want to help them find a permanent, peaceful solution to the conflict. Of course, this country cannot impose a solution, but we may be able to do more to

bring the parties closer together. I want to be absolutely clear that this is not about taking sides and saying, “If you are a friend of Kashmir, you are not a friend of India.” The problem must be resolved by peaceful means. I want the people of Kashmir to be given the right to decide their own future through self-determination, a right which was so historically exercised by the people of this country on 23 June last year when a majority voted to leave the European Union.

No one believes that there is an easy answer, but anything has to be better than having a military-controlled line of partition between the two neighbouring countries. I suspect that there will always be a rivalry between India and Pakistan, but that rivalry should be contained on the field of sport. In responding to the debate, I ask the Minister to set out not only the Government’s position on Kashmir, but what more this country can do.

**Robert Flello:** While I agree that we need a long-term solution that is in the hands of the Kashmiri people, does he agree that there is an important step to be taken beforehand? The Foreign Office and the Government can play an active role in getting both sides round a table to negotiate peace, stability and a calming of the situation, so that children’s lives are not ruined or lost in the meantime. Let us get a summit for peace going and then we can focus on the longer-term solution.

**Mr Nuttall:** I entirely agree. Perhaps I should have finished my sentence, because that is exactly what I was saying. I ask the Minister to set out not only the Government’s position on Kashmir but what more this country can do, either through the United Nations or by working directly with India and Pakistan, to bring the two nations together to find a lasting and peaceful solution to this conflict.

I commend the motion to the House.

12.4 pm

**Mr Khalid Mahmood** (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I declare that I am privileged to be the first Member of Parliament of Kashmiri heritage. I also have a significant number of Kashmiri constituents, who have a significant interest in this issue. I am sure that many other Members have been contacted by constituents with such an interest.

The key issues when discussing Kashmir are Kashmiri geography and Kashmiri self-determination, and many people are very concerned about that. For me, the key issue today is the violation of the human rights and civil liberties of the Kashmiri people—that is the most important thing. There have been violations of the Geneva convention by Indian armed forces.

As other Members have said, Kashmiris are having their human rights violated and abused. That has gone on for at least the past six decades, since Indian forces unlawfully invaded Kashmir in 1948. Kashmir was then an independent state under the reign of Maharaja Hari Singh. In 1953-54, a resolution was presented to the United Nations by the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, to allow the Kashmiri people the right of self-determination. To date, to the shame of the United Nations, such resolutions have not found their way to the General Assembly. People still wonder—certainly the Kashmiris are still wondering—whether the plight

of the Kashmiris is worth its salt; it certainly seems not to be worth hearing in the General Assembly of the United Nations. That is very significant.

A number of Members wish to speak, so I will try to be as brief as possible. I recognise the work of the shadow Foreign Office team, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who has responsibility for south-east Asia, and the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). They have both made recognising human rights and civil liberties a significant policy issue for the Labour party. The shadow Secretary of State has written to the Foreign Secretary, ahead of his second visit to India, asking him to raise the issue of human rights and civil liberties in Kashmir when he discusses trade. I hope that, on his return, he will report to the House that he has raised those issues with the Indian Government.

There are currently more than 500,000 Indian troops in Kashmir, and they are protected by the Armed Forces (Jammu & Kashmir) Special Power Act 1990, which allows them complete free rein to abuse and torture people. There is no accountability when people go missing, and there is no court in India that can hold Indian troops to account. It is a clear violation of the Geneva convention for any military to be able to do such things, and I am surprised that we still do not raise it. I hope the Minister takes note and raises it with the Indian Government.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this debate, and I congratulate him and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) on their powerful speeches. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a particular concern about the use of pellet guns in Kashmir? Does he agree with me and Amnesty International that there should be a ban on the use of such guns, which are causing such serious injuries to so many people?

**Mr Mahmood:** I thank my hon. Friend for that. I will deal with that issue later in my speech, but I wholly agree with what she is saying.

I was talking about half a million soldiers in Kashmir who have no control over how they behave and how they abuse the people. There are serious concerns in Kashmir, particularly about the situation of the civilian population. We are very concerned that when a woman leaves the house, whether she be a mother, a daughter or a wife, we do not know what state she will return in—if indeed she will return at all. There have been gang rapes by the military—an absolutely atrocious act by any individual or community.

**Ruth Smeeth** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I am sorry to interrupt such an incredibly passionate speech. One thing the Government fail to recognise is the passion, worry and fear that our constituents, British citizens of Kashmiri and non-Kashmiri extraction, have about this issue. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister and the Government really need to listen and start paying attention to the needs and demands of their citizens?

**Mr Mahmood:** I wholly concur with my hon. Friend, who makes a very valid point, particularly on the issue of the abuse of women. We do not allow and accept that in any way at home or in any other country, so why should we allow it to go unchecked when we are talking about the Indian forces in India and in Kashmir? Why should this be allowed to continue? I find it absurd and we should be making far stronger representations—I urge the Minister to do that.

When a man goes out of a house, whether he be a father, a husband or a son, there is no guarantee that he will come back and what state he will come back in. We have seen beatings taking place. We have seen videos on YouTube, Facebook and other social media of people being summarily beaten up in the streets—they are held by a disproportionate number of military personnel and beaten to within an inch of their life. They are tortured and taken away; people go missing. In some instances, when they go missing, they do not come back. That is a serious issue.

Children in Kashmir have no stake in their normal community or society. We expect our children to have a proper education in normal society, but Kashmiri children do not have an ounce of the protection needed in order to have that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said, when they go out into the streets they are greeted with pellets and such like. They have no proper education facilities and no healthcare. They have no real stake in the society that they are part of, and the generations go forward: this is the sixth generation of Kashmiris growing up under this tyranny and they have no protection whatsoever.

The pellet gun issue that my hon. Friend raised is about a horrendous act by the military. They have not just fired these guns to warn off crowds; they have specifically targeted the upper body of individuals. They have aimed at the face and at the eyes, and a number of people have lost their eyesight. Aiming these guns at the upper body means that people cannot even receive medical treatment, because the medical people will not use a scan on them as magnets are used when a body is scanned and so a scan would further assist the movement of the metallic pellets inside the person. That might lead to further injury, be it in their head, eyes or upper body, including their heart, arteries and so on. That would cause a significant problem for most people.

Those are the issues involved with the use of pellet guns. When someone is penetrated by these pellets and they go through a security barrier, it is easy to assess that they have been involved in these sorts of activities and so they will be pulled out, again to be held accountable. We are talking about torture of a whole community and of a whole society. A report entitled “BURIED EVIDENCE: Unknown, Unmarked, and Mass Graves in Indian-Administered Kashmir” has been produced by the International People’s Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice in Kashmir. It was written by Angana Chatterji, a well-known human rights activist, whose report deals with a significant number of mass graves that she has found, through her organisation. Unfortunately, no notice is taken by anybody. No notice is taken by any Government—our Government in particular. If this was to happen anywhere else, there would be a huge outcry, with people clamouring for international war crimes tribunals to be held and for these things to be dealt with.

I appreciate that we have an urgent debate to come after this and that a significant number of colleagues wish to speak, so I wish to conclude by saying that this is about the abuse of human rights and civil liberties, and the contravention of the Geneva convention. I would like the Minister to take note of those three important things when he sums up, and to say what he is going to do about it and how he will have an interaction with the Indian Government to hold them to account. If India wants to be a serious trade partner with the UK, these are the responsibilities it must carry. These issues are very important to my constituents and to all of us in this place, so it must ensure that that is considered and taken forward.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** In order to give everybody equal time and a fair crack of the whip, will Members please just take up to eight minutes?

12.16 pm

**Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): First, I wish to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this debate and on being such a strong advocate for Kashmir and Kashmiris in the Chamber.

In 1947, India and Pakistan partitioned, bringing about the largest migration of people in history, with more than 14 million people—refugees—crossing the newly formed India-Pakistan border for safety. One border disputed to this day is Kashmir, a small piece of land in the Himalayas which today is an unstable home to 12 million Kashmiris. On 24 January 1949, the first group of United Nations military observers arrived in Jammu and Kashmir to oversee a ceasefire between India and Pakistan. Almost 70 years later, India and Pakistan have evolved but Kashmir is still a region beset by political disagreement, violence, and human rights violations. Its population is just 12 million, yet more than 3,000 people have disappeared during the past 70 years and the conflict has left more than 47,000 people dead, including 7,000 police personnel. The death toll continues, with both India and Pakistan at an impasse, as was depressingly noted in a House of Commons Library research paper on Kashmir. It stated:

“Currently, the two governments”—

those of India and Pakistan—

“are engaged in a process of rapprochement. This is not the first such process, but it has given rise to optimism.”

That paper was written in 2004, and India and Pakistan have still got nowhere. Optimism has run dry, and bloodshed and bullets in Kashmir have taken over.

UN observations have taken place at various times since 1949, at considerable cost, but to what effect? Resolutions have been passed calling for ceasefires, for security forces to be withdrawn, and for a plebiscite giving Kashmiris the opportunity to decide whether to join India or Pakistan, or even to determine their own future—that is the cornerstone of any civilised democracy.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The UN clearly has a pivotal role to play in Kashmir, but does my hon. Friend believe it has sufficient skills, resources and political will to do what we are expecting of it in securing peace?

**Nusrat Ghani:** My hon. Friend makes a good point. I would say that the UN has considerable skill and considerable resources, but it is falling down on political will. Seventy years have been lost and Kashmir pays the price with lost lives and livelihoods. Last year, it saw an unprecedented level of violence and curfew, with 68 civilians killed and more than 9,000 people injured during months of unbroken violence. This was the bloodiest episode in Kashmir's recent history. The shame of the international community in failing to recognise the violence and offer support to Kashmiri civilians is a bloody stain on all our history books.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights emphasised the importance of an

“independent, impartial and international mission”

within the conflict-ridden region, with “free and complete access”. Top UN officials have said that they continue to receive reports of Indian forces using excessive force against the civilian population under India's administration, yet India has refused the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees access to investigate allegations of human rights abuses. I fully accept that Pakistan, not just India, has to allow the UN access to Kashmir so that it can evaluate the damage that the conflict has caused before it becomes another footnote in Kashmir's history.

The UN has had 70 years to help Kashmiris, but instead has for too long wilfully sidelined the dispute. We need a renewed effort for honest UN involvement to resolve the current crisis, with the UN using all its powers to investigate the crimes committed. What pressure can the UK, by taking advantage of our privileged position on the Security Council, put on the UN? The UN has to show some humility and give some backbone to its statements. No resolution or reconciliation can resume until there is acceptance, not dispute, over the lives lost and damaged. Unlike at any other time in history, we have a real role to play, offering our hand of friendship and partnership. Pakistan is one of the biggest recipients of our aid funding and a partner in tackling terrorism.

Only last year, the Prime Minister visited India to secure a substantial trade deal. During that trip, what discussions took place on Kashmir? Will the Minister update the House on his discussions on Kashmir with his counterparts in both Pakistan and India?

Prime Minister Modi of India said that

“any meaningful bilateral dialogue necessarily requires an environment that is free from terrorism and violence”,

and he is absolutely right. The recent escalation of violence creates terror where no authority is trusted, not even those that are meant to offer protection.

In Kashmir, pellet guns are being used by security forces. The Indian Government have advised that pellet guns should be used rarely, and only in pressing circumstances, yet the Central Reserve Police Force continues to use them persistently. These guns cause life-threatening injuries and brutally blind people—so far, more than 9,000 people have been injured. By their very nature, these pellet guns are the antithesis of targeted precision. They spray and maim through a 6-foot circle. It is impossible to limit the number of casualties with a 6-foot fan of pellets. These are not precision weapons or defensive weapons, and their use in open public places must constitute a human rights violation.

With a pellet gun, anyone and everyone within that 6-foot circle is a target, even children sitting at home. Twelve-year-old Umar Nazir was in the courtyard of his home—he was not protesting—when his eyes were hit by pellets. Both his eyes are injured, with little vision left. He is recovering in Srinagar, where the ophthalmology department has stated that it lacks the medical supplies to proceed with surgeries for injured retinas because the demand is so high. Depressingly, a former Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir was forced to tweet Prime Minister Modi to ask for eye surgeons and eye trauma experts to be sent to Kashmir to help those with injuries. People's lives are being lost and people's vision is being removed for life, and the best way to get help from Government agencies seems to be by sending a tweet. That is how desperate the situation has become.

Will the Minister ask his Indian counterparts what their justification is for using pellet guns in public spaces? I can see none. Does he agree that the indiscriminate nature of such weapons constitutes a crime when they are used in public spaces? The Central Reserve Police Force has refused to share its operating procedure for this lethal weapon. Will the Minister put pressure on India to disclose its justification? Perhaps the Indian authorities can share with us which other liberal democracy uses such a weapon on its own people. Will the Minister tell the House what aid or medical support is being provided to Kashmiri hospitals?

The human rights violations I have described should be argument enough for UN access for observation. Human rights violations will not disappear without observation; they will just be disputed. If the UN takes the Vienna declaration seriously, it must step up its activity and willingness to be involved.

This is not just a regional issue. India and Pakistan both have nuclear weapons, so the stakes in the dispute are high. Pakistan is reputed to have the 11th strongest military in the world; frighteningly, it is also ranked as the 14th most fragile country. This regional dispute is not so regional: when two nuclear powers fail to resolve such a volatile dispute, it affects us all and has the potential to threaten us all. That is especially true as the terror has taken a new, violent form.

Access to books and education is key to building a strong community. For the first time, schools and educators have become targets. Village schools are being targeted for destruction, with at least 24 being burned to the ground last year. In one incident, the principal of a school in Bugam, Mohammed Muzaffar, rushed to the school as it was burning to the ground. He cried out that it was like his home being burned. It was no ordinary school: built in 1948, it housed 3,000 books.

With schools on fire, teachers fearing for their lives and books burned to ashes, the future is bleak for both young and old in Kashmir, as is its economic security. It is in all our interests that the crisis in Kashmir is recognised, that the full force of our international community is marshalled to support the UN in gaining access to Kashmir, and that all our diplomatic relations are focused on providing a resolution and respite for Kashmir.

12.25 pm

**Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): First, Mr Deputy Speaker, may I send through you my good wishes to Mr Speaker on his birthday? There is a long queue of people wanting to wish him a happy birthday, and it is important to do so.

[Mr Virendra Sharma]

Two and a half years ago this House last debated Kashmir, and this is only the second debate in nearly 20 years. I declare that I am the chair of the Indo-British all-party group, and a person of Indian origin who was born in India, studied there, and then came here. I do not know how many Members have visited Kashmir; I think that, between my schooldays and now, I have visited Kashmir 14 times in my life, so I am quite familiar with the economic, social and political conditions there. I am not going to say anything that is hearsay; there will be no vested interests or ill-informed information here. I say that because I have seen practically what is happening and has happened, and the political situation over there.

Having listened to previous speakers, I feel sad that we are bringing together issues that are not linked at all and that are not happening in the way they are being presented. Let us look at the political situation. I strongly condemn any violation of human rights. For the past 45 years I have canvassed and campaigned on human rights issues. When India has violated human rights, I have criticised it—I have criticised India for many other traditions that the Indian Government or people have failed to tackle. That is why I feel strongly about the way we are debating the Kashmir issue today: the questions that are raised are untrue and not relevant to the situation.

**Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind):** My hon. Friend mentioned that he has visited Kashmir 14 times, but does he accept that the Indian authorities make it exceptionally difficult for British Members of Parliament to visit that part of the world?

**Mr Sharma:** I am sure that happens. The reason is that when someone wants to visit a place, they must be free of any prejudices before they go. If they have declared beforehand what they think is happening and publicly denounced it, no Government would allow them to visit. Give me one example of a Government who have allowed people to visit who have previously criticised their country.

**Imran Hussain:** I thank my hon. Friend, who is well respected in this House, for giving us his expertise. Does he at least accept that by speaking up against human rights violations in any country, one is not necessarily against that country?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. Can I help Members who are going to speak shortly? There is a danger that their interventions will take time away from somebody else. I do not mind having the debate, but Members must recognise that I want to treat everyone equally.

**Mr Sharma:** I am not saying that that is not the way one presents the argument or that that is not right. I am saying that no Government or authority would allow people to visit if they are not free of prejudice.

**Robert Ffello:** Will my hon. Friend allow me to intervene?

**Mr Sharma:** No, I will carry on. I am sure that my hon. Friend will be speaking later. [Interruption.]

**Robert Ffello:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. I am chair of the justice for Colombia group in Parliament. I criticise the Colombian Government time and again, and they let me into their country where I criticise them again.

**Mr Sharma:** Let us look at what has been happening since 1947. In 1948, after a line of control and a ceasefire were declared, India and Pakistan advocated that they should be part and parcel of the negotiations. In 1965 and 1971, India was attacked in an attempt to change that line of control. Again, in 1999, Pakistan tried to seize an opportunity to redraw the internationally accepted line of control. In total, that happened three times: in 1965, 1971 and 1999.

Having been unsuccessful in full-scale military manoeuvres to take control of more of Kashmir, subversive elements within the Pakistani Government have, since the millennium, turned towards terrorism to further their ends. In 2004, Pakistan made a public commitment to prevent terrorist groups from using its territory to plan, prepare or launch attacks against India. Since then the Pakistani spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence—ISI—has been heavily implicated in India's most notorious terrorist incidents, most notably the 2008 Mumbai attacks which left nearly 200 dead.

That behaviour—[Interruption.] I will come on to Kashmir, but I am giving some background. That behaviour is regularly seen across Kashmir. Although the line of control is demarked, fighters from Pakistan launch attacks across the state. Those terrorist atrocities are perpetrated only to destabilise the region. They do not help the people of Kashmir or make anyone stronger. All they do is further the misery of millions.

Since the 1948 riots, there has been an attempt to cleanse the region of native people opposed to Pakistani intervention. In the 1990s, we saw the most sustained civil activity aimed at driving Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmir valley. In 1947, a quarter of a million Pandits lived in Kashmir, now only around 20,000 remain. The majority live in squalid camps in Jammu, desperate to return to their homelands. They are unwilling to settle elsewhere and prejudice their right to return.

The threat of communal violence looms large—an ever present threat for millions. That is why we see images of soldiers across Kashmir: they are there to protect citizens of all stripes. People who want to go to work, school, or university are allowed to do so only under the protection of the Indian army. Without the protection of Indian troops, we can see all too easily what happens. The horrifying stories of brutality from the Peshawar school attacks that left more than 132 schoolchildren dead or the assassination attempt on Malala would not be so uncommon. Very few Members of this House would have done anything but affirm the actions of the British Army in trying to maintain the status quo in Northern Ireland. The army is there to protect the border, just as it did in Ulster, and, just as it did in Belfast when it made sure that young boys and girls from Catholic and Protestant families could continue to live the lives that they wanted.

The National Human Rights Commission of India has freely criticised and called for punishments when the rule of law has not been upheld to a rigorous standard. That is not a level of freedom allowed to those residents in Pakistan, which is recognised as the world's leading sponsor of terrorism.

The European Parliament observers had this to say after the state elections in 2014—

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** May I just say to the hon. Gentleman that he has now been speaking for nearly 11 minutes? I did suggest eight minutes; we are now well over. I know that this is a very important matter, but I want to ensure that everyone's voice is heard.

**Mr Sharma:** By working every day for a safer, more prosperous Kashmir, the Indian Government are fulfilling their commitment. The people desire a life unblemished by random acts of terror, where they are free to pursue their own dreams of education, employment and a peaceful life. Why must we again listen to hyped media accusations rather than look at the evidence of patterns of peaceful elections?

12.36 pm

**Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con):** I rise to support the motion. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this debate and on the spirit with which he moved the motion. I am very proud that we are having this debate—the second one since I was elected—and that I am rising in support of the position that I took in the previous debate on 15 September 2011.

I should also say that I am very proud of the Kashmiris in the United Kingdom, and in Wycombe in particular, for the dignity and determination with which they pursue this issue, despite the difficulty of doing so and in the context of the seriousness of the issues involved. I wish to make three points to the Minister: the first is about the intractability of the issue; the second about some lessons from our own referendum; and the third about how we might make progress.

It is the long-standing position of the Government that this is a matter for the two independent nations of India and Pakistan to resolve. I have reliably found that in the Foreign Office gallows humour is applied to this issue, which is known as the graveyard of Foreign Secretaries. That is a matter of very considerable regret. This issue of self-determination, which we have seen in the United Kingdom, is not one to be thought of as impossible to meet. We have just met it, and this is a moment when the Foreign Office should know that self-determination is not an issue on which no progress can be made in the 21st century. It is not good enough to adopt such a view. I am acutely aware, as is everyone here, that this is a long-standing policy, which Governments of all colours have held, so I mean no criticism of this Government or this Minister. However, it is not good enough to continue this policy for two reasons: first, it is incumbent on all of us in this House to represent the many thousands of people in our constituencies whose family origins will be in India, Kashmir or Pakistan, and they deserve to have their voices heard in this place and internationally.

**Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab):** The hon. Gentleman is making a very important point. What Kashmiris say to me, particularly those in Nottingham but also from across the country, is that there needs to be a much greater urgency from everyone to tackle this problem.

It has been going on for decades. The worry is that, in 10, 20, 30 or 40 years' time, people will still be discussing the same issue.

**Mr Baker:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and that is why I begin with the point about intractability. The other reason it is not good enough to adopt the current position is that this is a legacy of the British empire and we should acknowledge our historical responsibility. There is a conversation to be had about world views and the willingness of individuals to accept ancestral responsibility, but that is perhaps for another day. Just because it is difficult to make a stand on this issue does not mean that it is not the right thing to do. It is right for the British Government to make a stand on this question.

Secondly, I have some questions about lessons that we might learn from our own referendum. Those of us who are asking for a referendum for the fulfilment of United Nations mandates have to ask ourselves, what if we win, what if we make progress and what if a referendum were held? I want to make two points in particular. The first question is about the collective basis on which a referendum could be held. What would be the demos? Who would vote and on what basis would the result be enforced? We know that in the UK there are those who do not wish to accept the national referendum result; we know, for example, that the Scottish National party picks up on the point about how Scotland voted. These will all be live issues in the event that a referendum is held in Kashmir.

I appeal to all Kashmiris who work on these issues to give serious thought to what the demos would be and on what basis the result would be considered legitimate by all parties, because the other issue—which is of foremost seriousness—is that we saw passions run extremely high in the United Kingdom, where politics generally proceeds no further than harsh language. Given that we are dealing with a region of the world where live conflict among major nuclear-armed powers is a risk, we must ask ourselves how a referendum in Kashmir would proceed peacefully not just during the campaign but afterwards.

Finally on this point let me say something about unity and division. I know that in Wycombe there are British Kashmiris who voted remain, and perhaps many who did not vote at all, who supported the fundamental principle that we should have had a referendum. I am pleased and proud to stand with them, united that as we go forward we should have a referendum for Kashmir.

The third point is perhaps the most contentious: how should we make progress? The hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) described as untrue some of the things that the House has already heard in the course of the debate, and this is a very important point. At different times, we have heard Pakistan accused of state-sponsored terrorism, and India accused of using inappropriate weapons, of gang rape and of murder. I do not wish to see either nation slandered and, of course, the crucial difference between a valid charge and a slander is truth. When it comes to making progress, I appeal to everyone to focus relentlessly on objective fact, and to the Government to facilitate that.

I know what I have seen with my own eyes in the videos that have been shown to me. I have seen what is purported to be Indian soldiers beating a confession

[Mr Baker]

from a man and what is purported to be Indian soldiers killing a man in the rubble of his own home in Kashmir. They are images that I would prefer never to have seen and that I would never wish to see again, but the crucial question is whether they are a set-up, or propaganda, or whether they are true.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

**Mr Baker:** Will the hon. Lady bear with me a moment?

If the videos are true, Kashmir is a matter for the whole world. The most commented on videos on my YouTube channel are from the beginning and end of the 2011 debate on this subject. The overwhelming consensus is that we should stay out of Indian affairs, but if these allegations are true the whole world cannot stay out of Kashmir and of India and Pakistan's affairs.

**Stella Creasy** *rose*—

**Mr Baker:** I will not give way, because I am being encouraged to wrap up.

I understand that the Foreign Office thinks that this issue is intractable, but we have seen in our own country that it need not be. Yes, there are lessons to be learned and the Government can facilitate them, but for goodness' sake let us recognise that if even a fraction of the allegations being made are true this is an urgent and pressing issue for the whole world.

12.44 pm

**Shabana Mahmood** (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): The House will know of my long-standing interest in Kashmir. Many thousands of British citizens of Kashmiri extraction have made their home in my constituency, and I take an interest on their behalf, but I have a more personal interest as my family originates from Kashmir. All four of my grandparents were born in Kashmir before my family moved to this country, so this debate has very personal resonance for me.

The hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) has already set out the background to this long-standing dispute and I pay tribute to him and to others who led the charge to secure today's Backbench business debate.

We have heard already that this is a long-standing dispute between two nuclear-armed powers in one of the world's most heavily militarised regions. It does not receive enough attention anywhere outside the region, and certainly not in our own country given the size of our British Kashmiri population; it certainly has a lot of attention from that population, but not enough from those outside it. I therefore pay tribute to all the doughty campaigners from all parties who have taken every opportunity available to raise this serious matter in the House of Commons and to press both our current Government and previous Governments to do more to help to build a resolution to this long-standing crisis.

The further push for debate on Kashmir has come as a particular result of the upsurge in violence and fighting in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir since last summer. We see the unacceptable failure of the whole world, the refusal to give effect to UN resolutions and the denial of respect for the self-determination of the

Kashmiri people playing out in the worst possible way. People have lost hope and are rising against that loss of hope to try to force to have their rights be respected.

That significant upsurge in violence has elicited a brutal response from the Indian authorities. I am afraid that I wholeheartedly disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). I do not believe that it is possible to minimise the extent to which the Indian authorities have acted in a disproportionate manner that has significantly harmed and, indeed, created great tragedy for the Kashmiri people in the region. This is the biggest uprising in two decades and the brutality of the response of the police and security services cannot be ignored. The fact that that is the case is upheld by human rights organisations across the world, including Human Rights Watch, whose world report for 2017 found clear evidence that the police and security forces have acted with impunity, that there have been extra-judicial killings and that mass rape has occurred. All those things are not acceptable.

I concur with the comments made by the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker). Of course, there will be questions about the veracity of the videos we will see on YouTube, on Facebook and elsewhere on social media, but there should be an open investigation to prove the veracity of the videos. If they are true—I believe that they will be found to be true—there are big questions for the Indian Government to answer.

I have to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall that the big difference between the Indian Government and other Governments that commit human rights abuses is that India is the largest democracy in the world. Being a democracy is not simply about giving people a vote to decide their Government. It includes much more. It is about fundamental respect for the rule of law and for basic human rights that must be protected and that sit alongside the ability of the people to elect their Government.

**Nusrat Ghani:** Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

**Shabana Mahmood:** I am afraid that I would be doing other Members out of their time if I gave way. I apologise.

The use of pellet guns has been mentioned. This is a significant issue for the Indian Government, and our Government must press them more on it. The Indian defence for the use of pellet guns to see off protestors who they say are throwing stones is that pellet guns are non-lethal. Of course, a pellet gun will probably not kill, but I defy anyone to see the pictures of the victims of pellet gun attacks and say that that is a proportionate response against civilians in a democracy. It is not, and I do not believe that anybody would stand up in this House and say that it is.

When we debate Kashmir, people who speak more in favour of the Indian Government's stance will often say that the position of those who live in Jammu and Kashmir is better because they are able to vote, they are free to take part in the democratic process and they are basically free, and that self-determination is not necessary because they are a free people, freely electing their own local leaders with a significant devolution of power. Nobody—not one person—in Jammu and Kashmir has voted to be hurt, injured, beaten up, raped, blinded or

killed. Pellet wounds are brutal. They are a brutal response by the Indian authorities and send a brutal message to the Kashmiri people. They leave brutal scars, which are not just carried by the individuals who bear the physical scars but are borne by the whole community in Jammu and Kashmir itself and all around the world by those of us of Kashmiri extraction. They are a symbol of the population's repression, its desire to resist that repression and its cry to be heard.

That cry is falling on deaf ears in the largest democracy in the world, which wants to do more business with the rest of the world and play a greater role in world affairs. That position is simply not acceptable and our Government must not shy away from making that plain, especially in relation to the use of pellet guns. Tremendous, appalling, sustained and deliberate misery has been visited on the people of Kashmir for too long. The stories of disappearances and the discovery of mass graves have brought no official UN-led investigation whatever. The police and the security forces have impunity, especially given the implementation of the Special Powers Act of 1990. If a people are humiliated, abused and allowed to lose hope, and offered only despair in turn, and given no answers and no rights, there will an uprising. It is inevitable.

None of us as responsible legislators, also working in a democracy, can watch these events unfold and sit on our hands. We can do more. The legacy of empire demands that we do more. We have a duty to speak out more regularly. We have a duty to challenge as well as to encourage both the Indian and the Pakistani authorities. I have to say to the Minister that the written answers to the questions tabled, particularly last summer, are so bland it is as though these matters are a daily occurrence that can be ignored. That is not good enough. There are other disputes in this world that elicit much stronger responses from the Government when Members of this House table written questions. That has not been the case in relation to the dispute in Kashmir. In particular, there has been no definitive answer on whether the Prime Minister specifically raised the issue of human rights abuses with the Indian Government. It is not enough to tell us that the issue of Kashmir was raised. We need to know whether the human rights abuses and the use of pellet guns were raised.

I believe that it is now incumbent upon the British Government to make a clear call to raise this issue at the United Nations and to ask for an independent, UN-led investigation into human rights abuses, so that we can at least demonstrate that although some parts of this world see this as a forgotten conflict, or a conflict they want to be forgotten, we will never forget it and will keep fighting.

12.53 pm

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood). I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) for the calm and measured manner in which he introduced the debate. I hope that we can continue that throughout the debate.

No one in the debate has yet mentioned that 19 January 1990 was an evil day in the history of Jammu and Kashmir—the day when 65,000 Hindus were forcibly expelled from the Kashmir valley by Islamic jihadists,

under the slogan, “Die, convert or leave”. They forced only the men out. They said, “Leave your women. We will convert them, we will rape them and we will make them all Muslim.” One of the sad facts of this largely forgotten area of conflict is that it has a religious element as well as the aspect of where people wish to live.

I had the opportunity in February last year to visit Jammu and Kashmir. I went to Srinagar and to Jammu. I was heartened by the fact that when I met people from all walks of life in Srinagar, particularly those from the chamber of commerce, they came with a series of opportunities, including trade, hydro-electric power, agriculture, canning goods to be sold across the world, as well as using the beauty of the Kashmir valley to attract tourists to the area. It is an area that we would all love to go and visit and that we would all love people from across the world to be able to go and visit. The one fundamental issue that they all raised was that of safety and security.

The reality is that when we talk about the suffering in Jammu and Kashmir, we have to concentrate on the human rights abuses and violations against Hindus, Sikhs and minority Muslims. The sad fact is that this has been used as a means of ethnically cleansing this part of the world.

I hope when the Minister replies he will comment on the fact that the European and Indian authorities identified terrorism as one of the major sources of concern to both the European Union and India. Jointly, in their communiqué, they condemned the terror attacks in Brussels, Paris, Pathankot and Gurdaspur and recalled the November 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai. They called for the perpetrators of these attacks to be brought to justice. Leaders called for decisive and united actions to be taken against ISIL, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, the Haqqani Network and other internationally active terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Those terrorist groups all operate from Pakistan. They are along the international line of control. They are infiltrating terrorists into the sovereign state of Jammu and Kashmir.

We should remember that the fundamental element of this is when Britain ceased to be the colonial power. The decision on whether states opted either for Pakistani control or for Indian control was left to each independent state. The Maharaja Hari Singh, who was the last ruling Maharaja of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, signed the instrument of accession to India, bringing the state under India on 26 October 1947. We should be clear that under international law, the whole of Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India. It is the crowning glory of India. As such, every other aspect that has gone on after that date has been a violation of international law.

Several hon. Members have alluded to the United Nations resolution, and we must remember the detail: Prime Minister Nehru took the issue to the United Nations in the first place, seeking to get the Pakistani forces that illegally occupied part of the sovereign state of Jammu and Kashmir to leave. The UN resolution calls—this is the first element—on the illegal occupying forces of Pakistan to leave Jammu and Kashmir, then for the Indian forces to reduce to what is required for security purposes and then, and only then, for a decision to be made on a plebiscite for the people of Jammu and

[Bob Blackman]

Kashmir on what should be their destiny. Pakistan has never accepted or complied with that UN resolution. That is one of the fundamental reasons why we have this challenge and problem today.

**Mr Baker:** My hon. Friend is making an articulate case, as always. Does he think there is any chance of India engaging in confidence-building measures with Pakistan on this point so that that element of the resolution might ever be fulfilled? Is India willing to give appropriate assurances?

**Bob Blackman:** Clearly, I cannot speak for the Indian Government and the UK has ceased to be a colonial power. We are not the power that will tell India or Pakistan what to do and, in that respect, I am concerned that the motion could be misinterpreted in other parts of the world—[*Interruption.*] I think that Mr Deputy Speaker will hold me to account if I give way.

There have been numerous violations of the ceasefire along the line of control, and a recent upsurge in violence, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North mentioned. Studies have found that the shells, GPS units and everything else that emanated from the site where those Indian troops were killed and murdered came from Pakistan military use, so it is quite clear that Pakistan was behind that conflict. The number of violations across the line of control has been frequent and well documented, and that needs to be understood. The recent upsurge in violence resulted from the Indian forces eliminating Burhan Wani, the Jihadi John poster boy of jihad.

The use of pellet guns and other human rights abuses have been taken up by the state Government of Jammu and Kashmir, who have had four debates on the subject. Those human rights abuses have been called to account and will be fully investigated, and any proven perpetrators will be suitably punished. I think we can say that the sovereign state is looking after those aspects. We want a peaceful resolution to the situation so that the people of Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh, can live in peace and harmony.

1.2 pm

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this extremely important debate that, as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group, I assisted in bringing to the House. I am privileged to take part because the issue matters deeply to many of my constituents and to me personally, as my family originates from the state of Kashmir so I know the region well. Although the seriousness of the issue means that I could talk at great length, time does not permit so I will try to keep my contributions to several key areas.

I believe that the most pressing matter is the long-standing and ongoing human rights abuses taking place in the region. Last summer and long after, we saw the devastating deployment of pellet guns that resulted in the indiscriminate maiming and blinding of hundreds of Kashmiris, and the horrific photos of the aftermath of their use, with pellets embedded in the bloodied faces of demonstrators and children—images we would all like to forget. But

security forces did not stop there. Thousands were injured, phone lines were cut, internet access was constrained and the region was placed under a strict curfew. We would expect such moves under a repressive regime, not one with the hallmarks of a free, open and liberal society.

The abuse then turned deadly, with the illegal use of live ammunition by security forces on unarmed demonstrators resulting in their deaths. Unfortunately, however, this is nothing new. The reality is that human rights abuses have gone on, largely unchecked, for decades in the region, as is well documented by many well-respected human rights organisations. Unaccountability for these crimes is rife. If we are to address the abuses, we must first look at the draconian Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act, which allows the security forces to escape justice and accountability. It was only ever intended to be invoked on a temporary basis, but has continued in force since 1990. It has been widely criticised by well-respected human rights organisations, with numerous calls for it to be repealed. I repeat those calls today because the Act grants security forces in the region heavy-handed powers to kill, arrest and search. It is because of the Act that there have been near unspeakable horrors and abuses of human rights including extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, tormented and tortured civilians, mass rapes, widowed wives and orphaned children.

According to recent figures published in the *Journal of Law and Conflict Resolution*, between 1989 and 2010 there were almost 7,000 custodial killings. Some 118,000 civilians were arrested, almost 10,000 women were raped or molested, and as many as 10,000 Kashmiri youths were forcibly disappeared. There is no doubt that such abuses are taking place—I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma)—as they are well documented. To deny that they are well documented is to go against many well-respected human rights organisations and the evidence, including video footage and photographs, that we have seen with our own eyes.

**Nusrat Ghani:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Imran Hussain:** I may come back to the hon. Lady, but she knows that time is very limited.

As has been mentioned, we must not turn a blind eye to abuses that take place. We must not ignore them or just stand by. We must send a clear message today that wherever it takes place, injustice is injustice, and it will never be tolerated.

The second important issue is that of self-determination, specifically the right of the sons and daughters of Kashmir to self-determination and the urgent need for them to be able to exercise that right. A lot has been said about UN resolution 47, calling for a plebiscite on the future of the region. The resolution is crucial to the story of Kashmir, past and present, but it is non-binding, which is why the plebiscite has not yet taken place. However, I call again for the implementation of that resolution, whether it is called UN resolution 47, a free and fair plebiscite or whatever we name it. The ultimate choice must be for the sons and daughters of Kashmir to determine their own destiny. They have waited for more than 70 years for their voice to be heard and to make a decision on their future to determine their lives. For more than 70 years, they have been denied their

birth right to self-determination. The international community must do what is fair and proper, allowing the sons and daughters of Kashmir their birth right.

I am passionate about the subject and could go on, but time is not permitting, so I will conclude. I have previously asked the Minister in this House to condemn the human rights abuses in the region. I ask him again today to use this opportunity on behalf of the Government to condemn those abuses. At the very least, Minister, please accept that the abuses are taking place, and assure us that the Government are doing everything they can to allow for a peaceful resolution on the basis of the sons and daughters of Kashmir determining their own destiny—something that is very much overdue.

1.9 pm

**Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this timely and important debate.

It is said that in war there are no winners, only losers. If so, the people of the Kashmir region have surely paid too great a price. The UN resolution was passed in 1948—almost 70 years ago—and we seem no closer to self-determination in the Kashmir region than we did then.

As we know, and as many have said and will say in this debate, the last six months have seen nothing but backwards steps. We have curfews; censorship; the wounding, maiming and killing of civilians; the death of military personnel on both sides; the economy crumbling; food shortages; a refugee crisis caused by tens of thousands of displaced civilians; and skirmishes along the line of control. We have seen international pacts under threat, water shortages, deep divisions on both sides of the line of control, and progress well and truly in reverse.

As we all know, it has been the position of this Government and of successive Governments that the issue of Kashmir is for India and Pakistan to resolve at a pace they see fit, and in a way they see fit, and that it is not for our Government to intervene, suggest solutions or mediate. But what, then, do this House and this country stand for? We have loss of life, widely reported human rights abuses and a United Nations that cannot gain genuine access to the Kashmir valley. To our shame, although we raise this issue with both sides, every time any member of the Government has been challenged to raise it directly at the United Nations, that request has, as far as we can tell, been politely declined, politely deflected and politely ignored.

Those who live in the region and those of us who follow events in Kashmir closely know that a deep underlying tension has scarred one of the most beautiful places in the world. We have all seen the pictures and reports of the oppressive and aggressive tactics that have been used to silence dissent and squash civil unrest. But the people are restless, and rightly so—it has been nearly 70 years since partition, and they are no closer to being in control of their own destiny.

The reports that have come out of the region have been tragic and disturbing. Estimates put civilian deaths at somewhere between 85 and 120. The number of civilian casualties is estimated to be over 13,000, due to the action by security services. We have seen communication—internet and telephone services—restricted. We have

seen an attack on the free press, and particularly the *Kashmir Reader*, which was banned from publishing for months.

Many have talked today about the use of pellets. How a standard operating procedure of firing below the knee can be used for a shell of pellets that have a 6 metre dispersal range is a question for the ages. That is, by any definition of the term, an indiscriminate use of force when used in a crowd, and reports have shown that that is the case in practice, with many civilians losing their eyesight due to this modern form of crowd control.

One widely reported story that struck me was that of a 14-year-old girl who died of respiratory illness. She died as a result of inhaling PAVA chili gas. For six days, she lived with burns to her throat and lungs, and she eventually passed away in a hospital on a ventilator.

The motion raises a number of issues that need further consideration by the House. One is that the Government need to do more at the United Nations to encourage the de-escalation of tension, to encourage both sides to give the UN access to the Kashmir valley and to assess the reports of human rights violations.

**Stella Creasy:** Does my friend agree that one of the more constructive things the Government could do is press for an independent UN inquiry into human rights abuses? That has helped in other situations around the world.

**Naz Shah:** I absolutely agree that we need to push for an independent inquiry.

We are not asking the Government to prescribe how Pakistan and India resolve the entrenched issue of peace in Kashmir, but everyone here will recognise that, with the situation as it is on the ground—with civilians being killed, oppressed and impoverished—there can be no progress towards peace or a resolution. We have an obligation to do everything in our power to help the region return to a level of normality—I use that term loosely—before any progress can be made towards peace.

The motion also recognises that, for there to be any meaningful and lasting peace in the region, the people of Kashmir have to have the freedom and security to make a decision for themselves. We have long talked about the self-determination of the Kashmir people, but under the current occupation, and without robust and lasting local representation, can we truly expect to reach a position where the will and wishes of the people in this region are not only heard but truly listened to?

When uprisings like this are met with excessive force, that only further entrenches differences. These things have played out many times since the 1990s; at the end, the bodies of civilians are counted, and the people who survive and who struggle to live in this region become further embittered towards those they hold responsible for their oppression.

It is in the interests of Pakistan and India to improve relations, for the security and prosperity of the over 1.4 billion people who live in those countries and the region as a whole. The situation requires strong international leadership—not to force India and Pakistan into a solution but to invest in the foundations that can lead to a lasting peace and to the self-determination of the Kashmir people, and I call on the Government to take the lead.

[Naz Shah]

We have a responsibility 70 years in the making. We as a nation have a vested interest in both these countries. We are intrinsically linked to both of them. We have had a major impact on their history, and we must help them to create a future. We have just signed a massive trade deal with India. The China-Pakistan economic corridor will have an impact on the wider world in terms of trade, growth and prosperity. There is an international perspective, and it is to our benefit.

I spent my teenage years in what is known as Azad Kashmir. Azad, means “free”: free to go to the shops, free to play, free to go out into the street, free to visit—free to go wherever I, or my family, want. My family remain in Azad and continue to enjoy the freedoms of Azadi, but the children in occupied Kashmir do not have those freedoms. They might not return if they go out. A son might not return with his eyesight, and that will affect 70% of his abilities as a human being—I know that from my experience of working with disabilities. A young girl might not return, and if she does, has she been raped and violated? These things—these disabilities—are the reality of the occupation in Kashmir. We cannot and must not abdicate our responsibility. It will be quite frankly shameful if the Government continue in their inaction.

I ask Members to support the motion and to call on the Government to use the current climate to help push Pakistan and India into more prosperous diplomatic relations. I finish with the words of Martin Luther King:

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

This House and this Government cannot remain silent on the issue of Kashmir anymore.

1.17 pm

**Chris Leslie** (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a tragedy in some ways that we are still here debating this issue, although I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee and hon. Members for securing the debate. Here we are again—I think it is a couple of years since we had a substantive discussion of this matter.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), it is 70 years since the partitioning of the region, where Britain, of course, had an integral responsibility and role. It is for that reason that we cannot wash our hands of this problem, just ignore it or sweep it under the carpet. The UK has a long-standing duty and responsibility to take an interest and to be involved in this issue.

We have heard, of course, about the United Nations resolution and the call for a plebiscite to solve the issue, but nothing really moves forward. The frustration of many of my hon. Friends in the Chamber is palpable. We do not particularly relish having to come here to talk about this issue time and time again, but we find ourselves having to do so.

Decades on, we find ourselves talking about some of the tragedies that are occurring. Yes, there are occasionally brief spells of calm, but those are then broken by rising tensions, by conflict and by the flare-up of issues. Often, that is because funerals breach curfews that are put in place, which in turn escalates the conflict in this

heavily militarised part of the world—and on and on the cycle goes. We have heard a lot about the effects of pellet guns, for instance; I am glad that many hon. Members have raised that. The UK Government must make it clear that there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to address civil issues that arise on the streets.

Lots of different organisations and parts of the community have a role to play, as well as the UK. The United Nations clearly has a role. This issue should not be parked and hidden away, often because there is very little media coverage and not much information about what is happening in this part of the world. India and Pakistan do not just have a role—they have a responsibility to do more to move away from the heat and the conflict in this situation to find a better path to the future. Perhaps a wider regional approach to finding peaceful solutions should be explored, given that we see this in other conflict zones around the world. Often where there are bilateral disagreements between two countries in a region, trying to find ways of saving face on either side is incredibly difficult, as we have seen in the middle east, so there is an argument for involving other parties and nations in that part of the world to think about ways of breaking the deadlock.

The Kashmiri community themselves clearly want to have a role, and they do have one: they are a very vocal community in many of our neighbourhoods. As I have said to many groups that press for attention to be given to human rights and for self-determination in Kashmir, it would help massively if they could all co-ordinate and work together. That includes communicating with Members of Parliament, because we are not getting information about what is happening in that part of the world. Much more could be done in the new ways in which we operate, even on social media, to make sure that the wider community and policymakers are aware of issues that arise, and effective co-ordination would make a difference in that regard.

We need to start to think laterally about how to crack this problem so that we are not here again in two years' time. What different mechanisms could be available to try to find peaceful solutions? The UK has a role and should think about promoting peacekeeping, which means encouraging Governments to demilitarise and stop the attacks to take out the tension and the heat; promoting peace-building, which means reversing some of the destructive steps that have been taken in recent years; and promoting peacemaking, which means searching for negotiated resolutions where possible. All these things can and should be taking place simultaneously.

Leaders in India and Pakistan must all dial back on aggression and not be provoked by individual attacks, although that is of course difficult if they feel that different governmental forces are behind, or alleged to be behind, certain attacks. Normalisation of the situation in Kashmir is absolutely essential so that we can open the routes and channels for dialogue. As my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford East and for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) said, we must go back to the rule of law as a matter of urgency, and have the accountability for the police and the armed forces that has been lacking in many ways.

I know there is a long-standing position in terms of the Foreign Office's policy on this, but I call on the Minister and the UK Government to think about ways of promoting conflict resolution and confidence-building

measures between the different sides—for example, a summit to learn lessons about peacemaking tactics in areas where the UK has been involved in times past. The conflict in Northern Ireland was lengthy, and it took a lot of time to get people around the table, sometimes not even in the same building or the same room, but the UK Government have expertise in this field and they should find ways of applying it. It is also worth thinking about the potential role of economic development and regeneration in reciprocation for dialogue that we might want to have, because that has worked in other situations.

I thank those from the Pakistani and Kashmiri community who have made strong representations to me. On Friday 24 February, I will host a Nottingham roundtable on Kashmir, trying to bring together, as independently as I possibly can, all those with an interest in this issue to try to drill down into what the community is looking for and the solutions that might be viable, and then to make representations to the Government. I am grateful for the opportunity to make that point directly to the Minister this afternoon.

1.25 pm

**Simon Danczuk** (Rochdale) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie), who made a very good and solution-focused speech. I thank the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) for securing and leading this debate.

I first visited Kashmir in 2011 just after I was elected to serve Rochdale, a town with a vibrant Kashmiri community. Kashmir was just as beautiful, and the people just as welcoming, as I was told would be the case. Yet I knew that this wonderful part of the world was wrought with fear and tension. While I was there, I heard from people on the ground about the human rights abuses regularly carried out by the Indian army, and ever since I have kept a close eye on the situation. The brutality of the Indian army was seen in full force last summer when unrest broke out in the region. The use of live ammunition and pellet guns against crowds was entirely disproportionate, as a number of speakers have described. I thank my colleagues, in particular, for having already raised those issues with our Government. Tensions are still simmering away, manifesting themselves in small clashes that could escalate in the foreseeable future.

In such circumstances, Britain really does have to step up to the mark. We all know the old Pottery Barn rule: “You break it, then you have to fix it”. Thanks to our long imperial history there are plenty of broken pots all across the world, from Palestine to Hong Kong to Kashmir. It is therefore unacceptable for the British Government to wash their hands of the matter, as they are currently doing. While I accept that Pakistan and India must be at the forefront of striking a deal, there is no reason why Britain cannot play a more active role in mediating the conflict by bringing people round the table and monitoring the human rights situation in Kashmir. I understand that during the Prime Minister’s meeting with Indian Premier Modi last November, the issue of human rights abuses in Kashmir was not even raised. Can the Minister confirm this? If true, what does it say about Britain’s place in the world?

Earlier this week, the Prime Minister outlined her vision for a “global Britain” that is confident across the world. I welcome this ambitious vision for our country,

but I have my reservations. This new outlook cannot solely be about forging trade links across the world. The promotion of human rights and liberal democratic values must be at the heart of British foreign policy if we truly wish to be a positive global player. I worry that in the coming years human rights will be pushed even further down the agenda as the Government seek to secure Britain’s economic future. We have a vastly expanded team working on international trade, who I am sure will be keen to strike some sort of free trade deal with India. I wonder what this will mean for the people of Kashmir. It is perfectly reasonable for a Prime Minister to raise sensitive issues like human rights and territorial disputes behind closed doors, as many Prime Ministers have done with their Indian counterparts previously, but I am not confident that this will happen in future. I would like the Government to provide me and Britain’s Kashmiri diaspora with reassurances that settling the issue of Kashmir will remain a substantive part of the UK’s dialogue with India and Pakistan.

This is not just about India and Pakistan finding a solution; Kashmiris must also be part of any future dialogue. Britain should promote their voice in this debate—a voice that is too often shut out. While we talk about human rights today, it is important to remember that the most important right for a people is the right to self-determination. It is therefore incumbent on the British Government to help the people of Kashmir to determine their own future.

1.29 pm

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) for securing the debate. The political situation in Kashmir continues to be a long drawn-out conflict, ranging back to 1947. Since then, there have been occasional surges in violence, leading to the deaths of hundreds of civilians in the area. Although attempts at dialogue to resolve the conflict have been made by both the Pakistani and the Indian Governments, ultimately those attempts have amounted to nothing substantial for the people of Kashmir and their calls for self-determination.

In 2010, Kashmir saw one of its most brutal episodes of violence when 120 civilians, most of them teenagers, were killed at the hands of the Indian military. However, the violence of 2010 was overshadowed by the tragic series of events that we witnessed in the summer of 2016, which appear to constitute a violation of human rights. The killing of a rebel leader in Kashmir who was revered by the Pakistani population and known as a terrorist by the Indian state resulted in hundreds of Kashmiri citizens flooding to the streets in protest against the killing.

Undoubtedly, such events are but triggers in this long-standing conflict, which is perpetuated by a feeling of frustration and anger among the Kashmiri community, who have often found themselves restricted by curfews and limits to their freedom of speech, and who have been, at times, bullied and humiliated at the hands of Indian officials. The protestors threw stones when confronted by the Indian military, and the retaliation by the Indian military was staggering: they used pellet guns in an attempt to disperse the crowds, although the use of live bullets and CS gas was also noticeable.

[Gill Furniss]

By the end of August, after six weeks of violence, some 6,000 civilians had been injured. Almost 1,000 of them suffered injuries to their eyes.

Let us be clear: pellet guns are seen as non-lethal crowd control weapons, but they have devastating and long-lasting consequences. In a report entitled “Lethal in Disguise”, the International Network of Civil Liberties Organisations and Physicians for Human Rights made it clear that pellet rounds cause

“an indiscriminate spray of ammunition that spreads widely and cannot be aimed”

and that they are

“likely to be lethal at close range, but are likely to be inaccurate and indiscriminate at longer ranges”.

The report goes on to state that most countries

“prohibit the use of metal shot as excessively dangerous but several countries, including Egypt and Bahrain, use it regularly.”

It appears that we should add India to that list of states.

India is the largest democracy in the world, with a thriving economy and an increasingly educated population. I am therefore appalled by its attitude to the use of such methods, which have such damaging and, at times, life-threatening effects. In the long term, such methods only sow feelings of anger and resentment within the Kashmiri community that will no doubt spill over when something else triggers a reaction.

In answer to a question that Lord Ahmed tabled on 14 December in the other House, Baroness Anelay of St Johns assured us on 23 December that the Government of India are reviewing the use of pellet guns in Kashmir. A recent report in *The Independent* suggests that India will swap this non-lethal method for alternative mechanisms. Although that is welcome, India must make a clear commitment that it will not use pellet guns, and that any alternative crowd control mechanisms will be used proportionately and in line with human rights laws and international legal obligations.

India and Pakistan are both friends of the UK, but we should use that friendship to drive forward a policy of dialogue between them on the issue of Kashmir, and to encourage respect for human rights, freedom of speech and freedom of expression. I strongly condemn the violence in Kashmir, and in particular the use of pellet guns, which have devastating effects on civilians. Although we welcome the review of the use of those weapons, it may fall short of a clear commitment. As the UK is a member of the UN Security Council, I urge the Government to raise these human rights abuses at the UN and to call for an investigation into them. As touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) in her intervention, a wider review of human rights throughout the world would be very welcome.

It is in everybody’s interest that dialogue between India and Pakistan continues on the issue of Kashmir so that a long-term sustainable solution can be found to the conflict, which has already gone on for too long. I therefore support the motion.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. Because of the number of Members who want to catch my eye for this debate and the following debate, I am

going to drop the unofficial time limit—there is no official limit on this—to five or six minutes, with 10 minutes each for the wind-ups. Then we will come in just on time. If Members could keep to that time, that would be great.

1.35 pm

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I rise to support the motion and to congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing the debate.

Like many hon. Members present, I represent a richly diverse constituency, the people of which owe their origins to more than 120 countries. Those whose family roots are in Kashmir are one of the largest groups. One of the many advantages of having so many diaspora communities in my constituency is that when we see issues around the world, we feel them back home. For example, when the devastating earthquake hit northern Pakistan and Azad Kashmir in October 2005—killing around 90,000 people, leaving 3.5 million homeless, and destroying vital infrastructure—we felt the pain in Sheffield, through friends and neighbours whose families were in the region, and the city responded. As well as offering immediate support, we set about raising funds to rebuild the infrastructure. As a result of those efforts, seven years later Sheffield College opened on a wooded hill overlooking the city of Bagh—a community at the heart of the quake that lost 10% of its population. I pay tribute to my constituent Abdul Assim and all those who led the fundraising.

Just as that link through the diaspora community gives us a special responsibility for natural disasters beyond our control, so it gives us a special responsibility for events that we have shaped and that we can influence. The UK clearly has a special responsibility, dating back to our occupation of Jammu and Kashmir and the terms of our withdrawal after independence in 1947, so events of the sort that have occurred since last July should focus us all again on seeking a settlement to one of the most long-standing post-war grievances. The basis for that settlement should be, as others have mentioned, UN Security Council resolution 47, which was agreed almost 70 years ago in April 1948, calling for a plebiscite to enable the people of Kashmir to determine their own future.

The wave of protests and their suppression in the Kashmir valley following the killing of Burhan Wani have been a tragedy for the people of Indian-occupied Kashmir, and they should have prompted a concerted effort by the international community to reach a political solution. The Indian authorities have responded to the wave of strikes, rallies, protests and demonstrations with what looks to the whole world like disproportionate repression. In November the BBC estimated that more than 85 protesters had been killed and thousands more had been injured.

As many Members have said, of particular concern has been the use of pellet guns by the Indian authorities. Those are guns that fire shrapnel directly at protestors. As the BBC reported, despite Indian soldiers supposedly being required by their own standard operating procedure to target only the legs, and to do so only in extremely volatile conditions—the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford

West (Naz Shah) have described the nature of those weapons, which make that standard operating procedure irrelevant—90% of those who were injured received injuries above the waist. Those were horrifying injuries, and many children were blinded. That simply cannot go on.

I hope the Government will make the strongest possible representations to the Indian authorities and support the Amnesty International call for a ban on the use of pellet guns, but we need to go further and actively seek a political solution. When I tabled questions to the Minister, for whom I have high regard, in September, he confirmed that

“The longstanding position of the UK is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation in Kashmir”. Of course that is right, but it is not enough. In other situations around the world, where we see the sort of injustice that exists in Kashmir, and we see it exploding, as it has recently, the international community tries to bring pressure to bear on the protagonists to seek a solution, and to engage all the key stakeholders in realising that solution. That is why I asked what the UK Government were doing within the United Nations and the Commonwealth to seek action. Frankly, the Minister’s reply that he had had no discussions and that:

“The United Kingdom does not intend to support an international conference or a plebiscite on Kashmir in line with UN Security Council Resolution 47” is unacceptable.

I ask the Minister to think again. The UK played a part in creating the problem; let us now play a part in finding a solution.

1.41 pm

**Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) for bringing the debate to the House today. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) on her detailed and passionate speech and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) on the determination and clarity in her speech.

Like many other hon. Members, I have been horrified at the ongoing violence in Kashmir and I know that trying to get peace for the region is enormously important to a great number of my constituents. A couple of months ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) came to Batley and Spen in her role as shadow Foreign Secretary. Speaking to a packed hall in our Pakistani Kashmiri Welfare Association centre, we heard heart-breaking stories from my constituents, who were stressed and anxious about friends and loved ones in the region. Their anxiety was intensified by frustration at the seeming lack of political will to resolve the crisis. If the Minister had been in the hall that afternoon, he would have been left in no doubt of the urgency of the situation. A number of constituents have also contacted me in the lead-up to this debate, all stressing their desire that peace be agreed in the short-term and that self-determination for the people of Kashmir be negotiated in the long-term.

As we know, the UK’s long-standing position on Kashmir is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a genuine political solution, while respecting the wishes of the Kashmiri people. The Prime Minister has previously

stated that it is not for the UK to prescribe a solution, or act as a mediator. That said, we cannot ignore the urgency of the situation. We are considering two nuclear powers with a volatile history of mistrust, violence and brinkmanship.

As the Minister will know, under the partition plan of the Indian Independence Act 1947, Kashmir was free to accede to either India or Pakistan. Time does not permit me to give a full history of the Kashmiri conflict, but we cannot avoid the fact that there is a very clear link back to the conflicts there and the decisions made here. We have a moral duty to encourage Pakistan and India to commence peace negotiations to establish a long-term solution on the future governance of Kashmir, based on the rights of the Kashmiri people to determine their own future in accordance with the provisions of the UN Security Council resolutions. So far, we have not done enough.

For example, the Prime Minister had a unique opportunity to raise human rights abuses in Kashmir when she met Prime Minister Modi in November. We have heard in a reply to a parliamentary question that the Prime Minister discussed Kashmir with the Indian Prime Minister, but sadly we have no information about what was said or agreed.

However, we know that the Prime Minister engaged in a charm offensive to secure a lucrative trade deal with India. My concern is that the Prime Minister’s anxiety to secure a trade deal may have diluted her comments on Kashmir. With that in mind, I would be grateful if the Minister expanded on what the Prime Minister raised with her counterpart and the responses she received.

Did the Prime Minister raise the arbitrary and excessive force carried out by the Indian security forces? Can the British Kashmiri people be assured that their Prime Minister took meaningful steps to leave Modi in no doubt that the recent conflict is completely unacceptable? Amnesty International has stated that the excessive use of violence violated international standards and worsened the existing human rights crisis in the region.

The flare-up of violence that the world has witnessed since July 2016 has shocked us all: a devastating loss of civilian life and injuries counted in their thousands; closure of universities and schools; general strikes; curfews and the closure of media outlets and mobile phone services. As we have discussed, the authorities’ use of pellet guns has left people blind and with other severe injuries. Lives have also been lost. I wholeheartedly support Amnesty International’s call for a ban on the use of pellet guns against stone-throwing protesters.

The injuries that pellet guns leave are devastating. Insha Mushtaq who, at just 14 had dreams of being a doctor, is now blind, possibly for the rest of her life. When hit by the bullet, Insha was sitting by a window. She wants to know what she did wrong. My constituent, Amjed, told me of the state of anxiety his family live in every single day. Some are lucky enough to have made it out of Kashmir to Pakistan, others are left living in fear. The women and girls in his family do not leave the house for fear of being raped or attacked. The menfolk have to tell family members precisely where they are going in case they never return.

It is no wonder that women and girls do not leave the house. According to Asia Watch and Physicians for Human Rights, rape by Indian police and the armed

[Tracy Brabin]

militia is commonplace throughout Kashmir. The victims are generally poor women and those who are vulnerable and low caste, and tribal minority groups. Vicious acts routinely go unpunished.

The British Kashmiri community in my constituency has been at pains to stress that they want a peaceful solution. The lives of their friends and families in the region rely on it. We must continue to call on all parties to engage in meaningful dialogue to break the cycle of violence and breaches of international human rights on the Indian side of the line of control in Kashmir, and seek a lasting bilateral resolution. The wishes of the Kashmiri people must be at the forefront of those negotiations, because the world is watching.

1.47 pm

**Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on a fine speech. She is a great addition to the House and I welcome her to it.

Much has been said that does not need to be repeated, but I commend so many of the serious, weighty and important speeches and I hope that the Government are listening. Like many hon. Members here today, I represent several thousand Kashmiris in my Luton North constituency. Many came to Luton decades ago, but they have not forgotten the painful experiences of their fellow countrymen and women, which continue to this day. Indeed, in recent months, those experiences have got worse, and we must all stand against the violence and human rights abuses that are being inflicted on the people of Kashmir.

The Government must be pressed to do more in international forums to secure an end to those abuses. I have spoken in previous debates on the subject in the Chamber and have been with other hon. Members to the Foreign Office to make representations to Ministers and to press them to use their influence to help eliminate the human rights violations as a first step to resolving the Kashmir dispute once and for all.

I have visited Kashmir. I have been to Mirpur and the town of Kotli, where many of my constituents come from. The region is therefore not just a distant continent to me. As the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) pointed out, India and Pakistan are nuclear powers, and Kashmir is prime source of tension between the two countries. It is therefore of the greatest interest and concern to the wider world to find a solution to the Kashmir dispute to make the world a safer place.

I have had many meetings in Luton with Kashmiri constituents. Although all are united in wanting freedom for the people of Kashmir, there is a range of views about what its future should be. Some believe that Kashmir should simply become part of Pakistan, and doubtless others will want it to remain to part of India, while yet others want it to be an independent state. However, the concept that unites all of them is that Kashmiris should decide their future for themselves; that there should be self-determination. I support the Kashmiris in that aspiration. They should determine their future and we should support them.

1.49 pm

**Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): According to Reuters, at least 80 civilians were killed by Indian forces between July and December last year, many of whom were participants in protests. The protests began on 8 July after the death of Burhan Wani, the popular leader of the largest Kashmiri independence group. The authorities imposed a curfew, and disabled internet access and mobile phone networks, but this did not prevent an escalation. Both tear gas and live ammunition were used to disperse large crowds and groups of stone-throwers.

There have been expansive contributions in the Chamber about the indiscriminate use of pellet guns to disperse protesters. Pellet guns have the predictable effect of blinding those they hit. At close range, the hundreds of projectiles they fire can carry enough kinetic energy to penetrate skin and organs. They can therefore be fatal if fired at much of the body. A very large number of pellet injuries have been to the face, with 570 people seeking treatment for eye injuries at the main hospital in Srinagar on 8 November. According to hospital's figures, more eye surgeries were performed in the three days between 10 July and 12 July than throughout the whole of the previous three years. That cannot be right.

Many children are among those who have lost their sight as a result of such tactics. In the case of 13-year-old Mir Arafat, the pellets penetrated deeply enough to become embedded in his blood vessels, neck, oral cavity, lungs and heart. In the case of Junaid Akhnoon, also 13, the pellet injuries to his head and chest were severe enough to kill him. At a minimum, this is evidence that insufficient care is being taken to ensure that civilians are not seriously injured by security forces' tactics. It is also suggestive of something far more serious: that the security forces in the region are intentionally using tactics that blind civilians to discourage protests against Indian rule. According to a spokesperson for the state Government, the use of pellet guns is "a necessary evil". But it is not. It will never be necessary for security forces to blind children to ensure the restoration of order.

Both India and Pakistan have been responsible for deaths from army shelling and military raids across the line of control in recent months, in a cycle of retribution that regularly claims civilian lives in addition to those of soldiers. There are accusations that Pakistan has used the popular unrest of ordinary Kashmiris as cover for renewed attempts by proxy groups to enter and further destabilise the border regions under Indian control. I am sure that the Minister, like me, is deeply troubled by these recent reports, but equally disturbing is what goes on behind the scenes.

Amnesty International cites the example of Khurram Parvez, a prominent Kashmiri human rights defender who was arrested repeatedly and held without proper process for a total of 75 days last year. Eventually, his detention was ruled to be arbitrary and illegal by the Jammu and Kashmir High Court, and his release was finally secured following international pressure on 30 November. I am pleased the Minister is in his place and I beg him to hear that international pressure does have an effect. The case of Khurram Parvez is part of a pattern that human rights organisations have been detailing for years, most comprehensively in Amnesty International's 2015 publication, "Denied". Amnesty's view is that the dire situation the report describes remains largely

unchanged. Due process is still frequently denied both to those accused of militant activity or support, and to those victims—along with their families and communities—of state security abuses. They never see any progress towards justice and peace.

As we continue to work on these issues, we must ensure that humanitarian concerns remain at the forefront of our minds. It is clear that this conflict has gone on far too long. The individual stories we have heard today are really nothing new. Much of the conflict goes on away from the eyes of the western world. I hope this debate will begin to change things. I further hope that the Government will renew their efforts: to create opportunities for productive dialogue between India and Pakistan; to discourage escalation and exert pressure against policies that allow or encourage human rights abuses; and to facilitate, wherever they can, a permanent settlement that gives Kashmiris a genuine voice. To quote Mandela:

“It is so easy to break down and destroy. The heroes are those who make peace and build.”

1.55 pm

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome this debate. I hope our Government, who in a post-Brexit world are now very outward-looking and want to develop their foreign policy, use Kashmir as a good example of where they can use their new clout in a way they have failed to do, I am afraid to say, in relation to Israel and Palestine. I had assurances from the Foreign Secretary last week that the Government were involved in all forums when it came to Israel and Palestine, and were actively seeking a solution to that conflict. What hon. Members did not realise was that he meant the Government were not in fact going to be sending any Ministers to the Paris conference. That will no doubt be a subject of a future debate and it would be inappropriate of me to focus on it in this debate.

We have heard many eloquent contributions from Members with significant Kashmiri communities. They have run through the historical analyses of the situation, and set out distressing and harrowing descriptions of the injuries and deaths that have occurred in Kashmir, and the human rights abuses that Kashmiris have suffered. I will not repeat them, but in the few minutes available I would like to put some questions to the Minister. I hope he will be able to, either off his own bat or through the inspiration of those who assist him, provide answers to the questions during the course of the debate.

Does the Minister accept that this is an international conflict that requires the international community, and in particular the United Kingdom, to assist in its resolution? Does he support the idea of an international investigation into the human rights abuses committed by the Indian army or any other alleged perpetrators? Does he accept that as long as the Indian army presence remains at its current scale throughout towns in Kashmir, such allegations will continue to surface regularly? Do the UK Government challenge the Indian Government on the immunity granted to its army? Do the UK Government challenge the use of the pellets many Members have referred to? Do the UK Government regularly raise the issue of human rights in Kashmir? In the House of Lords on 12 December, my noble Friend Lord Hussain asked whether the Prime Minister had specifically raised the issue of human rights abuses in Kashmir in her discussions with Prime Minister Modi, but he did not receive an answer.

Finally, what exactly is the role of China? We have not heard much about China, but it is clearly one of the occupying powers, albeit in perhaps the more sparsely populated areas. What is China's role in this conflict?

The hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) suggested that the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) had made a solution-focused speech. I, too, want to put to the Minister a possible way forward: the opening of the line of control, so that family and cultural ties can be re-established; the formation of a Kashmir forum to negotiate what powers can be ceded by India and Pakistan to an autonomous elected authority; the retention of Indian and Pakistani bases; and, some years after that, a treaty to guarantee everything from water to power provision for India and Pakistan, as well as the strategic regional defence needs of the two countries. That might be a way forward. I hope that the Minister will set out the Government's precise approach.

As others have stated, Kashmir is just another long-standing dispute in respect of which the UK played a central role in creating the conditions that led to conflict and where it must now play an equally critical role in finding a resolution. We must now hear from him how he sees our role developing, what our role in the peace process will be and how peace in Kashmir will be secured.

2 pm

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the speech from the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), and I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this debate. I am proud to have been a member of the all-party group on Kashmir for the 12 years I have been in the House and to have been a secretary to it in the past. I also pay tribute to the speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) and for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), who spoke with particular power.

When I look back on the 12 years I have campaigned on this issue in the House, I am afraid it is the lack of progress on which I have to remark, not on progress that is worth celebrating. Of course, there have been advances around border controls, trade and transport, but the truth is that today we are not one step closer to honouring that basic requirement set out in the UN mandate all those years ago to grant the right—not the privilege—of self-determination to the people of Kashmir. Over the 12 years, among our most urgent calls have been those for the free movement of human rights observers and the media throughout the area of Kashmir, and my goodness the events of the last six months have underlined why we were so right to call for that. The abuses perpetrated—with pellet guns, rape, chili powder—have maimed, scarred and destroyed lives, and not just among this generation; the memories of the abuse will cascade down the generations, and that will not make the solution or the arrival of peace happen any sooner; it will make it tougher and slower.

In particular, we have to ask ourselves why we have learned so much about these abuses not from the mainstream media but from social media. I pay tribute to those who had the courage to post news about the atrocities so that the world and we in this House could not look away. We could see it on our phones and on our screens. The BBC has at least started to produce

[Liam Byrne]

some coverage, but it is of no comparison to the kind of coverage we used to see from South Africa when I was a teenager or of the kind we see from Israel and Palestine week in, week out. We have to call on our media organisations to give us the benefit of transparency so that the world might be forced to look at what is happening.

The moral arguments for a solution are pretty clear and have been well articulated this afternoon, and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr alluded to some of the geopolitical demands for a solution too. China's new silk road strategy will see \$4 trillion to \$6 trillion of investment poured into the business of integrating the Eurasian landmass. Indeed, yesterday in Dagenham we celebrated the arrival of the first train direct from China. This great continent is changing, and relations between China and Pakistan are changing. If we get this right, there is a tremendous economic prize ahead, and the principal beneficiaries could well be India and Pakistan, but not if they continue to pour money, arms and troops into the most heavily defended and dangerous border on earth. That is why both sides now surely have an interest in a solution and why we in this House have a moral obligation to help push that solution forward.

I have been part of a group of people in the House who have argued for change for the last 12 years. It is time now for some honesty and candour about whether that political strategy is going to produce any more change or further advance in the 12 years ahead. I do not think it will. We in the House now have to look to other Parliaments around the world—in Europe, the developing world, the US—and begin to think about how we might construct an international alliance of parliamentarians to call for change. We all know about the limitations of the United Nations. It has not made a lot of progress in the last 50 or 60 years. Do we really believe it will make any more in the years ahead? Let us take direct action now, as parliamentarians, not on our own but in alliance with others who believe in the same things we do, and let us together campaign for some basic changes that we all want: the repeal of the special powers Act, which is in clear breach of the UN obligation to which India has signed up; a ban on pellet guns, which many hon. Members have called for this afternoon; free movement of human rights groups throughout Kashmir; an investigation into the 2,200 mass graves that we know are there; and, yes, finally, self-determination for the people of Kashmir.

We have to make a choice in this House about whether we stand on the side lines of this debate, as impotent bystanders, or whether we are to be protagonists for change, just as we were in South Africa and Burma. One of my constituents put it to me like this:

“People of Jammu Kashmir seek a peaceful resolution of the issue and want their country to become a bridge of peace not a bone of contention between India and Pakistan.”

We in the House should support the motion and that basic instinct.

2.5 pm

**Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow that incredibly articulate speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam

Byrne). This has been an excellent debate, and I pay tribute to all those who have made contributions, particularly my colleagues from neighbouring constituencies in west Yorkshire, which all have significant Kashmiri communities. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this debate and on the broader contribution from the all-party group on Kashmir, which has sought to keep Kashmir on the political agenda in the UK—with varying degrees of success, despite its best efforts.

In preparation for today's debate, I watched the recording of the last debate on Kashmir, secured by David Ward, the then Liberal Democrat MP for Bradford East, back in 2014. That, too, was a Back-Bench business debate. It is a testament to the Backbench Business Committee that it finds time for debates on issues often overlooked in the day-to-day business of the House, so I thank it for allocating time for this debate.

As I have already mentioned, many of my constituents are of Kashmiri heritage, and so Halifax will always keep a close eye on what is happening in that part of the world. Before Christmas, I met a number of local residents at the local Madni mosque for a constructive discussion about the deterioration of the situation in Kashmir and to consider what practical steps we could take locally. I mentioned that one of the challenges was accessing the latest information directly from the region—my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill just made this point too. We know that this is a consequence of the restrictions on the ground, but I also worry that because this conflict has gone unresolved for so long, it is overshadowed and goes largely unreported by the mainstream media. It is a challenge for us all to get it back on to those media platforms. Even the Foreign Office, in a written response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Ffello), said we had limited access to the Kashmir valley, which made it challenging to obtain accurate information on the situation there.

The House will appreciate, however, that, as others have said, for some of those families in Halifax and other communities throughout the UK, the problem is not that they cannot access information—information comes directly from their family and friends still in Kashmir; rather, the challenge is their sense of helplessness on hearing just how desperate the situation has become, feeling unable to protect loved ones and unable to bring about the civil protections and stability we need in order to keep people safe and to work towards a long-term sustainable resolution to the conflict.

Among other issues, we discussed at that meeting the role constituents could play in securing a debate, so once again, although we are all frustrated at how long this conflict has gone on unresolved, that we are having this debate in the main Chamber is a sign that a little progress has been made. The Member who led the 2014 debate outlined that the conflict was long standing and complex; as we have heard today, he was not wrong. Kashmir is one of the longest-running territorial disputes in the world, and the region sits between two nuclear powers, so it is astonishing to think that the world does not pay more attention. Not only have we failed to make any progress since that debate in 2014; the situation has deteriorated. As the motion indicates, we have all grown increasingly alarmed by the recent escalation of violence on the Indian side of the line of control. Depressingly, progress seems to have gone backwards.

I could spend a long time describing the incidents and the timeline that have brought us where we are today, but a number of Members have already done so, and I want to focus, once again, on the human rights violations that are taking place in the region. I am fairly confident that the Minister will tell us that it is the UK's "long-standing position...that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or act as mediator."—[*Official Report*, 18 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 652.]

After all, that is what I have been told on a number of occasions in response to both written and oral questions.

I appreciate the complexity of the issue, and I do not believe that anyone here is asking the Government simply to prescribe a solution to the problem of either India or Pakistan. Along with many others, I believe in self-determination for the Kashmiri people, and believe that only by empowering those who actually live in Kashmir to determine their own future through the ballot box will we bring about a long-term solution. However, as a responsible member of the international community, we have a responsibility to seek to put a stop to human rights abuses, and that is the work that I am asking the Government to undertake today.

When tensions escalated dramatically last summer, we saw a sharp rise in the use of pellet-firing shotguns by the Indian forces as a means of controlling crowds. I will not go into that particular horror, and the damage that those pellet guns have caused, because other Members have already done so very articulately.

Back in 2008, Doctors Without Borders—MSF—published a report. Although the research was undertaken a number of years ago, the report makes the most comprehensive attempt that I have found to map the health requirements of Kashmiri people living in close proximity to the line of control, in terms of both their physical and mental wellbeing. I found it a harrowing read, and given that the situation has only deteriorated since 2008, I felt that it was worth sharing some of its findings. The research involved household surveys, conducted in person, in two districts in the Indian-controlled region of Kashmir. Of the 510 people who were interviewed, a staggering 86% reported frequent confrontations with violence including exposure to crossfire, 67% said that they had witnessed torture, and 34% said that they had had personal experience of forced labour. The report found that violence affects nearly everyone living in Kashmir: 40% of interviewees said that they had witnessed somebody being killed, and a horrifying 13% said they had witnessed rape.

Inevitably, MSF concluded not only that the requirements of the region were high in terms of physical injury as a result of the conflict, but that the prevalence of insecurity and prolonged violence had substantial implications for mental health. A third of those interviewed had contemplated suicide, and over a third had symptoms of psychological distress. Within that, the level of psychological distress among women was significantly higher. The prospects of any economic regeneration of the region are hopeless in those circumstances and in the face of such conflict. Fifty-three per cent. of those interviewed had had no formal schooling, and 24% reported high or total dependence on financial assistance from authorities or charities. I am struggling to find evidence that the position has improved substantially since 2008.

Given that the sustainable development goals are high on the world's agenda this year, may I ask the Minister to work with his colleagues in the Department for International Development to explore all the ways in which we can improve the situation in Kashmir? There is no way that we can make progress in terms of education, health and the alleviation of poverty, or support economic recovery, unless the violence stops. Both Pakistan and India are world players and have obligations in relation to the sustainable development goals. How can we ensure that Kashmir does not get left behind? I am one of the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for Fairtrade. One of the things that we discussed at our meeting in Halifax was the role that it might be able to play, and the direct link that my local town could establish in supporting little independent businesses in Kashmir that might stimulate economic recovery.

I see that I am being encouraged to wind up my speech, so I will leave it there. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in response to my contribution, and those of other Members.

2.14 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak about human rights issues. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on setting the scene so well. Members have made some incredible speeches today about an issue that has clearly fired them up.

It is well known in the House that I speak passionately about human rights and the treatment of people in places such as Kashmir and, indeed, places throughout the world. Human rights in India are fundamental rights that should include freedom of religion and freedom of speech, but it is clear that they fall short of that on many occasions. Although every individual has those rights in India, Kashmir often experiences violence, and the Indian army, the Central Reserve Police Force and various separatist militant groups have been accused of and held accountable for severe human rights abuses against Kashmiri civilians. The problem is that they have not been held accountable enough for some of the things that they have done, and that worries us considerably. I firmly believe that we in the House have a role to play, and that we should use any diplomatic influence that we have to bring about change. Indeed, part of our role is to influence and ask for change.

Human rights are often defined as principles to which any human is entitled, and the individuals who were targeted with violence were therefore entitled to express their religion, but because their religion was seen as a threat, that turned upon them. The attackers are rarely charged, and perhaps the Minister will give us an idea of how we can make them accountable. With a strong nationalist leader and Government, it is incredibly hard for justice to be brought. It is also clear that the Government have little interest in speaking out about atrocities. They are almost like Nelson, closing one eye and seeing nothing that is happening.

Certain ethnic minorities in areas of India, like Kashmir, are often exposed to all sorts of human rights abuses. Smaller religious groups such as Christians are often targeted. Christianity is seen as a threat to Hinduism, and despite the existing human rights policy that exists

[Jim Shannon]

on paper in India, Christian minorities assert that the authorities do not do enough to stop the brutal violence against them. That violence is often perpetrated by Hindu nationalists who harass, intimidate and attack Christians to prevent conversions from Hinduism and Muslimism, which they would see as a major threat in destroying the Hindu faith and promoting Christianity. That concerns me greatly. I have spoken about it before, and I have taken the chance to do so again today.

The human rights policy does refer to freedom of religion, but it also asks Christians in Kashmir if they feel free to share their faith. No, they do not: when they are asked that question they feel threatened and fearful, and they need help. In August 2016, the BBC reported violent actions taken against Kashmiri civilians and smaller minorities. That violence included arson attacks on Christian churches, and forced re-conversions from Christianity to Hinduism which often involved violent assaults. Other reported instances included sexual abuse and the rape of nuns and young Christian girls. Members have already referred to the systematic rape, abuse and sexual attacks on women and girls in an awful, violent fashion, which is totally unacceptable. Christian priests and other key religious figures have been murdered. We in the House who engage in the democratic process and have influence cannot sit by and idly watch murders being carried out with no redress without at least attempting to do something about it. There must be thorough investigations, and there must be accountability for these atrocious murders and the genocidal campaign against Christians in Kashmir.

During 2008, anti-Christian riots perpetrated by Hindu nationalists killed at least 50 Christian people, and arson attacks were made on some 730 houses and 95 Christian churches. These are not just statistics; they are the facts of life for many people. Stones were often thrown with force through people's windows, and still very little was done on their behalf. The police turned a blind eye. Violent attacks against minority groups have been an ongoing issue in Kashmir. I strongly believe that the discrimination must come to an end, and that we must play a part in that. It is often said in the House that evil triumphs when good people do nothing, but that does not make the point any less important. We must not ignore this issue. Through the House, through the debate and through our influence and our Commonwealth ties, we must do something. We must stick up for those who cannot speak for themselves. We must be a voice for those who look to us to speak on their behalf.

The innocent people of Kashmir have faced murder, forced disappearance, brutal attacks and the destruction of their own homes. India and Pakistan have called curfews to try to restrain the violence. General strikes and protests have also been called to halt violence for a limited time, but without success. Senior figures have encountered an escalation of tension, which increases fear of an escalation of conflict between both sides. That is a fear that we have: we fear things could get worse. The steps that have already been taken are not enough; we must do more.

We must speak for all those whose cries are ringing today in our ears. We in this greatest seat of democracy are duty-bound to respond; we have the greatest opportunity

to speak on behalf of those people. Our voice has been, and must continue to be, very clear from all parts of this Chamber and all parties. We look to our Minister today to outline action that will bring about change now. We must change the policies in Kashmir. Those people need us to speak for them, and I believe we are duty-bound to do so.

2.20 pm

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this important debate. We have heard some magnificent contributions, some from those of us with roots in India and Pakistan who speak from a hugely personal perspective, and some from others who are clearly speaking strongly and with such determination and passion on behalf of constituents. I hope the feeling in the Chamber will be hugely instructive to the Minister in terms of the direction that Members would like the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to take on future relations with India and Pakistan and the issue of Kashmir.

The Scottish National party fully supports this motion, which calls on the Government to encourage Pakistan and India to commence peace negotiations to establish a long-term solution on the future governance of Kashmir. It is absolutely vital that we use the influence that we have as friends of both nations to encourage people and authorities within Kashmir to work constructively together to calm tensions and reduce violence. In particular, the Indian authorities, both in New Delhi and Srinagar, should be encouraged to engage in genuine and constructive dialogue with moderate factions in Indian-administered Kashmir and help empower such groups over armed militants.

We wholeheartedly support the right of the Kashmiri people to determine their own future in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council resolutions, and call on all parties and the international community to recognise that right. We urge the UK Government and the international community to fully support UN Secretary-General António Guterres in his efforts at mediation and serving as an honest broker between India and Pakistan.

We understand that this is a difficult and long-lasting issue and that Kashmir has been a disputed territory since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, but over the past year we have seen a significant and deeply regrettable escalation in protest and violence. There was considerable unrest in Kashmir throughout 2016, particularly in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, beginning in July when Burhan Wani, a well-known and popular militant of Hizbul Mujahideen, was shot dead by the Indian security forces. As we have already heard, his funeral drew 50,000 mourners, and in the ensuing violence over 100 people were killed and 11,000 injured, a great many sustaining serious eye injuries when fired upon by Indian police using "non-lethal" pellet guns. We have heard much in this respect from many Members in the Chamber today.

Human Rights Watch has called on the Indian authorities to launch an impartial investigation into the use of both lethal force and pellet guns. On 6 December, Physicians for Human Rights issued a report accusing Indian police and paramilitary forces of using excessive,

indiscriminate force against protesters and blocking medical care since the start of the current protests. The hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) made an excellent point about human rights: wherever human rights abuse occurs, we must call it out. But it must feel to many people in various countries that we prioritise the human rights of some over those of others; this cannot, must not, will not continue.

We urge the Indian security forces to exercise much greater caution and restraint in their methods of crowd and riot control, including by discontinuing their practice of firing pellet guns at protesters. The authorities must allow full and unrestricted medical care in Kashmir and above all facilitate treatment by specialist eye doctors to the many people injured by these guns over these past months.

At the same time, we urge organisers of legitimate protests to deter their supporters from engaging in violence of any kind. Although the level of unrest de-escalated over the remainder of 2016, largely owing to the decisions of separatist leaders who have gradually scaled down their programme of shutdown and protests, local leaders have promised more to come.

Of great concern are the continued clashes between Indian and Pakistani forces which have been ongoing for some time. There have been exchanges of fire along the line of control, including the Indian artillery shelling on 16 December that reportedly hit a school bus in Mohra, Kotli district, in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, killing the driver and wounding several children. Most recently, on 15 January Indian security forces killed three militants in an operation described by the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs as

“a continued act of state terrorism”.

This escalation in military action is of great concern, and it would be wise for both Governments to reflect on their actions and tone down the increasingly violent rhetoric.

Further to this military escalation, there have been increasing and unprecedented suggestions that the Indian Government are considering using water as a means of applying pressure on Pakistan. Tension in Kashmir should not be allowed to affect other aspects of the India-Pakistan relationship, such as the Indus waters treaty.

Pakistan is hugely dependent on the six rivers of the Indus basin, all of which flow through India before reaching Pakistan. The Indus basin provides drinking water and livelihoods to almost three quarters of Pakistan's population of 192 million. More than 95% of Pakistan's irrigated land is in the Indus basin, and farm income amounts to a quarter of Pakistan's GDP. In 1960, the two countries signed the Indus waters treaty which guaranteed Pakistan's continued access to water and provides for inspections, data exchanges and arbitration processes administered by the World Bank. The treaty is regarded as the most successful example of an international agreement on water and has survived three wars without modification. However, India is increasingly threatening to revise the treaty or to moderate Pakistan's access to water as a form of leverage. This is a deeply regrettable act, which could have significant and dangerous implications for the region.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a review of the treaty in September, outlining specific treaty provisions which India could use to apply pressure on Pakistan, and stated:

“Blood and water cannot flow simultaneously.”

Sartaj Aziz, foreign policy adviser to Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, responded by saying that revocation of the treaty would be considered an “act of war”.

On 12 December, the World Bank halted two Pakistani and Indian arbitration processes under the treaty, citing concerns that current tensions could endanger the treaty. We urge all parties to uphold the Indus waters treaty, both in letter and in spirit, and not to use vital access to water as a means of diplomatic leverage—that is just so wrong.

Within the scope of the treaty, any changes should be mutually agreed through the proper channels and only after very careful consideration of the humanitarian and economic consequences for the people living in the Indus basin. We encourage the UK Government and the international community to provide all necessary support to the World Bank in its arbitration of the treaty and to encourage India and Pakistan to resume meetings of the treaty commission and to continue to successfully implement the treaty provisions regardless of tensions caused by other developments.

In conclusion, The SNP absolutely supports today's motion and this hugely constructive debate. The Government must continue to encourage both Pakistan and India to start peace negotiations as soon as possible. The Kashmiri people should be able to determine their own future in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council resolutions. It is in everyone's interests that a long-term solution is found on the future governance of the beautiful place that is Kashmir.

2.29 pm

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) for securing this important debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. The hon. Gentleman spoke very eloquently on behalf of his constituents of Pakistani and Kashmiri origin. I also thank all Members from across the House for contributing to an excellent debate that has highlighted many serious matters including human rights abuses and the intensification of violence while advocating the utmost need for conflict resolution instead of military escalation and the brokering of talks between the Pakistani and Indian Administrations.

We have heard powerful speeches on human rights abuses and civil liberties, notably from my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and for Halifax (Holly Lynch), the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), and the hon. Members for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) questioned the political will of the UN for a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

The right to self-determination was mentioned by, among others, my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) and for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) and my right hon. Friend the Member for

[Liz McInnes]

Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne). Calls for the Government to work to settle the Kashmir situation were made, notably, by my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie), for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) and for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin).

An element of controversy was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). Our historical responsibility for Kashmir was highlighted by the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). The role of China, to which not a great deal of reference was made during the debate, was mentioned in particular by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill and the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington. Many Members spoke passionately on behalf of their constituents of Kashmiri origin.

The Kashmiri people have seen a perpetual rise in conflict over the past year. It is the worst spate of violence in the region since 2010, when 110 people lost their lives. Inside and outside this House, I and many others have already called for a ban on pellet guns, tear gas and live ammunition in civilian areas. Will the Minister update us on the current situation in the Jammu region, with particular regard to the police and the Muslim community?

Some 400 people in Kashmir have been detained by Indian security forces under the regressive Public Safety Act, which allows preventive detention for offences defined by vague, overbroad terms and violates international due process standards. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International called it a “lawless law” and called for the Indian authorities to end its use. If people are suspected of committing offences, they should be properly charged and given fair trials. Does the Minister agree with that assessment of the PSA?

The region has seen the introduction and implementation of numerous curfews over this disruptive period, the longest of which lasted 53 days. Mobile phone services have been down and media blackouts have been imposed, leading to numerous protests, including a series of general strikes, the closure of schools and universities and regular public rallies against Indian rule. Of course, this is not a one-sided affair. We also encourage Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Government to condemn and take immediate action against abusive militant groups operating in Jammu and Kashmir and other parts of India, which would be an important move to help extinguish the conflict in the region. Will the UK Government consider their future military aid and sales, including programmes of military co-operation, to Pakistan on the condition that it begins to take significant steps to address attacks by militant groups in the region?

The nuclear arms race between the two countries is also of concern and has escalated over the past 12 months. That factor is intertwined with the relationship that either side seeks to have with China or the new United States Administration. Will the Minister update the House on whether the Government have raised any issues with the Indian or Pakistani Governments on the matter of their substantial shift in nuclear arsenal investment and testing?

The unrest has led to the tragic loss of over 80 lives in violent clashes since the beginning of July, including a police officer and 19 soldiers killed in a militant attack on a security base. Sadly, the violence continues to this day, with some 4,000 people wounded over this seven-month period. The line of control is at the heart of the divisional tension, with both countries cranking up the rhetoric and levels of military action on the border. Given the history of the line of control, what are the Government specifically doing to counter that ongoing retaliation? Even as recently as 2015, such action had disastrous costs when Indian and Pakistani border guards traded gunfire, leaving nine civilians dead and another 62 wounded.

As a symbolic destination for her first prime ministerial trip abroad, we welcomed the Prime Minister’s visit to India given our countries’ historic ties and heritage. However, like many other hon. Members, I want to know from the Minister what discussions the Prime Minister had with Prime Minister Modi on that visit. The visit came at the height of the current troubles, so will the Minister tell us what progress has resulted from those diplomatic talks? The Minister would find support for such a question among his own Back Benchers, notably the hon. Member for Wealden. In addition, will the Minister also inform us whether the Foreign Secretary ever discussed the letter sent to him just prior to the Prime Minister’s visit by the shadow Foreign Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), in which she raised the issues of human rights and civil liberties in Kashmir?

It should be stated for the record that Labour party policy on Kashmir has not changed since we were in government: we must allow all parties who are directly involved to determine their future through peaceful dialogue and co-operation. We also acknowledge the importance of the work of international organisations, the UN in particular, and their efforts to negotiate with all parties and member states involved to bring India and Pakistan to the negotiating table. We continue to encourage both India and Pakistan to seek a lasting solution on Kashmir in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council resolutions, which take into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. Their wishes are fundamental to the success of the process and to obtaining peace in the region.

Through the conflict prevention programme, the Labour Government funded several projects designed to support efforts to facilitate dialogue, which addressed the causes and impact of conflict and proposed to improve quality of life for Kashmiris. In 2010, an opinion poll was conducted on both sides of the line of control for the first time since the UN-brokered ceasefire in 1949. Despite the complexity of the political situation, it found that there are other clear concerns for the Kashmiri people, with 81% saying that unemployment was the most significant problem. Government corruption, poor economic development and human rights abuses also polled highly. Kashmiri citizens wish for an end to the indecision, the dispute, the division and the disruption so that they can access economic prosperity, good education and vital healthcare. Those should be the main points of consideration in all dialogue and actions in 2017. The need for a rapid response to the situation in Kashmir is now upon us.

I hope that the whole House and the Minister will agree that the UN must be involved at every stage of the process. On his first day in office, the new UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, pledged to make 2017 a year for peace. I hope those words lead to a rapprochement and then, step by step, a long-term resolution between the two countries. However, the first step must be the acceptance of the rule of humanitarian law and the starting point for negotiations between the bordering nations must be to uphold the UN universal declaration of human rights, therefore ensuring equal and inalienable rights for all Kashmiri people.

2.38 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma):** We have had a long, detailed debate with powerful speeches from Members on both sides of the House, and I am grateful to all hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this important debate and thank the members of the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group for their commitment to the issue and for welcoming me to their meeting in December.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North said in his speech, the region has a long, complex history. The situation in Kashmir continues to attract significant public attention and parliamentary interest in the UK, as shown by this debate, not least because of the thousands of British nationals with connections to Kashmir. An estimated two thirds of British Pakistanis hail from Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Before I respond to the many points raised by right hon. and hon. Members, I will briefly set out the Government's position on Kashmir and India-Pakistan relations. A number of Members set out what they believe to be the Government's position, and I can confirm that what they said is consistent with our position. It has been the long-standing position of successive Governments of all hues, and the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) has also stated that the Opposition's position has not changed.

India and Pakistan are both long-standing and important friends of the United Kingdom, and we have significant links to both countries through Indian and Pakistani diaspora communities living in the UK—I have many in my constituency. We also have strong bilateral relations with both countries, which we hope to make even stronger.

The long-standing position of the UK is that it can neither prescribe a solution to the situation in Kashmir nor act as a mediator. It is for the Governments of India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. In our discussions with both India and Pakistan, we encourage both sides to maintain positive dialogue, but the pace and scope of that dialogue is for them to determine.

I will address the issues in the order in which they came up in the debate. First, on the violence across the line of control, I agree that a strong relationship between India and Pakistan is crucial to maintaining regional stability and prosperity. I am pleased that the escalation of incidents between India and Pakistan along the line of control showed some signs of decreasing in the run-up to Christmas, but there have been recent reports of renewed activity this year.

A number of Members talked about combating terrorism. As Members will be aware, following the attack on the Indian military base in Uri last September, the Foreign Secretary publicly condemned all forms of terrorism in the region and stated that the UK

“stands shoulder to shoulder with India in the fight against terrorism, and in bringing the perpetrators to justice.”

He reiterated that message during his visit to Pakistan shortly before Christmas.

Following her visit to India last November, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and Prime Minister Modi released a joint statement in which they reiterated their strong commitment to combating terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. They also stressed that there can be no justification for acts of terror on any grounds whatsoever.

The UK and Pakistan are, of course, also committed to working together to combat the terrorist threat, and the extremism that sustains it, in line with human rights. The UK regularly highlights to Pakistan at the highest level the importance of taking effective action against all terrorist groups operating in Pakistan, as Pakistan has committed to do. The UK will continue to encourage both India and Pakistan to ensure that channels of dialogue remain open as a means of resolving differences.

Many Members mentioned the use of pellet guns. I have said in this House on a number of occasions that I am very concerned about the violence in Indian-administered Kashmir, and I extend my condolences to the victims of violence and their families. I have also discussed the use of pellet guns and alternative methods of crowd control with representatives of the Indian Government. The use of pellet guns in Kashmir has recently come under review by the Government of India. The results of the review have not yet been shared publicly, but I understand that alternative methods are now being used. I believe that, since September 2016, pellet guns have been replaced by chilli powder shells as a preferred non-lethal crowd control device. From media reporting, it appears that the number of fatalities and injuries has since declined, which I am sure the whole House will welcome. We will, of course, continue to monitor the situation.

A number of hon. Members mentioned the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act, and we are aware of the concerns regarding allegations of the immunity from prosecution for Indian armed forces personnel in Indian-administered Kashmir under the PSA and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act. The Indian Government have put in place a mechanism that allows people to request that they investigate such concerns, and we expect all states to ensure that their domestic laws are in line with international standards. Any allegations of human rights abuses must be investigated thoroughly, promptly and transparently.

I also understand that, on 11 January, Chief Minister Mufti told the state Assembly that the Indian Government have ordered the establishment of special teams to investigate the deaths of civilians and to look at the involvement of police personnel during the unrest over the past five months.

**Mr Baker:** On the face of it, it is very encouraging that those investigations have been launched, but will the Government take steps to make sure that there is international confidence that those investigations can be relied on to determine what is true?

**Alok Sharma:** Of course we continue to monitor the whole situation in the region and, if my hon. Friend will allow me, I will talk about the UN and other such matters.

The establishment of dialogue and confidence-building have also been mentioned, and the UK already supports a number of existing initiatives to encourage open dialogue between Pakistan and India on the basis that those attending are able to share their views in confidence. We hope that such opportunities will continue.

On the motion itself, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North calls for the British Government to raise the situation in Kashmir at the UN. As I have set out, the British Government believe that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting solution to Kashmir, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. Of course we stand ready to support both countries in that goal, but it is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or to act as a mediator. He made a powerful speech in the Westminster Hall debate in 2014, in which he said:

“The Governments of India and Pakistan are the principal parties who can bring about a resolution of the problem.”—[*Official Report*, 11 September 2014; Vol. 585, c. 365WH.]

That really is the case.

The UN and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights were raised by a number of Members. As a “permanent five” member of the UN Security Council, and as a member of the UN Human Rights Council, the UK is a long-standing supporter of the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and I am aware that the high commissioner has requested access to Kashmir from both the Indian and Pakistani Governments. Of course we encourage all states to consider visits by the high commissioner.

**Imran Hussain:** It is absolutely right that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has extended that request, and Pakistan has sent a letter saying that it will accept if India accepts. India has not got back to the high commissioner. What will the Minister be doing to encourage India to accept that request?

**Alok Sharma:** Let me reiterate the point I made to the hon. Gentleman, which is that we encourage all states to consider visits by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and I know that we have had this discussion previously.

We had a discussion about the Prime Minister’s visit to India in November. Of course, as Members would expect, she discussed a range of issues, including on Kashmir, and I hope that will be a source of reassurance to Members.

**Tom Brake:** I would like the Minister to be a bit more specific and confirm that “a range of issues” includes that of human rights abuses.

**Alok Sharma:** The right hon. Gentleman should take comfort from the fact that the subject of Kashmir was discussed by the two Prime Ministers. It was a bilateral discussion and he, as someone who has been in government, will know that we cannot comment on private discussions. Today, we have also had a discussion about the Foreign Secretary’s visit to India, and of course he is also discussing a range of issues, including regional security issues.

Let me conclude by saying that the UK Government will continue to encourage and support both India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation in Kashmir, in line with the wishes of the people of Kashmir. We cannot, however, mediate in the process. I am fully aware of the strength of feeling about Kashmir among many people in Britain, and of course in this House, and I am glad that this debate has given me the opportunity to set out the Government’s position. Once again, I thank right hon. and hon. Members for raising issues today and for their contributions.

2.49 pm

**Mr Nuttall:** This has been an historic debate, comprehensively covering the extremely important matters relating to Kashmir. I thank all 19 Members who have spoken in the debate and those who have made interventions. I particularly wish to thank the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh), who spoke for the Scottish National party, and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for their contributions. I hope that in the light of this debate, the Minister will reflect on the many positive suggestions for action that have been made. I commend the motion to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House notes the escalation in violence and breaches of international human rights on the Indian side of the Line of Control in Kashmir; calls on the Government to raise the matter at the United Nations; and further calls on the Government to encourage Pakistan and India to commence peace negotiations to establish a long-term solution on the future governance of Kashmir based on the right of the Kashmiri people to determine their own future in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council resolutions.

## Holocaust Memorial Day

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Before I ask Peter Kyle to move the motion, may I point out to Members that we are very limited on time, with 13 Members wishing to speak? I am therefore going to impose an absolute limit of 15 minutes, including interventions, on the opening speaker and suggest an informal limit of five minutes for Back Benchers. If that is not adhered to, I am going to have to drop it down to four or even three minutes. However, I hope it will all go well and everyone can have five minutes.

2.51 pm

**Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day 2017.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will try not to rush my speech after that introduction. Let me start by thanking the hon. Members who supported me in the application for this debate, the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it and all the Members, from both sides of the House, who are participating today. Holocaust Memorial Day was established in 2001 as a result of Andrew Dismore's private Member's Bill. We owe him a debt of gratitude because since that time it has provided our nation with the annual opportunity to pause to reflect on the holocaust. It is necessary to pause because of the enormity of the holocaust and the impact it had on millions of individuals, on families and on humanity as a whole. It is not something we can consider lightly.

**Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab):** Towards the end of last year, I visited Auschwitz with a group of students from my home town of Newcastle. It was an incredibly challenging and moving visit, but it was made really powerful by the presence of so many young people from the region. Does my hon. Friend agree, therefore, that we also owe a debt to those at the Holocaust Educational Trust, who make this visit possible for so many young people to ensure that we never forget and that we never repeat?

**Peter Kyle:** I am extremely grateful for that intervention, and in a few minutes I will very much echo my hon. Friend's sentiments. I will carry on with my speech and not take any more interventions, as we can see the ferocity with which Madam Deputy Speaker is clearly encouraging us to make progress. I will get through my speech and allow others to speak.

The theme of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day is "How can life go on?" It invites us to consider how our generation can comprehend the holocaust and act on its lessons when so few of those who survived it remain with us. We are entering an age when the lived experience of the second world war and all its horrors is being replaced by one where we experience it through stories handed down, or through the media, books or film. Because fewer survivors remain, it is easier to get away with trivialising those events or making light of them. It is not uncommon these days to hear people who are officious being described as having "Nazi tendencies" or to hear those in public life mindlessly calling others "concentration camp commandants" simply for disagreeing with them or feeling that they have strong views. Those sorts

of comments are extraordinarily irresponsible because they casually draw a line from those who deliberately attempted, through state murder, to kill every member of an ethnic or a religious group—the first and only time this has happened in history—to 21st century daily life in a country such as Britain. To do that not only trivialises the horrific events of the past, but makes the job of those who set out on the malicious path of outright holocaust denial that much easier.

For the reasons I have outlined, I completely agree with the words used just last night by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) at a Holocaust Educational Trust event. He urged people

"to push back when people lazily reach for glib comparisons that belittle what happened, calling those we disagree with 'Nazis' or claiming someone's actions are 'just like the Holocaust'. Ultimately, we must be prepared to do that most un-British of things—we have to make a scene. Maybe that'll be in private. Maybe in the media. Maybe on Twitter...What's certain is that if we don't speak out against hatred and anti-Semitism it will become normalised. It will become part of everyday life. And once that happens, the consequences once again will be tragic."

He was speaking as a Minister and a Conservative MP. I see his predecessor as Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), is present, and I look forward to hearing his contribution, which I am sure will echo those views and elaborate on them. I stand here as a Labour MP, yet I share the Secretary of State's sentiments. I look to see how I, and my party, can strive harder to avoid language and actions that are, or are perceived to be, anti-Semitic. As individuals and as a political party, we must do more. Not only should we react swiftly when there is anti-Semitic activity; we should be doing more to prevent it in the first place, because the point of offence is the point at which we know we have failed.

It is hard even to imagine the events we are remembering today, because of the sheer scale of human suffering involved. Approximately six million Jewish men, women and children were murdered by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during the second world war. Anti-Semitism was the defining element of Nazi ideology. The persecution of Jews started immediately after Hitler's accession to power in 1933, with policies designed to force emigration. The intensity, ferocity and brutality of such policies escalated throughout Nazi rule, resulting in mass murder and genocide. It is therefore understandable that the holocaust plays such a painful and powerful role in modern Jewish culture, both here in Britain and around the world.

I am fortunate to have a large and thriving Jewish community in my constituency of Hove and Portslade, which is proudly home to four well-attended and active synagogues. The community plays an active role in all aspects of life in our beautiful city on the south coast, from participating in festivals to hosting a dedicated Remembrance Day event to remember Jews who fell fighting the Nazis as part of the allied offensive. The community has welcomed me to events and helped me to understand Jewish culture and traditions, including the impact and importance of the holocaust in modern Jewish life. Rabbi Andre and Rabbi Elle in particular have invested many hours in answering my questions and discussing the complex history and modern faces of Judaism, both in my own community and further afield.

[Peter Kyle]

The great thing about a group that is so welcoming and integrated into the ebb and flow of community life is that it inspires others to share, learn and join in, which is why next week I will proudly join students and staff at Blatchington Mill, a local school that is holding an event to mark Holocaust Memorial Day at which people from throughout the city will come together to reflect on the meaning of the holocaust for today's generations.

As we approach Holocaust Memorial Day next week, it is appropriate that we in this House memorialise these terrible events. The memorial date was chosen to respect the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau by allied forces on 27 January 1945. The death camp sited in the Polish town of Auschwitz has become symbolic of the holocaust because of the sheer scale of murder that occurred there: 1.1 million lives were savagely ended at that place.

In November last year, I visited Auschwitz with 200 students from throughout Sussex, along with my colleague from across the Floor, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). Our visit was under the auspices of the Holocaust Educational Trust. I cannot praise highly enough the thoughtful, engaging and extremely powerful way the trust guides students through the process of learning about and experiencing Auschwitz. Before the visit, students get together in a set of structured seminars to learn the history, policies and facts behind the holocaust, even meeting a holocaust survivor. They then visit Auschwitz. Finally, when they return, they meet again to talk about the lessons and what it means for them as individuals and us as a society—the past, the present and the future. These fortunate young people will carry the burden of knowing the full horror meted out to Jews by Nazi Germany. They will also benefit from the wisdom that experience bestows.

Two of the students on my visit were from Brighton and Hove—Joe and Mattie from Cardinal Newman and Brighton College schools. They showed the depth of thinking, sensitivity and thoughtfulness that makes me so proud of young people today. Together, we saw: the cells in which people who tried to escape were bricked up and starved to death; the wall against which so many people were shot dead that the ground beneath could no longer soak up the blood; the desperately cold cabins where people slept; the train tracks that brought people to their deaths in cattle trucks; and the sidings where doctors—the people trained to save and enhance life—used their training to decide who was strong enough to work and who should be put to death that very day. For those of us who celebrate the good of which humanity is capable, it is a shattering place to visit.

At the end of our tour, guided by extraordinary staff from the Auschwitz museum, we gathered at the top of the Auschwitz-Birkenau rail tracks. We stood directly between the remains of two former gas chambers where tens of thousands of people lost their lives. There in the darkness, we listened to poetry read by students. Then a rabbi sang prayers, which echoed around the still remains of huts, gas chambers and the forest. The beauty of the prayers, for a moment, pierced the horror of our location. The symbolism of Jewish prayers being sung in that place was lost on no one.

As we departed, we left behind us lighted candles along the tracks. From the entrance, they looked like a blazing pathway of light into the terrible darkness that

still hangs over that place. That is the image that remains most strong in my mind, because a blazing pathway of light is what history needs from our generation and those in the future. It will come in the form of remembering, of learning and of being brave enough to confront hatred. For those of us in public life, it will mean using the power we have to unite and temper at times of anger and confusion and never to exploit.

Those are just some of the many lessons that I have learned from listening and discussing not only the holocaust, but its role in shaping modern Jewish life in Hove and across Britain. It is also why moments of reflection such as this, in the House of Commons through to the community schools and living rooms across the country, are so desperately important.

3.2 pm

**Sir Eric Pickles** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) who made a very thoughtful speech. I have to say that I agreed entirely with what he said.

Last April, I visited Treblinka, the former Nazi death camp, which the people of Poland have preserved as testimony to man's inhumanity to man. No country suffered more than Poland and the world is grateful for the way in which it has acted as the custodian of these absolutely terrible places.

Treblinka was unambiguously a death camp. Most victims survived only a few hours, and those who were too frail to make it to the gas chambers were escorted to a hospital, which was a façade—it was an open pit at which they were shot and then thrown in. Some of the victims were still alive when they were thrown in.

The Nazis, in their shame, destroyed their apparatus of genocide in the face of the advancing Soviet troops. The best estimate is that somewhere between 700,000 and 900,000 Jews and around 2,000 Roma were killed in Treblinka's gas chambers. More Jews were killed at Treblinka than at any other Nazi extermination camp apart from Auschwitz. It is a grim place. There is a dignified monument and carefully laid stones remembering the different communities.

I laid a wreath at the site and following the visit, as most politicians do, I tweeted my observations. Within minutes I received a tweet that said:

"No one died at Treblinka, it was a transit camp. There were no gas chambers, no crematoria, no mass graves".

I have no idea whether the person who sent me that tweet believed it or not, and it is too easy to dismiss this as yet another example of our post-truth world's fake news, which is all too prevalent on social media, but I think there is something more sinister going on. Members will recall the long-established 10 stages of a holocaust or genocide starting with classification and working through persecution and extermination. Of course, the 10th and final stage is holocaust denial: it did not happen; the numbers are exaggerated; there were not that many Jews in the first place; they brought it on themselves; the Jews are using it to justify their actions. To forget or belittle continues the holocaust.

This month sees the release of the film "Denial", which depicts one of the most infamous libel trials of the past 20 years involving the American historian, Deborah Lipstadt, and David Irving. If one looks at the trailer, and at the comments made beneath it, one can

see that there are thousands of abusive comments claiming that the holocaust was a fake. Only a few days ago David Irving claimed that he is inspiring a new generation of “holocaust sceptics”—a fancy way of dressing up holocaust denial.

It is in that context that we should see the building of the new holocaust memorial and learning centre just a short walk from this Chamber in Victoria Gardens. I am proud to be a member of the foundation alongside the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond). It will establish the memorial in a massively important place. An international design competition was launched in September 2016, and 92 teams have expressed an interest. Ten were shortlisted and when the competition ends on Monday we will see them on the web and will take the exhibition around the country.

It will be a lasting monument of which we can be immensely proud, but, as we are running short of time and others want to speak, and, given that last year we lost Elie Wiesel, I would like to end with a quote from him that explains why we are doing this. He said in his Nobel prize acceptance speech:

“What all victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs”.

3.8 pm

**Mrs Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I very much welcome this debate and the fact that it was a decision of this Parliament, made on an all-party basis, that has led to our having Holocaust Memorial Day in this country. Holocaust Memorial Day gives us an opportunity to focus on reflections about the enormity of the holocaust and the extermination of millions of European Jews with the aim of eradicating European Jewry, who were seen as a malignant, evil force, as well as an opportunity to reflect on current anti-Semitism.

Anti-Semitism is indeed a virus. It spans different religions and different political parties, and it changes its form over time. I very much welcome the Government’s acceptance of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of anti-Semitism, because it is important that we focus on what anti-Semitism means in this day and in this era, as well as what it has meant historically.

Figures from the Community Security Trust show us shockingly that there has been a resurgence of anti-Semitism and of anti-Semitic discourse. It is important not to exaggerate that—most British Jews will go about their lives without experiencing anti-Semitism—but there is a profound unease across the UK’s Jewish community with the increase in both anti-Semitic incidents and comments. As the Community Security Trust report on anti-Semitic discourse shows, that sometimes reflects insinuations and allusions if not direct anti-Semitism.

It is always important to remember that anti-Semitism does not lie solely in one religion. Historically, Christianity was often the source of anti-Semitism, but anti-Semitism is found in extreme Islamic sources, too. We have only to look at the Hamas charter to see very clear, explicit anti-Semitism, with references to Jews wanting to rule the world.

Anti-Semitism is not only found on the right. Conventionally, people sometimes think that anti-Semitism is confined to the right of politics. That is not, and has

never been, the case. It is a fact that people who declare themselves anti-racist are not necessarily opposed to anti-Semitism, and do not necessarily even understand what anti-Semitism is. Shocking as I find that, as a person of the left and a Labour party member, I recognise that there is a fight-back and that it is being led by non-Jewish people as well as by Jews.

This week, there has been a showing of the film “Denial” here in Parliament. The film shows, as the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) mentioned, the trial where the holocaust denier, David Irving, sued Deborah Lipstadt. He was alleging that the holocaust did not happen. It is truly shocking that today, as that film is being shown, and as he was defeated so conclusively—indeed, he had sued Deborah Lipstadt, not the other way around—it is reported that there are more supporters for the lie of holocaust denial, including more online supporters who appear to be gathering new force. This is a reminder of the importance of Holocaust Memorial Day, this debate and the continuing role of the UK Government, with all-party support, in combating modern day manifestations of anti-Semitism.

3.12 pm

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is an honour and a privilege to co-sponsor this debate to mark this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day and to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Transport, on which I serve.

Last November, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) and I stood with 200 young people from across the south-east of England on the train tracks at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where 1.1 million Jewish men, women and children were murdered by the Nazis. I had travelled to Poland as part of the “Lessons from Auschwitz” project, run by the excellent Holocaust Educational Trust.

The train tracks run right into the camp. Ahead are the watchtowers where the guards would have been positioned at all times. At the end of the tracks are the remains of the gas chambers. To the left and right, as far as the eye can see, are the barracks where those selected to work were held.

As we stood on the train tracks, our educator read to us an extract from a young boy who stood on those same train tracks some 74 years earlier. That extract has stayed with me and I want to share it now:

“Men to the left! Women to the right!” Eight words were spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight short, simple words. Yet that was the moment when I parted from my mother. I had not had time to think, but already I felt the pressure of my father’s hand; we were alone. For a part of a second I glimpsed my mother and my sister moving away to the right. Tzipora held my mother’s hand. I saw them disappear into the distance; my mother was stroking my sister’s fair hair, as though to protect her, while I walked on with my father and the other men. And I did not know that in that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora forever. I went on walking, my father held on to my hand.”

These are the memories of Professor Elie Wiesel, Nobel laureate, who has already been mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles). Elie spent the rest of his life working to ensure that the holocaust was never forgotten. He passed away in July 2016 aged 87, just a few months before my visit.

[Huw Merriman]

Today we debate this horror, and we speak in honour of Elie and all those who either perished in the camps or, against all odds, survived. Many of those who lived on dedicated the rest of their lives to ensuring that their experiences would never be repeated. Their stories act as a reminder of the evil that mankind can deliver to itself when hatred, prejudice and violence are left unchecked.

Yesterday in Parliament, I spoke to six young people who have made the same trip to Auschwitz over the past few years with the Holocaust Educational Trust. They have all been young ambassadors for the trust and have devised imaginative ideas to ensure that the horrors of the holocaust act as a flame to guard against the darkness of hatred and division. Time does not permit me to mention all their stories, but I will mention the final young ambassador I met—a lady called Charlotte Heard.

Charlotte told me that she had been keen to develop her knowledge of the holocaust, as she had a great-grandmother who was in a concentration camp in the last year of the war. Little was spoken about the experience and Charlotte lost her great-grandmother in 2015, motivating Charlotte to complete her “Lessons from Auschwitz” project in April last year. On her return from Auschwitz, Charlotte and a fellow attendee from her school set about creating a memorial that would inspire others. This is how she described her work to me:

“We wanted to involve the students within our school as a way of uniting them. We have a school that has 40+ different languages. We thought this was very poignant as many cultures and races were victims of persecution, but of course in particular the Jews. Therefore the hands represent the many different students within our school and although they may be different in appearance, language or traditions, their hands are something that unite them, and join them together. The words I have painted on one of the panels read: ‘I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining. I believe in love, even when I cannot feel it. I believe in God, even when he is silent.’ These words were written inside a cell in the Cologne concentration camp, and we chose this because it shows the struggle that the Jews had faced. However the prisoner had never lost faith in his God. Therefore, as ambassadors whose role is to ensure we make the existence of the Holocaust in our past live on, these are key words that could inspire all the students in our school.”

These young ambassadors are doing an outstanding job of reminding their peers of what happened during the second world war. The importance could never be greater. First-hand experiences truly deliver the power but, 75 years on, these voices are being lost. We therefore have to find imaginative ways to appeal to the consciences of others. We live in a society where negativity, cynicism and casual insults are never far from the surface.

We should never assume that the horrors of the Third Reich could never be repeated in Europe. The Germany of the 1930s had culture, history and people of differing creeds living side by side, yet the murmurings of hate quickly turned an entire country into a place where sending Jews, Romany Gypsies and other groups to their graves was accepted by millions of people who had previously lived and worked among them. The noise of hatred in 2017 may be low, but a civilised society must aim to switch it off before it can deafen us.

I conclude by thanking Karen Pollock and her team at the Holocaust Educational Trust for continuing to ensure that this country remembers the unspeakable

evil that created the holocaust. I also thank the trust for delivering these new voices—the young and not so young—who will continue to ensure that we never forget what occurred and that we do all we can to stop the undercurrents that, if left unchecked, could make it occur again.

3.18 pm

**Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): Holocaust Memorial Day marks a crime that we must never forget. We must never forget the genocide committed by Nazi Germany, and we must always remind ourselves of the horrors that anti-Semitism can produce.

At 10 am on 27 January—Holocaust Memorial Day itself—the Holocaust Educational Trust will host a live webcast with holocaust survivor Mala Tribich. The webcast will be livestreamed to schools across the UK, and more than 600 schools have signed up so far. The filming will take place at Kingsmead School in my constituency. I am very proud that it is happening there, and I commend the school for hosting it. The event at Kingsmead is very important, and it will have a significant impact. We thank Mala for being willing to share her terrible experiences and give her testimony to educate our young people. We also thank the Holocaust Educational Trust for organising the event.

Even when it makes for difficult hearing, we have a moral duty to listen to holocaust testimony. Survivors speak not only for themselves but for those who did not survive to tell their story. Arek Hersh is one such survivor. When he was 11, the Nazis invaded his home town in Poland and transferred him to the Lodz ghetto. He was then taken to an SS camp called Otoschno, near Poznan. After 18 months, Arek was one of only 11 of the original 2,500 men left alive.

Arek escaped transfer to the gas chambers at Chelmno twice, before being transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau. At Auschwitz, he was selected for death by Dr Josef Mengele, but when he saw that healthier and fitter people were in the other line, he ran across while the SS guards were distracted. Arek was a slave labourer in Auschwitz, before being forced on a death march to Buchenwald. He was then transferred to Theresienstadt, where he was liberated by the Russian army.

Arek describes life at Auschwitz and the death march:

“We were chosen to work on agriculture for the SS. First with two horses they ploughed the field and for fertilisation they bring us ashes from the crematorium and”

we

“strew it on the ground and the bones, you could feel the bones.

We marched out on the 18th January 1945, the death march, and we walked for about 3 days without any food in the striped pyjama, we were freezing, it was so cold.

It was terrible.

And we arrived at the station and we were loaded on the station and we were taken to a place called Buchenwald next to Weimar in Germany.

The camp was about 8km from Weimar in a forest. And there we were more dead than alive when we arrived.”

Arek lives in Leeds today, and is now 88 years old. His first-hand testimony reminds us of the brutality of Nazi anti-Semitism. His testimony is also a powerful rebuttal to those today who continue the awful practice of holocaust denial. Let us be clear: those who minimise, trivialise, distort or deny the horrors of the holocaust

do so to legitimise the anti-Semitism that fuelled it. We must recognise that whenever people claim the gas chambers are a myth, argue that the holocaust is Jewish propaganda, distort Nazi history, minimise the number of holocaust victims or attack holocaust memorial days, they do not do so out of historical interest or a desire for debate; they do so from nothing but prejudice, bigotry and naked anti-Semitism.

**Vernon Coaker** (Gedling) (Lab): Do not the testimonies that my right hon. Friend is referring to show the continuing relevance and importance of Holocaust Memorial Day? The vast majority of people in this country are decent, but we have seen a rise in hate crime—41% between July 2015 and July 2016. Although it has since gone down, it is still higher than it was, so the continuing relevance of those testimonies speaks to us all.

**Joan Ryan:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I would add that we must never be bystanders.

When Arek wrote his autobiography, he called it “A Detail of History”. He chose that title as a direct riposte to French fascist leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, who disgustingly referred to the Nazi gas chambers in those terms.

Our words of remembrance today will mean nothing if we do not commit ourselves to action. Preserving the memory of the murdered is not a theoretical exercise. We must act to oppose all those who deny, distort or dismiss the holocaust in the present day. As Arek Hersh has said:

“What hurts the most is not the actions of the oppressor, but the silence of the bystander.”

We must support the brilliant work done by groups such as HOPE not hate to counter racism and fascism in our society. Perhaps most of all, we must support the fantastic work done by the Holocaust Educational Trust.

The only way to truly eradicate racism, anti-Semitism and holocaust denial in our society is through educating people. This is what Arek Hersh has devoted his life to for the past 20 years. In his words,

“If you talk about”

the Holocaust

“to people... people learn, and if anything like that could come up again they would stand up against it, so that’s why I talk about it all the time.”

In his words we must follow. We must remember, we must mourn, and above all, we must educate, so that racism and anti-Semitism can never flourish again.

3.25 pm

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan). I commend the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for the way in which he introduced this debate.

Jewish people have suffered anti-Semitism throughout the centuries; there is nothing new in that. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) reminded us, it is still rife not only all over the world but in this country, and we can never forget that fact. However, it reached its peak with the systematic attempt by the Nazis to wipe out Jews from across the world.

I grew up in an area where we were educated among Jewish people, Hindu people, Muslims, and people of all religions and origins, but the holocaust was never talked about. On my first to Israel in 1992, I saw not the wonderful museum that is now Yad Vashem, but the original museum. That brought home to me what life was like for the Jewish people in Germany and beyond who suffered the systematic attempt to wipe them out. It also brought home to me that we must educate young people across this country on the need to remember what happened, because it is very hard to contemplate that systematic attempt to wipe people out, and very easy to think that it was about just a small number of mad people. But it was not: large numbers of people were involved. We must remember that it is not good enough to pinpoint just the evil people who did this; we should also pinpoint those who stood by while recognising what was going on.

I remember my visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau; it is seared into my consciousness. Going there and seeing at first hand what happened brought home to me the importance of the testimony of those who survived the death camps in proving what had happened. I was privileged to welcome to this House—together with the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), who is unfortunately unable to be with us today—Kitty Hart-Moxon, who, aged 16, was forced to go to Auschwitz-Birkenau at the point of a gun. She survived to tell the tale, and to come to this country to give her life to being a nurse, to build a family, and to build a life. When, on her arrival, she went to live with the Jewish community in Birmingham, they wanted to ignore the fact of the holocaust—to forget about it. It was a terrible thing, but they wanted to turn a blind eye to what happened. It is important to recognise that in this country way back then, there was almost an attempt, not to belittle the holocaust, but to try to forget about it. In 1978—a long, long time ago, before Holocaust Memorial Day was ever thought of—she went back to Auschwitz-Birkenau to do a documentary, “Return to Auschwitz”, and she wrote a brilliant book. That is almost the forerunner of what we now see in the Holocaust Educational Trust. She is a very brave lady who is very outspoken, quite rightly so, on the work she has done and what we have to do to combat such attempts.

There are three major feature films on this subject: “Schindler’s List”, “Sophie’s Choice”, and now, “Denial”. The first two will be well known to right hon. and hon. Members across the House. “Denial” will be on general release next Friday—Holocaust Memorial Day. It is about the trial of David Irving. Having brought the case himself, he was eventually put on trial, where he was proven to be a holocaust denier and shown to be the fool that he was. I think that that is symptomatic. It is a brilliant film, and I recommend that colleagues across the House see it.

I pay tribute to an honourable lady in my constituency, Gena Turgel. She was born in Krakow in 1923, the youngest of nine children. When the Nazis bombed her home city on 1 September 1939 at the outbreak of the second world war, her family planned to move to the United States, but unfortunately they tried to do so too late. The family moved to just outside Krakow, and in 1941 she had to move into the ghetto. She entered the ghetto carrying a sack of potatoes, some flour and a few other belongings, and she stayed there with her

[Bob Blackman]

mother and four siblings. One of her brothers was shot by the SS in the ghetto, and a second brother fled from the ghetto and was never seen again.

Gena and her surviving family were eventually sent to Plaszów labour camp on the edge of Krakow. She later discovered that her sister Miriam and her husband, who had married in the ghetto, had been shot after the Nazis caught her trying to bring food into the camp. In the winter of 1944-45 the camp was liquidated, and Gena and her family had to walk to Auschwitz-Birkenau as part of a forced death march.

In January 1945, Gena and her mother were sent on a death march from Auschwitz, leaving behind Hela, Gena's sister. They never saw her again. After several days, they came to Leslau—that was the German name for the place—where they were forced on to trucks. They travelled under terrible conditions for three to four weeks, eventually arriving in Buchenwald concentration camp. Then they were sent on cattle trucks to Bergen-Belsen, where they arrived in February 1945. Gena worked in a hospital for the next two months and tried to support her mother as best she could.

On 15 April that year, the British Army liberated Bergen-Belsen. Among the liberators was Norman Turgel, who became Gena's husband just half a year later. Today Gena lives in Stanmore and is in close touch with her children and grandchildren. She wrote a book recently called "I Light a Candle". At the age of 93, she goes to schools up and down the country to inform people about what happened.

I commend the early-day motion that was tabled in my name, on a cross-party basis, commemorating Holocaust Memorial Day. It has been signed so far by 44 hon. Members, but I hope that many more will do so later. The book of commitment from the Holocaust Educational Trust is available for Members to sign—it has been available this week and it will be available next week—in the Members' corridor. I encourage Members from right across the House to sign the book of commitment, to demonstrate that we commemorate those victims and make sure that we all know that life will go on.

3.33 pm

**Alex Salmond** (Gordon) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for his speech and for calling on all hon. Members to sign the book of remembrance over the next few days.

I declare an interest as a member of the Holocaust Memorial Foundation, along with the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles). It is the first commission that I have ever served on with the right hon. Gentleman, and it may be the first time that we have ever agreed on anything. It is an honour to serve with him in that task. When I was First Minister of Scotland, I was responsible for the "Lessons from Auschwitz" project, working in conjunction with the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust.

The right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar talked about man's inhumanity to man. That is a quote from Robert Burns; the full quote is

"Man's inhumanity to man

Makes countless thousands mourn!"

It is highly appropriate, because Burns night is on 25 January, two days before Holocaust Memorial Day.

The debate has been moving, as hon. Members have recounted their personal insights and, in some cases, recollections. It has also reflected the fact that although the holocaust was the greatest crime of the 20th century and perhaps the greatest crime in human history—the greatest example of man's inhumanity to man—anti-Semitism was not restricted to the 20th century, and certainly not to Islam, but was the norm in medieval and early modern Europe, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) reminded us.

Some years ago, I was privileged as First Minister to write the foreword to a book called "Scotland's Jews". I claim no special virtue for the Scottish nation, but I was able to recount that Scotland was one of only two nations in the whole continent that have never had any anti-Semitic legislation on the statute book. Scotland's declaration of independence of 1320 contains an appeal to Pope John XXII to respect the rights of Jews, Greeks and gentiles, all of whom, the declaration says, are equal in the eyes of God. It stands alone among medieval documents in making that call. We should remember that anti-Semitism and its consequences have been with us for the greater part of recorded human history.

I want to say a word about the work of the Holocaust Memorial Foundation and the Auschwitz project because it gets to the heart of what many Members have said. The Auschwitz project takes Scottish schoolchildren to Auschwitz-Birkenau. There is a similar project in England. Since its inauguration in 2013, 358 post-16 establishments have taken part in the project—more than two thirds of all local authority, independent and special schools and colleges in Scotland. I was privileged as First Minister to hear the personal testimony of the pupils who had been to concentration camps. Without question, not one of those pupils will forget that experience or have any truck with a holocaust denier.

Some hon. Members even yesterday expressed some doubt about building a memorial in Victoria Gardens, but—trust and believe me—it is a highly appropriate place for it. Regardless of where it is built, it should be emphasised that one aspect of the Holocaust Memorial Foundation's work is the learning centre that goes with the memorial, as was shown in the past few days in the special edition of the "Antiques Roadshow", which took place in the Palace of Westminster. It included many moving stories, including one about Jane Haining from near Dumfries that was told by her nieces. Jane was arrested by the Nazis for protecting Jewish girls at the Scottish mission school in Budapest, which was run by the Church of Scotland. She was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944. That testimony to powerful action showed that not everyone stood aside as the atrocities were happening, as the films that have been mentioned exemplify. Many people rallied to their fellow human beings.

The educational project and the learning that goes with it are vital because, sadly, few survivors of the holocaust are still with us and their number gets fewer by the day. The teaching and personal experience that can be imbued through family connections, the learning centre and visits to the concentration camps are therefore all the more vital.

There will be no dissenting voices from the Benches today, but I want to argue one fundamentally important point. Recognising and commemorating the significance of the holocaust, of man's inhumanity to man, is not restricted to any religious grouping or any point of

view. It should be commemorated by those who take a pro-Palestinian, a pro-Israeli or just a pro-peace view of the middle east. Last year, as a Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I commemorated Holocaust Memorial Day outside the Strasbourg Assembly. I was led to make a point of order because the Israeli diplomat representing the Israeli Government at that commemoration launched an attack on President Rouhani of Iran who was visiting France at the time. It was inappropriate in that context and it was particularly inappropriate because President Rouhani is one of the Iranian leadership who is not a holocaust denier.

All of us who are a part of humanity, regardless of affiliation, point of view, political party, religion and all the rest of it, must recognise that there are those among us who would seek to deny the terrible crimes of the past for their own cynical motivations. Those who do not deny it—who acknowledge it, face up to it and recognise it, which is the first step in preventing it from happening again—should be embraced by us, whatever their point of view, as fellow human beings.

3.40 pm

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for securing the debate. It is very relevant at this time of year, but it is also very relevant to me and many of my constituents. The right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) is correct to say that there are fewer and fewer survivors, but a significant number of them live in my constituency: people who lived through the holocaust, people whose families perished in the holocaust and people who escaped the holocaust because their relatives came here. One former constituent, Rev. Leslie Hardman, was a witness to what happened. He entered Bergen-Belsen with the British Army. During the day he was engaged in the circumcision of babies, and later in the day he was engaged with burial and cremation.

It is appropriate that the theme for this year's Holocaust Memorial Day is "How can life go on?" I want to take this opportunity to highlight the work of the Holocaust Survivors Centre in my Hendon constituency, which I have visited on many occasions. I know several survivors who visit regularly to eat together, give each other support and receive pastoral care in the later years of their life. As I know from the many people who visit, it is a much-cherished organisation that serves the community.

I would like to mention one person in particular. Renee Salt lives above the survivors centre and speaks to schools on behalf of the Holocaust Education Trust. Renee was born in Zdunska Wola, in Poland, in 1929. She lived with her parents and her younger sister. When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, the Nazis marched into her town and decided to take over her flat because they liked it so much. Renee and her family were simply thrown out into the street with no possessions. She went to live with various relatives who were able to look after her. By the end of 1939, as the war continued, however, the Nazis established a ghetto in the town where all the Jewish inhabitants had to live. Seven people lived in one room, which must have been a terrible existence. In 1942, the Nazis announced that everyone in the ghetto would be moved. Believing that they would soon return to their one room, the family hid Renee's grandparents and four-year-old cousin in the attic. That was the last time they ever saw them.

The people who had been assembled were told to hand over all the children under the age of 18. Renee's mum had decided to hide Renee and her sister under her coat, but her sister was found and taken. Renee was fortunate enough not to be noticed, so she went with her parents to the Lodz ghetto. In 1944, the Nazis said that the ghetto was to be liquidated and that they should all go the train station to another camp. Renee and her parents volunteered to go, and were taken by train to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where they managed to survive a selection.

Renee and her mother were then transported to a warehouse in Hamburg. In 1945, they were moved again, this time to Bergen-Belsen—a repeat of the nightmare. Renee and her mother were liberated from Bergen-Belsen on 15 April 1945 by the British Army, including by Rev. Leslie Hardman, whom I mentioned at the beginning of my speech. Unfortunately, Renee's mother died 12 days later.

Like other Members, I have visited Auschwitz on several occasions. Seeing really is believing and understanding. Watching the faces of the pupils from my constituency was not only very moving but very telling. I last visited Auschwitz on 27 January 2014, when, alongside Lord Howard, I attended the International Holocaust Memorial Day through the inter-parliamentary gathering at Auschwitz. The temperature that day fell to minus 10°—never in my life have I been that cold—and I remain incredulous that people survived those conditions. But survive they did, and many then moved to the UK, including to Hendon. On another visit to Auschwitz, I discovered the book "Night" by Elie Wiesel. In it, he speaks about his time in the camp and the problems he faced. One line, in particular, has remained with me:

"The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference."

That is why we continue to remember and to commemorate the holocaust.

On Monday, I visited Edgware and District reform synagogue, where I heard Mala Tribich tell over 100 pupils from a local school about her experiences of the holocaust. Mala's name has been mentioned already for the work she does for the Holocaust Educational Trust, and I pay tribute to the trust and to Karen Pollock and her team for the work they do—it was an inspiring move in 2012 to take the England football team to Auschwitz to show them what occurred there. We also heard first-hand testimony from Mala's brother, Ben Helfgott, about his experience. It not only highlighted the issue but brought the holocaust to the attention of a new generation.

Some of my staff have asked me about my experiences and visits to Auschwitz, and I am pleased to say that when it gets warmer, in the spring, I will be taking my parliamentary office staff to Auschwitz. I think I can give them a good experience, given the number of times I have visited and the number of books I have read.

I want to finish on a positive note, by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) for the work he has done. He has been a tireless campaigner on this issue and a real friend to the Jewish community. On behalf of my constituents, I truly thank him.

Finally, I want to thank every Member here today. I have many Jewish constituents, as I have said, so one would expect me to be here—I understand that—but I

[Dr Matthew Offord]

am particularly grateful to each and every Member here today who does not have Jewish constituents or those who experienced the holocaust.

3.47 pm

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): One day last November, I had the unforgettable experience of visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau with students from Ealing Independent College and the Holocaust Educational Trust. I say “one day”, but it was a long and, in some ways, difficult day. We flew out of Luton at 6 am and were back at 11 pm. For all of us—200 of us from schools across the London region—the memory of that day will remain with us forever. The icy conditions—it was minus 4°—and the emotional demands of the day set a harsh context for bearing witness to the horror of the atrocities committed in the death camps. Startlingly, if a one-minute silence had been observed for every person who perished at that camp, we would have been there for more than two years.

Seventy-plus years on from the liberation of Auschwitz, this subject still has enormous contemporary relevance. It has been pointed out that with the passage of time there are fewer and fewer camp survivors, Kindertransport children and people who liberated the camps, so we owe a huge debt to people and organisations such as the HET and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, headed up by Olivia Marks-Woldman, whom I was at school with in Ealing. The commemorations next week up and down the country are crucial to educating successive generations. We can only understand our present and future if we understand our past.

This is a debate about the 6 million Jewish victims of the holocaust, but it extends to the millions of others the Nazis exterminated, including Romani Gypsies, communists, socialists, trade unionists and gay people. It also includes those slaughtered in other genocides. Holocaust education campaigning evolves. We have already heard mention of the “Antiques Roadshow” at the weekend featuring memorabilia and other astonishing artefacts from Auschwitz and of those on display at Yad Vashem in Israel. That brought it into the nation’s living rooms on prime time television.

This year’s Holocaust Memorial Day schools pack contains recipe cards—things such as Rwandan vegetable stew. That is another way of digesting information about cultures attacked in genocide. I think there are other recipes from Cambodia and Bosnia. Culture is transmitted subtly, and when there are no grandparents, culinary tradition and memory die.

All communities must learn lessons and be vigilant against racism, anti-Semitism, islamophobia and all forms of hatred in the contemporary world. There are worries that following the verdict in the EU referendum, and even following the events across the Atlantic that will come to fruition tomorrow, prejudice and racism are in danger of becoming acceptable, and that holders of those abhorrent views may feel disinhibited from expressing them.

Holocaust Memorial Day has renewed significance this year. We live in a time of post-truth politics and fake news. Members have mentioned the film “Denial”, which I had an opportunity to see earlier this week. It deals with the trial in which the Nazi David Irving

opposed the American academic Deborah Lipstadt. I warmly recommend the film, which is a fact-packed treatment of the downfall of the UK’s most notorious rewriter of history. It is frightening to hear that he is making something of a resurgence. I think that such views are as ridiculous as those of people who think that the earth is flat, and we need to call them out.

At the end of last year, I attended my first-ever Rabbi’s Tisch, which is a Friday night meal. It was a great event, which was held at Ealing Liberal Synagogue. The presence of a Community Security Trust guard on the door served as a reminder that, while all communities deserve to worship in safety, that is not always possible.

It is deplorable that pigs’ heads are left on the doorsteps of mosques in the UK, and that we hear of the desecration of Jewish graveyards in Europe. Just over the border of my constituency, the Hammersmith Polish centre was attacked in the wake of the Brexit result. It seems that there has been a resurgence of hate-filled political rhetoric—ditto the scapegoating and vilification of migrants and refugees.

Last year the Kindertransport refugee Ernest Simon addressed us at Ealing town hall. He told us about the train trip from Austria into the unknown that he had made as a child in 1939. The first question posed to him in the Q and A session was “Should we take in Syrian refugees?” His answer was an emphatic “Of course”: we had a moral duty to do so. All debates such as this resonate with contemporary events.

There is a large Polish community in my constituency, and this week, along with members of the all-party parliamentary group on Poland, I met here a cross-party delegation of visiting Members of the Polish Parliament. They, too, voiced concern about the rising tide of hate crime, and we reassured them that strong ties bind our two nations. They also asked me whether I had been to Poland. I did not have a straightforward answer to that question. Yes, I had flown to Krakow, but what we saw there was something that all of us will remember forever: something utterly unforgettable and outside the accepted norms of what takes place in everyday Poland, the like of which we must make sure that we never witness again anywhere.

The diversity of my constituency is one of the reasons why it is the best in the whole world, along with the strength of our many communities. I have constituents of all faiths and of none, and the constituency contains numerous churches, a mosque in Acton and another in Ealing, and a liberal as well as a reform synagogue. I am proud to say that next Friday we will have our annual remembrance event to mark Holocaust Memorial Day. It has become an annual date in the calendar—as has this debate, a parliamentary fixture that is much looked forward to.

At that event in Ealing and throughout the country, we should mark this shameful episode in history, and also subsequent genocides. We must assess our own responsibilities in the wake of such crimes. We must never forget the holocaust, and we must ensure that such events never occur again.

3.53 pm

**Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): It is always a great privilege to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. Let me add my thanks to the truly amazing Holocaust

Educational Trust for its much-needed and excellent work to keep memories alive, but also to remind us of what our future might hold if we chose to ignore the plight of those in our world who are in trouble.

This year, the theme for Holocaust Memorial Day is a question: “How can life go on?” Given what we have heard today, and during our past debates on this topic, the force of that question is palpable. Personally, I cannot imagine how I could go on in circumstances even a fraction as bleak as those experienced by so many Jewish people, and others, during the Nazi genocide. For many survivors, almost everything that had anchored them was lost. The loving family connections that had given shape to their entire lives, the familiar places and supportive communities that may have been all they ever knew, their sense of our world as a potential home for them—all of it gone. On top of that, those sources of love and security had been taken away by an unprecedented, unrelenting wave of organised, arbitrary hatred.

In reflecting on this, I will draw on the testimony of one survivor, the artist Alicia Melamed Adams, who was born Alicia Goldschlag in Drohobycz in what is now Ukraine in 1927. We can read her story, in connection with a series of relevant—and beautiful and tragic—examples of her painting, in a booklet. It is a remarkable testament to a truly remarkable and very talented woman.

The German army took control of Drohobycz in 1941, when Alicia was only 13 years old. They forced the Jewish population into a ghetto, and Alicia’s family was separated. Her beloved older brother disappeared without trace at the age of 18 after being taken to another camp; he was one of the first to be taken in that area. During this time, she—at 13 years old—laboured for the Gestapo under the constant and explicit threat of beatings and death. In her words:

“At one time I worked as a cleaner for a Gestapo man. He was one of those who shot people in Bronica wood with machine guns—about two thousand at a time. He always used to drink beforehand. Once he said to me, ‘You are very nice, I will never kill you with the others.’ Then he showed me a beautiful flowering tree and said, ‘I will kill you separately and I will put you under that tree.’ I once painted a self-portrait with that tree. I sold the picture and called it ‘Childhood Memories’, but I’m certain the buyer didn’t know what kind of memories they were.”

Alicia narrowly escaped death a number of times, mainly because she was helped due to the kindness of others or sometimes just by luck—fate. Throughout her ordeal, Alicia was only a child.

After the war Alicia met Adam, also a survivor in western Poland, who is now her husband. I wanted to tell his story too, but we simply do not have time in this debate. I urge the House authorities to give us a proper, long debate next time so that we can truly talk about the stories of such people. Alicia and Adam moved to London, where they have lived ever since, but these events leave an indelible mark.

**Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): My hon. Friend has painted a moving picture. Does she agree that we sometimes think these kinds of events stopped at the end of the war, but there were dreadful pogroms after the war as well, and that should not be forgotten?

**Lyn Brown:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is why I plead for more time in these debates so we can draw out these stories and understand the lessons for us today.

Such events leave an indelible mark. After experiencing such intense horror, it is understandably difficult to go on with life in a new place among strangers. Stories like those of Adam and Alicia are relevant to how we should treat today’s refugee survivors—those for whom the question of how life can go on must be so pressing. It is so important that we create an environment for them that offers genuine shelter for body and mind, that genuinely reaches out, instead of shying away, when faced with deeply troubling past experiences and their consequences, and that gives survivors a genuine chance to create a new life in this country, just as Alicia and Adam, remarkably, have had the strength to do. I am delighted to be able to tell the House that Adam and Alicia are still with us today, and nestled in the bosom of their loving family.

I hope today the House will recommit to extending a welcoming, understanding, careful hand to refugees today and tomorrow. We must never let survivors of murderous horror feel such loss and despair that they might question how they can go on with life in our country.

3.59 pm

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I start by thanking those who keep the memory of the holocaust alive. There will soon be no living memory of the event, but it will have been passed on to future generations. I particularly thank the Holocaust Educational Trust. Like many Members here, I have visited Auschwitz and Birkenau and what struck me most was the industrial scale and the degree of planning to make the camps as efficient as possible. I also thank the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and Eve Gill, a holocaust survivor whom I have heard speak a couple of times. She speaks at many schools in my area and Surrey more widely. I heard about her ambitions and aspirations as a teenager and then about how they were blown apart by the holocaust and that had a real impact on me and on the pupils who listened to her.

We live in a troubled world, and extremism and nationalism are on the march. With ISIS, Le Pen, Geert Wilders, the AfD and Putin, this is an easier environment in which to whip up hatred of people of different faiths—Jews, Ahmadi Muslims or Christians—races or sexualities, such as the gays in Russia. We should not think that the UK is immune from that—other Members quoted a rise in hate crime of 40% over the past three years. It is therefore essential to recall the holocaust each year. We do that not only out of respect for its victims and those of subsequent genocides, but to debunk holocaust deniers, to which the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) referred in his remarks. Such people have had an easy outlet for their bile since the explosion in social media. We also do it to increase the chances that we detect future genocides before they occur. That is our greatest challenge, because we have seen genocides since the holocaust in Bosnia, Rwanda and other countries.

I will finish by mentioning South Sudan. There is evidence from the chair of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan that a genocide is under way and that a steady process of ethnic cleansing is ongoing in several areas, with killing, abduction, rape, looting and the burning of homes. Millions of people have been displaced by civil war, different groups are being dehumanised, and a large humanitarian crisis is ongoing

[Tom Brake]

due to a lack of food. While it is essential that we recall the holocaust and that significant events take place, we must also learn the lessons and seek to apply them when we identify genocides that are potentially under way, such as in South Sudan. In addition to officially recognising the holocaust, I hope that the Government will take action on the situation in South Sudan.

4.2 pm

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Backbench Business Committee and the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for enabling this extremely important debate to happen in the House and across the country. I declare an interest in that I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group against anti-Semitism.

Holocaust Memorial Day is vital. We must learn from the past and educate for the future. There can be no excuses for anti-Semitism or any other form of racism or prejudice. I congratulate the Holocaust Educational Trust and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance for their invaluable work supporting holocaust education, remembrance and research, which is recognised both nationally and internationally. The Home Affairs Committee recently produced a comprehensive report on anti-Semitism in the UK, and I urge the Minister and all parties to take appropriate cognisance of it.

Genocide does not happen out of the blue. There is a gradual process of victimisation, discrimination, hatred, words, actions, maligning, inferences and looking the other way. That leads to psychological distancing, and then to dehumanisation. That is the path to genocide.

I will never forget reading the diary of Anne Frank when I was at school and later visiting the site of her home in Amsterdam, where she and her family hid for two years before being discovered and arrested in 1944. I recall reading of her childhood pain that she could not go outside, of the lack of food and of her abject fear for herself and for her family, and then visiting and seeing those cramped conditions and wondering how my own family could have coped if placed in such danger and despair. Children could not make a sound and could not go to the bathroom until evening, and they lost their formal education and friends. It was impossible to go outside for fear of being shot. Such a burden on their young brains.

Education and remembrance are so important because, out of tragedy and suffering, Anne Frank, a 14-year-old girl, wrote some of the most inspiring words that I have ever read. The theme of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day is "How can life go on?" Anne Frank wrote that she kept to her ideals

"because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart."

She wrote:

"How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

And:

"Whoever is happy will make others happy too."

Holocaust Memorial Day commemorates, and it is important to pay tribute to all survivors and to never forget those who were lost and those who experienced such traumatic circumstances. Anne Frank wrote:

"What is done cannot be undone, but one can prevent it happening again."

4.6 pm

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), who is not in his seat, for the tone he set at the beginning of this afternoon's debate with such great sensitivity and, indeed, insight.

This year marks the 72nd anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps set up by the Nazis to prosecute the holocaust. The tragedy of the holocaust affected so many, directly and indirectly. From the millions of victims, their families and communities to the forces who liberated them in 1944 and 1945, the ripple effect of this tragedy casts its shadow far and wide. The physical and emotional trauma was shared by victims and those who witnessed it. Even today, the scars have not healed.

The holocaust raises deep and profound questions for all of us today, which is why the theme of this year's commemoration, mentioned by so many Members, "How can life go on?" is so important today and every day. In the face of such fundamental evil, it is human to feel a sense of hopelessness, but the theme challenges that. Even in the face of unspeakable evil, we are not hopeless.

The commemoration, and today's important debate, give us all an opportunity to reflect, and it helps us to find ways of coming to terms with the unthinkable. If we are to live beyond the tragedy of the holocaust and not just survive, we must resolve today to ensure that reconciliation and rebuilding take place wherever in the world they are needed. We must continue to learn from these experiences and remember them, taking care that our response to contemporary genocide in Srebrenica, Rwanda and Cambodia is guided by the need to ensure that those who make it through the darkness can eventually emerge into the light.

Most of all, if we are to guarantee that life goes on, we should try not to counteract hate with more hate of our own. This week I listened to the words of that great American civil rights campaigner John Lewis, who spoke so movingly on how we must instead meet hate with love:

"The way of love is the better way."

He went on to invoke Dr Martin Luther King Jr., who said:

"Hate is too great a burden to bear."

Holocaust Memorial Day takes place at a time when we should seek to learn the lessons of the past. We must understand that genocide is often the evil culmination of a gradual process that begins with unchecked discrimination, racism and hatred. In the wake of Donald Trump's election victory in November and the Brexit vote in June, we have witnessed deeply worrying increases in intolerance across western democracies. We must be vigilant and continue to provide positive leadership if we are to effectively address the root causes of hate in our communities and beyond.

The Scottish National party Government in Scotland have long supported remembrance and the importance of holocaust education, and the Scottish Parliament will also play its part in remembrance. Next Tuesday, Jessica Reid and Callum Docherty, two students from Braes High School in Falkirk, will deliver the Scottish Parliament's "Time for Reflection". These school students recently took part in the Holocaust Educational Trust's

“Lessons from Auschwitz” project, which has been referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) and which gives two post-16 students from every school and college in Scotland the opportunity to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau. This project is supported by a grant from the Scottish Government. They also set up the Independent Advisory Group on Hate Crime, Prejudice and Community Cohesion in 2015 to engage with minority ethnic stakeholders and communities in considering what more can be done to tackle these issues. This group gave a report in September 2016, setting out practical suggestions on how to advance this crucially important agenda.

The holocaust did not begin with the murder of millions; it began with what we now know as hate speech, perpetuated by a small minority and tolerated by the vast majority. We cannot make the same mistakes again. But as John Lewis so eloquently stated this week, we must face this reaction with tolerance, respect and understanding. We can and should be very proud of the diversity of modern Scotland, and the diversity we see across the British Isles, but we should never take that diversity or tolerance for granted. We want our Jewish community to feel safe and welcome, and so we condemn the growing anti-Semitism and the hate seen more recently across Europe and the USA. As we commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day, it is only through employing this kind of positive approach that we can ensure that life will go on, and that decent humanity continues to prosper in the face of unspeakable, unspeakable evil.

4.11 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): As always, it is good to make a contribution. First, I wish to thank the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for setting the scene so well. He had limited time but he did very well, so well done to him. We have heard some powerful speeches from right hon. and hon. Members encapsulating the energy, passion, thoughts, fears and concerns of us all. They have been put very well, in a dignified manner.

I take great pride in the opportunity to speak on this unfortunate and catastrophic event in history. We all know the facts, yet they bear repeating, as others have done through individual stories from their constituents and so on. If we were to read out all the names of those who were so brutally murdered, it would take more than 384 days, reading constantly, day and night, to get through the list—it would take more than a year. That shows the magnitude of the horror that took place. These facts bear repeating to ensure that there is never a repetition of events similar to this. I used to question why I had to learn so many Bible verses in Sunday school—perhaps others did the same—but I was told to learn this one:

“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you”.

We are dealing with the same idea here: we will keep remembering to learn the lessons.

Unfortunately, in some parts of the world those lessons have not been learned, so we need to keep repeating them and hope that their importance sinks in. There is a responsibility on every elected Member in this Chamber to learn the lesson well and ensure that we do not stand like former Members in this House, wringing our hands yet saying nothing. Today has been

a day when we have said much, and it has all been very well put over. I am known for getting up and speaking out on behalf of those who are being abused and persecuted—that is my job and it is the job of other Members in this House, too—and I make no apologies for that. I work hard for my constituents to provide a quality of life and support when needed. I also work on behalf of those who cannot ask me to help although the facts of their lives demand that I do what I can to help. It is a responsibility that we all have in this House and that we all must take very seriously. We all have a responsibility in preventing genocide and mass killings throughout different parts of the world, including our own country.

An important lesson we have to learn from the holocaust relates to the continuation of an ideology of hatred within different communities. I am very passionate about tackling the ongoing genocide faced by Christians in the middle east. I am chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief—that is about the religious belief of Christians and those of other faiths, and those with no faith. The genocide in the middle east contributes to the mistreatment of vulnerable minorities. Evidence of that includes mass murder, forced deportations, the destruction of Christian institutions such as churches and monasteries, and forced conversions to different religions.

My interest in this matter extends to the Kindertransport children. We all know the story of the children who were smuggled out of Germany, some of whom ended up at what is now McGill’s farm outside Millisle in my constituency. That gave them a chance, which is very important.

The history of this period of time astounds me. Following the outbreak of world war two, there was a drastic change in attitudes towards the Jews. After plans for their mass relocation to the island of Madagascar were disrupted, the Jews were forced into blocked-off sections of towns called ghettos, and used for slave labour, which often resulted in death because they were deprived of food and water and overworked. Right hon. and hon. Members have told personal stories about those very things.

**Mrs Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we are immensely lucky that there are brave individuals—including my constituent, Mala Tribich—who survived the horrific experiences he is talking about and are prepared to speak out about the horror they experienced? If we hear at first hand what happened, we can learn the lessons so that we can all work to make sure that nothing like that ever happens again.

**Jim Shannon:** The right hon. Lady succinctly makes a point that everyone who has spoken today believes. We have to remember those people and what they have been through.

The escalation of violence did not stop until the end of the war in 1945. As the Nazis established themselves in power, they built on the idea of an Aryan race that planned to eliminate any individual who was classified as genetically inferior. Such people were alienated from society, with all their social, civil and political rights removed. Nowadays, that seems highly discriminatory, as we live in a different generation and a different time

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with regard to race. The Nazis intensified their scheme from forced labour to unjustified murder, while the destruction of war covered up the fact that thousands of individuals were losing their lives because of the strong leadership in Nazi Germany at that time. It sounds so far-fetched that it could only be a film—if only that was the case. Members have referred to some of the films that correctly recreated the events that took place at that time.

All that happened during my mother's lifetime; it should not happen again in the lifetime of my grandchildren. I often consider what I would have done had I been a German citizen and seen my Jewish neighbours shipped off. Would I have stood up? We like to think that we would. Had the opportunity been there, I certainly hope that we would. Martin Niemöller wrote a very good poem that most Members present probably know. It is very clear:

“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

That is very good poem that illustrates the issue very clearly.

When we discussed this debate in my office, a secretary said that she had been to Auschwitz and that everyone should go. Other Members have said in clear terms that they have been there and been changed. I believe that we must be changed. We should face this harrowing lesson and determine that in our personal lives and in this place we do all we can to prevent anything that even resembles what happened in the holocaust from taking place again. I was not able to stand with my Jewish brethren at that time, but I stand with them now as we solemnly vow never to forget the holocaust and to make sure that it never happens again.

4.18 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is an honour to follow that excellent speech by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It is a real honour to be a co-sponsor of this debate and to be able to sum up for my party on such an important issue.

I thank the Holocaust Educational Trust for the help, briefings and advice it has given to all Members, and for the excellent work that it does all year. I commend everyone who has made such excellent and thought-provoking contributions to the debate. I was particularly struck by the comments by the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) about the importance of language, which were particularly well made. Like him, I think it is hugely important that we do not ever normalise the language of hate but always challenge it loudly. We must also challenge those who would shamefully deny something so eloquently spoken about by the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles).

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) spoke about man's inhumanity to man and the importance of learning the lessons from the distant

past. I know that many people in my local area will be focused on what is said here today. I hope that the same is true for people around the UK and beyond, because it is vital. I agree with the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) that now more than at many other times in our life, we must be steadfast in our desire to make sure that everyone understands exactly what happened and that the lessons of this terrible stain on history are learned and understood as widely as possible. There is no place for anti-Semitism here or anywhere else. Where it exists, it is our responsibility to challenge it vigorously and to challenge discrimination in all its forms.

The holocaust saw more Jewish men, women and children perish in ghettos, mass-shootings and extermination camps than the entire population of Scotland. As the hon. Member for Hove said, it was an almost unbelievable scale of deliberate terror against ordinary people simply because of their identity as Jews. As time passes and memories fade, we must not lose our focus on this or on making sure that it cannot happen again. The right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) was entirely right in stressing the importance of testimony and education. There is no doubt about the impact on hon. Members who have visited the camps.

I am very fortunate to represent the majority of Scotland's Jewish community. I live in a vibrant diverse place, where people from all religions, backgrounds and cultures live together harmoniously. That ability to live together and to appreciate the richness of our diversity and what it brings to society is hugely important. It was important, too, to the late Rev. Ernest Levy, who was Cantor of Giffnock and Newlands synagogue in my constituency. Rev. Levy, who died in 2009, survived seven Nazi concentration camps, having been taken from his home in Budapest to Auschwitz at the age of 19. Although it was understandably very hard for him to speak about his terrible experiences, he did just that, making it his mission to speak to young people in particular to make sure that they understood the terrors that people had faced, and the extraordinary level of cruelty inflicted on the Jewish community and others who incurred the wrath of the Nazis.

The things that Rev. Levy experienced are beyond our comprehension in many ways. He called them dehumanising and horrifying. He described how his family were forced to flee their home in Bratislava in 1938, after being persecuted by fascists. When we all go home tonight, feeling secure in our place in the world, let us reflect on that, because the Levy family was no different from the rest of us. They just found themselves in the eye of a hellish storm, simply because they were Jewish. That storm followed them, and he and his family were captured. He was sent to Auschwitz, which he described as a world of evilness beyond description. He experienced his brothers being compelled to dig their own graves, and he described the terrible stench that tore at his lungs.

We can probably never fully understand what happened, but we absolutely must try. I can easily empathise with how Rev. Levy must have felt when he tried to return to normality after he was released, by then from Belsen. He was very grateful to be alive, but, at the same time, he was beset by a loss of trust in people, in God, and in prayers. Who would be any different? It is testimony to his great strength of character that he did find that trust

again, and that he dedicated his life to helping others. His belief in the light of humanity is a lesson to us all in the strength of the human spirit, and in the need to stand up and never let racism gain credence in society.

That is the sentiment that led me to make a trip this year that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I was very fortunate to be part of my party's first official delegation to Israel and Palestine. The first place we visited was Yad Vashem, the memorial to those who died in the holocaust, which is a quite remarkable place. The impact that it had on me was immense, and it must be the same for anyone who visits. The stories of all those people were laid out so plainly. They were just ordinary people—like you and me, the man down the road, or the woman in the office. All of them were murdered so cruelly because they were different. The way that the Nazis targeted people and created hostility to those groups who did not fit into their idea of society was particularly frightening, because I could see only too well why we need always to be ready to stand up against those who foster hate.

Yad Vashem was a peaceful and thought-provoking place, for all the awful story it tells. It is a place that honours the dead and makes sure that we remember each one of them, individually, as a human being—a person to be valued and acknowledged. That focus on each person as a human—one of us—cannot be emphasised enough. In everything I saw, I was struck by its very personal nature. There were individual possessions—some red shoes, a comb, and a pair of broken glasses, painstakingly laid out in a display case. They had belonged to someone's mum and they were all that was left when the Nazis murdered her. These glasses had been cherished for decades by a daughter who had hidden them during her time in a concentration camp, after her mother had been taken away. She had simply nothing else to remember her by, and she felt her mum was closer to her through these cherished old glasses.

In the garden of remembrance there commemorating the righteous among nations—those people from around the world who stood fast against the Nazis and protected their Jewish friends and neighbours, paying with their lives—I saw the memorial to Jane Haining, whom my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) mentioned, the only Scottish victim of the concentration camps. Jane's selfless devotion to the children she looked after as a matron saw her sent to Auschwitz, where she died. The Church of Scotland, her employer, had repeatedly ordered her home, but she refused to leave the children and was sent to her death.

The heritage centre to be opened in her hometown of Dunscore will be a particularly important place where people can learn what she stood for as a beacon of hope against hate, which is so important now, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) described. We could all do with thinking about Jane Haining and how she was not prepared to leave behind those who would be persecuted simply for being different.

That is a theme that the young people in my constituency demonstrate brilliantly at their holocaust memorial events every year. Their parents must be extremely proud of their children showing such maturity and insight and sharing the lessons we must all learn from the holocaust. These children, from my fantastically diverse community, represent the best of us. They are children from all

religions and none, some with disabilities and some without, from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, girls and boys. Just like the children who were sent to their deaths.

Our children often show us the way forward, and a number of Members have described that movingly today. That is why we cannot take it for granted that this cannot happen again. We must all commit to speaking out whenever we see anti-Semitism, racism or hate, and when we hear things we know are not right. We must never be afraid to call these things out for what they are, loudly and clearly. My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) described all too clearly what can happen if we stand back and do not act.

I close with the words and sentiments of Jane Haining, who stood so fast against hatred and paid so dearly for her principles and compassion. She said:

"If these children need me in days of sunshine, how much more do they need me in days of darkness?"

4.27 pm

**Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab):** The tales this afternoon have been extremely moving and that strengthens why these lessons should never be forgotten. The theme of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day is, "How can life go on?" It is intended to promote consideration of the aftermath of the holocaust and subsequent genocides. As has been eloquently observed many times in this place and elsewhere, the industrial mass murder of millions did not begin with state-sponsored violence and the intimidation of Jews in Germany. It did not begin with the construction of camps. It began with the view that someone's racial background marked them out as inferior. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) said in this debate last year,

"we should never avert our eyes from the most uncomfortable truth of all—that its perpetrators were not unique. They were ordinary men and women carrying out acts of extraordinary evil"—[*Official Report*, 21 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 1635.] while others stood by.

Society can only progress when such a fact is recognised and the memory of those awful times must be shared with future generations. We must teach our future generations that they must stand up to hate, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and any other injustice. As the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) eloquently put it, we have a solemn duty to remember the victims and to educate young people about the horrors unleashed on continental Europe through hate less than a century ago.

Through the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust, children from schools and sixth forms across the country have the opportunity to visit the former concentration camp of Auschwitz. Since 1999, more than 30,000 children have been able to benefit from the trust's "Lessons from Auschwitz" programme and become ambassadors for the trust, communicating their experiences to friends and peers. Students from my constituency of Blackburn, in particular from St Bede's school, have benefited from the opportunity and were very keen to share their experience with other young people in Blackburn.

This month, we will see the exhibition of the 10 finalist concept designs for the national memorial of the holocaust to be constructed in London. We must not allow the

[Kate Hollern]

generational memory of the holocaust to fade and the establishment of permanent physical memories has a huge role to play in that.

Many people have had the opportunity to listen to the incredible stories of holocaust survivors and those who worked against the Nazis. As the years pass and the number of living holocaust survivors decreases due to the passage of time, sadly there will be fewer and fewer opportunities to hear their incredible stories, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) already stated. However, thanks to the bravery of individuals during the war and its aftermath—including the young lady who preserved her mother's glasses, whom the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) spoke about—letters, diaries, documentation and personal belongings are all publicly available. Recordings of survivors remain with us. Museums dedicated to the preservation of their experiences will continue to communicate our shared history with the public. Historians will continue to inspire discourse. We will never forget, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) said.

In some circles, there is a view that young people will become less interested in the subject if it becomes simply history, but that does a tremendous disservice to the empathy of the next generation. As we think about how life can go on after the holocaust and subsequent genocides, the role of the next generation is even more crucial. Through establishing permanent memorials and the continued presence of the holocaust in schools through the national curriculum, and the support of devolved Governments, young people must be given every opportunity to engage with the difficult subject of the holocaust and other atrocities that have happened. Dedicated and conscientious teachers of history can convey the gravity of the holocaust and young people can draw parallels between historical events.

The concerning rise, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), in anti-Semitic incidents in the first half of 2016—an 11% increase on the same period last year—shows that we have more work to do in combating anti-Semitism. We must fight attitudes that cast any group as somehow less than any other and that define any group as unable to be British. Vibrant, accepting communities are possible. We must work to make that the legacy of the holocaust—that the ultimate result of genocide is the rejection of the hatred at its heart—and work to bring groups of young people together to facilitate social contact, to break down social and economic barriers and to emphasise the common threads that run through all young people: a hope for a better life, the desire to learn and the need for opportunities.

How does life carry on? It does so by ensuring that the missing generations—those abrupt endings on family trees—are commemorated and celebrated; by ensuring that communities targeted by fascists are able to live and work freely in Britain and around the world; and by instilling in young people a sense of pride in our country that does not exclude any community.

Nothing can fill the void of family members who were killed, but we can work for a better Britain and a better world where no group is stigmatised or discriminated against, and where prejudice is wholeheartedly rejected.

We can be proud of the UK's role in establishing Holocaust Memorial Day, when we joined 45 other Governments in signing the Stockholm declaration. This year's theme—"How can life go on?"—underlines the importance of the events arranged by faith groups, schools and community organisations that take place in the days and weeks leading up to the day.

For 20 years, I was honoured to stand on the steps of Blackburn town hall, paying respect and remembering the atrocities of the holocaust with Jews, Christians, Muslims, people of no religion whatever and people of many other religions. It is important that every area in the country recognises what our parents went through in the war and what the Jews went through at the hands of the Nazis. We must never ever forget and it is important that we keep those memories alive. The Holocaust Educational Trust will do just that, raising awareness in the community and the educational profession about the holocaust and lessons that can be drawn from it. It already does exceptional work in training teachers and equipping students to understand the attitudes that led to the unique crime of the holocaust.

The Government's ongoing funding of educational programmes is essential. Since 2008, the Government have funded the Centre for Holocaust Education at University College London's Institute for Education, which had benefited more than 7,000 teachers as of March last year. The ongoing funding of the "Lessons from Auschwitz" project benefits so many students and, it appears, hon. Members. Through those students we must confront head-on holocaust denial, distortion and equivocation; the denial of the historical reality; the deliberate effort to minimise the effect and impact of the holocaust; and the drawing of false equivalence between the unique crime of the holocaust and current events.

The establishment of Holocaust Memorial Day and the continuing efforts of the Holocaust Educational Trust are invaluable not only in commemorating the awful crimes and ensuring that the legacy of the holocaust is not forgotten, but in providing an example of bringing communities together and instilling values of tolerance and acceptance in young people.

4.38 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy):** It is a real privilege and honour to respond to a debate from this Dispatch Box for the first time since becoming a Minister, not least because this was such a consensual debate and because I was a secondary school history teacher in Yorkshire before I was elected to this place, so I used to deliver holocaust education to young people. It is also a privilege for me because of my own journey within Judaism, which has become so important to me over the past couple of years.

I am grateful for the contributions that have been made across the House, which have been thoughtful, insightful and, in many cases, moving. I thank the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) for securing the debate.

Many of us know the Holocaust Memorial Day events in our constituencies well, and we take part in them. I pay tribute to the ones organised in my constituency; it does not have a big Jewish population—as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) pointed out, that is the case in many seats—but the community wants to mark the day and to remember the horrors of the holocaust. So I pay particular tribute to Brigg Town Council for its work in organising the event in Brigg on the same basis as happens in many other constituencies.

As so many colleagues have said today, the theme for Holocaust Memorial Day is, “How can life go on?” It is a powerful and thought-provoking question, and I wish I was back in the classroom so that I could pose it to the young people I used to have the privilege of teaching. We have heard many moving testimonies today from people who prove that life actually can go on. I want to reiterate their names—I have tried to make notes as we have gone on—because it is important to repeat that people came to this country after the holocaust, and their lives did go on. We have heard of Renee Salt, Kitty Hart-Moxon, Arek Hersh, Gena Turgel, Ben Helfgott, Mala Tribich, Ernest Simon, Eve Gill, Reverend Levy, and Alicia Goldschlag and her husband, Adam.

I have heard some of their testimonies myself, and I want to pay particular tribute to Zigi Shipper BEM, who survived the Lodz ghetto, Auschwitz-Birkenau, another camp near Danzig and a death march. He came to the UK in 1947. He is now married, and he has children and grandchildren. With the Holocaust Educational Trust, many Members will have seen the film produced by the trust and one of his grandchildren, which was shown in the House of Commons not so long ago. He proves what can be achieved as life goes on, and we should thank him and all the survivors who came to this country who have kept the memory of all those who perished alive in the work they do going into schools and communities to speak about the horrors that took place.

We heard a lot today about the “Antiques Roadshow”, which was aired at the weekend. I got a text from my mum saying, “You must watch this,” so I went on iPlayer. It was truly moving, as she said, and so many colleagues have made reference to that today. It was very moving to see those items—often the only connection people have to people in their families and in their lives who were so brutally murdered in the holocaust—and to see just how important they were to them.

That programme showed us what a story of survival this is. Despite the horrors of the past, and despite their unimaginable experiences, survivors have gone on to become Nobel laureates and to make a contribution in this country and internationally in the worlds of science, medicine, politics and so many others. There are also people who just came here and got on with their ordinary lives, building, out of that horror, a family and a future for themselves. They overcame terrible odds, and that is why this year’s theme is all the more poignant: it is very personal, and it can resonate with all of us.

All of us in here will have experienced the loss of a loved one and wondered how we would cope—how would life go on? Let us imagine someone’s feeling of loss when it involves generations of their family; that is unimaginable to so many of us. Great-grandparents, grandparents, children, nieces, nephews, brothers and sisters—all lost. And beyond all that very personal loss,

there is the loss of their very way of life, their home and the community they grew up in—a place that has gone and that will never be again. That is so difficult for so many of us to imagine.

We can all look at the black and white photos of loved ones in albums; we look at them from time to time, and we remember. I just imagine looking at those same pictures and realising—as we saw with some of the photographs on the “Antiques Roadshow” last week—that everybody in them apart from you had perished in a death camp or in more recent conflicts, such as the killing fields of Cambodia, in Rwanda or in Srebrenica.

However, such photographs, and some of those we saw on the programme last week, also invoke strength and renewal, and they encourage new lives and new memories. That is why Holocaust Memorial Day is not only about commemorating past genocides and honouring those who died, but about standing with those who survive and about the new lives they have built. It is also, as many Members on both sides of the House have said, about standing up against intolerance and hatred, whatever form it may take. Today, for most of us, standing up against intolerance does not involve the same risks as it did for those who stood up against the Nazis or Pol Pot. Hassan Ngeze was a journalist sentenced to 35 years in prison by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda for spreading anti-Tutsi propaganda that led to the slaughter of 1 million Rwandans. We all know very well the crimes against humanity committed by Radovan Karadžić. For us, standing up against intolerance does not involve imprisonment, staring down the barrel of a gun, or thinking that somebody is going to come and round you and your family up in the night, but it does require us to speak out and to stand firm, because we all know, as many colleagues have said, that evil flourishes when good people stand idly by.

In the context of the Holocaust, we are also required to bear witness—we hear that all the time. We must not trivialise the Holocaust. We have to recognise the peculiarly unique evil of the Holocaust, and that is why we must bear witness to it. There are many ways that I personally, and colleagues here, have done that; it can take many different forms. A lot of colleagues have mentioned Yad Vashem in Jerusalem—a place I have visited a number of times. I think that anybody who has been to Yad Vashem will be very touched by how it is put together in telling the story of the development of hate and the horrors of what happened. The most powerful thing, which really touched me, was that on leaving, having seen all that horror, one goes slightly up an incline to a balcony that overlooks what must be the most peaceful scene in Jerusalem of trees and quiet below. When I looked at that, I thought that it symbolised the hope of people who survived the Holocaust, and how sad it was that people who were murdered in the Holocaust will never know the peace and tranquillity of a new life that it represents.

Closer to home here in London, at the synagogue I am proud to attend—Westminster synagogue—there are 1,564 Czech scrolls, of which there are many around the world being used in prayer in synagogues. They are housed at the synagogue in the Czech Memorial Scrolls Museum, which is well worth a visit. Each of those scrolls represents a community that does not exist any more—hundreds of years of Jewish history in eastern Europe were wiped out.

[*Andrew Percy*]

Many of us have mentioned how we have borne witness at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Like many others, I took the opportunity to visit with the Holocaust Educational Trust, and with 200 post-16 students from across Yorkshire and northern Lincolnshire. I had never been there before, despite teaching and delivering education on the holocaust in schools. I had visited Dachau—another evil place—but had never taken the opportunity to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau to pay respect to those who were murdered by the Nazis and more fully to understand the scale of that killing operation.

I found the experience incredibly moving, but the place I found most moving was the Jewish cemetery in the nearby local town, where the Nazis took the headstones from the cemetery and used them on roads and pavements. Many of the headstones were recovered and are looked after by the Jewish community from Krakow, but they are not looked after by the Jewish community in that town because that community does not exist any more. The saddest thing about the cemetery is the burial of the single Jew who, almost in an act of defiance, went back and lived in the town following the end of the war.

Perhaps what I found most difficult about visiting Auschwitz was the time of year that I went, because it was a beautiful, warm spring day. Colleagues have referred to being there in the depths of winter at minus 5° or minus 10°, but for me, going there on a spring day, it was very difficult to understand how such horror could have taken place in that setting with the trees and woodland around; it simply defied belief. As many colleagues have said, we hear and read the stories and poems, and see for ourselves the true horror of what took place there.

As I have said, I used to deliver holocaust education to young people in Hull. I agree with Members from across the House that we must ensure that holocaust education remains in place across all these islands. I used to find with the young people I taught that the problem was not denial, fortunately, but disbelief. As I showed them the photographs and the footage of the holocaust, the young people were silent and some of them were moved to tears at having to believe that this had actually happened, and that human beings could be so cruel.

One piece of film that I used to use was a scene from “Schindler’s List”. There is always a debate about using Hollywood movies in holocaust education, but the scene in that film showing the liquidation of the ghetto is so powerful that I used to use it, and young people were stunned into silence at the thought that that could have happened. That is why visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau help to ensure that the holocaust is never forgotten, and it is why we should all do everything we can to ensure that holocaust education is at the heart of the curriculum, in this country and across the world.

I thank all the holocaust organisations that are involved. They have been mentioned a lot today, but I am going to refer to them again. I particularly thank Karen Pollock, the CEO of the Holocaust Educational Trust. She and her team are an inspiration for us all. I sat down with Karen and young people in Auschwitz-Birkenau on my visit, and in Tel Aviv in Israel. The work of the trust is absolutely fantastic. I pay tribute to the trust for campaigning to ensure that the holocaust is part of the national curriculum and particularly for advocating

that the subject be taught at the later stages of key stage 3, when young people are emotionally developed enough to understand the full horror of it all; I know that that is important to the trust.

I pay tribute to the work of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and its CEO Olivia Marks-Woldman. Along with her team, she delivered a most successful Holocaust Memorial Day last year.

I would also like to mention some of the other holocaust remembrance, education and survivor organisations, as colleagues have done. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon spoke about the Holocaust Survivors Centre in his constituency. The Anne Frank Trust uses Anne’s diary, and the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) made reference to her visit to Anne Frank’s house. I also want to mention the Wiener Library, the Association of Jewish Refugees and the National Holocaust Centre in Newark, Nottinghamshire.

I pay tribute to the businesses that are playing their part in marking Holocaust Memorial Day. I met the Royal Bank of Scotland yesterday, which informed me of the work it is doing through its Jewish society and by encouraging its employees on Holocaust Memorial Day to take time out and reflect.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the work of the Prime Minister’s post-holocaust issues envoy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), who spoke brilliantly, particularly about his recent visit to Treblinka and about holocaust denial. He has not only focused on the restitution of property and art, but has been the driving force behind the Government’s adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of anti-Semitism. The definition, although not legally binding, is an important tool to help criminal justice agencies and other public bodies to understand how anti-Semitism manifests itself in the 21st century. It is really important that we recognise the definition—the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) mentioned this—because we cannot deny that there has been an increase in anti-Semitism across the country and across Europe.

I used to serve on the all-party group against anti-Semitism. I visited a Jewish school in Brussels, and I was shocked by the fact that outside the school Belgian armed forces were guarding the young people who were inside. I asked those young people, “Would you wear your kippah out and about in Brussels?” They laughed; they would not. In a modern, western European capital that is the home of the European Union and a liberal, open-minded place, Jewish children are not prepared to walk about outside with a kippah on because of the risk of attack and abuse. Of course, sadly, that has happened on campuses here. Swastikas have appeared and meetings organised by Jewish societies have been violently disrupted. That is not acceptable and we cannot be silent about it.

The right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) was right to say that we must all acknowledge Holocaust Memorial Day, regardless of our views on the middle east—whether pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli. Unfortunately, there has been an increased Israelification of anti-Semitism, using Israel and Zionism as a proxy for Jews. I have seen that and been on the receiving end of it, particularly on Twitter. There are pictures of the Star of David represented as the Nazi flag—that is unacceptable and a form of anti-Semitism.

At an event in Parliament, it was wonderful to see Laurence Rees, who produced the documentary, "The Nazis: A Warning from History", so beautifully destroy the arguments of those who argue that Hitler was a Zionist and so on. There has been too much of that. It is ignorant and sinister and we should call it out for what it is: anti-Semitism. That also applies to attending a rally in support or holding a flag of Hamas or Hezbollah.

We should be proud of what we have done in this country to tackle anti-Semitism and our work on the UK holocaust memorial. I want to give the hon. Member for Hove time to sum up, so I will end with a quote from Zigi Shipper, whom I mentioned earlier. It epitomises Holocaust Memorial Day's theme of how life can go on. Zigi Shipper returned to Poland about a decade ago and said:

"I went to Auschwitz after being nagged by my children."

He recalled standing under the "Arbeit macht frei" sign at the camp entrance:

"It meant nothing to me. I stood under that sign and said: 'After all that Hitler tried to do, he didn't succeed, for I am still here!'"

Life can go on, but only if we all take responsibility for reconciliation, rebuilding lives and communities and preventing such events from ever happening again by calling out intolerance wherever it may be.

4.57 pm

**Peter Kyle:** It is the first occasion in my short time in the Commons that I have agreed with every single word that has been spoken by Members of all parties, and it was a privilege to be here for that. I would like to single out one or two Members.

The right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) spoke with steely determination to confront holocaust denial wherever they see it, but also helped to educate us about the pathways towards that.

I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for accompanying me on the metaphorical and literal journey on the pathway and for his contribution. My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) powerfully brought to life survivors' testimony and related that to today's political challenges.

I thank the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), who spoke with tremendous power and provided a forthright analysis of the challenges of disentangling the holocaust from today's events in the middle east. Some people stumble naively into mixing them and we should confront that when we see it because they are separate issues that need our intellectual inquiry in two separate ways.

I have discovered that the Chamber thrives on difference and often on conflict. I hope that today we have also seen strength through consensus. I hope that that strength does not mean that we agree to walk away benignly, but that the consensus gives us steely determination to ensure that the events of the holocaust and the issues that we have discussed today are driven into the fabric of our communities so that lessons continue to be learned.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day 2017.

## Ayrshire Growth Deal

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That the House do now adjourn.—(Guy Opperman.)*

5 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): This evening's debate could not be more important to the good people of Ayrshire. As everyone at home and everyone in the Chamber can see, it is also very important to the MPs from across Scotland who have turned out to show their support for the Ayrshire growth deal. The Ayrshire growth deal is of huge importance to re-energising of the economy of the whole county of Ayrshire. The whole of Ayrshire, including the part I represent, has quite breathtaking natural beauty in parts. However, no one would deny that it also has its challenges.

The Ayrshire growth deal, should it secure the necessary support from the UK Government, would represent a step-change in economic growth and the economic prospects of Ayrshire. The Scottish Government are already supportive, but UK Government support, and the value it can bring cannot and must not be underestimated. Indeed, the entire Ayrshire growth deal depends on support from the UK Government.

Targeting the costed £359.8 million of investment would support a number of exciting projects, and generate and stimulate real, lasting and inclusive economic growth. The Scottish Government are enthusiastic and I understand—correctly, I hope—that the UK Government are receptive to it as well. I am keen tonight for the Minister to articulate his Government's support for this bold, ambitious, innovative and transformative vision for the whole of Ayrshire. The feedback from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has been most encouraging and I understand that the Secretary of State for Scotland has also expressed his support for this initiative. I am therefore both lobbying and urging the Minister today to do all he can to ensure that on the day of the spring Budget, 8 March, the Ayrshire growth deal is firmly on the UK Government's agenda. There is no doubt that on the Scottish National party Benches and across the whole county of Ayrshire there is a collective will to maximise the considerable and significant economic potential of this particularly picturesque part of Scotland.

We all know that in the past such growth deals have focused on cities. However, I sense that there is some interest in seeing how such an initiative would work on a diverse county such as Ayrshire, with its mix of urbanisation, towns, rural elements and two islands. Ayrshire is a diverse county with so much to offer. There is no doubt that stimulated growth would be repaid, as it would do much to re-energise, galvanise and revitalise the considerable untapped potential of the Ayrshire economy.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate for our area. She rightly says that to date the Government have focused on city deals. City deals certainly have a place and we welcome the investment they have brought to Scotland. However, in terms of connectivity and distance between cities, there is no

doubt that another approach needs to be undertaken to regenerate areas like Ayrshire, which have suffered from de-industrialisation.

I was looking today at the latest unemployment figures: 1,960 in my constituency of Kilmarnock and Loudoun, the 76th highest claimant rate by constituency; 1,745 in Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock; 1,635 in Central Ayrshire; and 2,185 in North Ayrshire and Arran, the 29th highest claimant rate by constituency. It is therefore really important that a new way is found to re-industrialise our area.

**Patricia Gibson:** The figures my hon. Friend quotes paint their own picture of the challenges faced by the entire county of Ayrshire. I am sure the Minister was listening keenly and will take them on board.

For Ayrshire to truly reach its potential, it is essential to reduce inequalities across communities and give everyone a stake in Ayrshire's growth. Therefore, inclusive growth is, and must be, an integral part of the Ayrshire growth deal business case. A successful economy must ensure that all the talents of our people are harnessed, which will help Ayrshire to be truly competitive and resilient to emerging technologies and challenges. We must work to ensure that Ayrshire folk are better connected to the economy, and have better and greater opportunities to prosper. I believe, and all MPs on the SNP Benches believe, that the Ayrshire growth deal provides a compelling route towards achieving that. We have so many resources and successes in Ayrshire to build upon, with our aerospace and space industry, life sciences and manufacturing.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): As well as the beauty that my hon. Friend has mentioned, we also have incredible potential. Even in my small part of Ayrshire, we have life sciences at one end and at the other an airport that not only was Scotland's first passenger airport but has the potential to be the UK's first spaceport, with its long runway, its clear weather and an air traffic control centre and aerospace cluster. We have the pieces of marble in the grass; we just need help to put them on top of each other.

**Patricia Gibson:** My hon. Friend has well articulated the importance of the spaceport to Ayrshire and the opportunities it would bring to build on that to spread and attract growth to Ayrshire.

In addition, we can enhance Ayrshire's beautiful coast and capitalise on the considerable opportunities that Ayrshire's harbours and ports provide. Indeed, proposed projects are well placed to feed into the delivery of national tourism strategies, such as marine tourism. This is an area in which there is great potential for growth in Ayrshire, but the infrastructure to make it possible is essential, alongside opportunities for the provision of land for the development of new housing.

I am particularly excited about the coastal regeneration of Ardrossan. Investment of about £22 million will deliver a transformation of the port as a regional transport interchange, serving south-west Scotland. Ardrossan is Scotland's largest and busiest ferry terminal and is well placed to play a key role in delivering wider benefits to communities and businesses across Ayrshire. The prize is a port that will serve and promote a range of opportunities—cruising, leisure, marine tourism, waterfront

residential—as well as improving lifeline services to the Isle of Arran, which I believe will continue to be served by the port of Ardrossan.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned the exciting project for the establishment of a spaceport at Prestwick airport. Estimates from the Spaceport UK report of 2014 show that a spaceport has the potential cumulatively to realise a baseline of £320 million of additional economic activity.

The vision is also for Ayrshire to be recognised as a centre of excellence for digital skills. This can be done by developing—indeed transforming—the use of digital technology in schools, weaving technology through the teaching and learning process. Ayrshire's Connected Classroom initiative is a recognition that digital is a key enabler of science, technology, engineering and mathematics—the so-called STEM subjects—and aims to ensure that our young people are well prepared for our increasingly digital world. Such a digitally savvy generation will support the exciting potential of Ayrshire's space industry and aerospace innovation district.

**Alan Brown:** The digital connectivity initiative is a fantastic scheme giving every kid in Ayrshire from the age of three to 18 the highest level of digital connectivity. It is a welcome ambition and will help to close the skills and productivity gaps, as those young people move into the workforce, and the aim of a 40% higher entry level into the digital workforce is laudable. Just yesterday, I was reading an EU Commission report saying that the UK has 5,000 such skills vacancies but that this figure is predicted to rise to 161,000. So such an initiative could open up opportunities across the entire UK.

**Patricia Gibson:** Indeed, it could. The importance of upskilling our population cannot be underestimated when we are talking about inclusive economic growth.

North Ayrshire schools have the third-highest rates of positive outcomes for school leavers in Scotland. By continuing to ensure that our transitions from school are robust and continue to develop, Ayrshire is well placed to meet changing economic challenges, and this will enable our communities to become more prosperous, ambitious and vibrant. The UK's medicine industry is one of the leading manufacturing sectors, with exports worth more than £22 billion. The medicines manufacturing innovation centre is a national innovation centre for the life sciences and pharmaceutical industries, and north Ayrshire is shortlisted to host it. Infrastructure funding secured through the Ayrshire growth deal would go a long way to seeing it constructed in Ayrshire's i3 investment park in Irvine before too long. Ayrshire has so much to offer. All Members, including the Minister, are invited to sample some of its delights, both in the gastronomic sense and in the context of business potential.

**Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP):** I am lucky enough to have some fantastic drinks companies in my constituency, including the company that produces Hendrick's gin, and Caledonian Bottlers and Ayr Brewing Company, as well as wonderful food suppliers such as We Hae Meat, Barweys Dairy, Choclati and Roundsquare Roastery, which roasts coffee beans. In fact, there are too many to mention. Does my hon.

Friend agree that the growth deal would give a welcome and much-needed boost to Ayrshire, which would include the food and drink sector?

**Patricia Gibson:** Indeed. One of Ayrshire's real selling points, and one of the reasons why so many tourists go there—apart from the fantastic scenery and the lovely people—is the provision of gastronomic delights, some of which my hon. Friend has just mentioned. However, I would not want the Minister to think that it was just about the alcohol. We have so much more to offer—although the alcohol does go down well too.

The event at which the gastronomic delights that the Minister, and indeed all Members, are invited to sample will take place on 8 February. It will be hosted by all four Ayrshire Members, and what it will show—if, indeed, it needs to be shown to those who have not yet been lucky enough to visit the county—is that Ayrshire is one of the most productive agricultural regions in the United Kingdom, which is well known for its outstanding and award-winning food and drink produce. It is home not just to a range of dairy, beef and seafood suppliers, but to world-renowned farmhouse cheese makers, ice cream producers, bakers, brewers, smokehouses, chocolatiers, and, of course, all the businesses that my hon. Friend mentioned.

**Alan Brown:** And the world Scotch pie championships.

**Patricia Gibson:** Yes, indeed.

Perhaps it is because of the presence of all the businesses that might supply the gastronomic feast that we could put in front of you in Ayrshire, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the town of Dalry, in my constituency, houses a very well-respected Michelin-starred restaurant, which I recommend to you.

Ultimately, the Ayrshire growth deal is about people. It is about removing barriers to employment, upskilling our workforce to address the issue of low pay, and promoting apprenticeships.

**Dr Whitford:** I am sure my hon. Friend agrees that we have an additional strength. The three separate campuses belonging to Ayrshire College work closely with our local employers in the aerospace and food and drink sectors to ensure that the young people training in those sectors—along with other young people from the senior sections of our schools—have access to the same equipment and materials that they would use professionally. It is a great relationship: the college is delivering the skills that local industry needs.

**Patricia Gibson:** Absolutely. That is an excellent point. I think that the other colleges in the United Kingdom should note the links between Ayrshire College and local employers. That delivery to young people of the skills that employers say they need and that are in short supply is second to none. The college has won many accolades—far too many for me to mention to the Minister today—for its work in this sphere, and in several others as well.

**Alan Brown:** Ayrshire College recently opened a £53 million new campus in Kilmarnock. It is a fantastic facility, and it is all about getting people ready to go into the workplace. It has been built on the site of the

[Alan Brown]

former Johnnie Walker bottling plant; that iconic industry has been lost to the town. As part of the growth deal, the HALO project is expected to achieve the final regeneration of the entire site. It is predicted that the project will generate nearly 1,000 jobs, and it is shovel-ready. That is another fantastic aspect of the Ayrshire growth deal: some projects come out of the ground very quickly, and we see real results within a very short time.

**Patricia Gibson:** I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. As the Minister will be well aware, economic growth creates more economic growth: it creates its own dynamic. If we secure this investment, Ayrshire will grow from a flower into a tree. [*Interruption.*] That was very poetic; I may represent some of the parts of the country that Robert Burns was familiar with, but I do not have his skill in that regard.

We want to remove the barriers to employment, to upskill our workforce to address the issue of low pay, to promote apprenticeships, linking them with schools and investing in our schools and local colleges, and to support local companies with the greatest ambitions for growth. We also want to attract new inward investment, to deliver on key infrastructure projects such as the Dalry bypass—which is very close to starting—to improve connectivity, to improve public transport, and to improve digital connectivity by investing in the roll-out of superfast broadband.

I am very pleased that we have secured this debate on the Ayrshire growth deal in the Chamber of the House of Commons. I am delighted that, as far as I have been able to establish, this is the first time Ayrshire has been centre-stage in the House of Commons. I am proud that my colleagues have, with me, set out the ambitious plans for Ayrshire—our bold vision which requires what is, in the scheme of things, quite a modest £359.8 million of investment, which will of course be in partnership with the Scottish Government and local authorities. I am delighted that the UK Government are engaged in this debate and I hope that, with this investment forthcoming, Ayrshire can enjoy inclusive growth and her greatest asset—her people—can reach their true potential.

If I may be permitted to have another bash at the poetry, I will add that, relative to what it is now, as much as it is now, the Ayrshire growth deal could awaken what may be called the economic sleeping giant of Ayrshire. Wonderful as this part of the country is, it could be—and I hope, with the UK Government's help, it will be—so much more.

The Ayrshire growth deal seeks to create a virtuous circle of growth: growth in business leading to growth in employment, and growth in individual household prosperity—and, as a benefit from that, growth in health outcomes. I urge the Minister to support it, and I urge the Chancellor of the Exchequer to offer support to Ayrshire's growth deal when he delivers his deliberations in his spring statement on 8 March. I urge him to work with us—the four Ayrshire MPs—the three Ayrshire local authorities, and the Scottish Government.

This vision is a partnership of the best in the private and public sectors and represents key stakeholders in Ayrshire. It represents the local knowledge of Ayrshire College, the University of the West of Scotland, and the

Ayrshire chamber of commerce, which has been fused with the national expertise of Scottish Enterprise, Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Futures Trust and the Scottish Council for Development and Industry. We are all working together for the good of Ayrshire and her people. I ask that the UK Government in their spring statement join in with and support that work and invest in the county and the people of Ayrshire.

5.17 pm

**The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis):** I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this debate. She spoke so well for her constituency and area that I felt like I was sitting through a 20-minute commercial from the Ayrshire tourist board, if there is such a thing, for the picturesque and beautiful area she has the honour to represent. I certainly found the gastronomic delights very interesting.

I am aware that the hon. Lady raised this matter in Treasury oral questions earlier this week and has recently written to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland on the matter. She has clearly been working hard for her constituents in raising this matter at every possible opportunity, and I congratulate her on that. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has asked me to answer this debate today.

As the hon. Lady and the House will know, the UK Government are committed to ensuring that all parts of the country have the tools to grow their local economies. As such, I am pleased that we now have the city deal that has been referred to, which is either in progress or in pre-negotiation for each and every one of Scotland's seven cities. That is important. It was mentioned earlier, but I want to reiterate it. No other part of the United Kingdom has achieved that. Every one of Scotland's seven cities now either has a city deal in progress or has one in pre-negotiation. That is an indication of the UK Government's commitment to ensuring that all parts of the country have the tools to grow their local economies.

In Scotland, such deals are tripartite, meaning that the arrangements involve the UK Government, the Scottish Government and the local area in which they are active. Since 2014, the UK Government have worked well in partnership with the Scottish Government to agree three ambitious city deals, which cover the Glasgow city region, the Aberdeen city region, and Inverness and the highlands. It is worth noting that local leaders in those three areas believe that, once fully implemented, the deals will unlock significant new investment in Scotland. At the 2016 Budget, the UK Government committed to opening city deal negotiations with Edinburgh and south-east Scotland and those negotiations are now in progress. At the autumn statement, the UK Government similarly committed to opening negotiations with Stirling and Clackmannanshire and the Tay cities. Our priority now is to take forward this significant body of work, in partnership with the Scottish Government and all the relevant local authorities. Following the autumn statement, I am pleased to confirm that the Scottish Government will have more than £800 million of additional capital funding through to 2020-21 to support such proposals.

There is interest in other areas for further deals. It is of course open to the Scottish Government, given their devolved responsibility for economic development and

using the significant resources available to them, to take forward projects to enable growth in places such as Ayrshire—that beautiful area—if they wish to do so. It is important to emphasise that the Scottish Government do have devolved responsibility for economic development. Significant resources are available to them—those resources have been increasing—enabling them to take forward projects, such as the one to which the hon. Lady refers, and to support growth in areas such as Ayrshire.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this debate and on speaking so passionately. The Minister will be aware that my constituency is one of the areas that is currently under discussion. Industrial areas such as mine and Ayrshire were damaged beyond recognition under the previous Conservative Government, so it is absolutely incumbent on him and his colleagues to ensure that those wrongs are righted by deals such as the one proposed for Ayrshire.

**Michael Ellis:** I do not accept that characterisation. It is important to note that employment in North Ayrshire and Arran is up by 1,100 over the past year and by 300 overall since 2010, so things are clearly moving in the right direction.

**Patricia Gibson:** The Minister is correct to talk about the importance of city deals, but is it fair that communities that do not happen to be part of a big city are left to suffer without UK Government support? He was quite right to mention the Scottish Government, which are on board and doing all they can, but I said in my speech—I know he was listening—that UK Government support is essential here. Is Ayrshire to be punished simply because, through an accident of geography, it does not happen to be part of a city?

**Michael Ellis:** The hon. Lady clearly represents a picturesque rural area, but she will no doubt recognise that the United Kingdom Government have provided very significant support to large conurbations, to city areas, by way of the city deals, which we use as an example of the Westminster Government's support for such areas. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the city deals are an example of the Government's support. This option is open to the Scottish Government, who have devolved responsibility for economic development. There is no rationale for disregarding the fact that the Scottish Government, wishing to have that devolved responsibility, do have it and can use the very significant resources available to them.

**Alan Brown:** I had hoped that this would be a consensual debate and that we would talk about working together. We are hoping to achieve another tripartite agreement

involving the UK Government, the Scottish Government and local councils, but that is not the message that we are hearing, which is a bit disappointing. Many of our Ayrshire communities have been devastated by the loss of open-cast coal mining, particularly in my constituency and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). The UK Government did not contribute anything to the restoration of those mines, so I hope that they can work with the Scottish Government to provide money for this growth deal.

**Michael Ellis:** The United Kingdom Government are working with the Scottish Government in myriad different ways, and I could give many examples of positive developments in those areas. For our part, in addition to working to deliver the seven city deals across Scotland, we will look at this proposal in the context of wider UK Government policy, including the industrial strategy and the national productivity investment fund.

**Dr Philippa Whitford:** That leads exactly to my point. In the meeting that I secured between the four of us and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Secretary of State seemed particularly interested in the deal, as a non-city deal. We have three large towns but no city in Ayrshire, and there is therefore potential to learn from projects and ideas that could be shared elsewhere. Ayrshire is way up the left-hand end of the gross value added scale. All the cities that have deals are starting from a better position than Ayrshire. We have pockets of absolute rural and urban deprivation.

**Michael Ellis:** We want to look at all these issues, and I have said that the Ayrshire growth deal is being looked at in the context of UK Government policy, including the industrial strategy and the national productivity investment fund. The Secretary of State for Scotland went to Ayrshire just a few months ago—in June 2016, I think—and my noble Friend Lord Dunlop is due to go. The industrial strategy is due to be published shortly, after which the United Kingdom Government will want to consider carefully how it sits alongside the asks being made by the partners in Ayrshire, and by others, so that we can help to deliver the economic benefits that such proposals represent.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran spoke eloquently about the area she has the honour to represent. We are due to publish the industrial strategy shortly, and as the United Kingdom Government we will be considering carefully how it sits alongside the asks being made by others, including in Ayrshire. Every consideration will be given to this matter so that we can help to deliver the economic benefits that such proposals represent.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.29 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

*Thursday 19 January 2017*

[MRS CHERYL GILLAN *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### NHS Fertility Services

1.30 pm

**Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered decommissioning of in vitro fertilisation and other NHS fertility services.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mrs Gillan.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate; to the right hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), and for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), for their support in securing it; and to the many other Members who are either here today or who have indicated their support for a debate on IVF. Change is urgently needed in this area, and we have broad, cross-party support for such change.

I know that it is not customary, Mrs Gillan, to refer to the Public Gallery during debates such as this one, but perhaps I can just say in passing that I am told that a number of people have travelled here today because of the importance they attach to this issue, and because of their strong feelings that what is going on is not fair and needs to change. It is through listening to their experiences that I have begun to understand the extent to which the present arrangements are not working.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, rather than imposing a postcode lottery on our constituents by withdrawing these services, the areas under financial pressure need to become more efficient and to look at how other areas manage their health systems better to make efficiencies, so that in vitro fertilisation can be provided everywhere?

**Steve McCabe:** I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman about a postcode lottery; there is a massive variation in service, so we must strive to achieve a cost-efficient system that is genuinely national in the way it is delivered. I agree with that absolutely.

This debate is about IVF and related services. At a time of so much concern about the NHS generally, the debate could easily drift towards becoming a series of questions about other aspects of the NHS, but I am clear that we asked for this debate to raise concerns associated with those who need treatment for infertility issues.

Infertility is a problem that does not get a lot of Government or parliamentary attention; in fact, it was not debated at all in the previous Parliament. Yet we know that it is an issue that affects one in six couples in the UK and is the second most common reason for a woman to visit her GP. The problems of infertility are recognised by the World Health Organisation as a condition for which medical treatment should be provided, but that is not how we approach the matter today in England.

I am immensely grateful to my constituent Louise Jackson for bringing this issue to my attention and for giving me permission to share some of her experience with people today. Louise and her partner have been together for more than 13 years and have been trying for a baby for nearly six years. After tests confirmed that they would need IVF treatment, they were refused it because Louise's partner already had a child, as a result of a previous relationship in 1975. That child is actually older than Louise herself, who has said:

"Anyone who is experiencing fertility problems will understand the agonising pain and upset it brings on a daily basis. The fact that we have been refused treatment on the NHS just adds to the anguish. We cannot express enough how hard it is to not be able to have children naturally, never mind being faced with the fact we've been saving for years for the thousands needed for this treatment. I hope one day these laws will be changed for couples like us and others in the near future."

My information is that four clinical commissioning groups in England—Mid Essex, North East Essex, Basildon and Brentwood, and South Norfolk—have already decommissioned their assisted conception services, essentially as a cost-saving measure. Also, more than one in 10 CCGs in England are currently consulting on reducing or entirely decommissioning NHS fertility treatment. That means that more than 60 Members of Parliament represent seats where the provision of IVF services is at risk.

The guidelines produced by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence are fairly clear on the provision of IVF services. NICE recommends that all those women who are eligible for IVF should have access to three full cycles of IVF if the woman is aged under 40, and in 2013 it updated its guidance to recommend further that women aged between 40 and 42, and who meet some additional criteria, should have access to one full cycle.

Fertility Fairness is an umbrella body that has the support of several organisations, including the Royal College of Nursing, the Association of Clinical Embryologists, the British Fertility Society, the National Gamete Donation Trust and the Miscarriage Association. In 2016, it undertook an audit of every CCG in England and found that only 16% of CCGs offer three cycles of IVF, which is the NICE recommendation. That was down from 24% in 2013, while the number of CCGs offering just one cycle of NHS-funded IVF treatment has leapt to 60%. The Minister is on record as saying that she finds the decommissioning of such services "unacceptable", so she will not be surprised if I ask her what she plans to do in response to these figures.

According to NICE, a full cycle of IVF treatment should include one round of ovarian stimulation and the transfer of all resultant fresh and frozen embryos, but only four out of 209 CCGs comply with the NICE definition of a "full cycle". As a result, in many parts of England, these efforts to provide IVF on the cheap are—perversely—wasting resources, because this incomplete offer is rarely successful and compromises the cost-effectiveness of IVF as a treatment. It is a bit like giving less than the recommended dosage of any other drug or treatment.

As I have said, NICE offers guidance on age appropriateness for IVF. However, without being required to offer any kind of explanation, some CCGs have lowered the maximum age for IVF to 35; others have introduced non-medical criteria, such as refusing couples

[Steve McCabe]

treatment if one of them has a child from a previous relationship, as happened in the case of my constituent, Louise Jackson; and apparently even more criteria are applied for same-sex couples, including a requirement to demonstrate that they have already paid privately for six cycles of treatment before they can be considered by the NHS. Those requirements do not look like medical criteria to me; they look like crude, discriminatory rationing, based on pseudo-moralistic prejudices.

In Birmingham, CCGs justify their approach by testing their proposals via public consultation, and in 2014 a consultation covering the criteria for eight CCGs across the west midlands was undertaken. Of the 351 people who responded, 40% were against providing IVF to a couple where one party has a child from a previous relationship; 40% disagreed with that view; and 20% did not know. Nevertheless, those proposals are now the criteria that must be met. I cannot imagine such a crude approach being adopted for determining treatment eligibility for any other medical condition, but that of course is part of the problem.

Too many people think, in defiance of the World Health Organisation, that it is a lifestyle issue and not a medical condition. That is not helped by the fact that the Department of Health merely asks that CCGs “have regard to” the NICE guidelines. This recognised medical condition can have a number of related impacts. If left untreated, it can result in stress, anxiety, depression and the breakdown of relationships. A recent survey of almost 1,000 people with infertility problems conducted by Middlesex University found that 90% of respondents reported feeling depressed and 42% reported feeling suicidal, which was up from 20% when a similar study was conducted in 1997. Some 70% reported a detrimental impact on their relationship, and 15% said that it had led to the break-up of their relationship.

The debate is not about statistics, though; it is about real people and the devastating impact that being denied treatment for infertility problems can have on their lives. On Monday afternoon, I took part in a digital debate with many members of the public, and they helped contribute to our debate today. Hundreds of people shared their experiences. I cannot name them all, but I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their contributions. I want to briefly share just a few examples that illustrate the kind of problems that mean we need to see some significant change in the delivery of this service.

Kelly Da Silva from south Derbyshire said:

“This is such an important issue for me, the anxiety and depression caused as a direct result of infertility and involuntary childlessness has affected every aspect of my life and caused me to leave a successful 12-year teaching career. The emotional and social impacts are absolutely devastating.”

Becky Thomas is from Hertfordshire, and comes under the direction of a Cambridgeshire CCG. She said:

“My local CCG cut the amount of cycles they offer from three down to one and are considering getting rid altogether. I live in one area that actually offers three full cycles however I come under a completely different CCG. It shouldn't be a postcode lottery. It's not a lifestyle choice. It's a medical condition.”

Erin Nina Desirae from Sheffield said:

“I am in a same-sex marriage. My wife and I have been together for six years and have always talked about having children. We assumed that the law in this country would support us and

enable us to try for a family with help from the NHS. Unfortunately, we were surprised and hurt to find that same-sex couples are not offered fertility treatment on the NHS until we have first self-funded at least six cycles ourselves. Whilst a heterosexual couple can receive NHS treatment after two years of trying to conceive. This feels like discrimination. Why should we be treated differently?”

What of the costs? Evidence suggests that many of the decommissioning and service reduction decisions are driven largely by budget considerations. Reports show that the cost to CCGs of commissioning one cycle of IVF can range from £1,300 to £6,000. It varies dramatically across the country. For example, it is much cheaper in Newcastle than it is in Birmingham, without any obvious explanation. What kind of way is that to run a health service and provide a vital treatment? Is it not a classic example of the fragmentation of the NHS that many predicted would follow the Lansley reorganisation?

In England, more than 200 CCGs are responsible for setting their own criteria and commissioning their own IVF services. To make matters worse, research suggests that the high cost of IVF in the private sector is forcing people to travel to such countries as the Czech Republic, where IVF treatment is far cheaper. The problem is that IVF is not anywhere near as well regulated in those countries as it is in the UK. As a direct result of reducing services in the UK, the NHS is being saddled with the high cost of complicated multiple pregnancies and births and other postnatal issues. There is also the additional cost to mental health services, which I touched on earlier. [Interruption.] As you can see, Mrs Gillan, I have successfully transposed a page of my notes. I hope you will bear with me for one second.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair):** Mr McCabe, this sort of thing happens to people all the time. We will bear with you.

**Steve McCabe:** I cannot believe I have done it, but I am extremely grateful for your patience.

As I was saying, the costs of people having to go abroad fall on the NHS, and that leads to further complications that may impact on our mental health services.

In the course of my speech, I have concentrated on the impact on women, but the issue does not solely affect women. It affects couples, same-sex couples and men. I understand that CCGs that are cutting back on IVF generally are also cutting back on ICSI—I am told that it stands for intracytoplasmic sperm injection and is the most common treatment for men with infertility problems—and I worry that men's experiences of infertility are not fully appreciated. They may also suffer hidden trauma and stress as a result of their problems. I am grateful to Richard Clothier from Dunstable who said:

“The emotional strain served to us when our infertility was confirmed was absolutely horrific and debilitating. However, this does not touch the sides when compared with the mental health deterioration we endured from the precise point at which we learned our entitlement has been slashed by two thirds. Luton, in the same county, has three cycles, the rest of us in Bedfordshire get just one cycle.”

What do I hope to get from this debate? I hope that the Minister, by the time she has had a chance to reflect on all the contributions and the terrible experiences of so many people, will have heard enough to be convinced that she should set up an investigation into the provision

of IVF services in England. I hope she will be persuaded to offer much stronger guidance to clinical commissioning groups that in all normal circumstances they should be expected to comply with NICE guidelines and at the very least offer a clear and unambiguous explanation for their reasons when they choose not to follow NICE guidelines. I hope she will be persuaded to look again at the case for setting a national tariff for the provision of IVF. It is simply ludicrous that when NHS resources are so stretched, as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said earlier, the same treatment can vary in price between £1,300 and £6,000. Those who have suffered with this condition feel they have been ignored and mistreated for far too long. They are entitled to expect that we will now act to address the problem.

1.49 pm

**Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con):** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for securing it. I appeared with him in front of the rather intimidating Backbench Business Committee, but thanks to his eloquence and advocacy we now have time to raise this issue in the House. Hon. Members frequently table questions about IVF, but I do not recall when we last had a debate on the subject. It is right that we have the chance to raise the issue, which has frequently crossed my desk since I was lucky enough to be elected to represent the Wantage constituency. Like the hon. Gentleman, I will talk about some of the cases that have come across my desk. They will sound very similar to those that he raised, because couples not being able to have children and not being able to access the treatment that can help them have children has a huge emotional and health impact on them.

As the hon. Gentleman said in his eloquent opening speech, which covered all the issues, it is important to stress that infertility is a disease. Choosing to have children—I hate to put it like this—is not a lifestyle choice; it is a fundamental choice that many people are lucky enough to be able to make. People who are not able to conceive children suffer from a disease, and I think it is therefore incumbent on the national health service to help combat the impact of that disease, as it does for many other diseases. This issue is much more prevalent than people realise: it affects one in seven couples in the UK. I am sure everybody in this House knows people who have been affected directly, and our constituents contact us about it. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, it is the second most common reason why women visit their GP.

We have also heard how more and more clinical commissioning groups are now disinvesting in NHS fertility services. The signals from NICE, the Government and the CCGs themselves clearly show that fertility services are seen as second-class NHS services that do not rank alongside other, more important services. We in this House know from the many debates we have had, and not least from the huge increase in the profile of and focus on mental health services, that treating something as a second-order issue stores up significant problems. We can reverse that attitude through sustained campaigning. As has been pointed out, in 2016 North East Lincolnshire, Somerset, Wiltshire, Herts Valley, Cambridgeshire and

Peterborough, and Bedfordshire CCGs all cut their fertility services and now offer the bare minimum: one funded IVF cycle. Approximately 10% of CCGs are currently considering disinvestment.

The NICE clinical guidance has been around for more than 10 years. It is important to remember that this is not a static issue: the cost of infertility treatment has fallen dramatically and its effectiveness has increased. The second or third cycle tends to be the one that helps a couple to conceive, so I think NICE was visionary and right to say that three full cycles should be offered to women under 40. It is important to remember that CCGs restrict fertility services not only through the front door by making it clear that they will offer only one cycle, but through the back door by restricting the age at which women can access them. In Oxfordshire, for example, the age limit is 35, not 40.

There is also the issue of how a cycle is defined. In Oxfordshire, one fresh cycle is offered to those under 35, and no frozen transfers are allowed. Other definitions of a cycle allow frozen embryos that have been created from the first cycle to be used, so Oxfordshire does not comply with what I understand to be NICE's definition of a cycle.

Going back to fertility services being seen as second-class services, Oxfordshire CCG's response to me when I asked it to comply with the NICE guidelines was, "How are you going to fund it? What other services are we going to have to cut to fund fertility treatment?" It was clearly posited as an either/or, and the undercurrent of the message was, "We are funding the important services. Additional fertility services are a luxury. You are asking us to spend £x million on a luxury."

To defend Oxfordshire CCG, it uses the NICE cost guidelines when it works out what the additional costs would be. It claims that they would be £2.5 million in year 1, four-and-a-bit million pounds in year 2, £5 million in year 3 and just under £5 million in years 4 and 5. What depresses me about that is the fact that it simply took the off-the-shelf guidance from NICE, which gives the game away: it is simply a desktop exercise by a CCG that is not really interested in addressing the issue. It should be possible for it to investigate with a range of different providers how it can potentially reduce the cost. The cost variation in fertility treatment can range from something like £2,000 to up to £8,000 for a cycle, so it is possible to at least engage with providers to investigate how one can provide a cost-effective service.

I also challenged the CCG on how rigorous it is in stopping services that are out of date and past their usefulness. My understanding—I am sure the Minister will confirm this—is that CCGs should be carrying out an ongoing process of reviewing all the services they are currently funding, because there are probably many services that are out of date or falling into misuse but are still being funded.

I pay tribute to Fertility Fairness, which campaigns assiduously on this issue. It made the point that treatment can cost about £2,000 in the north of England, £6,500 in the south and £3,500 across the UK as a whole. One of its asks, which perhaps the Minister can respond to, is this. CCGs can take refuge by charging the highest cost possible, which acts as a barrier to what we want to achieve. If there were a national tariff, more CCGs might be tempted to come to the table and increase what they are doing to support fertility services.

[Mr Edward Vaizey]

The Minister is not only a fellow Oxfordshire MP but an absolutely brilliant Health Minister. I know that to a certain extent I am knocking at an open door, because she has spoken very strongly about this issue in public. She said:

“Fertility problems can have a serious and lasting impact on those affected. It is important that the NHS provide access to fertility services for those who need clinical help to start a family. I am very disappointed to learn that access to IVF treatment on the NHS has been reduced in some places and it is unacceptable that some Clinical Commissioning Groups have stopped commissioning it completely. I would strongly encourage all CCGs to implement the NICE Fertility guidelines in full, as many CCGs have successfully done. The Department of Health, NHS England and professional and stakeholder groups are working together to develop benchmark pricing to ensure CCGs can get best value for their local investment.”

That is very welcome news indeed.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak pointed out that there are knock-on costs to not providing fertility treatment in the UK. We know, for example, that many couples understandably go abroad to fund and access fertility services, but different regulations apply abroad. Often, many more embryos are implanted in treatment abroad, which can lead to multiple pregnancies. Multiple pregnancies can lead to greater complications, so paradoxically that can lead to increased costs for the NHS. We would all much prefer people living in the UK to be able to access more familiar services, instead of having to go abroad and take those risks.

I mentioned that all of us speaking in the debate will have real stories to tell. We are speaking not in a vacuum about some impersonal procedure, but about a disease that affects the lives of our constituents significantly. The reason why I supported the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak in securing the debate, and the reason why I am present, is the letters I receive as a Member of Parliament from my constituents.

One 33-year-old constituent wrote to ask how the situation was fair given that in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, people are entitled to three full cycles of IVF—I understand that the Scottish Government are moving to three full cycles early this year. For four and a half years she and her husband have been trying to conceive. They have been through every test, but all the results have come back as normal, so they have what is called unexplained fertility. They pinned all their hopes on a single funded cycle of IVF, although that was difficult to accept. She points out that infertility is not a choice made by women; they have no control over it. Her first cycle, in August, failed and she went on to a frozen egg cycle, but unfortunately miscarried. Her emotional status is now such that she sees her GP regularly, has been referred to TalkingSpace, an NHS service, and awaits counselling. She was quoted £6,000 for a private cycle—her parents helped with the cost of the treatment—although it transpired that the overall cost was about £8,000. That second cycle failed, too, and the couple will now remortgage their property to fund a third cycle.

Those who think of infertility as a second-order issue should consider that some people will mortgage their financial future to treat the disease, as people might do for other diseases. The idea that infertility is something that one can simply put to one side is absolutely ludicrous. Another constituent wrote about having to go to Barcelona

for treatment, which cost about £12,000. A third constituent, at the age of 36, was again refused IVF treatment, and she is now funding her treatment privately.

Infertility is clearly a disease, and one that affects many couples throughout the UK, and some of the devolved Administrations are moving forward on it. I respect the difficult choices that clinical commissioning groups have to make, but the NICE guidance is crystal clear and fair. The guidance sanctions not unlimited cycles but only three, recognising that the first cycle often fails. The technology continues to advance, prices continue to fall and there is little evidence from my CCG or, I suspect, many others of active engagement on the issue, such as research on the ground in real time into what it might cost to procure fertility services, as opposed to simply using off-the-shelf NICE cost guidance to rebut my constituents' concerns.

The lack of infertility treatment has hidden costs, as the hon. Gentleman said, in mental health and emotional issues and the ongoing costs when people go abroad for treatment that might have an impact back home. A great step forward would be if the Minister were to bring forward a national tariff, or if research were commissioned into some of the ongoing costs of not providing infertility treatment. I encourage the Minister to continue to hold CCGs to account for not complying with NICE guidance.

2.4 pm

**Colleen Fletcher** (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and the right hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) on securing this extremely important and timely debate. As we have heard, difficulty conceiving is a problem that will affect around one in six couples in the UK. I want to highlight the experience of one couple whom I know personally, although many elements of their story will resonate with others who have been affected by fertility problems and experienced difficulties accessing IVF treatment on the NHS.

When that couple made the decision to start a family of their own, there was no doubt in their minds that they would have a child together. Even as the early months of trying yielded no success and as many of the people around them, their friends, family members and colleagues, started to fall pregnant, they remained hopeful and expected that it would simply be a matter of time until they themselves conceived. After more than a year without success, and as the doubts that were absent at the beginning started to emerge, the expected did not happen and a sense of heartache, frustration and anxiety began to replace the hope that had gone before. They visited their GP to ask for help and advice, and so ensued a lengthy process involving tests, hospital referrals, and invasive and non-invasive procedures alike, yet the root cause of the problem remained unexplained.

Just as the couple had all but given up hope of conceiving naturally, they fell pregnant, nearly three years after initially making the decision to start a family together. Here, amid the darkness of their difficult journey towards prospective parenthood, emerged a shining beacon of hope. Yet, as we know, beacons can be so easily and cruelly extinguished, and so it was that

only 10 weeks later they endured a devastating and heartbreaking miscarriage. The almost one and a half years that followed the miscarriage were punctuated by a continued inability to conceive, further visits to their GP, more tests and, ultimately, referral back to the hospital. The couple were eventually told in November of last year, nearly five years after starting their journey, that their last, best hope of conceiving was through IVF treatment.

More devastating news was to follow, however, because the couple were told that, despite having a clear clinical need for treatment, they were ineligible to access IVF on the NHS in their area. The reason: their local CCG uses arbitrary access criteria that are not applied in other areas of the country in order to ration access to treatment for financial reasons. A miscarriage in the previous three years is one of the criteria used to deny funding—in essence penalising our couple for experiencing a tragic event over which they had absolutely no control.

The unfairness of the situation is further exacerbated by the knowledge that were the couple to live in a different part of the country—my own area of Coventry, for example—they would be eligible for at least one fully funded cycle of IVF on the NHS. In other areas, they would be eligible for three fully funded cycles. That inequitable postcode lottery adds insult to injury for a couple who, like many others, are already trying to cope with the distressing effects of infertility. The couple are now faced with a situation in which their only opportunity for treatment comes with an enormous financial outlay. Therefore, treatment is reduced to a simple financial decision: those who can afford it have the treatment they need, and those who cannot do not—hardly a just system.

That couple, like many other couples throughout the country who are experiencing fertility problems, deserve fair and equal access to treatment. They deserve an NHS that fulfils its guiding principle of delivering care and treatment free at the point of delivery and according to need. To achieve that, the Government must act to eliminate the regional variations in IVF treatment provision, including the use of arbitrary access criteria, and ultimately seek to ensure that all CCGs routinely commission fertility treatment in line with NICE guidelines. That would mean eligible couples having access to three full cycles of IVF, which would significantly increase the chance of successful conception. I hope that the Minister will make such a commitment.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair):** As no other Members are seeking to catch my eye, I will now move to the winding-up speeches. I call the Opposition spokesman, Mr Justin Madders.

2.10 pm

**Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey)—they both made excellent contributions—and the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing this extremely important debate. My hon. Friend has been a keen campaigner on this issue, and his expertise and passion were clear when he described the urgent need for change. This is a huge issue that affects many couples up and down the country.

My hon. Friend described the rationing that CCGs are undertaking as crude and based on pseudo-moralistic prejudice. He rightly said that, in other areas of the health service, we would not base decisions on allowing access to treatment on such prejudices. He highlighted well the human aspects of this issue with personal accounts that I do not think any of us could have failed to be moved by, and he rightly highlighted the additional burden on the NHS of having to deal with complications from births resulting from treatments received abroad, where regulatory regimes may be less strict. I do not know whether the Minister is able to examine the cost of that for the health service, but that may be one way to build a financial argument for not rationing treatment. The moral argument has already been put extremely well.

The right hon. Member for Wantage also spoke in a measured and knowledgeable manner. He summed up the issue when he said that signals are being sent that the fertility service is a second-class service. He rightly pointed out that the cost of treatment has come down and its effectiveness has increased. In those circumstances, one would expect availability to improve, but that is clearly not the case. He spoke about the personal experiences of his constituents, one of whom said that infertility is not a choice. That is the perfect riposte to those who argue that IVF treatment is a lifestyle decision.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) spoke about her own friends' experience. She conveyed clearly how their hope evaporated as time went on, and how after five years that hope was finally dashed on the cruel and inhumane ground that they had suffered a miscarriage in the last three years. We know from other debates how hard it is for a couple to lose a child in that way, so it is surely unconscionable that we allow that to be a factor in denying people access to fertility treatment.

Since being appointed to the Front Bench, I have been involved in several debates about issues that traditionally have not received the attention that they deserve, perhaps because they have been seen as too difficult to discuss or seemed taboo. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak said, this issue was not debated at all in the previous Parliament, so we clearly do not talk about it enough, despite the fact, as Members have said, that it is the second most common reason for women to visit their GPs. As we have heard, one in seven, or one in six couples are affected by infertility. Whichever of those figures we want to stick with, that means that millions of people face a serious and lasting impact on their lives. Sadly, that results in stress, anxiety, depression and relationship breakdown. In some cases, infertility is the result of another serious condition, the impact of which couples are already having to deal with. I therefore welcome the opportunity to give a voice to people who often struggle silently with this disease and increasingly face the additional frustration of an unfair and unjustifiable postcode lottery.

Before I talk about the rationing and decommissioning of infertility treatment, I, too, want to talk about the human impact to put into context what we are talking about. Like other Members who have spoken, I have been contacted about this issue by a constituent. Her name is Zoey Evans, and she was denied IVF treatment by NHS West Cheshire clinical commissioning group, despite the fact that her infertility was caused by

[Justin Madders]

gynaecological treatment, part of which was undertaken without her express consent. The reason the CCG gave for her ineligibility is one that we have heard given by other CCGs—that her partner had a child from a previous relationship. The exceptional circumstances of her case and the cause of her infertility do not appear to have been adequately considered. I know from talking to Zoey how devastating the decision to refuse her the opportunity to become a mother has been for her, and the fact that she finds herself in that position only because of previous treatment on the NHS has made it even more difficult to deal with. Every avenue has been explored. I do not mind saying that I know that Zoey would make a great mum, and it is hugely frustrating to know that, if she had lived in a different area, she might have been given that chance.

Zoey's situation, like many of the other personal tales we have heard today, demonstrates the point that has been raised already that infertility, as defined by the World Health Organisation, is a disease with an identified treatment—a treatment that is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. We are in a situation where, in some parts of the country, the NHS is allowed to ignore an individual's healthcare needs as well as the NICE guidelines and effectively add another barrier to treatment by introducing further arbitrary criteria.

In the run-up to this debate, I was contacted by another individual, Richard, who also contacted my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak. As we have heard, Richard lives in Dunstable, and as such, he and his partner were entitled to only one cycle of NHS-funded treatment, which sadly was unsuccessful. He emailed me and described what it is like to deal with infertility. My hon. Friend read one quote, but I picked out another, about the human impact, that I thought was equally powerful. Richard said:

“It is very hard to explain to someone who has not experienced infertility the mental health struggle that you go through. If I had to describe our feelings with one statement, I would liken them to the emotion and turmoil that one goes through when a relative dies, the difference being with infertility, the feelings experienced do not slowly ease over time—they intensify.”

He told me of his anger about the fact that, if he lived just one mile from his current address, he would fall into the Luton CCG area, where he would have been entitled to three cycles of treatment rather than the one he received, which might have helped him to become a parent. That illustrates the perverse and cruel nature of the postcode lottery for treatment, which I will now address.

As we know, the NICE clinical guidance on infertility issued in 2004 is extremely clear. It says that

“all eligible couples should have access to three full cycles of IVF where the woman is aged below 40.”

Further guidance was issued in 2013, which recommended that women aged between 40 and 42 should have access to one full cycle. NICE, which was founded in 1999 to end the postcode lottery in prescribing, made those recommendations after deeming such interventions to be a reasonable cost and a clinically effective use of NHS resources. Incredibly, as we have heard, the charity Fertility Fairness found that, of the 209 clinical commissioning groups in England, just four follow the

NICE guidance in full, despite CCGs having a legal duty to have regard to NICE guidelines when commissioning treatments. Again, the words of the right hon. Member for Wantage about a second-class service ring true.

When the previous public health Minister, the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), was challenged on that in a written question, the response we got was:

“NHS England expects that all those involved in commissioning infertility treatment services to be fully aware of the importance of having regard to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence fertility guidelines.”

The reality is, as we have heard, that there are enough caveats in that statement to render it meaningless. In another response, she went further and said:

“Blanket restrictions on procedures that do not take account of the individual healthcare needs of patients are unacceptable.”

We all agree with that. However, she stopped short of saying what the Government planned to do about the fact that 98% of CCGs are failing to apply the NICE recommendations in full. We know that at least 45% of them do not offer a full cycle and that more than 80% do not meet the recommendations on the number of cycles. If those restrictions are unacceptable—I think there is general agreement on that—we need to know what Ministers will do to change the situation. What is the point of having NICE recommendations if CCGs, facing huge financial pressures, can disregard them without any penalty?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak said, access to treatment is being reduced, and about 10% of CCGs, including my own, West Cheshire, are consulting on that. What can we ask from the Government to stop the further slide away from recommending treatments? Does the Minister accept that something needs to be done? The impression given is that the guidelines can be routinely ignored. Does she accept that the impression can be given of an abrogation of responsibility? Does she accept that that raises real issues about accountability and legitimacy? It is called local decision making, but I do not think people on the receiving end feel that decisions are being made locally in their interests at all.

If the Government do not take a more robust stance when NICE guidance is being ignored by CCGs, they are not only accepting but entrenching the notion of a postcode lottery. We therefore need to look again at whether to strengthen NICE's role in cases where there is clearly stated treatment that is affordable and effective but we see CCGs failing to implement that advice. I hope that the Minister will reflect on what has been said by me and other Members about how we can move that issue forward.

As we know, infertility treatments are far from the only example of NICE-recommended treatments not being commissioned. Postcode lotteries exist for a whole range of medical interventions such as hernia repair, hip and knee replacements, cataracts and varicose vein surgeries. Further rationings of treatments are being proposed by CCGs across the country as they struggle to cope with finances that simply are not keeping up with demand.

I have mentioned my CCG several times already. I do not wish to be over-critical of it because it is in a difficult position: its core funding allocation for the

year is £9 million less than the funding formula says it should be. That gap is projected to close slowly in the next five years, but there will still be millions of pounds of shortfall every year over that period. At a time of increased demand, inevitably, it is being forced into this position, as are many other CCGs. Clearly, financial pressures are driving those decisions not just in my CCG but across the country. That does not chime with the claims we have heard that the health service has been given everything it has asked for.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak and the right hon. Member for Wantage said, the postcode lottery is exacerbated by the huge variance in the amounts that CCGs pay for a single cycle of IVF, from as low as just over £2,000 to possibly three times as much in other parts of the country. In response to a written question on 21 April 2016, the previous public health Minister said that

“the Department and NHS England are considering options for addressing variation in the prices that CCGs are currently paying for in vitro fertilisation treatment.”

A report by an expert group on commissioning NHS infertility provision identified that

“a lack of knowledge and expertise in commissioning fertility services was a barrier to compliance with NICE guidelines”.

How close are we to a national benchmark on price? What support can be put in place to assist CCGs when they are commissioning fertility services?

I bring my remarks to a close by reminding us of the founding principles of the national health service: good healthcare, available to all and free at the point of use. Those founding principles came some 30 years before the first IVF birth, but, whatever the advances in medical science, they should apply to any treatments where a medical case is made for their use, not just to people living in certain parts of the country.

2.25 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) and the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who is not in his place, on securing this important debate. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss NHS fertility services. This has been a moving debate and, on behalf of the Government, I recognise at the outset that infertility is a serious condition, affecting a growing number of people: women and men and same-sex couples. I personally thank all of those who have allowed their stories to be shared today. They remind us powerfully of the distress that infertility causes. The value of their being shared in the debate cannot be overstated.

It is important to remember that those stories are not isolated cases. As hon. Members are well aware, fertility problems are estimated to affect one in seven heterosexual couples and, for couples who have been trying to conceive for more than three years without success, the likelihood of pregnancy occurring in the following year is 25% or less. We should keep those figures in our minds.

As my right hon. Friend said, infertility can and does have a powerful and lasting impact on the quality of life of those affected. Research has shown that there can

often be psychological effects, as powerfully described in the debate, for both men and women suffering from fertility problems. It can cause stress and it puts pressure on relationships, primarily between the couple themselves but also on relationships with family and friends. It is therefore important that the NHS provides access to fertility services for those who need clinical help to start a family.

The availability of NHS fertility treatment is and always has been a matter for local determination. As my right hon. Friend said, these are not easy decisions to make, but we expect them to be made fairly. Decisions on the level of service provision are underpinned by clinical insight and knowledge of local healthcare need. That has been the case since the introduction of the purchaser-provider split in the 1990s, and today that determination is, as we all know, made by CCGs, which are clinician-led and have a statutory responsibility to commission healthcare services that meet the needs of their whole population, reducing inequalities and improving care quality.

While provision of services will, by necessity, vary—for example, the health needs and priorities of the population of Birmingham will not be the same as that of Bournemouth—it is right that those difficult prioritisation decisions are led by clinicians who know their patients and local areas best rather than being made centrally. The Government have made it clear that blanket restrictions on any healthcare treatment—including fertility services—are unacceptable. Where a service is not routinely commissioned, clinicians can still make individual funding requests for their patients when a clinical case can be made and if treatment is likely to provide significant benefit. It is the role of NHS England to ensure that CCGs are not breaching their statutory responsibility to provide services that meet the needs of their local population and to take action if such breaches do take place.

**Steve McCabe:** I recognise what the Minister says about this being an issue for local determination. However, does she agree that it does not make sense to use moralistic criteria to ration the provision of services, which—as in the example I cited in Birmingham—is then put to a public poll that produces an inconclusive result on a very low turnout? Surely that is not the kind of local determination we want. Is that not something that NHS England should act on?

**Nicola Blackwood:** The hon. Gentleman gave a very good opening speech in which he raised some points that I will comment on. The quality of commissioning of fertility services is one of those points, and having regard for guidance already in place to guide local commissioners in commissioning fertility services is a point on which I am about to comment. He has anticipated my speech as only a seasoned politician can.

NICE first introduced its fertility guidelines in 2004. As with all clinical service guidelines, they have never been mandatory. Successive Administrations have supported the principle of locally determined implementation of key recommendations of the guidelines, because decisions about local services should be made as close to patients as possible by those best placed to work with patients and the public in their area to understand their needs. However, it is sadly the case that implementation has

[*Nicola Blackwood*]

been variable over the years, particularly with the provision of three IVF cycles for qualifying couples, as we have heard. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak and the shadow Minister rightly said, the 2016 Fertility Fairness survey showed that just 16% of CCGs provided the recommended three cycles of IVF, with 22% providing two, 60% providing one and 2% providing no IVF funding at all.

I understand that commissioners in some areas are undertaking their own evidence reviews, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak said, to determine whether their CCG should offer IVF. I take this opportunity to say that that is unnecessary. NICE was established for the specific purpose of reviewing the available clinical and scientific evidence of a treatment's effectiveness and, working with a wide range of stakeholders, to make recommendations based on that evidence about services that should be available to all within the NHS. NICE guidelines for fertility services are robust and fit for purpose, and there is no need for them to be second-guessed by commissioners.

The hon. Gentleman also raised NICE guidelines for same-sex couples. NICE guidelines seek to offer heterosexual and same-sex couples the same access to investigation and treatment for fertility problems, the criterion for which is a failure to conceive over a set period of time. NICE sets that criterion to ensure that NHS funding is available for donor sperm for female same-sex couples, or surrogacy arrangements for male same-sex couples, on the basis that they are medically sub-fertile, not that their childlessness is owing to the absence of gametes from the opposite sex—sperm or eggs.

Access to NHS-funded investigations is commissioned in female same-sex couples who fail to conceive after six cycles of artificial insemination within a 12-month period. NICE recognises that same-sex couples could be disadvantaged, because they may have to pay for artificial insemination before they can be considered for NICE assessment and possible treatment. NICE considers six cycles to be equivalent to the 12-month period of unprotected intercourse required of heterosexual couples before they are offered investigation for fertility problems. Same-sex couples are offered access to professional consultation and advice in reproductive medicine before they embark on attempts to conceive, to ensure that they are informed about appropriate and safe self-funding attempts. I can tell the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak that NICE is due to review its fertility guidelines this year, and he may wish to write to NICE's guidelines review team to offer his views on the issue. The Department of Health will certainly be doing so.

On the implementation of NICE guidelines, I commend CCGs, such as Camden, Oldham and others that have been mentioned, that have implemented the NICE fertility guidelines in full and continue to offer three IVF cycles to qualifying couples. That shows it is entirely possible for CCGs to implement NICE's IVF provision recommendations. It was disheartening to learn from the Fertility Fairness survey that access to IVF treatment on the NHS has been reduced in so many places, and it is deeply disappointing that some CCGs have stopped routinely commissioning it. I strongly encourage all CCGs to implement the NICE fertility guidelines in full, as some CCGs are successfully doing.

**Justin Madders:** The Minister has correctly identified that some CCGs are not providing any treatment at all. Does she think that blanket policy should be dealt with?

**Nicola Blackwood:** I am about to go on to work that we are doing to assist CCGs with better commissioning, including giving them advice on pricing, which the shadow Minister mentioned. Perhaps he will allow me to do that; I think it will be enlightening for him.

Work is under way to assist CCGs in better commissioning fertility services for their local community. It is right that we do that. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage was correct—the cost of IVF is falling, but not all CCGs are benefiting from that. We know that the prices that fertility clinics charge CCGs for an IVF cycle vary, and that some CCGs are not contracting in the most effective way.

The Fertility Fairness survey reported that the price being charged by service providers for an IVF cycle varied across the country, from around £2,000 at the bottom end to more than £6,000 at the top, although it is not clear what all of those treatment cycles involve. The Department of Health, NHS England and professional and stakeholder groups are working together to develop benchmark pricing for fertility services to ensure that CCGs get the best value for their money. That is obviously the first step to be taken before NHS England's longer term work towards developing a national tariff, which my right hon. Friend called for.

In addition to that initiative, the national fertility regulator—the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority—is developing commissioning guidance that aims to improve the quality of commissioning, for example by encouraging greater use of single embryo transfers where appropriate for a patient. That does not reduce the chance of a woman having a baby but significantly reduces the incidence of multiple births, with their attendant risks and complications for mothers and their babies. NHS England has agreed to disseminate and promote that guidance to all CCGs in England.

Those approaches are intended to raise the level of knowledge and expertise within CCGs to ensure that they are able to commission services appropriately in what is a specialist area, exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous)—who is no longer in his seat—called for. It would also be helpful for CCGs to pool their resources and expertise and collaborate more with each other to get a better deal for their patients. That has happened in the north of England, where members of two commissioning collaboratives are able to offer three IVF cycles to qualifying couples.

As I hope has been clear, it is the Government's view that infertility is a serious medical condition. Those suffering from infertility who meet the criteria in the NICE fertility guidelines for NHS-funded treatment should be able to seek that treatment. We do not agree that clinical infertility should not be part of a comprehensive national health service. Reflecting on the strength of feeling expressed today, I will be writing to NHS England to ask that it communicates clearly to CCGs the expectation that NICE fertility guidelines should be followed by all.

The Department of Health, NHS England and professional and stakeholder groups will redouble efforts to develop the benchmark pricing for fertility services,

which, as I have said, is a precursor to NHS England introducing a national tariff. NICE will continue with its review of fertility guidelines this year. I hope that series of actions demonstrates just how seriously the Government take this situation, and leaves all those watching the debate confident of our commitment to finding practical solutions to this serious problem.

2.37 pm

**Steve McCabe:** I thank the various Members who have taken part in this debate: the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who has now left. It is never easy on a Thursday afternoon, but I really felt we had to have some focus on this issue in this place today.

I am extremely grateful to the Minister for the tone she adopted in her response. One reason why I asked her to instigate an investigation into what is happening is that I understand, from a parliamentary question I submitted, that the Government do not, as a matter of routine, centrally collect information on the provision of infertility services. While I acknowledge her point about provision being locally determined, the extent of the disparity has been a revelation to me. It is difficult to believe we are talking about a national health service when we see that level of disparity. I gently say to her that there would still be some merit in a further investigation into the extent of the variation in England at present.

I am extremely pleased to hear that the Minister plans to write to NHS England. I interpret that as meaning she will put pressure on NHS England to put pressure on the CCGs that are not complying with the NICE guidelines. I will certainly take the opportunity to write to NICE about the experience of same-sex couples, as she suggested, although the key here is obviously that the NICE guidelines have to be followed. That is the central problem.

I was extremely pleased to hear that the Minister is taking steps on benchmark pricing, which may well lead to the construction of a national tariff. All I will say on that is: the sooner, the better. If she were able at some stage to offer us a realistic timescale for that, it would be some comfort to the very many people who have contacted all of us to explain the pain and anguish they have suffered as a result of this condition. I am grateful to Members for their contributions and to the Minister for a thoughtful response.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair):** This has been a very valuable and important debate.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered decommissioning of in vitro fertilisation and other NHS fertility services.

2.41 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

*Thursday 19 January 2017*

## BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

### Overseas-owned Plutonium

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman):** The Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has agreed to the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA):-

Taking ownership of 600 kg of material previously owned by a Spanish utility.

Taking ownership of 5 kg of material previously owned by a German organisation.

These transactions, which have been agreed by the Euratom supply agency, will not result in any new plutonium being brought into the UK, and will not therefore increase the overall amount of plutonium in the UK.

The Department has agreed to these transactions on the grounds that they offer a cost-effective and beneficial arrangement, which allows the UK to gain national control over more of the civil plutonium located in the UK, and facilitates conclusion of outstanding contracts with the Spanish and German counterparties. The revenue from the transaction is also expected to be of significant benefit to the UK and sufficient to cover the cost of the long term management of the additional plutonium.

The UK has committed to publish annual figures for national holdings of civil plutonium at the end of each calendar year to improve transparency and public confidence. The most recently published data for 2015 can be found at the following link, published on the 14 November 2016:

<http://www.onr.org.uk/safeguards/iaeaauk.htm>

This data will be updated in due course to reflect the changes described above.

[HCWS422]

## WALES

### Wales Bill: English Votes for English Laws

**The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns):** I am pleased to announce the publication of analysis of English votes for English laws in relation to Government amendments to the Wales Bill during its passage through the House of Lords.

The English votes for English laws process applies to public Bills in the House of Commons. To support the process, the Government have agreed that they will provide information to assist the Speaker in considering whether to certify that Bill or any of its provisions for the purposes of English votes for English laws. Bill provisions that relate exclusively to England or to England and Wales, and which have a subject matter within the legislative competence of one or more of the devolved legislatures, can be certified.

The memorandum provides an assessment of tabled Government amendments to the Wales Bill, for the purposes of English votes for English laws, ahead of Commons consideration of Lords amendments (CCLA). The Department's assessment is the amendments do not change the territorial application of the Bill.

This analysis reflects the position should all the Government amendments be accepted.

The memorandum can be found on the Bill documents page of the Parliament website at: <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2016-17/wales.html> and I have deposited a copy in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS423]



# Ministerial Correction

*Thursday 19 January 2017*

## COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### **Dorset Combined Authority**

*The following is an extract from topical questions to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government on 16 January 2017.*

**Mr Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): Last summer, the nine Dorset councils submitted a proposal to my right hon. Friend to establish a combined authority.

Will he ensure that the order establishing that authority is brought forward in sufficient time to enable the authorities to be set up on 1 April this year?

**Sajid Javid:** We have only just received the proposal to which my hon. Friend refers. We want to make sure that we take the right amount of time to consider it carefully. Whatever the result, we will make sure that enough time is allowed for this House to do its business. [*Official Report, 16 January 2017, Vol. 619, c. 683.*]

*Letter of correction from Sajid Javid:*

An error has been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope).

The correct response should have been:

**Sajid Javid:** We have received the proposal to which my hon. Friend refers. We want to make sure that we take the right amount of time to consider it carefully. Whatever the result, we will make sure that enough time is allowed for this House to do its business.



# ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 19 January 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>CHURCH COMMISSIONERS</b> .....	1060	<b>ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS</b> —	
Human Trafficking/Vulnerable Women.....	1062	<i>continued</i>	
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# WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 19 January 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL</b>		<b>WALES</b> .....	36WS
<b>STRATEGY</b> .....	35WS	Wales Bill: English Votes for English Laws.....	36WS
Overseas-owned Plutonium.....	35WS		

# MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Thursday 19 January 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT</b> ..	5MC
Dorset Combined Authority .....	5MC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than  
Thursday 26 January 2017**

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