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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 2 March 2017

House of Commons

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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—

Microbeads

1. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What steps she is taking to deal with the effects of microbeads in products not included within the scope of her Department's proposed ban. [908998]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): We ran a consultation between 20 December and 28 February on proposals to ban microbeads in cosmetics and personal care products. The consultation also sought evidence on the extent of the environmental impact of microplastics found in other products. We are now reviewing the responses to the consultation and any new evidence will be used to inform future UK actions to protect the marine environment.

Mr Hollobone: May I welcome the proposed ban as far as it goes? However, it appears that several products such as make-up and sun cream will be excluded. I therefore urge the Minister to adopt the Greenpeace definition of microbeads, which is, "all solid water-insoluble microplastic ingredients of 5mm or less in any dimension used for any purpose."

Dr Coffey: I am sure that my hon. Friend will welcome the fact that many manufacturers are proactively removing microbeads from their products. We will consider the responses to the consultation carefully and use them to inform any future policy.

9. [909007] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I urge the Government to go further than the United States and ban all products containing microbeads that risk getting into the marine environment. Will the Government reject the idea that biodegradable microbeads could be used instead, because there is no evidence that there is such a thing? Will they also commission some research into whether microbeads in human tissue have a long-term health effect?

Dr Coffey: The US ban has not yet come into force, but we will continue to monitor its progress and consider any learning from that approach. Our proposals so far are supported by evidence, which shows that rinse-off products can damage some marine environments. We have extended the consultation and issued a call for evidence on other matters.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Government's progress on banning microbeads is welcome, but other forms of plastic are polluting our seas, including the 15 million plastic bottles that are thrown away every day. The Cornish-based charity, Surfers Against Sewage, has obtained 209,000 signatures to a petition that calls for a plastic bottle deposit-return scheme. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can advance that petition and make progress?

Dr Coffey: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter. As I informed the House at the previous Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Question Time, we are looking at the issue in the context of the litter strategy. Let me take the opportunity to publicise this weekend's Great British Spring Clean campaign, in which I am sure many hon. Members will be involved. I also want to advertise BBC Suffolk's "don't be a tosser" campaign. Frankly, we do not want people who toss litter about to flood our beaches with the plastic bottles that my hon. Friend mentions.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): A microbeads ban would be welcome, as would extending it to more products. However, as has been said, larger plastics that break down and become microplastics in the marine environment are the biggest problem. A deposit-return scheme would make a big difference. What is the Minister doing with the circular economy to try to get manufacturers to design out such products so that we do not have the problem of what to do with them in the first place?

Dr Coffey: The advance of plastic packaging reflected consumer desire for on-the-go, safe products that individuals can carry. I welcome instances of manufacturers introducing their own recycling schemes. When we were children, we perhaps got pocket money on some of the deposit-return schemes, but we now have kerbside recycling, which has successfully increased the amount of recycled plastics.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): The Minister has shown real leadership on the issue and I applaud the Government's efforts so far. However, for us to make a genuine difference we need other countries to get on board. Will my hon. Friend say more about what she is doing to ensure that we work collaboratively across borders to tackle the problem?

Mr Speaker: But not too much more.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right. I understand that the recent explosion of nurdles in the world's oceans is due to the fact that several containers fell off a ship and the contents were dispersed. We are all stewards of the ocean and we therefore want to work with other countries and support efforts to ensure that our oceans are as clean as they can be.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Having visited the nurdle hotspot at Kinneil, we clearly need to know much more to quantify their impact and presence in our seas in order to eliminate them. To date, the European Union has co-ordinated and funded much of the research by scientists in the UK under the marine strategy framework directive. Can the Minister give any certainty that those scientists will still have funding or opportunities for collaboration with European scientists after the UK leaves the EU?

Dr Coffey: The United Kingdom is a leading player in OSPAR. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we protect more than half the seas of this region. I am confident that we, and our scientists, will continue to work with many other countries to tackle this global issue.

Leaving the EU: Fisheries

2. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What discussions she has had with representatives of the fishing industry on the priority to be given to that industry in the UK's negotiations on leaving the EU. [908999]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): First, may I welcome the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) to her place? It is very good to see her on the Opposition Front Bench and I look forward to working with her.

Mr Speaker, may I convey the sincere apologies of my farming Minister, whose plane has been delayed? He sends his very sincere apologies and we will write to you shortly.

Since the referendum, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers and officials have regularly met representatives from across the fishing industry. Fisheries will be a key area in negotiations. As a coastal state outside the EU, the UK will be responsible under international law for controlling UK waters and for the sustainable management of the fisheries within them.

Mr Carmichael: I have an instinctive sympathy for anybody who is delayed by planes. It is a big part of my life.

The Secretary of State will be aware that before we had the common fisheries policy we had the London convention of 1964, which governed the access of foreign vessels to the six to 12-mile-limit waters. Is it the Government's intention to remain a party to that convention after we leave the European Union?

Andrea Leadsom: What I can say to the right hon. Gentleman is that I am very aware of the issues around the London convention. We are looking at it very closely and will be able to comment on it in the near future.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): There is no doubt that when we went into the EU back in the 1970s fishermen had a very poor deal on the amount of fish they could catch and on quotas. Is there not now a real opportunity to ensure we have better access to our waters and to larger quantities of fish, so that the industry can progress much further?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right that leaving the EU presents enormous opportunities for UK fishers. We will seek to get the best possible deal in our negotiations.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows that our fish processing industry is more important to our economy than the catching sector, and that it is very dependent on imports. We export more than 80% of what we catch, so is not maintaining tariff-free and other barrier-free access to the single European market more important than sterile arguments about fishing rights that could result in battles or worse?

Andrea Leadsom: I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman. Our fishing communities around the UK provide a vital vibrancy to local communities and the rural economy, so I do not agree with the suggestion that processing is somehow far more important. We will seek the freest possible access to European markets, but when I was in China last year I signed a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese worth £50 million, which included UK seafood. It will be very important for us to be able to find new export markets.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Last Friday, I spoke at a seafood processing and fishing industry seminar in the Grimsby-Cleethorpes area. The industry recognises the opportunities of Brexit, but understandably it has some concerns. I welcome the Secretary of State's reassurances to date, but can she give an absolute reassurance to the seafood processing sector that it will form a key part of the negotiations?

Andrea Leadsom: I had a very happy fish and chip lunch in Cleethorpes with my hon. Friend and I look forward to further such opportunities. He is right to point out that seafood processing is an absolutely vital part of our fishing sector. We are very much taking it into account in our negotiations on leaving the EU and in looking at opportunities around the world.

Mr Speaker: It is always a joy to learn about the culinary habits of the Secretary of State. We are most grateful for being provided with a little extra information.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): Despite the fact that we are eight months on from the referendum, at a recent meeting with Scottish Ministers the Secretary of State was unable to provide any information on what powers over the rural economy will flow to Scotland after Brexit. Has Ruth Davidson, the Scottish Conservative leader, let the cat out of the bag today in *The Times*? It looks like there will not only be a power grab, but a cash grab. When will the Secretary of State come clean and own up to what the Government plan to do with Scottish fishing and Scottish farming?

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Gentleman will recognise that the UK market is incredibly valuable to all our fishing communities. It will continue to be very important. The Prime Minister has been very clear that no powers that are currently devolved will be, as he says, grabbed. They will continue to be devolved. What we are looking very carefully at is the best possible deal for all parts of the United Kingdom as we seek to negotiate Brexit.

Domestic Food Market

3. **Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): What recent assessment the Government has made of the effectiveness of its support to British farmers in increasing their share of the domestic food market. [909000]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Mr Speaker, I apologise for being a little late. I was at the Gulfood exhibition in the Gulf and my plane was sadly stranded because of fog.

The Government want the UK to grow and sell more British food and drink. Through the introduction of a new plan for Government procurement, we have sought to enable Departments to source more local food, and recent successes include the Ministry of Justice implementing the plan in prisons. Last year, exports of food and drink increased by 9% to £20 billion.

Jeremy Quin: West Sussex is home to our finest food and drink, including the superb Sussex Charmer, produced by our exceptional Rudgwick cheesemakers. What further opportunities does the Minister foresee to promote high-quality, well-branded food of local provenance?

Mr Speaker: Very exciting!

George Eustice: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The quality heritage of our local food, such as Sussex Charmer and all the great wines produced in the South Downs, is second to none. That is why we have set up the great British food unit—to promote our food at home and abroad. It is also why I have just returned—late, sadly—from Gulfood, the world's largest annual trade fair.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I remind the Minister that we do not want food at any price. As we have heard this morning, another seven species are in danger in our country because of intensive farming. When will we have good, productive, sustainable farming and start importing less?

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. As we design domestic agriculture policy after leaving the EU, we will be looking to ensure we have sustainable farming, so that we get the benefits of farming sustainably, while improving productivity.

8. [909006] **Mr Andrew Turner** (Isle of Wight) (Con): Will the Minister join me in celebrating the success of Wight Marque on the Isle of Wight? There are now more than 450 food and drink products on the Isle of Wight, and Wight Marque is being used to promote the island as a speciality food destination.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. Wight Marque celebrates the Isle of Wight's brilliant range of food, from locally produced milk to a vast array of fruit and veg. It is a great example of how a little public money and the support of partners can really celebrate the provenance of our local food.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Farmers are facing a critical shortage of seasonal labour, and some are afraid that our food will rot in the ground this year. The Government have been asked to reverse their decision to scrap the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, and Ministers say that they are reviewing the issue, but can a decision please be made as a matter of urgency?

George Eustice: While we remain members of the EU, we still have free movement, and fruit farms and farmers can still source their labour from countries such as Romania and Bulgaria. We are aware that some have

raised concerns about agricultural labour after we leave the EU, and we are listening carefully to their representations.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share the view expressed by the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation that leaving the EU can both help farmers increase their share of domestic products and improve animal welfare by preventing the import of goods produced under circumstances not permitted in the UK?

George Eustice: As my hon. Friend is aware, the Government have a manifesto commitment to place a stronger recognition of animal welfare issues in the design of future agriculture policy and to promote higher standards of animal welfare in international trade deals. We intend to implement those manifesto commitments.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Yesterday during a session of the Scottish Affairs Committee, we heard evidence from Gary Mitchell of National Farmers Union Scotland, and two things were made very clear: access to migrant labour for seasonal work is essential for our agriculture sector and the Government are yet to respond to the representations made by NFU Scotland over these concerns. Will the Minister commit to looking into this and providing an urgent clarification to the agriculture industry on where they stand on migrant labour?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady can now breathe.

George Eustice: I have regular meetings with NFU Scotland. Earlier this year, we had a meeting and engaged on a wide range of issues pertinent to future agriculture policy in Scotland, including labour.

Seasonal Agricultural Workers

4. **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the employment of seasonal agricultural workers.
[909002]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): There is a lot of interest in seasonal agricultural labour at the moment. DEFRA Ministers engage regularly with ministerial colleagues at the Home Office and other Departments to discuss the issue of migrant labour in the agriculture sector after we leave the EU. We are aware that the availability of labour is a concern for some sectors of the industry. However, leaving the EU and establishing controlled migration does not mean closing off all immigration; it simply means that we will be able to identify where we have needs and put in place suitable arrangements.

Helen Whately: Growers in my constituency are worried about fruit going unpicked not only after we leave the EU, but this year. Can my hon. Friend assure me that he will continue to press the Home Office on this issue, and not only on seasonal agricultural workers after we leave the EU, but between now and then?

George Eustice: As my hon. Friend may know, I spent 10 years working in the soft fruit industry; indeed, I will know many of the strawberry farmers she represents. I am also aware that the Secretary of State has taken up a kind offer from my hon. Friend to visit and meet some of the farmers there to discuss their concerns. As somebody who ran a soft fruit enterprise employing several hundred people, I can tell my hon. Friend that I do understand the challenges the industry faces.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): But there is an immediate problem in that many of the fruit farmers in my constituency have already entered into contracts for migrant labour for this coming fruit-picking season. They have been concerned about some reports last week that the Government are considering restricting free movement or introducing work permits when article 50 is triggered. Can the Minister confirm whether that is happening, or give them an assurance that it will not happen and they can fulfil the contracts they have already entered into?

George Eustice: The point that we have been making to the industry when we have met it is that while we remain members of the EU—that is, until we leave, not until we trigger article 50—free movement remains. The feedback I am getting is that most farmers are able to source the labour they need from countries such as Bulgaria and Romania. We will give the industry plenty of notice of what arrangements we intend to put in place after we leave the EU.

Leaving the EU: Farming

5. **Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con):** What plans her Department has to strengthen the British farming sector after the UK leaves the EU; and if she will make a statement. [909003]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): At the recent National Farmers Union conference, I set out five principles that will support a prosperous future farming industry: trade, productivity, sustainability, trust and resilience. We are now in the process of a broad consultation ranging right across farmers, food producers and non-governmental organisations to hear their views as we build a policy that will achieve our twin ambitions of having a thriving farming sector and an environment that is in a better state than we found it in.

Michael Fabricant: Like my right hon. Friend, I meet farmers regularly—mainly through Staffordshire and Lichfield NFU—and they are actually very positive about Brexit and see the opportunities. But I know we export about £20 billion-worth a year overseas and into Europe, so what efforts is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that we continue to have access after Brexit?

Andrea Leadsom: We are working very hard right across Government to make sure that we get the best possible deal on market access for our agri-food sector when we leave the EU. There are huge global opportunities for Staffordshire farmers and food producers, and later today I will visit Harper Adams University in neighbouring Shropshire and the chamber of agriculture to hear from the next generation, as well as current farmers, about how we can seize those opportunities.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Our constitutional arrangements today are very different from those in 1972. What assurances can the Secretary of State give that after our exit from the EU the agriculture rules that are currently set in Brussels will not be exclusively set by the UK Government, but will instead be set by the devolved Administrations with the closest knowledge of the local farming industries?

Andrea Leadsom: In the great repeal Bill we will be bringing all the *acquis communautaire* into UK law. We in the United Kingdom will then be in a position to look at what works best for the UK. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I am working very closely with our colleagues in the devolved Administrations to make sure that we get the best possible deal that works for all parts of the United Kingdom, and I will continue to do so.

10. [909008] **Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con):** Does the Secretary of State share my view that the need to accommodate the views of 28 different countries has led to the common agricultural policy becoming overtly bureaucratic in a way that has harmed the interests of British farmers?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The complexity and bureaucracy associated with the CAP cost the industry £5 million a year and 300,000 man hours, so reducing burdens will help our farmers to grow more, sell more and export more of our great British food.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The strength of the farming sector will depend on whether it has an adequate supply of labour. Earlier the Minister of State suggested that there was not yet a problem here, but we know that workers from the European Union are already reluctant to come to the UK to work, so when is the Secretary of State going to make it clear that we are going to have a seasonal agricultural workers scheme? What is the timeline?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is not correct when she says that people are reluctant to come here. In fact, the Office for National Statistics figures for last year show that there were more migrant workers coming from the EU than ever before, so that is just not true. As my hon. Friend the Minister of State has pointed out, free movement will continue until the point at which we leave the EU. We are working closely with the Home Office to assess, understand and put in place good systems to ensure that we continue to thrive in this important sector.

14. [909013] **Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con):** Recent EU regulations such as the three crop rule have tied farmers up in red tape but not delivered for the environment. As crop rotation has been around in Lincolnshire for rather longer than the EU, does my right hon. Friend agree that the first thing we do when we leave the EU should be to get rid of burdensome regulation on farmers?

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with my hon. Friend. The three crop rule is exactly the sort of measure we should change once we have left the EU. Of course, we want farmers to manage sustainable rotations, to optimise

yields and to protect soil, but we can do that without forcing them to grow a specific number of crops on a specific acreage of land.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): The National Farmers Union warned last week that the Government's lack of clarity risked stifling the farming industry. This week, it was reported that the price of agricultural land fell by 7% in the past year due to the uncertainty of Brexit. The absence of any Government planning is plunging farming into a grave state. When will the Government give clarity and a long-term commitment to the farming industry on access to the single market, access to a seasonal workforce and a new long-term agricultural policy?

Andrea Leadsom: The Prime Minister has made it clear that our ambition is to have an all-encompassing free trade agreement with the European Union and to retain free and fair access to the European single market. As we have already discussed, we are looking closely at the need for a workforce now and in the future, and we are looking carefully at what more we can do around the world to make a huge success of leaving the European Union.

Trees and Woodland: Carbon Target

6. **Dame Caroline Spelman** (Meriden) (Con): What the contribution of trees and woodland creation is to meeting the Government's carbon target. [909004]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): We recognise the important role that forestry plays in the United Kingdom as a carbon sink. In 2015, forestry contributed an annual emissions reduction of 17.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide to our carbon reduction targets.

Dame Caroline Spelman: During last week's Storm Doris, many trees were felled by the force of nature, and we could see that many of them were diseased. What is the Department doing to ensure that threats to tree health are factored into the carbon reduction strategy?

Dr Coffey: The Government take tree health extremely seriously. That is why we promote biosecurity internationally, at UK borders and inland to ensure that pest and disease risks are effectively managed, so that we can continue to actively manage our woodlands and forests and contribute to the carbon reduction targets.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): As well as helping to meet the Government's carbon target, the planting of trees has a wide range of environmental benefits. Does the Minister think that the Department's plans are ambitious enough to reap the benefits that trees and woodland undoubtedly bring?

Dr Coffey: I do think that they are sufficiently ambitious. We are absolutely confident that we will hit our target of planting 11 million new trees during the lifetime of this Parliament. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will speak to his former right hon. Friend the Mayor of London to ensure that he plants the 2 million trees that he pledged to plant, before he was elected.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The Minister will be aware of the outbreak of sweet chestnut blight near Exeter. I welcome the first national survey of historical woodland, but what more can be done in the short term to prevent the importation of the devastating diseases that are spread by the international plant trade while doing nothing to discourage tree planting and woodland creation?

Dr Coffey: Biosecurity is one of the key elements for the agencies at our borders, and they are proactive in trying to identify risks and threats coming into this sector. That is why we will always encourage people to buy trees grown in this country.

Leaving the EU: Food Prices

7. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the potential effect on food prices of the UK leaving the EU. [909005]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The main drivers of changes in food prices are energy costs and exchange rates, and those forces affect all countries, whether or not they are members of the EU. In 2008, there was a steep spike in food prices, which continued to rise until 2014. Since 2014, food prices have fallen by 6%. Despite the depreciation of sterling last summer, retail food prices have remained relatively stable, with an overall fall during 2016 of 0.5%.

Alex Cunningham: Large numbers of people in my constituency are in work, but they are still in poverty. They are feeling the effects of increases in food prices over recent months. Given that they are so dependent on cheaper EU food products, what will the Minister do to protect them in the longer term?

George Eustice: As I said, the facts do not bear out what the hon. Gentleman says. Food prices have fallen by 0.5% over the past year and by 6% since 2014. We monitor the situation closely. The annual living costs and food survey closely measures the poorest households in particular and how much they spend on food, and the situation has remained remarkably stable over the past decade.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The paradox is that we starve the poor by refusing to buy food from them. Will the Minister bear that in mind when we escape from the common external tariff?

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. We have some preferential trade agreements in place with some developing countries, particularly to buy sugar from the Caribbean. We want to maintain and secure such arrangements so that we can support developing countries.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The Minister talks about food prices falling, but supermarkets are warning of the potential for food prices to rise significantly this year, which will have a huge effect on every household in the country. Nearly half our food is imported and prices are already starting to rise for the first time in three years owing to the weak pound and inflation. What exactly are the Government doing to help with rising prices in people's weekly food shop?

George Eustice: As I said earlier, we closely monitor the amount of money that people spend on food, which has remained remarkably stable at around 16.5% for the past decade. We continue to keep the issue under review. I simply point out to Labour Members that the greatest spike in food prices took place in 2008 on Labour's watch. Food prices have been falling since 2014.

Sue Hayman: The Minister talks about monitoring, but it was recently revealed that research to inform agricultural and environmental policy once the UK leaves the European Union has not even been commissioned by the Department. The Minister's warm words are all very well, but the agricultural sector desperately needs long-term clarity and the Government are failing to deliver it. Will the Minister tell us how the Government can have any real understanding of the current situation without adequate research being in place?

George Eustice: I simply say to the hon. Lady that the Department is doing a vast amount of analysis and research to inform future policy. We received a specific parliamentary question about whether we have commissioned direct scientific research on the effects of leaving the European Union, and she is right that we have not, but we do not need to. All our environmental policies are regularly evaluated for their strengths and weaknesses.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are behind time. May I gently hint to colleagues that there are opportunities for others lower down the Order Paper to come in on Mr Carswell's question if they wish?

Leaving the EU: Fisheries

11. **Mr Douglas Carswell** (Clacton) (UKIP): What her policy is on the self-regulation of the UK fishing industry after the UK leaves the EU. [909010]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): There is already a degree of self-management of the fishing regime by producer organisations in the fishing industry through our system of trading quotas and markets in both the leasing and exchanging of quotas among producer organisations. However, leaving the EU does create the opportunity to consider how we manage our fisheries and to look at the approach taken by other countries.

Mr Carswell: Leaving the EU is a wonderful opportunity to rethink public policy. What are the Minister's thoughts on ensuring better terms for UK fishermen and better access to our exclusive economic zone?

George Eustice: As the hon. Gentleman will know, I have consistently made it clear that leaving the EU means that we will take back control of our exclusive economic zone—the area out to 200 nautical miles or the median line—and that will allow us to look afresh at mutual access agreements and shares of the total allowable catch in shared waters.

13. [909012] **David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): As the Minister will know, current EU regulations prevent farmers from trimming hedges in August. Does he agree

that Brexit therefore offers a great opportunity for trimming the regulations and rules that prevent hedge cutting at that time?

Mr Speaker: I was hoping that there would be some linkage between hedge cutting and fishing previously unknown not only to the Chair but to humankind, but we will have to leave that for another occasion.

George Eustice: They have in common the fact that they are policies that originate in the EU. Leaving the EU obviously gives us an opportunity to review some of those things, but we already have a derogation so that farmers who grow winter crops are able to trim their hedges a little earlier. Certain species are very vulnerable—particularly the yellowhammer, which breeds late—and we want to protect them.

16. [909015] **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): Scottish farmed salmon has experienced a significant increase in exports to Canada. However, why did this Government not propose any Scottish geographical indicators in the comprehensive economic and trade agreement, despite indicating that not doing so would put the Scottish food industry at a commercial disadvantage?

George Eustice: I reassure Scottish National party Members that I regularly promote Scottish salmon, most recently in the Gulf this week. Scottish salmon is one of our major exports, alongside Scottish whisky, and we champion it at every opportunity.

15. [909014] **George Kerevan** (East Lothian) (SNP): The chief executive of National Farmers Union Scotland, Scott Walker, has come up with a worthwhile idea on framing a post-Brexit support regime for agriculture and fishing. His suggestion is that the devolved Administrations should be allowed to choose from a menu of policies that are best applicable in their jurisdiction. Will the Minister look at that proposal?

George Eustice: I specifically discussed proposals along those lines with NFU Scotland at the beginning of this year. A consensus is emerging that there needs to be some kind of UK framework, within which we obviously want to ensure that the devolved Administrations can pursue the policies that are right for them. We will work closely with all the devolved Administrations to ensure that, after we leave the European Union, policy works for Scotland and other parts of the UK.

12. [909011] **Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Not only can this Government not confirm where powers on our rural economy will lie after Brexit, but they cannot say how financial support for farmers will work, either. Why are the interests of Scottish farmers such a low priority for this Government?

George Eustice: I do not accept what the hon. Lady says. The truth is that we have guaranteed payments up until 2020. We have ensured that the budget is still there, and we have made it clear that, well in advance of that date, we will be able to give farmers throughout the UK a very clear picture of what future support arrangements will look like.

Topical Questions

T1. [909017] **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): I will update the House on the delivery of the basic payment scheme. As of today, 95.5% of eligible farmers have received their payment, which is good progress but there is still more to be done. Last week I secured agreement from the Treasury that a 75% bridging payment will be available to any farmer with an outstanding claim at the end of March. The window for 2017 applications opened yesterday.

Dan Jarvis: I thank the Secretary of State for that response. In response to my earlier question, the Under-Secretary mentioned our former colleague, the Mayor of London. Will the Secretary of State pay tribute to his work on tackling poor air quality? Will she say whether it is her policy to retain the existing provisions of the air quality regulations in UK law after the UK leaves the European Union?

Andrea Leadsom: It is absolutely the case that we will keep all regulations when we leave the EU so that regulations look the same the day after we leave as they did the day before. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we are looking very carefully at the whole issue of air quality. We have spent more than £2 billion since 2010 on ultra-low emission vehicles and on trying to reduce the impact of poor air quality. There is more to be done, and we are looking closely at that.

T4. [909020] **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to poultry producers across Norfolk who set the highest animal welfare and biosecurity standards? There has obviously been concern about the recent avian flu outbreak, but can she confirm that no poultry producers in Norfolk will lose their free-range status?

Andrea Leadsom: We are determined to hold this terrible disease at bay for the sake of our entire poultry sector, and our robust actions so far have included an amended avian influenza prevention zone from 28 February, which covers all of England and requires mandatory biosecurity for all keepers and the compulsory housing or netting of poultry and captive birds in defined higher-risk areas. That is very important for the entire sector.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Further to what the Secretary of State just said, she must be aware that English poultry producers are concerned about the prospect of losing free-range status because of the postcode lottery of the bird flu restriction system. The British Free Range Egg Producers Association is particularly concerned about the inconsistent approach. What more can she say to assure egg producers throughout the UK that the right measures are being taken to sort out this whole sad issue?

Andrea Leadsom: Colleagues will be aware that there was a full housing order until 28 February. With extensive scientific advice, we have gleaned that those places where wild fowl congregate are high-risk areas. That has been extensively peer reviewed on the basis of scientific

evidence, which is why we have published a paper to outline the rationale. This has absolutely not just come out of our own heads; in no way whatsoever are we doing anything other than protecting this vital sector.

T6. [909022] **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): I have been contacted by a number of my constituents who are concerned about the welfare of puppies, particularly in the context of puppy farming and puppies being bred for sale. Will my hon. Friend the Minister set out what action he is taking to tackle so-called backstreet breeding and to ensure the highest welfare standards for puppies bred for sale?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): My hon. Friend makes an important point about an issue I championed while I was responsible for this part of the portfolio. The Government have recently published proposals for improving the laws on the breeding and selling of dogs, among which are proposals that anyone breeding and selling three litters in a 12-month period will need a licence and that no puppies will be sold under the age of eight weeks.

T2. [909018] **Mr Douglas Carswell** (Clacton) (UKIP): Tendring District Council recently did a superb job dealing with a flood threat, calmly overseeing a mass evacuation. Is any extra funding available to support local councils when they are putting in place flood contingency plans?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Traditionally, councils were given grants for their flooding responsibilities through the rate support grant. I visited the centre near Jaywick and saw the excellent work that was being done by the council and by many voluntary services, as well as by our emergency service response. I am sure that councils will continue to work, to reflect on what happened, and to monitor whether their schemes continue to be appropriate.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Prime Minister recently laid out plans to invest £4.7 billion in innovation by 2021. Will the Minister please explain how the food and farming communities of rural West Oxfordshire can look forward to benefiting from such measures?

George Eustice: As my hon. Friend will know, we already have in place an agri-tech strategy worth £160 million, which has supported more than 100 different projects to support science and technology transfer in food and farming. In addition, we have food information networks to try to create clusters of innovation in the food sector.

T5. [909021] **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State go back to her office and think seriously about how we will protect the maritime environment when we come out of the EU? Where are the protections that will save the future of fish and the maritime environment?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: We take the marine environment very seriously, which is why we said in our manifesto that we would extend the blue belt, and that is what we

have done, not only around this country's shoreline but around those of our overseas territories. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will continue to play a leading role through OSPAR, as well as through our role on the Council of Europe and the related Bern convention.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The BBC drama "Resistance" airs tomorrow on Radio 4 and portrays a dystopian future without effective antibiotics, and antibiotic resistance is also the subject of a Westminster Hall debate I have secured for next week. Does the Secretary of State agree that although we are world leaders in work on antibiotic resistance both in health services and in agriculture, the fact that we have recently licensed three new colistin products, which are the last line of defence, shows that there is more we can do?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend will be aware that the UK has taken a leading role in the work on antibiotic resistance, which we have pushed on to the agenda of the OECD, the G7 and the G20. We can adopt processes to reduce our reliance on antibiotics—for example, through the acidification of water in the pig sector. We can always do better, but some of these critical antibiotics have a role in agriculture, too.

T3. [909019] **Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The partial liberalisation of the water market starts in April this year, with further phases of liberalisation being planned, yet we have seen nothing of the abstraction reform legislation, which is essential if this liberalisation is to work. When will the Secretary of State publish the Bill?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: We take the preservation and the use of water very seriously. The opening up of the market for small and medium-sized enterprises and businesses is a good advance, but I am looking at those other matters carefully.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): On the day after St David's day, will my right hon. Friend reassure Welsh farmers that Welsh lamb and not New Zealand lamb will be at the forefront of her mind when negotiating an EU exit?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend, like me and lots of other colleagues from across the House, enjoyed that lovely reception at Downing Street and the fabulous Welsh singing. I can absolutely assure him that we will keep Welsh lamb farmers at the heart of any negotiations on free trade agreements.

T7. [909023] **George Kerevan** (East Lothian) (SNP): At a recent meeting with the Scottish Rural Affairs Minister, Fergus Ewing, the Secretary of State described the discussions as "good". However, the Scottish Minister said that all he got was radio silence. Does that mean that her interpretation of a good meeting is to say nothing?

Andrea Leadsom: It was a private meeting. In fact, the agreement was that we would not talk openly about the level of discussions. I found our meeting helpful. We made some progress and got a clear way forward. Such discussions need to take place, and I look forward to more of them in the future.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Has the Secretary of State seen the very positive statement from Associated British Foods, which runs British Sugar, the iconic sugar beet and sugar factory in Newark, saying that it expects that, post-Brexit, the ability to design our own system without EU quotas will lead to up to a 50% increase in its profits and sales, which is good news for farmers and consumers?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Associated British Foods is one of the great British-owned food companies. It is a world leader in sugar and it has driven competitiveness and investment in the industry. I believe that the sugar industry in this country has a great future.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Since 2010, the budget of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been cut by 57%, which means that the Department is struggling to get out plans such as the 25-year farming plan. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Treasury to protect the budget from the 6% cut expected next week?

Andrea Leadsom: My Department is indeed involved in a transformation project, which will take out costs, but it will also deliver better and more focused frontline customer service. I am very optimistic about that, and we are looking very carefully at the further efficiency savings that are needed.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise to the House. The House is very hungry today, but, as is so often the case, demand exceeds supply, and it is not possible to satisfy the appetite of all colleagues. We must now move on to questions to the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), representing the Church Commissioners, and to the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), whom we welcome to her responsibilities as representative of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, and the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Parish Churches: Wi-fi/Broadband

1. **Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): What progress has been made on identifying parish churches suitable for wi-fi and broadband in rural areas. [909024]

7. **Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What progress has been made on identifying parish churches suitable for wi-fi and broadband in rural areas. [909031]

9. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What progress has been made on identifying parish churches suitable for wi-fi and broadband in rural areas. [909033]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): I would certainly like to welcome the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) to her position and I look forward to working with her at these question sessions.

There has been a lot of interest from colleagues in this question of how to provide the internet to parts of the country that currently have poor provision. Churches play an important role in supporting community infrastructure, and the Diocese of Norwich has led the way. Since 2011, it has been the majority shareholder in WiSpire, which provides wi-fi internet signal boosters to churches across the diocese. We are in early discussions to expand that provision into the St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and Ely dioceses.

Andrew Stephenson: May I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer? Can she explain how the Church is engaging with communities that live in particularly rural and sparsely populated areas to enable them to receive high-speed broadband?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Obviously, the topography of Lancashire is challenging, so I am very sympathetic to my hon. Friend's case. In fact, I went to see an example of a wi-fi booster signal, and as long as there is a line of sight between a church tower and another church tower, or a high building, it is possible to provide internet coverage in remote rural areas that currently have no signal. I encourage him to speak to the Bishop of Carlisle and I will give every support in his endeavour to ensure that his constituents are not digitally divided.

Mr Speaker: This is very reassuring indeed.

Chris Davies: Right across the country, church buildings are central to strong local communities. Will my right hon. Friend explain whether it has been possible to provide wi-fi and broadband in listed churches and chapels to help those buildings to remain sustainable well into the future?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am grateful for that question, because there is a commonly held myth that it is not possible to amend ancient and listed buildings in these ways, but as my hon. Friend will have seen from the success in Norwich diocese, there is no fundamental barrier to putting a wi-fi booster set or a mobile phone booster on the top of a church tower or spire. That is why the Government have welcomed the partnership with the Church of England to try to reach our notspots.

Daniel Kawczynski: Will my right hon. Friend outline what work the Church is undertaking to assess the potential scale of this project, and how Members can identify buildings in notspot areas that could be used for wireless transmitters?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Yes; my hon. Friend is right. I am sure that he would like the Church in Shrewsbury to be actively involved in this. The absolute key to this is knowing where the notspots are. I met the Minister for Digital and Culture, as I think many colleagues in the House did, who has an enormous spreadsheet that shows where the gaps are, and that is now being matched to what the Church can provide. We have offered to help

to create a property asset register, so that this matching process can take place, and I hope it will benefit my hon. Friend's constituency.

Art Exhibitions

2. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What assessment the commissioners have made of the use of churches and cathedrals as venues for art exhibitions. [909025]

Dame Caroline Spelman: Chester cathedral already has a very strong reputation for the provision of excellent services to its visitors and its local community. Indeed, for over 1,000 years, the Church has been a patron of the arts. Churches and cathedrals provide an excellent venue for exhibitions; I am convinced that the cathedral in Chester is a very good venue for them.

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful to the right hon. Lady for the support that she has given in the past to Chester cathedral's efforts to increase visitor numbers and therefore, hopefully, to increase worship numbers as well. Does she share my dismay, however, that Arts Council England has declined to support Chester's bid for support for the major sculpture exhibition that it is hosting this year—the largest in the north of England? Might the Church Commissioners indicate to Arts Council England their support for the cathedral?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Cathedral attendance is rising, in no small part because of the quality of the services that are offered. People enjoy going to cathedrals for exhibitions. The Church of England fully supports Chester's ambition to hold a similarly significant exhibition. My understanding is that the funding for this is on a rolling programme, so I really encourage the cathedral to apply again, and of course we will provide our support.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): It is often new churches that are best configured for a variety of uses. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Richard Coldicott, the incumbent, and the congregation of St Mark's, Holbrook, in my constituency, on its consecration last week as a brand-new parish church?

Dame Caroline Spelman: It gives me great pleasure to congratulate the congregation of St Mark's on having the vision to create a new church. In fact, the Church of England is opening as many new churches, typically in new developments, as it is closing old ones. Of course a new facility like that is a wonderful venue for the arts and for exhibitions such as those that we are discussing.

Mr Speaker: I hope the *Hansard* text of the right hon. Lady's reply to the hon. Gentleman will be posted on the church door. That would seem only fitting.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the right hon. Lady also bear in mind not only exhibitions, but new music? Will she look at a work performed at Peterborough cathedral only a few days ago, "Even You Song", with a wonderful new libretto by someone called Dr Lucy Sheerman?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am very impressed to hear about that. When one looks through the list of the exhibitions that are being held in cathedrals up and

down the country, one cannot fail to be impressed by the range and depth. May I commend to hon. Members an exhibition about refugees at Southwark cathedral, a mere short step from the House, should they require some respite from the labours of the House and its debates? This is a very current topic, and I commend it to the House.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Many parish churches in the borough of Kettering, particularly in rural villages, are opened up for a variety of community activities, including art exhibitions. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is an excellent way of getting people into churches who might otherwise never cross the threshold?

Dame Caroline Spelman: My hon. Friend is completely right. The sheer scale of these beautiful buildings creates a backdrop for the presentation of art and the display of sculpture. We have some really interesting and famous examples of sculpture in our cathedrals, including works by Gormley, and indeed Tracey Emin has a piece in Liverpool cathedral. I encourage all Members to encourage their constituents to visit their churches and cathedrals not just for worship, but for the beauty of the art presented within them.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

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

Official Development Assistance

3. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): What scrutiny of the official development assistance budget the National Audit Office has undertaken in the last 12 months. [909026]

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The NAO audits the financial statements of the Department for International Development annually, and it issued an unqualified opinion on the Department's accounts for 2015-16. The NAO also produces a number of reports each year on different aspects of DFID's expenditure. It last reported specifically on official development assistance in 2015. Its January 2015 report, "Managing the Official Development Assistance target", looked at DFID's management of its increased budget and at the target to spend 0.7% of the UK's gross national income on overseas aid.

Martin Vickers: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. He will be aware that our constituents in Lincolnshire have growing concerns about the aid budget. They will be reassured that the NAO is looking closely at it. Can he commit the NAO to looking much more robustly at many of the aid projects, which are of growing concern to our constituents?

Sir Edward Leigh: I can assure my hon. Friend that the NAO will indeed look robustly at all aspects of DFID's expenditure. For instance, its reports on the

CDC and on St Helena both identified challenges for DFID in overseeing expenditure outside its core area of expertise. The Public Accounts Committee's report on St Helena concluded:

"Thus far, the Department has unquestionably failed the residents of St Helena and the British taxpayer."

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Under the Government's new aid strategy, an increasing proportion of the 0.7% is being spent by Departments other than DFID—it is estimated that the proportion will be 30% by 2019. Will the NAO also look at how that money is spent and address concerns that it is being siphoned off, undermining DFID's core objectives?

Sir Edward Leigh: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that an increasing proportion of the aid budget will be spent by other Departments. That is clearly a challenge for audit, but one that the NAO is capable of undertaking, because DFID remains responsible for reporting to the OECD on official development assistance spending and for reporting to Parliament on the Government's performance against the 0.7% target. I can reassure her that the NAO is scrutinising that expenditure extremely carefully.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Polling Stations: ID Requirements

4. **Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What assessment the Electoral Commission has made of the potential implications of introducing ID requirements at polling stations. [909027]

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): The Electoral Commission has recommended that an accessible proof of identity scheme should be developed and implemented for polling stations across Great Britain. However, the commission has also recognised the potential implications for electors who do not have access to the prescribed identification documents and costed options for introducing identification requirements.

Julie Elliott: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. What steps is the Electoral Commission taking to ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable in society are not disproportionately affected by the requirement to show ID at polling stations?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right to raise that concern, because some groups will be less likely than the general population to hold certain forms of photo ID. The commission estimates that approximately 3.5 million electors in Great Britain are without suitable ID and would therefore need to obtain an alternative form of identification. It is for that reason that the commission has recommended that electors in that position should be able to apply for identification free of charge, as they can in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: In welcoming again the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) to her new responsibilities, I hope that I can, on behalf of the whole House, very warmly thank the hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter), who undertook these important responsibilities for several years, and who in fact served on the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission from October 2006 onwards. He has discharged his obligations extremely competently and efficiently in the interests of the House, and we know that the hon. Lady will certainly follow in his footsteps by doing so as well.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): As part of this assessment, what consideration is being given to international best practice from around the world?

Bridget Phillipson: The Electoral Commission will consider all evidence, and I will relay the hon. Gentleman's comments to it. It is clear that recent public opinion shows that 82% believe that voting at polling stations is safe. That will be kept under review. It will be for the Government to make recommendations to the Electoral Commission about how that can be improved.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): My hon. Friend correctly identified the 3.5 million people who do not have the photographic ID required. Does she agree that the Government are completely short-sighted by ruling out a voluntary voter card scheme that would assist those very people?

Bridget Phillipson: The Electoral Commission has been clear that an identification scheme along the lines of that in Northern Ireland would be the best option. I will relay my hon. Friend's concerns to it, and I am happy to arrange for him to meet the Electoral Commission to make those points more clearly.

Church Commissioners

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

Anglican Church (South Sudan)

5. **Mrs Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What plans the Church of England has to support the Anglican Church in South Sudan. [909028]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church of England is responding to the crisis in South Sudan with prayer and practical action. The Church of the Province of South Sudan has 5 million members and is spread across 43 dioceses, so there is an opportunity to provide aid right to the frontline through the Church network.

Mrs Villiers: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Church, which is flourishing in South Sudan, can play a really valuable role in helping to distribute aid and support to all those affected by the famine there?

Dame Caroline Spelman: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. In International Development questions, I asked the Secretary of State to acknowledge the opportunity to distribute aid through the Church network. We should not forget the work of Christian Aid in

South Sudan, which is providing direct unconditional grants, equivalent to \$93, to families who have lost everything so that they can rebuild their lives.

Bishops' Report on Human Sexuality

8. **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Church leaders on the vote by the General Synod to reject the bishops' report on human sexuality; and if she will make a statement. [909032]

Dame Caroline Spelman: The majority of members of the General Synod voted to take note of the report of the House of Bishops, but the motion did not pass because a small majority was against it in the House of Clergy. Following that, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York issued a statement committing them to find a way forward.

Mr Bradshaw: Was it not very significant that it was the clergy, who are in the frontline of providing pastoral care to their parishioners, who voted down the bishops' paper? Is it not increasingly untenable for our Church, which enjoys significant privileges in this country because of its established status, to continue to discriminate against its own members simply because they happen to be gay?

Dame Caroline Spelman: There was a narrow margin in the House of Clergy vote—93 in favour of taking note to 100 against—but a majority is required in all Houses. The way forward, as outlined by the archbishops, is that the pastoral oversight group led by the Bishop of Newcastle, the Rev. Christine Hardman, will now work on how to be as generous as possible to welcome all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people into the Church and to include them in the work of the pastoral oversight group.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): My right hon. Friend may be aware of the case of my constituent, Canon Jeremy Pemberton, who was found not to have been discriminated against on the grounds of sexuality when the Diocese of Southwell denied him permission to officiate in the light of him having had a gay marriage, despite the fact that neighbouring diocese would allow him to officiate. Does my right hon. Friend accept that allowing each bishop discretion in how to handle these, admittedly, complex issues is creating unfairness and variances that are quite hard to justify?

Dame Caroline Spelman: It is hard to comment on the specific case. It has come before the House previously, but it is a legal process, which we normally do not comment on, although it has now reached its conclusion. My hon. Friend may not be aware that the Ecclesiastical Committee actually met and was content with changes to the law with regard to the need to protect children and the powers and discretion that bishops have. Changes have taken place and more need to happen.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): But discretion is not always good in the Church, is it? Jeffrey John, the Dean of St Albans, has been barred from becoming a bishop in the Church in Wales, which I know is separate from the Church of England, because the other bishops have

refused to do what they have done in every other case—accept what the members of the local diocese have wanted.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am not responsible for the Church of Wales—[*Interruption*—because I am responsible for the Church of England. However, I appreciate the point the hon. Gentleman is trying to make. This is a really serious matter, and we should heed what the Archbishop of Canterbury, as the head of the Anglican communion, said about the need to have radical Christian inclusivity. The Church of England is working within the current legal and doctrinal context towards a culture change that is inclusive.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

EU Referendum: Campaign Expenditure

10. **Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): What assessment the commission has made of the adequacy of the rules on campaign spending during the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU. [909034]

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): The Electoral Commission's report on the administration of the EU membership referendum, which was published in September 2016, concluded that, overall, the rules on campaigning worked well. The commission has, however, made a number of recommendations based on the experiences in the referendum, which are intended to further improve transparency and the overall effectiveness of the referendum controls. These are now matters for the Government to consider, and the commission looks forward to receiving their response in due course.

Mr Nuttall: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for that reply. Given that lead campaigners and several of the campaign groups on both sides of the debate now face investigation regarding their spending, does she agree that that suggests there may be a need for the rules to be made simpler for participants to understand?

Bridget Phillipson: The commission announced last Friday that it has opened a number of assessments and investigations into the accuracy and completeness of campaigners' spending returns. It would not be appropriate to comment at this stage on ongoing cases, but the commission will announce the outcomes when it has concluded its investigations.

Business of the House

Mr Speaker: Just before we come to the business question, I remind the House that, on Monday, I did indicate that there would be an opportunity for hon. and right hon. Members to pay their own tributes to the former Father of the House—that parliamentary giant, Sir Gerald Kaufman. That opportunity for Members comes today, in the course of business questions. Therefore, I will exercise some latitude in terms of the normal length of questions if colleagues wish to express their own personal and heartfelt tributes. I look forward to hearing what colleagues have to say about a very, very remarkable man.

10.37 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): Mr Speaker, as you said, this is the first business questions since the death of the Father of the House. There is this sense with Gerald Kaufman's passing of another link being broken with a former political age. His first general election contest was in 1955, when he stood against Harold Macmillan himself in the Bromley constituency—I think without too much expectation of a shock victory on that occasion. Then, of course, he represented successive Manchester constituencies for many years.

This was a man who also served in No. 10 under Harold Wilson and who carried the memories of working alongside him and debating against—in those days through the columns of the press and in his speech-writing capacity, rather than as a Member of the House—his opponents in my party. He went on to serve as a Minister and, for many years, as a senior member of the shadow Cabinet during the Labour party's years in opposition.

I can certainly say from experience that Gerald's book "How to be a Minister" is still worth reading—[*Interruption.*] I suspect that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is looking for ways in which to publicise a second edition sometime soon. I do recall from my reading of Gerald's book the importance he gave to getting control of your diary and private office at the earliest possible date, and also his sage warning to Ministers to avoid, so far as they could, their numerous invitations to speak at banquets and formal dinners, which inevitably ended with the host denouncing the guest of honour in the most strident possible terms.

Gerald was perhaps most in his element as the Chair of first the Select Committee on National Heritage, and then the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport. Even those of us who did not share Gerald's politics knew that he was a man who was passionately committed not only to his own political party and tradition, but to the importance of the arts and cultural values as something that mattered to people in all walks of life in all parts of the United Kingdom. While his interests and enthusiasm in the field of the arts ranged widely, it was perhaps cinema for which he had a particular affection. I do just wonder what we have missed in not being able to hear his comments on the Oscars debacle that took place earlier this week. I suspect that they would have been fairly forceful and waspish in tone.

We mourn Sir Gerald's passing and we shall miss him in this House. I am sure that everyone, on whichever side of the House they sit, would want to send their sympathy to his family and friends.

The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 6 MARCH—Second Reading of the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill.

TUESDAY 7 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Children and Social Work Bill [*Lords*], followed by a motion relating to the appointment of the chairman of the UK Statistics Authority, followed by a motion relating to Standing Orders.

WEDNESDAY 8 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his Budget statement.

THURSDAY 9 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

FRIDAY 10 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 13 March will include:

MONDAY 13 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

TUESDAY 14 MARCH—Conclusion of the Budget debate.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 6, 9, 13 and 16 March will be:

MONDAY 6 MARCH—Debate on an e-petition relating to high heels and workplace dress codes.

THURSDAY 9 MARCH—Debate on the second report of the Scottish Affairs Committee on the demography of Scotland and the implications for devolution, followed by a debate on human rights and political situation in Turkey.

MONDAY 13 MARCH—Debate on an e-petition relating to sentencing for child abuse offences.

THURSDAY 16 MARCH—Debate on the sixth report of the Transport Committee, "The future of rail: Improving the rail passenger experience", followed by a debate on Jobcentre Plus office closures.

Colleagues will also wish to know that subject to the progress of business—I stress that point—the House will rise for the summer recess at close of play on Thursday 20 July and return on Tuesday 5 September.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to spend some time talking about and paying tribute to one of our great parliamentarians and the Father of the House, Sir Gerald Kaufman, who died at the weekend. You paid a brilliant tribute on Monday. His family described his death as the end of an era; it is for us here in Parliament, too.

As the Leader of the House said, Sir Gerald's great loves were ice cream and films. Apparently he went to see "Singin' in the Rain" 20 times in all the cinemas in Leeds when it first came out. He worked on "That Was the Week That Was", the forerunner of "Saturday Night Live", with the great broadcaster Alasdair Milne, the future director-general of the BBC. He was fearless in his support for justice internationally and for his constituents. His majority at the last election was 24,000, and that was down to his popularity and his care for his

[Valerie Vaz]

constituents. Today—World Book Day—he is remembered for his iconic book “How to be a Minister”. Before I came into this place—before I met Sir Gerald—I bought that book as a present for my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) when he first became a Minister in the Blair Government. Many hon. Members here, as well as former Members who are now in the other place, have told me how they used that book as their bible.

We have some lovely anecdotes. The Clerk of the House reminded me that on your re-election, Mr Speaker, Sir Gerald was quite keen to get the whole process right, and he proceeded with avuncular dignity. I remember the day; it went off absolutely beautifully and you were re-elected. He loved marmalade, so on a Select Committee trip to the Isle of Mull, to cheer him up on his birthday—it was one of the big numbers—he was made orange marmalade ice cream. On a Committee visit to Rome, some Members had not been there before, so before he went to the ambassador’s dinner, he took them to the Trevi fountain and, of course, to have some gelato. Another Member told me that when Sir Gerald was a Minister, he always gave a lift to Back Benchers in his ministerial car because he knew that one day he would be a Back Bencher. We talk about the greasy pole of politics. I think it is more like the luge, actually—you just get battered as you go down.

Sir Gerald dressed beautifully—I always used to watch him in the Tea Room—and that was probably a tribute to his father, who was a tailor. He was a close friend of Harold Wilson, another great Labour Prime Minister. He was loyal, clever and courageous, and he will be missed from this place. We send our condolences to his family and friends.

I thank the Leader of the House for providing the dates of the summer recess. Everyone is rejoicing because we now know we will rise on 20 July. I wonder whether he could give us an indication of when the state opening of Parliament will be. I know that the Deputy Leader of the House is keen to get his outfit ready, perhaps in keeping with the tribute to Sir Gerald.

I know that the Leader of the House has been busy tabling motions. One, in particular, will be considered on Tuesday 7 March. It relates to Standing Order No. 83. Many lawyers like amendments that read “Substitute ‘the’ for ‘and’”, but I might have to explain the motion to other people, so I wonder whether the Leader of the House could publish an explanatory memorandum and tell us why this is being hurried through on the day before the Budget? I know that the motion relates to things that are happening in Scotland.

The Leader of the House is keen on visiting the other place, so he will be interested to know—I do not know whether he has caught this on the news—that their lordships intend to send back the EU Bill with an amendment, which they won by 358 votes to 256. Will the Leader of the House give us some indication of when the Bill is likely to come back to this House? Will it be in the week commencing 13 March or the week commencing 20 March?

On a point that the Leader of the House made last week, I remind him that, as has been pointed out in a cross-party Select Committee report, the Government’s

claim that the NHS will receive an additional £10 billion by 2021 does not accurately reflect

“the impact of the Spending Review on health expenditure...If the spending review period is considered—2015–16 to 2020–21—that increase is £4.5 billion”,

not £10 billion. I would be grateful if the Leader of the House cited the alternative figure.

I thank the Leader of the House for providing me with the closing date for the consultation on the new funding formula, which is 22 March. I appreciate that he has also written to me. The Prime Minister yesterday said that we “have had free schools”, as though they are in the past, but that they continued to create more good places. She said no to grammar schools, but was that a no to free schools? The overall funding of new places through free schools is set at £7.9 billion out of a total of £14.9 billion for new places. Will the Leader of the House comment on the latest National Audit Office report, which found that some free schools opened in areas where there were already plenty of places, thus creating spare capacity that could affect the future financial sustainability of other schools in the area? May we have a statement on whether funding for free schools represents good value for money for the taxpayer, and whether it will fix the problem of school places?

I am trying to rush through my points because I am aware that other hon. Members want to make contributions on Sir Gerald’s life. Given that we will have a debate on International Women’s Day after these proceedings, I want to raise two cases of women who have been arrested and placed in a detention centre. Irene Clennell was married to a British husband for 27 years, and her children and grandchild were born here. She has been removed without warning. A 20-year-old student, Shiromini Satkunarajah, who is about to finish her degree, has also been placed in a detention centre with no warning. Will the Government clarify the policy on the deportation of women who are no threat and who have been caught unfairly by these arbitrary decisions?

It is now 10 years since the Corston report on women in prison. Women who enter prison are more likely to be there for non-violent offences. Last year, 12 women killed themselves in prison in England and Wales, and there were 22 deaths of women in prison. The noble Baroness Corston has called for more Government funding for women’s centres. I know from sitting on the Criminal Justice and Courts Public Bill Committee that the Government had committed funding for secure colleges, but they U-turned on that decision. If that money is there and committed, will the Leader of the House have discussions with the noble Baroness about using it to protect existing women’s centres and create a more sustainable model?

Lastly, I welcome the two new Members: the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who is the 456th woman in this place, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). It is good to have another Labour Member from the west midlands. I hope that both hon. Members will be inspired by the life and work of Sir Gerald Kaufman, a great parliamentarian. May he rest in peace.

Mr Lidington: I happily join the hon. Lady in welcoming our two new colleagues. Apropos of state opening, while I can assure her that my hon. Friend the Deputy

Leader of the House has more than one outfit available for such ceremonial occasions, I cannot yet give her the date that she is seeking.

On the hon. Lady's point about the motion on the Standing Orders, I have already had a similar request from Scottish National party Members for an explanatory memorandum—we will provide one. The proposed change to the Standing Orders is to recognise the fact that the Scotland Act 2016 has devolved to the Scottish Parliament the right to set the main rates of income tax. Our own Standing Orders on English votes for English laws therefore need to be adjusted to take account of the fact that we may well in future have resolutions or pieces of legislation relating to main income tax rates that are specific to England, or to England, Wales and Northern Ireland, but not to Scotland, because those matters have been devolved. That is the purpose of the technical change to the Standing Orders.

We will return to the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill as rapidly as possible after the House of Lords has finished debating it and given it a Third Reading. The Government certainly remain of the view that the Bill is straightforward—it does no more than confer authority on the Prime Minister, as required by the courts, to initiate negotiations by triggering article 50 of the treaty—and we will therefore seek to resist changes that would make the negotiating task more difficult.

The hon. Lady asked about the national health service. The figure of £10 billion is completely accurate. It represents the £8 billion that the head of NHS England said was needed to finance the NHS's own reform plan, plus a further £2 billion that was allocated to the financial year before the period in which NHS England intended to carry out its reform plan. It is not only that because, in response to the request from the chief executive of NHS England, the Department of Health has front-loaded the funding, so the NHS is getting an additional £4 billion this year to get the reform plan off to the best possible start.

The hon. Lady asked about free schools. I have to say to her that, for me, the key test for free schools is whether there is a demand for them from parents in the area in which they are to be located, because without that, those schools will not be able to survive. The test for free schools, like the test for any other school, is whether they are able to provide the best possible opportunities and life chances, and to improve the achievements of the children sent to those schools. Children only get one chance of an education, and we should be looking for every opportunity to improve the quality of educational opportunities offered to them.

The hon. Lady talked about International Women's Day and cited two particular cases. Without going into the detail of those cases, the principle is that people—men or women—are detained only if the Home Office or the immigration service has reason to believe that they may be at risk of disappearing and avoiding removal from the country. Such a step is taken only after people have exhausted their rights to appeal and it is clear that they have no further legal right to remain in this country.

The hon. Lady's point about prisons was perfectly reasonable, but it is one of several important issues to do with prison reform. My right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary made it clear in her recent White Paper that she is committed to a programme of prison reform that

improves the chances of women and men who serve time in prison being treated decently while they are there, as well as giving them opportunities for the type of courses, work and education that mean that they will have a better chance of leading law-abiding lives after their release.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I associate myself with the remarks of both Front-Bench spokesmen about the late Father of the House. He gave me one piece of helpful advice when I first arrived in the House: "On immigration cases, young man"—that is always good for getting my attention—"my strong advice is to ask anyone who comes to see you, 'Have you got a lawyer?' If they haven't, tell them to get one, and if they have, tell them to use the lawyer."

Speaking on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee, I note that the Leader of the House did not announce the business for a week on Thursday. We now have a queue of debates that would fill Thursdays until Prorogation. Early sight of the business for a week on Thursday would therefore be appreciated.

Sadly, on Monday, Mohammed al-Zufairi, a constituent of mine, was murdered at a cash point in Wealdstone High Street. It appears to be a targeted murder, and I am pleased to say that the police have arrested an individual whom they believe to be responsible. May we have a debate on the increase in knife crime in London and the impact that we can make on stopping people carrying knives to ensure that no one else suffers my constituent's fate?

Mr Lidington: I happily take on board my hon. Friend's request for allocating more slots for the Backbench Business Committee at an early opportunity.

May I pass on to the family of my hon. Friend's constituent my sympathy and sincere condolences? They must be going through the most appalling and harrowing time. There will be an opportunity on Monday 6 March at Home Office questions for my hon. Friend to raise his concerns about knife crime more generally, and he may well wish to seek an Adjournment debate on the subject.

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

May I add to the tributes to Gerald Kaufman? The Leader of the House was absolutely right—he summed it up perfectly—when he said that Gerald Kaufman was from a generation that is quickly passing away. Hon. Members relied on Sir Gerald for advice and guidance, such was his experience. For many hon. Members, he was simply a style guru. I remember those long scarves he used to wear. One day he had to be rescued at the entrance to the tube station because his scarf had got caught, and I remember the great efforts that went into ensuring that Gerald was separated from his scarf. I send my condolences to his family and friends.

I welcome the fact that today is World Book Day—I think that Sir Gerald would appreciate that, too. We should pay tribute to the writers of this country. I have the great pleasure and privilege of chairing the all-party parliamentary writers group, and it is right to recognise

[Pete Wishart]

the wonderful work of all our authors and writers, and to ensure that they are properly rewarded for the fantastic works that they produce.

What about three cheers for our heroes in ermine, although perhaps not from the Government Benches? The people's aristocrats have spoken and their voice must be heard. Every time I raise the House of Lords with the Leader of the House, he tells me that there are no plans whatsoever to reform the other place, therefore accepting its legitimacy to raise such issues. Will he now listen to the House of Lords and say today that the Government have no plans to use the Parliament Acts if our unelected friends continue to show backbone?

I also thank the Leader of the House for announcing the dates of the summer recess, but I express our profound disappointment that, yet again, the Government have conspired not to have a long recess that will cover the school holiday periods of every nation of the UK. Once again, my colleagues from Scotland will have to try to make sure they have particular childcare arrangements in place. They will struggle to find an opportunity to have a proper school holiday with their children. Will the Leader of the House make sure that this is the last time we have to deal with this issue and ensure that in future all nations are covered by the summer recess?

We need a debate on how the Scotland Act 1998 operates. Schedule 5 to the Act lists all the reserved powers. If it is not on the list, it is devolved. I looked at the list again this morning and I cannot find agriculture or fisheries on it, so I presume they will be devolved after Brexit. Will the Government confirm that today, or do they intend to reserve more powers?

Finally, next week will see a huge Commons event. I am referring not to the Budget, but to the Second Reading of the driverless cars Bill. Believe it or not, they do share similarities: one is a journey with no one at the wheel heading for disaster and the other is the driverless cars Bill.

Mr Lidington: I am happy to join the hon. Gentleman in celebrating World Book Day and in paying tribute to authors. It is a welcome trend to find that the public's appetite for old fashioned hard copy books seems to be increasing in a way that defies many of the predictions of recent years.

On the Scotland Act, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland could not have been clearer yesterday at Scottish questions. As powers are brought back from the European Union following Brexit, additional powers will be exercised by the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government. What we have to work out, and what the United Kingdom Government are looking at in consultation with all three devolved Administrations, is how that can be done in a way that preserves the integrity of a single market across the United Kingdom as a whole. It will not help food and drink producers in Scotland who sell in large quantities to customers in England if we find, because we have not thought this through properly, trading obstacles in the way of them being able to sell at the least possible cost to those English customers. I therefore suggest that the hon. Gentleman needs to have regard to the interests of Scottish producers.

On the House of Lords debate on the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, I cannot add much more to what I said in response to the shadow Leader of the House. However, the hon. Gentleman's new-found passionate affection for the House of Lords suggests to me that it is not just Mr Farage who has secret yearnings for the honours list.

Mr Speaker: It is a great pleasure to welcome members of Sir Gerald's family, whom, I have just been advised, are here to witness the proceedings. You could not be more welcome and thank you for coming.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Those of us who had experience of Sir Gerald's long life and parliamentary career will choose those parts that affect our own areas of interest, so I hope the House will forgive me if I focus on the crucial role Sir Gerald played, between the years of 1988 and 1991, in shifting Labour party policy away from a stance in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament.

He started in 1988 by contributing to a policy review. If I remember correctly, it was called "Meet the challenge, make the change." In it, Labour acknowledged that it would be sensible to get some reciprocation in return for giving up Britain's nuclear deterrent. Then, after a lively exchange of letters in the national press with the then chairman of the Conservative party, Chris Patten, and others, he ended on 10 July 1991 with the all-important statement that a future Labour Government would continue to possess nuclear weapons as long as other countries had them. This marked the end of a crucial policy realignment.

When the Blair Government, with the support of the Conservative Opposition, voted to renew the nuclear deterrent in March 2007, Sir Gerald made a great speech, referring back to the fact that he famously described Labour's 1983 anti-nuclear manifesto as the longest suicide note in history. He urged his colleagues not to make the mistakes of the 1980s, and he ended by pointing out what it would mean if Labour went back to that stance:

"Defeating the Government tonight...could so reduce our party's credibility as to contribute to a Labour defeat at the next election...A cartoon in *The New Yorker* once showed an army officer in a bunker saying to his assembled troops:

'Gentlemen, the time has arrived for us to make a futile gesture.'

Futile gestures can be personally satisfying, but what do they get us? I will tell the House what they get us: 18 years in opposition. It is one thing to revisit the scene of the crime; it is quite another to revisit the scene of the suicide."—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2007; Vol. 458, c. 344-45.]

Those of us who believe in nuclear deterrence have every reason to be grateful to him for his crucial role in restoring bipartisanship between the Labour Government and the Opposition of the day, which secured the renewal of the nuclear deterrent, and I think the country has reason to be grateful to him too.

As I ought to pay lip service to the fact that this is business questions as well, I will segue from one form of unilateralism to another. May we have a statement from a Brexit Minister about the Government's assessment of the motives of those with whom we will be negotiating in other countries in not responding to our initiatives and indications that members of their societies who

have chosen to live in Britain can continue doing so as long as our citizens can continue living in their countries? Unilateralism, as a principle, is sometimes high minded and sometimes a futile gesture. In the spirit of what Sir Gerald did to the Labour party, we ought to think about whether we really want to leave so many of our citizens exposed to poor treatment by other countries while offering generous treatment to their citizens living here.

Mr Lidington: The EU27 Governments have been clear that they will engage in negotiations only once article 50 has been triggered, but I am optimistic that a reciprocal agreement on the status of each other's citizens can be achieved. It is in the rational interests of the UK and all our 27 EU partners, and so I very much hope that it can be an early achievement of the negotiations once they start.

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the dates of the summer recess. It was a shame he could not do it earlier, but at least we now know where we stand.

On Sir Gerald, it is rare—it must be many decades since it last happened—that we are unfortunate enough to lose a Father of the House during his incumbency. I am sure the whole House shares my regret that the new Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), cannot be with us today. One of Sir Gerald's more gleeful tales was of how he had the forethought, when first elected to the House, to take the oath before the right hon. and learned Gentleman, in the belief that both were likely to be here for some considerable time and so be contenders for the post of Father of the House. He took great glee in telling that story. I would like to say that I think he probably would not have begrudged the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe his opportunity, but I am not absolutely certain about that, and I would not wish to do Gerald an injustice in any way. Certainly he was desperately anxious to become Father of the House and fully deserved to hold that office.

As everyone has said—like others, I am pleased that some of his family can be here—he was witty, he was brave and he could be extremely acerbic, but he was a very skilled parliamentarian. I see that some of the obituaries have referred to his skill in Committee, and, as somebody who was a Whip when Gerald was a Minister, I can certainly testify to that. Gerald was a Minister of State trying to get a Bill through the House at a time when we did not really have a majority; people would be astonished about that period, and it might be worth their looking back at some of the *Hansards* of the time. We had a notional majority of maybe one or two, most of whom were too sick to be here at any time unless things were absolutely desperate. So in Committee things were extremely tight, but Gerald was an absolutely brilliant Committee Minister. He flattered the Opposition shamefully and quite disgustingly; he covered them with compliments and praise while just not being able to quite see his way clear to accepting their brilliant amendments to the Government's proposed legislation.

As people have already said, he was also very good value as a confidante and adviser. I happened to be in Committee with Gerald on a day when we had a Government vacancy—it had been vacant for some

little time. I was summoned to No. 10 and I had to say to the civil servant who made the call, "I can't possibly come. I'm the Whip on a Committee and we have not really got a majority. Don't be ridiculous, of course I can't come now. I will come at lunchtime." That gave me the opportunity to consult Gerald. I had only been a Member for just over a year and was unenthusiastic about the prospect that appeared to lie before me, and I said to Gerald, "Do you think I can ask for time to think about it?" He, like me, had guessed what the summons might mean and the first thing he said was, "Congratulations. That's fantastic. I'm thrilled." I said, "Yes, but hang on; can I ask for time to think about it?" He replied: "My dear Margaret, when the Prime Minister sends for you and offers you a post in the Government, you either say 'Yes, Prime Minister,' or you say 'No, Prime Minister.' You do not ask for time to think about it." Looking back I am stunned by how naive I was even to ask the question, but it was certainly very helpful advice.

Gerald was also an extremely kind man. As it happens, I have a close personal friend who worked with him in No. 10 and who always spoke about what hysterical and great company Gerald was, but also what a kind person he was. He was—despite the advice he gave to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who spoke earlier—a ferocious advocate on behalf of his constituents. The Leader of the House should probably count himself lucky that he did not have the chance to hear Gerald's comments on the cases raised by my hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House on people who were detained without notice. Gerald would have had a lot to say about that, and it would not have been very nice to hear.

Mr Lidington: I was looking forward to hearing more of the right hon. Lady's reminiscences. She has reminded us of the length of Sir Gerald's career and the depth of his experience, and of the wisdom that comes with that experience of operating in this House and in government over such a long period of time.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Like you, Mr Speaker, on separate occasions I saw Gerald Kaufman at his home in St John's Wood only a few weeks ago: I know that you visited him as did a good friend of mine and that of a number of other hon. Members, Claire Ward, the former Member for Watford. Even just a few weeks ago, Gerald was still saying how keen he was to return to this place, and we are all very sad that he did not.

Those who did not know him saw him as being ferociously vitriolic, and he was in this Chamber. But outside he was a very different man. He had a waspish sense of humour. I had the privilege of joining him in 1993 on the National Heritage Select Committee. The Committee was excellent, the trips were so marvellous and he was such a brilliant Chairman that I stayed with him not only on the National Heritage Committee, but also, for two Parliaments, apart from a brief excursion to the Select Committee on Home Affairs, on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Gerald hated pomposity—that was one of his most admirable features—but he loved outrageous clothes, as hon. Members have already said. I used to go with him to the theatre and the cinema from time to time. His last

[*Michael Fabricant*]

recommendation to me was to see a brilliant movie called “Hail, Caesar!”, which I duly saw and loved. It could sometimes be embarrassing to go somewhere with Gerald, because if the weather was cold, he would wear a red tea cosy on his head. When I mentioned this to him, he said it was not half as embarrassing as what I was wearing. [*Laughter.*]

Gerald also loved ice cream. I remember being on a Culture, Media and Sport Committee visit to Los Angeles and attending a meeting that was getting very boring. We were being addressed by a chap from the Foreign Office about something that had nothing to do with our inquiry, and Gerald got up and said, “Thank you very much for your speech.” The Foreign Office official rather foolishly said, “But I haven’t finished.” In the way that only he could do, Gerald turned round slowly and said, “Oh yes you have.” Then we toddled off to get our ice cream. Ice cream, musicals—which he could sing along to; he knew all the words—and Judy Garland were his great loves.

Gerald was a brilliant Chairman of the National Heritage Committee and the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. He was great fun. He was not party political. I am now going to lose the support of all my hon. Friends by saying that I often found myself defending the BBC, whereas Gerald wanted to abolish it. That was a strange juxtaposition of roles.

He told me not long ago that the present Conservative party chairman—when he was a junior Whip back in 1993—had asked him to take me under his wing because I was rather wild and perhaps he could make me more like a conventional parliamentarian. You can see that that worked!

In short, Gerald was a wonderful man who brightened all our lives. He was a great friend, and he was nothing like the person whom I think the public saw him as. He was self-deprecating, kindly and a great parliamentarian. I think we will all miss him.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving the House this opportunity to pay tribute to Sir Gerald. He inspired so many parliamentarians, as others have said, and he certainly gave me invaluable advice and support during my time as a Minister and as Chief Whip. Gerald was a stalwart member of the Labour party and, with a political career stretching back over 50 years, he knew that principle without power was not enough, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) said. He campaigned tirelessly for a Labour Government. His book “How to be a Minister” remains a classic guide for new Ministers wanting to make their mark. He had an ability to sum up his views with a witty turn of phrase that could be as colourful and memorable as his suits.

It was an honour for all of us when Gerald became Father of the House, and we were very proud to see him take up that role. He took the role extremely seriously. He had always been fiercely protective of the rights of parliamentarians, and I remember him bellowing at the then Leader of the House, William Hague, when he felt that Mr Hague had sided too closely with the Executive

against the wishes of Members of this House. Gerald continued to uphold Members’ rights when he became Father of the House.

When I last saw Gerald, he was clearly very ill, but he was still keen to talk politics and to offer his advice. That advice was as insightful as ever. I was greatly comforted to see him surrounded by his loving family, who clearly adored Uncle Gerald.

As so many have said, Gerald made a distinctive mark on our national life, particularly in this place. He will be greatly missed. Given his 10 years of chairing the culture Select Committee, I can think of nothing more fitting than a debate on the importance of the arts to our economy and society and on the devastating effect of Government cuts, particularly on arts funding in the regions. I hope that the Leader of the House will let us have that debate.

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Lady pays a moving tribute to Sir Gerald. I will take on board her request for a debate about the arts at some future date. It may also be something that the Backbench Business Committee would consider.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I join others in paying tribute to the late Sir Gerald Kaufman. I got the impression that Sir Gerald did not entirely approve of me, which is quite understandable. I was never sure whether that was because I was once the Member of Parliament for Basildon or whether it was down to my views on the state of Israel, but I can say without hesitation that he was a commanding figure in this House and a great orator, and that I would not have wanted to get on the wrong side of him.

I am really glad that Sir Gerald became Father of the House. As a result of his death, I am now No. 14 on the list. As I look around the House, I see a number of colleagues who are in front of me in the queue and note that they are in extremely good health, so I am not holding my breath about my becoming Father of the House.

Turning to my question, will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on fake news? An increasing number of constituents complain to me about once reliable websites giving false information and about the number of scams. I have to tell my right hon. Friend that it was announced this week that Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway opened an envelope and suggested that I had won the Oscar for leading actor. I am delighted to tell my right hon. Friend that they opened the wrong envelope and that the award has now been given to its rightful recipient: Mr Tony Blair for his performance at the press conference following the publication of the Chilcot report.

Mr Lidington: I understand the genuine concern about the wide availability of sometimes deliberately misleading information on various websites. Inevitably, the international character of the web means that addressing the problem is not straightforward, but the Minister for Digital and Culture is convening a roundtable of a broad range of people from the news industry on 14 March and this topic will be under discussion.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I met Gerald Kaufman when I came into the House in 1979. He was part of a wonderful gang of people,

including John Smith and Roy Hattersley, who were getting used to being in opposition, which we had to get used to because we were going to be in opposition for a very long time. We would all say that Gerald Kaufman was a great parliamentarian, but when I came into the House—when the wind-ups were taken much more seriously, and when debates were taken more seriously in terms of attendance—the one thing that could be guaranteed was that the House would be packed if Gerald Kaufman was at the Dispatch Box. He was the funniest, most incisive and most brilliant debater I ever saw in this House. I have seen some very good debaters in this House, but Gerald in his prime was peerless. People should remember that.

I look at where Gerald sat for so many years and remember him serving on the Liaison Committee with me as the Chair of a Select Committee. As he got older, the wonderful thing about Gerald was that he did not lose any of his brainpower in his later years. His body let him down, but his brain certainly did not.

As some will remember, last year was the centenary of the birth of Harold Wilson. Gerald gave me a tremendous amount of information about when he worked for Harold Wilson in No. 10, and I will tell the House about one little incident. Gerald was in No. 10 one night when the phone rang—it was Lyndon Baines Johnson, the President of the United States, asking to speak to Harold Wilson. Gerald took the phone call and passed it over to Harold Wilson. Lyndon Baines Johnson was begging Harold to send at least a token British force to Vietnam, and Gerald described how Harold listened patiently—he was a good friend of LBJ—and, at the end, said, “I’m sorry, LB. Not even a Scottish pipers band.”

I talked to Gerald about where the party had been, and some Labour Members will remember some of the uncomfortable things from when the Labour party was in trouble. No one has mentioned this, but Gerald was the brains behind Solidarity, the group within the Labour party that wanted to be very careful about a shift to the hard left. That work, with Hattersley, John Smith and a bunch of others, was very important to how the Labour party survived and thrived to win the election in 1997. Labour Members must pay tribute to the man who kept our ship moving towards a decent target.

When I first met Gerald, he had a great friend, Eric Varley. Many people do not remember Eric Varley because he died very young, but he and Gerald were close friends, and I think it right to mention Eric’s name in relation to that period of Gerald’s life when he was a very happy man.

I will tell the House one last story. No one ever wanted to cross Gerald about a film. I remember foolishly going into the Tea Room and being enthusiastic after seeing “Superman” for the first time. Gerald had also been to see it, and he gave a caustic review about everything that was wrong with American cinema at the time, with the plot and with the acting. He said, “But you liked it, Barry, so it couldn’t have been all bad.”

Gerald Kaufman has left a legacy. He did not have any children, but he has left a legacy both in this House, in the country and in his constituency. I used to tease him because Harold Wilson was born in Huddersfield and had to go to Lancashire to get a seat and, of course, Gerald was a real Leeds man who had to go to Manchester to get a seat.

Some people have talked about Gerald’s sense of style, and his wonderful suits pushed the boundaries in some ways. He remained faithful all his life to the same Leeds tailor and would specify the Huddersfield mill in which the cloth would be spun and woven. He was a man of great talent, great common sense and brilliant oratory. We owe him so much, not only as a party or as a House but as a country.

Mr Lidington: I thank the hon. Gentleman for this heartfelt tribute, and particularly for his reminder of the key political role that Gerald Kaufman played at that particular time in the Labour party’s history.

Mr Sheerman: And may we have a debate on films?

Mr Lidington: I will take careful note of that request.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I am afraid I am unable to contribute any anecdotes about the life of the late Father of the House, but I of course associate myself with the expressions of sympathy to his family and friends.

Earlier this week, the all-party group on retail crime met to review a recent survey of the increasing levels of verbal and physical violence against people who work in the retail trade. Will the Leader of the House find time for an early debate on this serious issue?

Mr Lidington: I cannot offer an early debate in Government time, but there may be other opportunities. I am sure the entire House shares my hon. Friend’s sense of revulsion at the threats faced by shop workers and others in the retail trade, which should not be tolerated in any decent society. I am sure everyone would agree on how important it is not only that the police try to make sure that such attacks are deterred and that perpetrators are punished appropriately, but that citizens who might have information about them come forward.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I thank you, Mr Speaker, and the Leader of the House for this opportunity to pay brief tribute to Sir Gerald Kaufman. After my selection as a parliamentary candidate, I was lucky enough to attend many community meetings and events with my next-door neighbour. They would often reflect the causes that Sir Gerald championed, such as the rights of the Palestinians or Kashmir. I particularly remember doing a Bollywood dance routine with him on an open-air stage in Longsight market a couple of years ago. I have to say, his dance moves showed up my own, even though he was well into his 80s at the time.

Whatever the event, what was quite remarkable was the admiration and extraordinarily high esteem in which Sir Gerald was held by his constituents. I genuinely do not think I have come across another MP who was so widely admired by their constituents. It was largely because he was such a fierce champion of their interests both in Parliament and in Manchester, but also because he was so assiduous in his dealings and communication with them. Residents often told me how they had written

[Jeff Smith]

to Sir Gerald and received a hand-written reply. Sometimes, the replies would reflect his sharp tongue; a particular favourite of mine was:

“I agree with your concerns on this issue. Unfortunately there’s no point in me writing to the chancellor because he’s useless and won’t listen to me.”

Perhaps the only thing sharper than Sir Gerald’s tongue and mind was his dress sense. In Parliament, we will miss his remarkable suits and shirts almost as much as the people of Manchester, Gorton will miss his quite remarkable service.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman made his point well. I think we will all be searching YouTube to see whether a video of that dance routine survives.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I, too, add my commiserations to the family of Sir Gerald. He was not only a legend in this place, but had a formidable career before he arrived here, working for the BBC on satirical programmes such as “That Was the Week That Was”. I must say I was a bit too young to watch them, but I have seen some of the stuff that went on.

As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House knows, in 2020, Plymouth and the UK will celebrate the 400th anniversary of the Mayflower ship leaving Plymouth to found the American colonies—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): With hedgehogs on board?

Oliver Colvile: Sadly, I do not think there were any hedgehogs. May we have a debate on the possibility of a Mayflower national walking trail through the concordat places through which the pilgrims travelled?

Mr Lidington: That sounds like an excellent idea, and I hope there might be an opportunity for an Adjournment debate in which my hon. Friend can pursue the matter further. It strikes me that it is something to which the Government would be sympathetic, but that it would also need a great deal of local work to try to make it happen.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I would like to add to the tributes to Gerald Kaufman, who was a friend of mine for very many years. As has been said, he was elected in 1970—at the same election as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner)—and was one of that generation of MPs who did not get to the Cabinet. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was a Minister of State in 1979 when Labour left office—sadly for many of us, including Gerald, it was for 18 years. If things had been different, Gerald would have reached the Cabinet and would certainly have made an extremely impressive Minister: he was quick; he was witty; and he had a rare ability to think on his feet. Not many people can do that, but Gerald certainly could. I used to see it on a regular basis, including in parliamentary Labour party meetings. As chair of the PLP, I can tell Members that PLP meetings have certainly had their moments of interest. [Laughter.] I am not breaking any confidences in saying that as

those meetings are virtually open to the public at the moment. Gerald certainly lightened the tone. There were times when I was chairing PLP meetings when I would find myself momentarily discombobulated by Gerald’s sartorial magnificence. He used to walk in just as I was saying something sensitive.

Gerald always had something interesting to say in PLP meetings, in private conversations and in the Chamber. He was never that easy to pigeon-hole politically or personally. He often had views that seemed at odds with his public reputation. Although he was, in some ways, rebellious, he was actually a natural loyalist. Every Labour leader recognised that Gerald had very loyal qualities. If he had any criticisms of Tony Blair when he was Prime Minister, he never made them public. When he spoke to me, he would start any criticism with, “As you know, John, I bow to no man in my admiration of the Prime Minister.” Then he would go on to be acerbic about something that the Government had just done. He will be very, very deeply missed by many of us from all parts of the House.

In a not entirely unrelated issue, because Gerald represented a city that has a very, very strong footballing tradition, the local football team in my constituency, Leyton Orient, was served with a winding-up order yesterday. This was not something that I was going to raise, but the order was served yesterday. The owner, who has caused mayhem in two and a half years and who has taken the club right down from some of its highest points to some of its lowest, has not paid Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs for a number of years. No one knows exactly how much he owes, but the rumour is that it is about a quarter of a million quid. We are seeing that sort of pattern in football on a fairly regular basis. I know that we have had debates and statements in the past on the governance and administration of football clubs, but I think that we could do with another statement, or a debate, on the governance of football clubs, because we are seeing people of increasingly dubious character buying up football teams in Britain for whatever mendacious reasons they may have. I think that an awful lot will come out about the owner of Leyton Orient.

Mr Lidington: I am sure that the whole House will have welcomed the hon. Gentleman’s tribute to Sir Gerald Kaufman. On his point about football and Leyton Orient, we did have a debate about the governance of football only two weeks ago, so I do not think that I can offer a further debate in Government time in the short term, but I will undertake to report his concerns about both Leyton Orient and the general issue that he raises to the Secretary of State.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): May I associate myself with the tributes paid by right hon. and hon. Members to the late Father of this House? It speaks volumes about the depth of knowledge and wisdom in this House that the late Sir Gerald was a Member of this House and of the Government before I and many other Members were even born. Although I only overlapped with him in this House for a year and a half, I think that I am on very safe ground in saying that his wisdom, judgment, wit and experience will all be sorely missed from the deliberations of this House in the future.

Today the Joe Humphries Memorial Trust, which was set up in memory of Joe Humphries, a 14-year-old boy from my constituency who dropped dead suddenly while jogging in 2012, is holding an important conference in the city of Leicester to bring together professionals from the world of sport and the medical profession to discuss sudden arrhythmic death syndrome, also known as sudden adult death syndrome. They want to discuss what can be done to raise awareness of it and to help to prevent it. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Joe Humphries' family and to all those who work with the trust for their work, and can we have a debate in this House on sudden arrhythmic death syndrome?

Mr Lidington: I certainly join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Joe's family and to the others working with them. I very much welcome the initiative that he describes to encourage a fruitful exchange of ideas about how we can do more to detect and treat these very distressing conditions. The death of a young person, in particular, causes devastation to their family and friends.

We have some of the fastest improvements in hospital death rates for strokes and heart attacks anywhere in Europe, and there is some evidence that that is partly due to the creation of specialist stroke and cardiac units, but there is a great deal more to be done. I know that the Department of Health will want to applaud the work that is happening in Leicestershire.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): May I associate myself with everything that has been said about Sir Gerald Kaufman? He had acerbic wit and pomp, certainly, but in his role as Father of the House, kindness and wisdom were his outstanding characteristics. Listening to the warmth of these tributes, I cannot help thinking of a procedure in the Scottish Parliament in which the death of a sitting Member is followed by a motion of condolence led by the party leaders, which provides a real opportunity to hear some of the warmth, humour and insight that we have heard from so many Members today. Someone of Gerald's stature would certainly have been well worthy of such a motion.

The Leader of the House could have done with having Gerald Kaufman here today, because Gerald had been a Member for almost 30 years when the late Donald Dewar introduced the Scotland Bill. Donald Dewar's genius was to put at the heart of the Bill the principle that any matter not specifically reserved to this Parliament would automatically be devolved to Scotland. When the Secretary of State for Scotland was caught like a rabbit in headlights yesterday, and the Prime Minister was seemingly unaware of that foundation principle of the Scottish Parliament, that was not just insensitivity towards Scotland or a betrayal of commitments that were made in the referendum campaign; it struck at the very heart of the devolution statute itself. Rather than resting on civil service gobbledegook, perhaps the Leader of House will now show some awareness of the seriousness of not agreeing that everything that is not specifically reserved automatically goes to the Scottish Parliament, including fishing, farming and a range of other issues.

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Gentleman is correct in how he describes the Scotland Act 1998, but that Act was taken through Parliament in the context of the

United Kingdom's continuing membership of the European Union and with the clear knowledge on all sides that certain powers were exercised at that level. We are now in a very different situation. Whichever side any of us took in the referendum, I think there is an understanding that the decision that the UK electorate made represents a profound change of course for the United Kingdom. This is exactly why the UK Government are talking to the Scottish Government, both at ministerial and at official level, about how exactly to deal with the repatriation of powers from Brussels to ensure that they are correctly allocated.

The right hon. Gentleman oversimplifies the position, I am afraid. To take the fisheries question that he cited, the powers exercised by the European Union relate to matters that might well involve the devolved Administrations exercising jurisdiction, and the settling of matters between the European Union and third countries that involve United Nations conventions and that would be reserved matters under the Scotland Act. It is that conundrum that has to be addressed.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): May I, too, associate myself with the many comments that have been made about the late Sir Gerald Kaufman? I cannot claim to have known him very well, but that does not diminish the respect that I and fellow Welsh Members on the Government Benches had for him. I send our sympathies to his family.

There are several park home developments in my constituency. The owners pay their council tax, utility bills and maintenance charges, but when it comes to selling their properties, in addition to the estate agent's fees, they have to pay 10% of the sale price to the site owners. May we have a debate on the unfairness of that additional charge?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend, as always, speaks up strongly on behalf of his constituents. The site owner's entitlement to receive a commission is an implied term in all agreements, and my understanding is that the commission is an important income strand for park home businesses, enabling them to ensure that sites are properly managed and maintained. The issue was looked at in 2012 by the Communities and Local Government Committee, which recommended that the 10% or less commission rule remain in place, and the Government then agreed that the current position should continue. A review of the Mobile Homes Act 2013 this spring will provide a further opportunity to listen to representations and consider how the present system is operating.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Gerald Kaufman was justly proud of being the longest serving Member of Parliament for Manchester ever, both continuously and by broken service, as he would tell us from time to time—he was particularly proud of that.

When I became leader of Manchester City Council in 1984, I went to see Gerald, because he had not always been appreciative of the efforts of the council's officers to deliver services to his constituents. We came to an agreement whereby he could come to me if he had contacted a department twice already, and if I could not sort it out he could be as critical as he liked. My phone rang one morning and it was Gerald. He said—this

[Graham Stringer]

is not one of the most acidic comments he made, but I think it epitomises him—“Graham, do they employ human beings in the housing department?” He was very dissatisfied with the treatment of a family who were in severe housing difficulties.

What was more remarkable was that on that morning he was the centre of worldwide media attention because, as shadow Foreign Secretary, he was in charge of changing Labour’s policy from unilateralism to multilateralism. Yet he took time off in the middle of that media hubbub to take up cudgels on behalf of a family in his constituency who were in need. He was a ferocious tribune of the people of Manchester, Ardwick, his first constituency, and Manchester, Gorton.

Gerald loved this place. He intended to stay here as long as he did. When he started drawing his pension, there was a lot of interest from young Turks in his constituency, who rather fancied that they could do a better job of representing the people of Manchester, Gorton. When they sidled up to him and asked, “Gerald, are you standing at the next general election?”, he would reply, “Yes—and the one after that.” That was always his reply, even until recently.

Gerald’s love of musicals has already been referred to. He was a personal friend of Stephen Sondheim, the American lyricist and songwriter. He brought Stephen Sondheim to Manchester to stage some of his plays. I guess you, Mr Speaker, have never been serenaded by Gerald Kaufman, but my office has been opposite his for the past 18 years. If he had been to a particularly good musical in the west end the night before, I could hear him singing the songs from it, which is not the image that most of the public would have had of him.

A number of colleagues have mentioned Gerald’s book, “How to be a Minister”. I once went with Gerald and the other Manchester MPs to see a Labour Health Minister because there was a problem in the city’s hospitals. The unfortunate Minister mentioned that he had read “How to be a Minister”, and, as we were leaving—not particularly satisfied with the meeting—Gerald said in a very loud whisper, “He might have read it, but he didn’t understand it.” That Minister is no longer a Member of this House. Gerald loved his constituents and cared passionately about his party, and both will miss him.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman reminds us that, although an adopted son of the city, Gerald Kaufman always felt that his roots were very much embedded in Manchester. He always strove to represent the interests of his constituents and the city more widely.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): May I associate myself with the lovely tributes to the late Father of the House? As a new Member, I did not have the opportunity to get to know him well, but what I have heard today has provided a tremendous insight, from which I can conclude only that he will be a sad and great loss to his friends and family.

I ask the Leader of the House whether we may have a debate on what it actually means to

“be committed to the best possible outcome for the United Kingdom following its departure from the European Union”.

Does the Leader of the House not agree that we all want the best possible deal in the circumstances following the referendum result, but that we may disagree on what that deal might look like? To that end, does he agree that to ask the organisations bidding for Government contracts to subscribe to the Government’s political view on Brexit is not only wrong but would take us down a dangerous path for the future?

Mr Lidington: I assure the hon. Lady that there will certainly be many opportunities to have the sort of the debate she seeks, when all views, including her own, can be expressed in full. Government contracts are allocated under a fair and transparent process that is laid down by the Cabinet Office.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): We all feel a real sense of loss at the passing of Sir Gerald Kaufman. In considering why, we remember, as hon. Members have done this morning, his many qualities such as his personality, humour, powerful intellect, dress, individuality and charm. In missing him, the greatest tribute we can pay is to ensure that his memory lives on and that we never forget the example he set to all of us.

When looking at Sir Gerald’s past, I noticed that he was shadow Home Secretary in the ’80s. I am sure that he would wish me to continue to hold the Government to account as he did then, so I ask the Leader of the House whether we can have an urgent debate on policing. Astonishingly, the Government have today failed to come forward with a statement on the policing crisis we face. Forces, including my own, are rationing their responses to the public in the face of a 15% reduction in the number of police officers between 2010 and 2020. It is not good enough. We need a debate. It is a crisis. What does he say to that?

Mr Lidington: First, I salute the hon. Gentleman’s tribute to Sir Gerald Kaufman.

In response to the hon. Gentleman’s challenge about the police, I would say that the police—like all parts of the public sector—have, indeed, had to face up to the need for very difficult decisions about budget priorities. Those decisions were made necessary by the parlous state of the public finances that the Government inherited in 2010, but chief constables, and police and crime commissioners, have responded extraordinarily well. Testament to that is the fact that there has been a significant fall in crime despite the reductions in police funding described by the hon. Gentleman. I pay tribute to the work that the police are doing and the leadership they have shown in setting those priorities and getting on with the job successfully.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): May I apologise to the House and to you, Mr Speaker, for not being here earlier? It was just not possible for me to be here, as I indicated yesterday.

I would also like to say a few words about Gerald Kaufman. I pay tribute to him, as hon. Members on both sides of the House have done. If there ever was a one-off, it was Gerald—in the way he approached his job and in the way he had various enthusiasms, not least films. Apparently, he saw “Singin’ in the Rain” 70 times, but he was not entirely satisfied with that, so he made

an appointment with Gene Kelly in Hollywood and wrote about it—it must have been one of the high moments in his life.

I knew of Gerald before I came to the House in the mid-60s, because he was quite a well-known journalist by then and wrote a regular column in the *New Statesman*. When I came here, he was what we now call the “spin doctor” for Harold Wilson. If you look at all the diaries about the kitchen Cabinet—the rows that went on, the difficulties about Harold Wilson’s private secretary and the rest of it—it is all very interesting, gossipy stuff, and it is perhaps politically interesting as well, but you will not find a single mention of any of that by Gerald. He never wrote about it, although he could easily have done so—he was a professional journalist, and he might have kept a diary, for all we know. The reason he did not write about it was that he was so dedicated to Harold Wilson as his employer, and he did not gossip about what went on in private proceedings. As I say, none of the exploits of the kitchen Cabinet at 10 Downing Street, which became so well known in political circles, was written about by Gerald.

I was once in the Members’ Lobby during the days when Gerald was a spin doctor. He said to me, “Come here a moment,” so I did. He said, “Look at those two”—they were two of my Labour colleagues. They were chatting together, and it was simply innocent, as far as I was concerned. He said, “You know, those two were hardly on speaking terms until recently, and look at them now.” What he was implying was that they were plotting against Harold. If Harold had paranoia, his spin doctor contributed to that, but he did so out of a dedication to the Labour Government.

Gerald spoke in the House when Harold Wilson died. He told us about his time as a junior Minister in the Environment Department dealing with transport matters. He said, “I received a memo from the Prime Minister saying, ‘Will you make provision for former Prime Ministers to have a car and a chauffeur?’” He said, “At that moment, I knew Harold Wilson was going to retire,” and he was probably right.

If I may, I will make two other points before I sit down. As has been mentioned by others, including Manchester colleagues of his, Gerald was dedicated to his casework. You will know, Mr Speaker, and you mentioned it yesterday, how he would rise in the Chamber and ask why he had not had a reply about so-and-so and so-and-so. It was not just occasionally—he did it quite frequently. That shows his dedication. Despite the fact that he did 46 years, he was as dedicated as a constituency Member of Parliament, by all accounts, as he was in his first week or his first year here, and that says a great deal about him. It also says a great deal about Members of Parliament in general, because there are very few now who do not take great care of their constituents in replying as promptly as possible and pursuing their cases.

The last point I want to make is perhaps controversial. Gerald was born in 1930. If ever there was a person of Jewish origin who understood the horrors of what was to take place by the time he was 15, it was Gerald. He knew from the very beginning, when the stories came out and the statements were made in the House of Commons, how Jews were being slaughtered in their hundreds of thousands—in the end, 6 million—not because of their politics or anything else, but for no

other reason than that they shared the same origin as Gerald, and indeed myself for that matter. From early times, he was an ardent supporter of Israel. Before he was a Member of Parliament, during the 1967 war, I remember his eagerness that Israel should survive. His great fear, shared by many others who became critics, was that if it was otherwise, the Jewish population could be forced into the sea, as in the threats that were made at the time.

But later Gerald became a harsh critic of Israel, not because he ceased to be concerned about Jews—a false accusation that was made against him from time to time—but because he believed that the Israelis were showing a total lack of consideration for Palestinians, thought that they were treating Palestinians, in many instances, with contempt, and felt a strong urge to speak out in the way he did. In doing so, he antagonised a number of people in the Jewish community, but Gerald was not the sort of person who would feel intimidated because people did not like what he said. I happen to believe that he was right. One would expect me to say that, because I too have very strong feelings about the way in which Palestinians have been treated: the contempt for human rights and the fact that, as far as I can see, the Israeli authorities—the leading people—show no desire to bring about a sovereign, independent Palestine alongside Israel.

Gerald was not the easiest of people to get on with. I had my own rows with him occasionally, and then we made up and spoke about films. He was difficult in many instances, but how many people with such courage, determination and single-mindedness do we not find difficult when we assess their lives? He did good; he wanted to do good. He was dedicated to the Labour party and the Labour movement, and to this country. We shall miss him a great deal.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he has said.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I wish to add my tributes, on my behalf and that of my party, to the late and much missed Father of the House, Sir Gerald Kaufman. He was an extraordinary servant of Manchester, which he represented for such a remarkable number of years, but, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) said, he was in fact originally a Leeds boy. He was born in Leeds, went to school in Leeds, and developed a lot of his political thinking in Leeds. Leeds is proud of him and pays tribute to him.

He was also the son of Jewish refugees who escaped pogroms in Poland. For the son of foreign refugees fleeing persecution to end up as Father of this House is not only an enormous tribute to him and his family but something that must surely send a very clear message today, in these troubled times. We should all reflect on it and be proud of his achievement. He was a great parliamentarian—a real defender of this Parliament. All of us who regard ourselves first and foremost as parliamentarians, ahead of our roles in government and party, have certainly lost one of our own.

With regard to my party, it has to be said that he was not always the greatest fan of Liberal Democrats. No doubt that was largely because of Manchester Liberal Democrats snapping somewhat unsuccessfully at his heels for many years. He was clearly never going to be

[Greg Mulholland]

shifted, no matter how long that continued. He had a large personal vote, in addition to representing a safe Labour seat.

Sir Gerald, as hon. and right hon. Members have said, spoke without fear or favour, and he will be long remembered for that. I think some of that goes back to his Leeds origin and famous Yorkshire bluntness. He had the courage to disagree with his own party leaders and colleagues. He had the courage to criticise journalists, as a former journalist. He had the courage, whatever people may feel about his views as a proud Jewish man, to speak out about the situation in Israel and Palestine. The legacy of that is that we must reach the stage where we feel obliged not to take one side or the other, but to fight, as he did, for justice, peace and resolution.

Sir Gerald, I am pleased to say, supported consistently the campaign for fairness in respect of pub companies and their landlords. I am proud to say that he was a parliamentarian who stood up for Parliament in the vote on the matter in November 2014, in which MPs defeated the Government on a three-line Whip after Ministers had not listened. I am proud of the fact that he was involved in that.

On that point, may I ask the Leader of the House for a debate on the way in which we tax pubs? In this country, 37% of pubs face a rates rise, and many thousands face paying £10,000 or more. That will put many pubs out of business. For pubs in Manchester, Leeds, London and all around the country, can we have a debate urgently in Government time about recognising the social value of pubs in the tax system? That simply does not happen at the moment.

Mr Lidington: Although I cannot offer a specific Government debate on that subject, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I am confident that the debate on the forthcoming Budget statement will provide him with the opportunity to raise all those questions.

Chris Bryant: I think the last Father of the House to die in office was T. P. O'Connor in 1929, so this is a very unusual moment for us. I support the earlier call for us to have a formal means of paying tribute to Members, so that the decision is not just left up to you, Mr Speaker.

I think I am the first gay MP to speak in today's business questions. Many LGBT people in this country are deeply grateful to Gerald. He campaigned on LGBT equality for a long time when it was very unfashionable, long before anybody thought of a Labour Government introducing equal marriage and all the rest of it. He had an impeccable record on that.

Sir Gerald loved musicals to the point of distraction. Everybody has referred to the fact that "Singin' in the Rain" was his favourite musical. I was on the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport when he chaired it. When the Committee went on tour—I use the term advisedly, because every year he insisted that the Committee had to go to the west coast of America, so we had to find something that we needed to investigate there—he would welcome us all to breakfast by singing, "Good morning, good morning". I remember him being very angry with the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant)—I am sorry the hon. Gentleman is not here—who said one morning, "Oh yes—that great song,

sung by Debbie Reynolds." Sir Gerald pointed out, "No, Debbie Reynolds danced in the routine, but she was dubbed by Betty Noyes. You should know that." He was, as has been mentioned, a great friend of Stephen Sondheim, and the first time he met me—I having formerly been a priest in the Church of England—his first words to me were from "Sweeney Todd": "Stick to priest!" But his favourite lyric was:

"shepherd's pie peppered

With actual shepherd on top!"

People have referred to Sir Gerald's dress sense. It was recondite, I would say. I think he probably outlived his tailor from Leeds, because he certainly wore Etro from Milan all the time by the end. It was not enough to have a loud suit; he had to have a loud tie and a loud shirt, neither of which went with the other. It was a kind of act of defiance against people's eyesight. I remember that when he was cold in Las Vegas airport, he wanted to go and buy a jumper, so he went off with Claire Ward, and when he saw the Missoni store he went straight in. He and Claire could not decide between two jumpers, so they asked me for advice. I said, "Gerald, they're both absolutely hideous. You shouldn't buy either of them", so he bought both.

Gerald had been at university with Rupert Murdoch, who had never given evidence to a Select Committee at that time, so on the same trip we went to Fox studios to beard him in his den, as it were. There was a great moment when Rupert arrived with his men at the end of a very long avenue of trees while we were at the other end, and we then marched towards each other as in the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. During the phone hacking scandal, I told the story about the lunch we had had with Rupert Murdoch, when Gerald had teased him about getting him thrown out of the Labour party for corruptly organising the election of the wrong person at university. I think they opened the wrong envelope—it feels as though that has been happening for the past six years in British politics as well, but anyway. I told a journalist the story about how Rupert Murdoch had been so violent and aggressive in the meeting—how he kept on hitting the rings on his hand against the table and all of that—and that I just thought it was so funny for all that to happen in the Judy Garland room at Fox studios. About three weeks later, Gerald came up to me in one of the Division Lobbies and was absolutely furious with me. Many people have referred to his reputation for giving a little bit of a sharp dig. He came up to me and said, "Christopher, you should know better! You told that story, but we were on tour." I thought he was going to say, "What goes on tour stays on tour," but he did not; he said, "It was not the Judy Garland room; it was the Shirley Temple room."

I remember once at a meeting of the parliamentary Labour party—the chair of the PLP, my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), has left the Chamber, so I hope it is all right for me to refer to something that has been said in the PLP—that he started his contribution with the words, "As Lana Turner once said to me," and a new, young Member of Parliament who was sitting next to me said, "What seat did she sit for?"

Gerald was also something of a fan of Bette Davis, and I am thinking of his last few years. Bette Davis once said:

"Old age is no place for sissies",

and I think Gerald would have agreed, because it was sometimes a travail for him to come to the House. He was quite frail, but when he had to represent his constituents he was absolutely determined to be here, and when there were issues he cared passionately about, he made sure he was here. I think the last year was tough for him. I know, Mr Speaker, that you visited him, as Claire Ward did regularly. I do not know whether it was “Sweeney Todd” or “Singin’ in the Rain”, but he was still singing musicals last Tuesday.

To move on to a serious subject, Gerald used to get very angry about ticket touts. He thought it was very unfair that people who contributed nothing to the performance or the venue and who did not enhance the experience for anybody should manage to make, in some cases, thousands or tens of thousands of pounds on the secondary ticket market. I just hope that the Government will do something about this very soon; we are still waiting for a review. In honour of Gerald, may we have a Gerald Kaufman memorial debate on ticket touts and the pernicious scum that they are?

Mr Lidington: I cannot help remarking that if Gerald Kaufman was actually able to sing along with numbers from “Sweeney Todd”, he must have had a very good musical ear indeed, because they have some pretty challenging lines.

In response to the hon. Gentleman’s question about ticket touts, I will refer to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport his point about wanting a review. I also draw his attention to the efforts being made in the Digital Economy Bill to limit what ticket bots can do in snapping up vast numbers of tickets for musicals and other public events and then selling them at, indeed, a quite extortionate price.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): First, I pay tribute to the late Father of the House, Sir Gerald. As I arrived in the House only in 2015, I did not get much of an opportunity to learn from him. However, while going through the voting Lobby, I observed how stylish and dapper his sense of dress was. In fact, one day he went through the Lobby with a fabulous Panama hat on. He spent time with two of my parliamentary colleagues on an overseas trip to Jordan, and they spoke very highly of him, including of how interesting all his parliamentary stories were. I will leave it to parliamentarians who had the pleasure and good fortune to serve alongside Sir Gerald between 1970 and 2017 to pay longer tributes to him, but I offer my condolences to members of his family who are in the Gallery today.

The Hansard Society, which is widely respected and regarded as an independent expert on Parliament and democracy, has warned that the current process of scrutiny is “not fit for purpose” for the Brexit process. The society’s director has warned that if Parliament is to fulfil its responsibility to hold the Government to account, MPs need better procedures. Will the Leader of the House inform the House whether he is taking these concerns seriously, and will he urgently review the parliamentary scrutiny process so that any necessary changes can be made before the great repeal Bill is introduced?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady makes a very serious and important point. The Government, including me, are indeed paying close attention to the question of how, given the implications of the Brexit process for both primary and secondary legislation, we can ensure that there is proper and fully adequate parliamentary scrutiny and parliamentary debate.

I hope I can reassure the hon. Lady on one point arising from the Hansard Society report. Any additional powers for secondary legislation that may be sought in new primary legislation, such as the repeal Bill, will of course themselves have to be approved by Parliament through the normal process. When such a Bill providing any kind of enabling power is introduced, Parliament will be able to debate and decide properly on questions concerning the scope, definition and duration of such powers.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It has been wonderful to hear from many long-standing colleagues of Sir Gerald. When I was first elected as a new MP in 2010, I distinctly remember deciding to take an office on the corridor above Star Chamber Court on the basis that if it was good enough for Sir Gerald, it was certainly good enough for me. To my delight, during my first week there was a knock on the door and it was the man himself, Sir Gerald. I was a young MP—I was only 29 when I was first elected—and I did not really know anyone down here and I was away from home, but our constituencies were quite close to each another. He knocked on the door and invited me to his office for a drink, which I thought was a wonderful gesture. We talked for hours: about Harold Wilson, about Jim Callaghan, about the winter of discontent, the 1983 manifesto, the Social Democratic party. He was a living encyclopaedia of Labour and British history. We talked a lot about foreign policy—about Kashmir, about Israel and Palestine—and many of the Labour party’s foreign policy positions are actually those that he set during his time as shadow Foreign Secretary. When I expressed my admiration of his office, which was rather more palatial than mine, he took very great delight in telling me that he had been given it over Tony Benn, who made expressly competing demands, on the basis that he had a longer period of continuous service, and that clearly still mattered a great deal to him. I believe that for someone so distinguished and experienced to give so much time to and take so much interest in lots of new Members is the mark of not just a great and true parliamentarian but a great colleague, and we really will miss him a great deal.

One piece of advice that Sir Gerald gave me that day was never to hesitate to raise on the Floor of the House of Commons a constituency problem that I was not able to resolve through paperwork alone. In that spirit and in homage to Sir Gerald, may we have a debate about decent access to universal broadband in all parts of this country? My constituent Peter Edwards of Matley in Hyde runs a business from home, but his business is severely hampered by poor broadband speeds. BT has not been able to resolve this matter satisfactorily in correspondence with me, but surely Mr Edwards should not have to wait to get a decent broadband connection. Universal access to good broadband speeds should be available for everyone.

Mr Lidington: We all know from our constituency experience how important it is for businesses, large and small, to have fast broadband access so that they can compete and sell to customers. If the hon. Gentleman will let me have details of his constituency case, I will refer it to the Minister responsible for digital affairs.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I did not know the late Father of the House but, as a student of politics, I was aware of him for many years. It is clear from today's tributes that he combined great intellect, principle and political acumen with warmth, humour and insight. I would like to pass on my sincere condolences to his family and friends, particularly those on both sides of the House.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for reminding us of Sir Gerald's work in campaigning for LGBT rights. As a gay woman, I am very grateful for that. I am particularly conscious of the fact that Sir Gerald campaigned at a time when it was not fashionable to support LGBT rights and when, sadly, not all political parties in the House supported them. That has now changed, which is largely due to the work of people like Sir Gerald.

Earlier this week, I wrote to the Home Secretary expressing my concern about the circumstances surrounding the deportation of Irene Clennell, whom the shadow Leader of the House has already mentioned. May we have a debate about flexibility and discretion in the immigration system, the need to respect basic human dignity and family life, and the need for due process? May I suggest that such a debate would be a fitting tribute to the late Father of the House, who clearly believed in such principles?

Mr Lidington: I understand the strength of feeling that the hon. and learned Lady expressed about that particular case. However, my understanding is that Mrs Clennell has spent the majority of her life, including her married life, in Singapore, that several applications were refused between 2003 and 2008, and that since July 2014, she has had no legal basis for remaining in the United Kingdom. I stress that all applications for leave to remain are considered on their individual merits, in line with immigration rules, and subject to the various appeal mechanisms under United Kingdom law. Obviously the hon. and learned Lady is welcome to raise that particular case directly with the Home Secretary or the Immigration Minister, but the facts are as I have outlined.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Like many Members and thousands of people throughout the country, Sir Gerald Kaufman had an impact on my life, not least because I was given a copy of his book, "How to be a Minister", for my 21st birthday, which probably had something to do with the fact that I became a Minister 25 years later. I had not forgotten the brilliant advice in Gerald's book about how to deal with one's ministerial box and civil servants, and about how to get things done, rather than just being a spectator in government. I am eternally grateful for his advice in that book.

Those who have paid tribute were right to mention Sir Gerald's assiduousness towards his constituents. I entered the House in 2001, at the same time as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), and I learned that business questions is the most important

session of the week and that Members of Parliament value it. It is more important in some ways than Prime Minister's questions because, apart from on the rare occasions when Mr Speaker has to curtail our efforts on a Thursday morning, it is an opportunity for every Member who is present to raise a matter. Sir Gerald often used business questions to raise a point, and it was almost always related to constituency casework: a Department that had failed to answer a letter; a Minister who had not come back with a quick reply; or even some other institution that had failed to treat correspondence from a Member of Parliament, acting on behalf of a constituent, with appropriate respect, or to furnish an appropriate reply.

Sir Gerald was absolutely right to do that because, whatever one's view of electoral systems and so on, the strongest thing about our democracy is the representative link between Members of Parliament and their constituents, and the way in which Members of Parliament use this place and their title of "Member of Parliament" on behalf of their constituents to help them—not to enrich themselves or to burnish their reputation, but simply to help the weak against the strong. That is what democracy should be about and Gerald, I think more than anyone in the House, showed us all how that should be done. We would all do well to remember, whatever heights we reach in politics—whether just the Back Bench or ministerial office—why we are here. Sir Gerald was an exemplar of how to do that.

As has been said, Sir Gerald was also politically brave. Although my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) said that this was a controversial point to make at the end of his remarks, he was right to mention Gerald's position on the state of Israel and its treatment of the Palestinian people. It was extremely brave of him to raise those issues in the House in the way that he did, and it is to his eternal credit that he did so.

People have mentioned Gerald's dedication to his constituency. One morning about four years ago, I was having tea in the Tea Room, as I often do—I was probably with my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda—when Gerald came in, dressed as usual in colourful fashion. My hon. Friend and I had a brief debate about exactly what colour his suit was, and indeed whether a word existed in the English language to describe such a colour. Gerald had a spring in his step and looked delighted. We wondered whether he had been to a musical the night before—he was whistling as he entered the Tea Room. Then the penny dropped. The Boundary Commission proposals had just been published and Manchester, Gorton was not to be dissected in any way. Sir Gerald was delighted that he could say, "Yes, I'll be standing at the next election, and the one after."

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda also mentioned Rupert Murdoch; as this is business questions, I think that Gerald would have wanted my next point to be raised. The Leader of the House will have read press reports about the speech that is being made today on the proposed takeover of Sky by 20th Century Fox. How will the Government inform the House of their intentions in relation to that announcement?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue about media ownership. He will know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture,

Media and Sport has to act in a quasi-judicial manner when making decisions about any proposed merger. It would therefore be wrong of her to express any kind of view in advance of a formal notification. If formal notification is made, she will make whatever decisions fall to her by law.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Anyone who has a love of musicals, Judy Garland and Bette Davis, and who can begin a sentence with the words, “As Lana Turner once said to me,” is positively sound in my book. Although I did not know Gerald Kaufman well, there is clearly much admiration for him, particularly among Labour Members. I send his family, friends and colleagues on the Labour Benches my sincere condolences.

On 24 March, it will be exactly one year since the shopkeeper Asad Shah was killed in my constituency by a man called Tanveer Ahmed. Members may know that the newspapers today cover a “celebration”—I hate to call it that—of Asad Shah’s death and the veneration of his murderer in Pakistan. Mr Shah was one of the most gentle and kind people ever to own a shop anywhere in the United Kingdom. He was loved by many people in the south side of Glasgow. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning the horrifying display that we can see in newspaper and online coverage? Will he also do something to ensure that what we remember is the kindness of this wonderful man and his wonderful family, not the demagoguery of the man who took him from us?

Mr Lidington: I willingly join the hon. Gentleman, and I am sure the entire House, in expressing unreserved revulsion at and condemnation of the event he describes. It is, frankly, sickening to hear that human beings could be prepared to behave in such a fashion. I remember, from reading and seeing news reports just under a year ago, the sense of shock and genuine grief on the part of people in the south side of Glasgow. People from very different ethnic and religious heritages felt that they had lost a friend and a devoted champion of community life. That is how we should remember.

In a sense, the best tribute would be for people in Glasgow in particular, and all of us, to redouble our resolve to eradicate from our society this scourge of bigotry, whether it is based on racial, religious or any other grounds. I hope very much that the Pakistani high commission in London, which I think will have been equally appalled by these news reports, will have taken note of the words that the hon. Gentleman has spoken this morning.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): As a fellow Greater Manchester MP, it was my privilege to visit Sir Gerald in his constituency and see for myself the love of his constituents and the esteem in which they held him. He will be greatly missed in that constituency and by everybody in this House. Like everybody, I will miss Sir Gerald’s sartorial elegance. I remember one day, when he turned up in a particularly flamboyant number, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) commented that several deckchairs in Blackpool must be missing their seats.

My last memory of Sir Gerald is his absolutely barnstorming speech from the Labour Back Benches against the forced academisation of schools. I was

pleased—no doubt this was thanks to the efforts of Sir Gerald and many others—that the Government backtracked on those plans.

Another subject very close to Sir Gerald’s heart was the NHS. With that in mind, I would like to request an urgent debate on the activities of NHS Shared Business Services. When I worked for Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, NHS Shared Business Services put in a bid to run our payroll services. As trade union reps, we did a quick search of the internet and found a catalogue of woeful errors it had left in its wake from the NHS contracts it already held. May we have an urgent debate about why it was allowed to carry on performing NHS work?

Mr Lidington: The issue with NHS Shared Business Services was identified by the Department of Health and NHS England in March 2016. They immediately established an incident team, which is still working to try to resolve the situation. A team led by NHS England, including clinical experts, has now reviewed all 708,000 items of correspondence. Some 2,500 were identified as having potential risk of harm and required further investigation. Local GPs have now identified nearly 2,000 as having no patient harm. There remain 537 active cases, and they are still being followed up so that we can be absolutely certain there has been no harm to any patients. So far, there is no evidence to suggest actual harm. When the investigation is complete, I am sure that it would be reasonable for the relevant Health Minister to report to the House.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I would like to associate myself with the many wonderful tributes to Sir Gerald Kaufman and offer my condolences to the family. It is interesting to hear so many stories, and it is through such stories that we remember our own. As a very new Member—within the first month of my being here—I had my first opportunity to have a quick chat with Gerald in the Lobby. I remember saying to him, “I really like the look of your new suit.” To this I got a long, slow languorous look up and down to say, “You’re not doing too bad, either.” I assure the House that I will aspire to Gerald’s sartorial nature.

The UK Government claim to support a world free of nuclear weapons, achieved through multilateral disarmament, yet bizarrely they plan to boycott multilateral negotiations at the UN to ban nuclear weapons. May we have an urgent debate about the Government’s important obligation not only to support but to participate in this UN conference?

Mr Lidington: I will draw the hon. Gentleman’s concern about the conference to the attention of the Defence Secretary, but the Government’s position is very clear indeed. We are a party to the non-proliferation treaty. As the hon. Gentleman knows, that gives particular responsibilities to the acknowledged nuclear powers. We remain an active supporter of the independent inspectorate. We are a very active supporter of multilateral nuclear disarmament, but that has to take place in a way that is genuinely multilateral. It is sometimes easy to come up with suggestions for unilateral action or slogans that do not actually deliver what is needed: detailed treaties that help to reduce the nuclear threat.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): It has been really good to remember Sir Gerald Kaufman today. I used to talk to Gerald in the Members' Tea Room about film whenever I could, and I got some great recommendations about what important films I should see.

May we have a debate on the rent to buy sector? Customers are being ripped off across the country. In my constituency, young families who are struggling to get by are being told by BrightHouse that they can buy a cot for their baby for just £5 a week. However, because of eye-watering interest rates, they end up paying £780 for a £283 cot. That is just not on.

Mr Lidington: It is very important that people who are tempted by offers of apparently cheap finance really do look hard at the underlying terms and conditions before they commit themselves to what turn out to be quite extraordinary and extortionate repayment obligations. The law is not always the right answer when trying to deal with these matters, as sometimes that just has the effect of driving such activity underground, but this is the sort of question that the Government keep under review the whole time.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): As a relatively new Member, I confess that I did not have the opportunity to get to know Sir Gerald Kaufman personally, but I can tell by the warmth of the tributes that have been paid to him today that I have seriously missed out in that regard. I would like to extend my sympathy to his friends and family.

My constituent, Mr Johnson from Whitburn, was medically disqualified from driving. Since his treatment, he has made an excellent recovery. In June, with favourable reports from his consultant and doctor, he applied to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to resume driving. May we have a statement or a debate in Government time on how long such DVLA reviews take? I was informed in September that the process would take a few weeks, but his file is with a specialist DVLA professor for review and he is still waiting for a conclusion.

Mr Lidington: The best advice I can give is that the hon. Gentleman pursues the matter directly with Transport Ministers and the chief executive of the DVLA. The principle has to be that somebody who has temporarily lost their licence on health grounds should be able to reapply and have their case looked at fairly on the basis of the evidence, but those assessing the evidence clearly have to satisfy themselves that other road users and pedestrians would not be put at risk were their licence to be restored.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): May I associate myself with the comments about Sir Gerald Kaufman? I hope that in my time here I achieve a fraction of his stature in the House and reputation as a doughty campaigner.

Given Sir Gerald's passion for all things related to culture, as well as the recent by-election in my great city of Stoke-on-Trent and some of the appalling coverage it received, can we have a debate in Government time on why my great city should be designated City of Culture in 2021?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady has launched the campaign this afternoon, and I am sure she will have opportunities, whether in questions to Ministers or debates of various kinds, to make the case even more strongly. Most of us know that the towns making up the modern city of Stoke-on-Trent have an amazing history of cultural contribution to our country, most notably through the pottery industry, but also in the role Stoke played in the industrial revolution and in the development of British industry and technology over many years. We have seen with Hull this year the difference that being designated City of Culture can make to a city's self-confidence and opportunities. I hope, without prejudicing any future decision, that one day Stoke-on-Trent might have that opportunity as well.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): I would like to associate myself with the remarks about the late Father of the House. I did not know Gerald as well as some of my colleagues, but I always found him to be immensely kind.

I wish to talk about my private Member's Bill on boundaries. Last year, more than 140 Members, from every region and every party, stayed on a Friday to vote overwhelmingly for the Bill. It was and is the will of the House. Yet, instead of allowing it to progress into Committee and, if they so wish, voting against it on Third Reading—if they could get the votes—the Government have chosen to engage in what I can only describe as a series of dirty tricks to prevent it from getting into Committee. I suspect it was because they feared I would have the support of the Committee and that the Bill would have progressed to Third Reading. I remind the Leader of the House that we had a referendum in this country in which the sovereignty of Parliament and the will of the House was an important feature. Yet this has demonstrated to me that the will of the House counts for nothing if it clashes with the will of the lady in No. 10. I have worked well with the Leader of the House in the past—I shadowed him when he was Europe Minister—and I have found him to be a decent man, but this has not reflected well on him. It has not been well done.

Mr Lidington: There is no doubting the hon. Lady's commitment to her private Member's Bill, but in fairness she must acknowledge that the Government are the Government only by virtue of having a majority in the House of Commons and that the Government came into office with commitments of their own on boundary changes—commitments on the basis of which they fought and won a general election. I understand that it is possible for her Committee to meet and to begin debating, irrespective of whether a money resolution has been secured. My advice is that the Committee convene and begin its work.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): In May 2005, I was in the Tea Room, and I was rather chuffed to be sitting near Sir Gerald Kaufman, listening to him talk. A Whip came in and said that the queue to take the Oath of Allegiance was short and that any new Member who wished to join it could do so, even though it was ahead of the days allocated. Gerald turned to me and said, "Go! One day, it might help you to be Father of the House." I slightly glazed over at the thought of how

old I would have to be, and how long I would have to totter on for, to be Father of the House, but I heard this voice say, “Go!”, and I did. Yesterday, female MPs were sent a list of where they stood in the ranking of women elected to the House, and I am ashamed to say that I took some pleasure in noting how many women who arrived in the same year as me I was ahead of because of that advice. I am 264th and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who is sitting opposite and who went to school in Bridgend, is 265th. I cannot begin to tell the House the pleasure Sir Gerald will always give me thanks to that little piece of advice.

Sir Gerald also talked about the importance of focusing on the people who send us here, so that is what I shall do. Is the Leader of the House aware that the automotive industry is worth £71.6 billion a year to the economy, and an additional £18.9 billion in added value; that it directly employs 169,000 people; and that more than 184,000 are employed in the wider industry? Is he further aware that 12% of the total value of UK exports and goods comes from the 30 manufacturers building 70 models of car and the 2,000 component providers working in the industry—never mind the £4 billion invested in automotive research and development? Given events in Bridgend yesterday, may we have an automotive summit composed of hon. Members, appropriate Ministers, automotive companies and trade unions involved in this great British industry, the future of which we must work to secure post-Brexit?

Mr Lidington: I completely understand the vital importance of the automotive industry both in the hon. Lady’s constituency and in the country as a whole. There will be questions to the Business Secretary on Tuesday 14 March, but I will certainly ensure that he is aware of her concerns before then. I hope she knows that he is committed personally to doing all that is in the power of Government to ensure that the UK automotive industry is competitive and able to deal with the challenges posed by Brexit and the wider issues of global competition and digital technology, and that the Government are determined to ensure an industrial strategy that delivers jobs and prosperity to every part of this country.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): May I associate myself with the many warm tributes to the recently passed Father of the House?

The Tory-Labour coalition administration running Stirling Council recently tried to privatise sports service provision in the area and was only forced to back down because of public outrage, having spent a colossal sum of money in pursuit of that policy. May we have a debate on the provision of public services more generally so that we can help to educate Tory and Labour councillors in Stirling that privatisation is not the answer for these services?

Mr Lidington: The judgment that local authorities of all political colours, as well as national Government, have to make is what outcome will be best for the people we serve who use particular services. The quality of outcome for the service user is more important than whether it is provided through a directly managed service or one managed by a contract of some kind.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): In paying tribute to Sir Gerald, I speak, I think, as the newest Member of the House currently present in the Chamber; seven by-elections have followed mine, but I think I am the most recently elected Member here at present. I do not think I ever had the privilege of actually speaking with Sir Gerald—he became very ill following my election in May 2016—but I did receive a note from him on my election, as I did from many Members from across the House. The note said, without quoting it verbatim, that, “As the Member for Ogmore, get comfortable, you could be here for some time,”—if anybody knows the history of my seat, they will know about that—“but don’t take it for granted.” He then decided to give me a potted version of the chequered history of my three immediate predecessors, all of whom he had served with. I will never, ever release the letter, especially to my immediate predecessor, who is now the Assembly Member for my constituency, but that experience will live with me for the rest of my life.

As many Members have mentioned, the key point of Sir Gerald’s work in this House was championing his constituency, and I am sure the Leader of the House was in the Chamber yesterday and heard the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) to the Prime Minister about Ford, which affects many hundreds of workers in my constituency. May I echo the calls that my hon. Friend has made for an automotive summit? May I also request that we do not just wait for questions to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but that we have a statement on the Floor of the House to explain what the Prime Minister meant yesterday about there being ongoing discussions with the automotive industry and how exactly the Secretary of State will help the people of Bridgend and ensure that Ford continues in the years ahead?

Mr Lidington: As I said in response to the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), I will, well ahead of questions on 14 March, ensure that the Secretary of State is fully aware of the concerns that both the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Lady have expressed, and I will ask the Secretary of State to consider the requests for a summit and for a statement.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): May I echo the sentiments expressed on the passing of Sir Gerald? I have enjoyed listening to the heartfelt tributes from Members across the House on his passing, and offer my condolences to his friends and family.

Following a promise of near-federalism, voting no to remaining a member of the EU, the plea that we lead the UK rather than leave it before immediately proposing English votes for English laws after the independence referendum, a promise that agriculture and fisheries would be devolved in full, and the establishment of a UK-wide position for triggering article 50 after the EU referendum, will the Leader of the House facilitate a debate on broken referendum promises made to the Scottish people?

Mr Lidington: The promise that I remember being broken is the promise that the referendum in Scotland would settle the issue for a generation.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House and all colleagues who over the last two hours and more have contributed so eloquently and with feeling, based on their knowledge and appreciation of the late Sir Gerald. These are very difficult, fraught and perhaps even harrowing times for members of Gerald's family; I hope that they will derive some succour and comfort from knowledge of the affection and esteem in which their great family member was held in this House.

Reference was made to the fact that I, among others, had visited Gerald in recent months; I did indeed visit him twice at his London home, most recently in January, and I will always treasure my very close memory of the conversations we had. His recollection of historical anecdotes was second to none and they were often extremely amusing. He was a very special person, he was certainly a great parliamentarian, and I am sure people will understand if I say that, alongside being an outstanding and indefatigable Member of Parliament in his constituency, Gerald was quintessentially a House of Commons person. I think that on behalf of colleagues I can offer no greater tribute to Gerald than to say that.

Point of Order

12.54 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. First, may I associate myself with those eloquent remarks, and completely concur?

I know you were in the Chair, Mr Speaker, when the unaccompanied children in Greece and Italy debate occurred—I know that because you cut the time limit for speeches immediately before I spoke. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] That must have been said by a Whip. There was a strange occurrence at the end of that debate, however. There was suddenly, in the normal way, the call of Ayes and Noes, and there was a bellowing of Noes from the Opposition Benches; in fact, I remember the Labour Deputy Chief Whip bellowing that he did not agree with the motion. Because we had passed the time of interruption, there was a deferred Division. Well, lo and behold, the results of the deferred Division were reported in *Hansard* this morning, and I can find only one person, who happens to be Conservative Member, voting against the motion. Normally when a Division takes place, there has to be at least two Tellers and somebody who has objected. It appears to me that this was a totally contrived vote to waste the time of the House and cost the House money. But perhaps I am misunderstanding it. I would certainly like your advice, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. It certainly would not be for me to suggest that any Division of the House was contrived; I am not in a position to make any such statement. There is of course a very long-standing convention in this place that vote should follow voice; that is to say, it is profoundly disorderly for somebody to shout in one direction and then vote in another. However, the convention is quite strict and, in my experience, clear: a Member must not vote in opposition to the way in which he or she shouted; there is, however, no obligation to vote. It is therefore conceivable that somebody could shout in one direction and subsequently not be present in the Division Lobby. I am neither advocating nor denouncing such a practice; I am simply recognising the procedural and constitutional reality for what it is. Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman, who is himself doughty and indefatigable, has registered his point in his own inimitable way.

BILL PRESENTED

SENIOR JUDICIARY APPOINTMENTS (DISREGARD OF AGE OF CANDIDATES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Keith Vaz presented a Bill to require those responsible for the selection and interviewing of candidates for, and appointment to, the posts of Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, the President of the Queen's Bench Division of the High Court of England and Wales, the Keeper or Master of the Rolls and Records of the Chancery of England and the President of the Family Division of the High Court of England and Wales to disregard the age of applicants under 70 years of age; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 150).

Backbench Business

International Women's Day

12.57 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes International Women's Day as an important occasion to recognise the achievements of women; and calls on the Government to join in this international event and pledge its commitment to gender parity.

I am honoured to lead this debate today and pay special thanks to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and the hon. Members for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) for supporting the application to the Backbench Business Committee, on which I remain the only woman member.

International Women's Day is an opportunity for all of us to use our voices to celebrate the amazing women of the world. It is also our opportunity to send a rallying cry out to the world about the hardships and injustices women everywhere still face. With each passing day, it seems that right now the women out there need to hear us in here and how we support them more than ever before.

It will surprise no one that the subject that I will speak about today is violence against women and girls. Before my rallying cry, I want to reflect on where we were last year and where we are now. As I closed my speech on International Women's Day last year, I declared that the women murdered in the UK deserved better than what they got. I pressed this House to hear their names and feel their pain.

I have been proud to be a Member of this House in the past year, where parliamentarians, including my hon. Friends the Members for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) and for Hove (Peter Kyle), myself and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke and many others, called on the Government to overhaul a family justice system that leaves women and children damaged and unsafe. Our calls were heard, and an establishment—an actual establishment, in this time when we talk of establishments—that others said we would never change will now begin to improve. From this place, a message was sent to women living in fear, and hundreds of them have contacted me to express their gratitude.

Last week, the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) did a thing that few will manage in their time here when she pushed her Bill to ratify the Istanbul convention through this place to its completion, regardless of those who wanted to stop it. That Bill will mean that a Minister will stand at the Dispatch Box in this place every year and lay out to us exactly how they are going to protect vulnerable women and children.

Yesterday, the Government finally heard the calls that have echoed round this place for over six years and made sex and relationship education compulsory. We have waited too long for this, but the euphoria felt by myself and many campaigners across the House made me want to cartwheel down the halls.

The work over the years of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract

and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), the right hon. Member for Basingstoke and many others means that girls will now be safer. These changes in the past year are not exclusively due to but have been led and pushed through by the women in this place, with the support of amazing women's organisations such as Girlguiding, Women's Aid, IC Change and many other female-led organisations.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jess Phillips: Briefly.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The issue that the hon. Lady has rightly drawn to our attention has international implications. Does she agree that one of the most important things we can do is provide the incentives for girls to remain in school much longer? That reduces the opportunity for early marriage, from which so many of the evils of which she has spoken flow.

Jess Phillips: I absolutely agree. Every time a girl stays in school in any part of the world and uses her education to stand up and speak for the other women in the world, the whole world becomes a better place. Women with voices matter. Women with voices change things. Women with voices in here give hope and protection to women without a voice at all. I am proud of our efforts, and today I will lay down another marker and say that there is still much to do.

Last year, I rose to my feet in this House and read out the names of the 125 women who had been murdered by men. I decided that I would do that every year while I still had the privilege to be in this place. While we have achieved many things here, I hope that this list once again reminds us of all the reasons we must keep going. I want to stress that this list is the Femicide Census, which is collated by Karen Ingala Smith. The list is made up of all the women killed where a man was the perpetrator or is the principal suspect. While the majority of these deaths can be attributed to partner violence, they are certainly not all in that category and include all the women murdered by men they did not know in the UK since last International Women's Day. Their names are:

Lyndsey Smith; Robyn Mercer; Paige Doherty; Carrie Ann Izzard; Lynne Freeman; Jodie Betteridge; Joanna Trojniak; Amina Begum; Natasha Sadler; Laura Marshall; Elizabeth MacKay; Marie Johnston; Norma Bell; Tracy Cockrell; Helen Bailey; Leigh-Anne Mahacci; Jean Ryan; Coleen Westlake; Nasreen Khan; Laraine Rayner; Fay Daniels; Louise O'Brien; Xin Liu; Natalie Hemming; Becky Morgan; Iris Owens; Julie Cook; Khabi Abrey; Anne-Marie Nield; Maria Mbombo; Maria Erte; Sonita Nijhawan; Dawn Rhodes; Sylvia Stuart; Andrena Douglas; Karen Hales; Jade Hales; Jo Cox; Helen Fraser; Jean Irwin; Nijole Sveteckiene; Agnieszka Szmura; Sarah Nash; Albertina Choules; Allison Muncaster; Fiona Southwell; Emma Baum; Claire Hart; Charlotte Hart; Tracy Gabriel; Samia Shahid; Nicola Haworth; Lenuta Haidemac; Hannah Pearson; Margaret Mayer; Darlene Horton; Gregana Prodanova; Lynne Braund; Donna Williamson; Xixi Bi; Mia Ayliffe-Chung; Shana Grice; Alison Farr-Davies; Melinda Korosi; Hayley Dean; Annie

[Jess Phillips]

Besala Ekofo; Zofia Sadowska; Elizabeth Bowe; Nasreem Buksh; Zoe Morgan; Jackie Pattenden; Natasha Wake; Mandy Gallear; Lucy Jones; Vicky Bance; Alice Ruggles; Sophie Smith; Jodie Wilkinson; Pardeep Kaur; Ellia Arathoon; Belen Trip; Natasha Wild; Deeqa Ibrahim; Lisa Skidmore; Rebecca Johnson; Linda Ordians; Holly Alexander; Andraya Webb; Umida Eshboboeva; Angela Best; Claire Nagle; Hayley Wall; Nicola Woodman; Eulin Hastings; Victoria Shorrocks; Leonne Weeks; Kiran Daudia; Kulwinder Kaur; Anita Downey; Ann Furneaux; Chrissy Kendall; Gillian Zvomuya; Amandeep Kaur; Tina Billingham; Hannah Dorans; Catherine Kelly; Hang Yin Leung; Karina Batista; Humara Khan; Hazel Wilson Briant; Margaret Stenning; Avis Addison; and Julie McCash.

Let these women be our inspiration. Let these women be the ones who drive us. I would ask each and every one of us to remember these women, one of whom was one of us. We must remember them when we make our decisions and when we use our votes and our voices. We have a responsibility to be the voices of these women, now they are gone. On this International Women's Day, let us remember why we are all here and let us raise our voices.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, I must inform Members that there will be a time limit of five minutes on other Back-Bench contributions and that, if there are too many interventions, that will have to be reduced.

1.7 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is an enormous pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). She is right to say that we are here to raise our voices. Another hon. Member who is particularly good at raising her voice is the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford), to whom we should all pay tribute for the way she works on behalf of women, not only in her constituency but throughout the country. It is a particular pleasure to see you in the Chair for this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I should also like to thank the members of the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity to hold this debate, and to hold it here on the Floor of the House. I hope that it will become entrenched as part of the parliamentary calendar from now on. I also want to thank the numerous organisations that have so carefully prepared briefings for us today. They include the National Federation of Women's Institutes, Women's Aid, the Young Women's Trust and Relate—the list goes on. Without their experience and frontline work, our debate would not be as rich as it is.

We are here on a daily basis, and we are reminded daily of the challenge that we still face in achieving equality. The job is far from done. When I tell people that I was only the 265th woman MP ever to be elected in this country, they cannot believe it. Indeed, I was the first ever female MP in north Hampshire, though I am proud to be joined on these green Benches by at least two other female MPs representing Hampshire and leading the way on women's issues. I think that there was another in our midst earlier.

I sat in the Chamber yesterday to see the swearing in of the newest Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison). It was heartening to hear that she is the 456th woman MP. Things are changing, but there is still a steep hill to climb. To mark International Women's Day, it is right to applaud the work of organisations such as Women2Win, led by my noble Friend Baroness Jenkin, and 50:50 Parliament, and also individuals such as Professor Sarah Childs and our very own Mr Speaker. All are absolutely committed to ensuring that there are more women in this place after the next general election.

Women's lives have changed for the better over the 100 years since we were given the right to sit in this place. We have a record number of women here and record numbers of women are in work. The right to request flexible working benefits thousands of women, and the gender pay gap has been all but eliminated for younger women. There are no more all-male boards in the FTSE 100, which the Government felt was a significant milestone that demonstrates the importance of female representation at the heart of decision making. I am therefore somewhat surprised that a third of Government Departments—eight out of 25—have all-male ministerial teams, so we may also need some targets there.

The theme for this year's International Women's Day is "Be Bold For Change" and we must all be bold. There can be no hiding places. Women's Institute research shows that 70% of women still feel that they are not equal to the men in this country, that women are judged by different standards, that women who stay at home to raise children are not valued in today's society, and that despite record numbers of women in work the way that our workplaces are structured means it is still difficult to balance work and home life. We understand all that. Those problems have not gone away. We must continue to modernise our country's approach to reflect how women's roles have changed, not simply try to retrofit women into a workplace designed for a different age.

Men are also central to any change. Working Families' "Modern Families Index" shows that men want change, too. So many families now have two full-time working parents—one in three—and 47% of dads want to downshift to a job in which they can better balance work and family life. A third of dads would even take a pay cut. The sorts of false choices that women have been forced to take for generations are now being forced on men. One of the many reasons why the Women and Equalities Committee is looking carefully into the role of fathers in the workplace is so that we can solve such problems for them as well.

The establishment of the Women and Equalities Committee has given hon. Members the opportunity to drive forward the scrutiny of Government equalities policies and particularly of how those policies affect women. I hope the Minister will take this opportunity to update the House on the Government's support for making the Women and Equalities Committee a permanent feature. The value of the Committee's work is clear to see. In our report on sexual harassment in schools, which was published last September, we uncovered disturbing levels of sexual violence against girls in schools. Indeed, it was the third Select Committee report to call for sex and relationship education to be made compulsory for all children in all schools.

With the support of more than 40 other Members, my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and I tabled an amendment to the Children and Social Work Bill that was due to be debated next week. The amendment, which also had the support of the Chairs of the Health and Education Committees, was intended to make relationship education compulsory. I am delighted that the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson), did so much work on this and that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education has been able to take the idea forward and will put it in the Bill for the Government to press on with next week. That is the sort of change that cross-party working can achieve. I also put on the record my thanks to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for her support in ensuring that that work was truly cross-party. Organisations such as Barnardo's and Girlguiding worked hard on making sex and relationship education a top priority for politicians. We should thank them for that hard work and their assiduous campaigning.

I want to highlight the work done and progress made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. This week, she announced a review of online abuse, which will be of benefit to women in particular, and sits well alongside making relationship and sex education compulsory. I urge the Government to support a Law Commission review of online law, particularly the need for anonymity for adults who are subject to online abuse through images in what is commonly known as revenge pornography. The revenge pornography helpline was put in place by this Government and provides victims with invaluable help. Is the Minister able to update the House on its future?

All of us will acknowledge that the Government have made great progress on several issues that particularly affect women. I acknowledge the personal role of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in championing the cause of stronger legislation around domestic violence. The Government recognise the complex nature of domestic abuse and coercive and trolling behaviour. I pay tribute to the campaigning work of Women's Aid in this area, which demonstrates that domestic abuse is not simply about physical violence. Training for police officers is critical if the legislation is to work as intended, so is the Minister able to tell the House how many police officers have received approved training on domestic abuse issues?

Time is short today, but there are a few more issues that I want to shed light on. It is right that Parliament scrutinises issues, including how they might affect vulnerable groups, and the Government are to be applauded for recognising that an exemption is needed around new child tax credit limits, which will come in next month, for women who have children conceived by non-consensual conception or rape. We must ensure that our policies do not penalise women who live in an abusive relationship, perhaps in fear of what might happen if they leave. They are perhaps one of the most vulnerable groups of women. What plans does the Minister have to ensure that that group are not penalised as a result of the actions of the men they live with?

Our country has done so much on the world stage to champion women's rights, and we should be proud of our international reputation. I am sure that Home Office Ministers carefully followed the national refugee women's

conference in London this week. We need to look at how to ensure that women refugees in this country are properly supported. However, the sustainable development goals that the Government signed up to begin at home. In advance of the Commission on the Status of Women meeting in New York later this month, I hope that the Minister is able to reaffirm this Government's specific commitment to implement sustainable development goal 5 in this country. How do the Government plan to ensure that the devolved Administrations are compliant with SDG5? Is there a plan for the harmonisation of women's rights across the UK? Universal access to sexual and reproductive health services and to reproductive rights is central to the sustainable development goals. My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) and the then Prime Minister David Cameron fought hard for that goal. We must fight hard for women's rights internationally, but we also must fight hard for every woman in this United Kingdom, including in Northern Ireland, and not hide behind the fact that such matters are devolved.

We will not make the necessary progress unless we lead by example. We need to address the lack of women in this place, the fact that some Departments have no female Ministers, and the need for the permanent scrutiny of equality issues. We must be bold for change, and we must advocate that that change is as strong at home as it is abroad.

1.19 pm

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I have spent much of my time in this place encouraging and celebrating women. At the turn of the century I made a study of how much difference the 101 Labour women who were elected in 1997 made, and it was clear that it was because of women in this place that, for example, our defence forces started focusing for the first time on the needs of the families of those who fight. It was because of women in this place that Budgets started resourcing women's purses, rather than men's pockets. Frankly, it is very sad that since 2010 the tradition, which started in 1999, has been reversed. I hope that when the Chancellor delivers his Budget on International Women's Day he might go back to recognising that it is time for women to benefit at least as much as men, if not more. After all, we put our money into the pockets of children, and men use their money for their own pleasure—I generalise, but it is true.

My speech will concentrate on violence against women. We all have constituents who have been groomed by pimps, beaten up by violent partners or subjected to forced marriage or genital mutilation. It is important to think about how we help them. Rather than just supporting the expert organisations—in my case, East Berkshire Women's Aid and Sewak Housing—we must ensure that organisations that are not so expert actually realise their own failures. One organisation in Slough is very good at promoting itself but, frankly, is not very good at protecting women. I have called out Jeena International on those things because it cannot offer people a service and then let them down.

We also need to try to increase resilience among women by helping them to be aware of and to resist the risks of grooming, and so on. I have tried to create a network, largely of south Asian women in my constituency, that aims to build their resilience and that of their sisters.

[*Fiona Mactaggart*]

It aims to raise women's awareness of things such as how to help their sons deal with porn on the net.

I will finish by focusing on some of the most vulnerable women in the world. Yesterday I had the privilege of hosting a meeting organised by Khalsa Aid, a flexible, opportunist aid organisation led by the Sikh community in Slough. Khalsa Aid has been working with Yazidi women. When Daesh overran the Yazidi community, many women starved and expired of thirst after they were abandoned on a hill. What happened to the other Yazidi women afterwards was more degrading than most of us can imagine. They were bought and sold like radios or books. They were raped, beaten up and forced to watch their children being raped. Their sons were kidnapped so that Daesh could try to turn them into terrorist jihadi fighters.

Daesh developed a kind of bureaucracy with rules for using the people who are owned. One of the 15 rules states:

"The owner of two sisters is not allowed to have intercourse with both of them; rather he may only have intercourse with just one. The other sister is to be had by him, if he were to relinquish ownership of the first sister by selling her, giving her away or releasing her."

That is today. That is the reality of slavery. We call modern slavery "slavery" in the UK, but this is ancient slavery. It is horrifying to look at the price list. A woman of between 40 and 50 years old is worth £27—that is her price. Daesh publishes the prices because it wants the money to buy bombs with which to blow us up. Terrifying, a child under nine is worth four times as much—£109 is the price of a young girl.

Those women have participated in an exhibition called "I am Yazidi" that tells their stories and shows photographs of them. I hope to bring the exhibition to this House, but in the meantime I encourage everyone to see it.

Ravi Singh of Khalsa Aid told me about one woman who managed to fight off her rapists, who then turned on her daughter. After her daughter's abuse, her daughter said, "Mum, it's your fault." The woman does not know where her daughter is now, and she is terrified that her daughter still believes it is her fault. That is the extremity of violence against women, and we should work in solidarity against it.

1.24 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is an honour to speak in this debate about International Women's Day, a privilege that few women across the world are yet able to enjoy. I congratulate our determined and passionate colleague the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) on securing this debate and on continuing her great mission in this House.

I am proud to follow in the footsteps of my predecessor as MP for Berwick-upon-Tweed, Mabel Philipson, who was only the fourth woman to be elected to this place—she was first elected in 1923. I am only the 378th woman ever to be elected to this House, of a total of 456. I very much hope that the number increases sharply in the years to come, and we all have a part to play in encouraging women who are already passionate about their families, their businesses, their communities and their country to

play their part in shaping the future of our nation by standing for election to this place. Our latest arrival, No. 456, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), is a walking example of that, and she is the woman who took us across the line—the total number of women ever elected to this House is now greater than the number of men currently serving in this Parliament.

I shall focus my remarks on the women who serve in our armed forces, often in unsung roles. They work just as hard as their male counterparts, and often harder. Many of us civilians are perhaps unaware of the huge strides that women have made in their crucial roles protecting our nation. We are perhaps already aware of the vital part that women played, through necessity, during the great war and the second world war, when women stepped up, ably and with great passion, to take on the roles left vacant by the men who had gone off to war.

During the first world war, 100,000 women served in the uniformed services, primarily as nurses but with few officially close to combat. The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps was formed in 1917—100 years ago—and provided women with jobs as telephonists, clerks and chauffeurs. The Women's Royal Naval Service was created in the same year and saw women taking on domestic work within the Navy, freeing up men for combat roles. The Women's Auxiliary Air Force was formed a year later, with women working as drivers, cooks and record keepers.

Beyond the uniformed services, women took on a range of roles left vacant by the men who had left for war. From working in munitions factories to driving trains, women rose up to fulfil what had been seen as "male" roles. Of course, many of those women were forced out of their job once the surviving men returned to the UK, but their ability to take on such roles demonstrated to society how capable women are and what a valuable resource they are to our economy. Just a year after the end of the war, the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 made it illegal to exclude women from jobs because of their gender.

Women have played an integral role in our armed forces for a century, but what of their role today? As of October 2016, there are 15,380 women serving in our armed forces, making up just over 10% of the total across the three services, with more women serving in the RAF than in the Army and Navy. That represents an increase of three percentage points over the past decade, but there is clearly much more to do. Just as we need more women serving in this place, the talent of women to serve and defend our nation must be harnessed more effectively.

The value of having more women in our armed forces extends beyond their individual contributions. The female of the species brings a different perspective to the challenges of war fighting and peacekeeping in the modern age. The presence of women during peacekeeping operations brings an opportunity to gain access and insight to local communities that is simply not permissible for our male military personnel.

As they serve, women are quietly proving that they are an invaluable asset to our nation, from Royal Navy officers Captain Ellie Ablett, recently promoted to command HMS Raleigh, and Commander Eleanor Stack, who has taken command of HMS Duncan—one of our Type 45 destroyers which I had the privilege to inspect

last year—to Commodore Inga Kennedy, the most senior female officer in the Royal Navy; Major General Susan Ridge, our most senior female Army officer; Brigadier Sharon Nesmith, who was the first woman to command a brigade of 5,000 soldiers; and Air Vice-Marshal Elaine West, the most senior woman in the RAF. Those women, and the 15,000 serving across our three armed services, are an inspiration to girls and women today who, when pondering their future career choices, can be inspired by the leadership of those amazing women in leading roles in the armed forces.

The future of our nation's great asset, the finest armed forces in the world, is safe in the hands of its women and men, and I look forward to continuing my efforts to encourage more young women to study maths and the sciences and then to take up careers as engineers, medics and musicians, pilots and navigators, submariners and logisticians, linguists and intelligence officers. Those are all rewarding career choices both within the armed forces and as civilians with the extra military skillset of personal self-discipline, commitment and passion for a chosen trade.

This time next year I hope to be able to report that the statistics for women in our political networks and our armed forces have continued to grow, and I also hope to report that my recent application to join the Royal Naval Reserve has been accepted. I encourage other colleagues to consider applying too.

1.29 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I wish to focus on Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a British citizen, charity worker, mother, daughter, sister and wife, who has been imprisoned in Iran for almost a year now. Nazanin lives 10 minutes down the road from me in west Hampstead. Her life was not very different from mine until she went on holiday to visit her parents with her two-year-old daughter Gabriella, who is also a British citizen. She was detained at the airport and, following trumped-up charges, handed a five-year sentence.

Long periods of Nazanin's detention have been spent in solitary confinement in a wing of Iran's notorious Evin prison. Her health has been deteriorating further and further, and her mental health has also been affected. Last week, she tried to walk to the prison clinic, but could not physically make it there and collapsed. After she came round, many hours later, she could not speak for hours on end. Doctors at the hospital in Iran have said that she needs immediate treatment to prevent long-term damage.

Nazanin's detention, and her lack of legal representation and access to her family, fit the UN's criteria for torture. It is therefore not a surprise that the UN has said that her detention is unlawful and arbitrary. Some 800,000 people have called for her release, and Nazanin's family and I took a petition to the Foreign Office with the signatures of 200 MPs from different parties.

This country is not perfect in our treatment of women in prison, and more than half a million women and girls are currently in appalling conditions in prisons around the world. The excuse we often hear for criminal justice systems not having gender-specific options is that the proportion of women prisoners is too tiny to require circumstances to be changed. That is not a good excuse; we must ensure that the needs of female prisoners are met.

It was no surprise when in 2010 the UN General Assembly voted unanimously to adopt the Bangkok rules, the first international instrument to address appropriate conditions for female prisoners around the world. The rules also outline safeguards for the children of female prisoners. Iran has signed up to the Bangkok rules, but it has flouted them at each and every stage of Nazanin's detention.

I ask the House to bear with me as I read out just how those rules have been flouted. Rule 23 states:

"Disciplinary sanctions for women prisoners shall not include a prohibition of family contact, especially with children."

Try saying that to two-year-old Gabriella, who spent her second birthday without her parents and has not seen her mother for the best part of the past year. Rule 26 states:

"Women prisoners' contact with their families...shall be...facilitated by all reasonable means",

especially when they are detained in prisons located "far from their homes." Try saying that to Nazanin's husband, Richard Ratcliffe, who has had barely any phone calls with his wife. Those that he has been allowed have been monitored by Iran's revolutionary guards.

Iran has signed up to the Bangkok rules, and so have we. As I said, our record is not 100% positive. We need to look at our prisons and the way in which our female prisoners are treated, but that does not mean that we should shut our eyes to abuse in other countries. We should be shouting loudly to make sure that Nazanin, a British citizen, is reunited with her family and brought back to this country. I went to the Foreign Office with a Government Member, the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden), but the Foreign Secretary did not come down to receive the petition, and he has repeatedly declined my request for a meeting.

I shall end on this. I am a female Member of Parliament, and I ask another female Member of Parliament, the Prime Minister, to do something to secure Nazanin's release so that she can be brought back to west Hampstead and reunited with her family. The Prime Minister has said that she wants to be a compassionate leader; if there was ever a time to show compassion, this is it.

1.34 pm

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): It is an honour to follow that passionate speech by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). The theme for this year's International Women's Day is "Be Bold for Change", so that is the theme of my speech.

In medieval times, a woman who killed her husband was guilty of not only murder but petty treason, because she had betrayed someone superior to her. Her punishment was to be drawn and burned alive. In comparison, a husband who murdered his wife was hanged. Why was the woman's crime worse than the man's? Because she threatened the established social order, in which each person had, and knew, their place. By killing his wife, the man did not threaten that order.

The law was changed in 1828, and four years later the Reform Act 1832 gave the vote to 300,000 more people, but none of them were women. Between 1870 and 1904, women's suffrage was debated 18 times in this House. In every vote on the matter from 1886 onwards, a majority of MPs were in favour of allowing women the vote, but we did not get it until 1918.

[Nusrat Ghani]

I shall read out some of the arguments that were made against women being given the vote—arguments that we probably still hear when we are going about our business, delivering public service. They included that women are by nature subordinate to men; that men are made for public life and women for private; that allowing women to vote would, heaven forbid, allow them to think that one day they could become MPs—an idea that was self-evidently absurd; that only men should legislate for women because only men know what is good for women; that we have no grievances, and if we do, they can easily be put right by men; that politics would get women over-excited and lead to nervous breakdowns; and that if women had the vote, they would be pestered on polling day.

Political parties had their own motivations. For the Labour party, votes for women would just enfranchise more of the propertied classes; for the Conservatives, women voting would lead to socialism; and for the Liberals, women were too conservative by nature, so the Liberals would lose elections.

Not everything has changed, but some things have. I want to put on record the women we must acknowledge who came to this place before us. The first female MP to take her seat was elected in 1919. We got our first female Cabinet Minister in 1929, our first female Prime Minister in 1979, and our first female Speaker—the legend that is Baroness Boothroyd—in 1992. Yesterday, in 2017, when my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) was sworn in, we got our 456th female MP, finally surpassing the number of male MPs currently.

It has taken us close to 700 years to reach this stage, and we still have a long way to go. With only 30% of our MPs being women, we are behind Italy, Germany, Norway and Rwanda. I want to send out a message today to any young girl or woman who is listening and wants to enter politics. I want her to hear loud and clear that everyone in this House will welcome her wholeheartedly.

We have moved on from the medieval age; we are now in the technical age. We are among the first generation of parliamentarians who have had to deal with modern technology and the access it gives the public to their politicians. Those of us who use social media know what it is like occasionally to go on to Twitter and Facebook and see a barrage of abuse from trolls. These faceless and nameless cowards need to be called out and challenged. When the Minister responds, will she say what more can be done to put pressure on social media companies and search platforms to encourage them to take down the hate and abuse that is focused on women just because of their gender, faith or heritage? It would be a grand day if, when all the women in this House saw a fellow female parliamentarian being abused just because of who she was, we all went on to social media and drowned out that hate.

I shall finish by thanking some of the female leaders in and around my constituency. Five of the eight East Sussex MPs are women: my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd); my hon. Friends the Members for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) and for Lewes (Maria Caulfield); the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas); and me. We have a female chief executive of the county council, Becky Shaw, and a female police and crime commissioner,

Katy Bourne, as well as dozens of fantastic female councillors at county and district level who have mentored me and are inspiring leaders in their communities. They are the ones who show, each and every day, that politics is very much the business of women.

1.39 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and all the female Members who have spoken in the debate so far. Notwithstanding the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), it is a shame that there are not more men participating in this debate—[*Interruption.*] I am pleased that he has saved us all some time.

The theme of this year's day is, "Be Bold for Change". It is a call for women and our allies—I thank the few men who are here—to think outside the box, to envision, to be more inclusive, to ensure we have a more gender-equal and fair society, and, ultimately, to be the change that we want to see in the world. Yet today, despite all the progress that we have made, there are still too many women who are adversely affected by cuts, pay disparity, domestic violence, sexual assault, rape, and female genital mutilation. I could continue, but the list only reminds us of how far we still have to go.

I am pleased to say that, last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) made history in this House by ensuring that the ratification of the Istanbul convention will proceed. I am grateful to all women's aid organisations, both in Scotland and across the UK, and to IC Change, which helps to deliver the services on which women rely every day.

Although I welcome the Government's actions on the gender pay gap—I was proud to sit on the Committee overseeing legislation on that matter—they do not go far enough. It is simply not good enough if a baby girl born today has to wait until 2041 to achieve gender parity. I am pleased that the Government are taking action but, as always, I want to push for more.

I want to highlight some of the bold and courageous women from my constituency who have acted for change and made a difference. Those women have shaped my world view and my view of politics. They are one of the reasons why I am standing here today—this is not the institution that I aim to be in but, none the less, I am here.

I recently went to see the film "Hidden Figures" which documents the untold story of African-American women working at NASA, challenging gender and race stereotypes. The fact is that, all too often, many women who do both ordinary and fantastic jobs every day remain hidden in our society. We should recognise them, although no films are made about a cook, a cleaner or an ordinary woman who works hard but does not earn the same as a man.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the election of Winnie Ewing in Hamilton in 1967. She was a lawyer who became the second ever SNP MP. Therefore, being a young girl growing up in Hamilton meant knowing about strong, passionate women who believed that they could change things in politics, and I hope that that is what I am here to do. Winnie Ewing went on to be known as Madame Ecosse in Europe, and she led the way in fighting for many of the protections that we

enjoy today. We must ensure that Brexit will not remove those equality protections. Winnie was unquestionably bold and she acted for change. As well as increasing representation in this Parliament, I wish to see an increase in women local government representatives after the elections in May.

Hamilton was also the home of the late and great Margo MacDonald. Margo challenged the established political order in 1973 in the Govan by-election, and she went on to have a long and successful career in journalism and politics. Sadly, Margo lost the battle with Parkinson's disease, but she never lost the courage to fight for what she believed in. She was indeed bold and brave in striving for change. Like me, she wanted Scottish independence—I remain resolute that I will see that in my lifetime.

One more great woman who inspired me from a young age is Horse McDonald, who grew up in the area of Lanark. She is a role model for many in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. Her play "Careful" outlines her own experience of growing up in Lanark. She displayed bravery at a time when being an openly lesbian musician was challenging to say the least.

I have named just some of the inspirational women from Lanark and Hamilton East, but, as I said earlier, there are many more who do ordinary jobs and live ordinary lives, and also deserve to be recognised.

Let me outline one final matter that I wish to change. The Prime Minister has committed to review domestic violence legislation, which I welcome, but I ask her to consider the cross-party calls for a review of the child maintenance tax for domestic violence survivors. I have gone on at great length about that, but if the spirit is to be bold and to ask for change, I will continue to do so.

There is still much work to do. As we celebrate women across the world, let me quote some words from Maya Angelou:

"If you don't like something, change it."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Who could argue with that? I call Lucy Allan.

1.44 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and her excellent speech—indeed there have been many excellent speeches so far. I am pleased that there are so many women who are being bold and who are bringing about change in this place, and I am proud to be one of them.

I am deeply proud of being Telford's first ever Conservative MP, and of overcoming the odds and obstacles to make that possible in what was once a safe Labour seat. However, I am prouder still of being Shropshire's first female MP since 1929 and of overcoming the odds and obstacles to make that possible, because that was the greater challenge.

No one should underestimate the difficulties and roadblocks that, inevitably, are still there for women who want to come into Parliament and get the voices of women heard. It may not be as difficult as it was in 1929 when Edith Picton-Turbevill was elected to be MP for The Wrekin, or in the days of my family member, Janie

Allan, who was a militant socialist suffragette arrested for smashing windows in Downing Street. In 1912, she was imprisoned in Holloway where she was force fed.

I have no doubt Janie Allan would be proud, and probably also amazed, that I am here and can go to Downing Street to make my voice heard without the need to smash any windows, and that when I do so, the Prime Minister is a woman. I pay tribute to Janie Allan for her daring; she was a bold woman. I also pay tribute to the women who came after her who enabled us to be in this place today.

Sometimes, we minimise the difficulties that women face in getting into Parliament and in staying here. Sometimes, we prefer just not to talk about it. However, if we pretend that there are no problems, we do no favours for the women who are still to come to this place.

The increase in women MPs since 2005, when there were only 17 female Conservative MPs, has created transformational change in the make-up of the House of Commons and it has transformed the things that we talk about and the debates that we hold, which is to be welcomed. We must pay tribute to Baroness Jenkin, our Prime Minister and the organisation, Women2Win, which has helped so many women over those years. Today, seeing 70 women Conservative MPs in Parliament, is a proud day, but the work is not yet done. For more women to stay in Parliament and to follow on behind us, we need to speak out about some of the obstacles that we experience. That will make it easier for the women who come to this place after we have gone.

I am becoming increasingly concerned about a tendency to treat certain crimes, where women are predominantly the victims and men predominantly the perpetrators, as gender-neutral crimes. It is suggested that, as these crimes can happen to men too, they are not about gender relations, and that the male/female dynamic is irrelevant. I do not agree with that. I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is not in his place to hear this part of my speech. An example of where that is happening is child sexual exploitation. The perpetrators are men and the victims are almost entirely women and yet, because there have been some male victims, we are told that it is a gender-neutral crime. If we fail to understand that some crimes are predominantly committed by men against women, we cannot tackle the causes and we cannot provide the support that women need to recover from these crimes.

Child sexual exploitation is about the exploitation of a power imbalance between men and women, and it is where men groom and trade young girls for sex with other men. If we do not see it in those terms and we say that child sexual exploitation is a form of child abuse, that gender is irrelevant and that the perpetrator's gender is irrelevant, it does not take us any further forward. This is a crime perpetrated by men against women, and let us not pretend otherwise.

I do not have much time left, so I shall cut to the chase. I began by talking about the difficulties that still exist for women to get into this place and stay here; I want to add that most women do not want any special treatment or favours. No one wants to be perceived as complaining. In fact, when I first came here, I did not want to be labelled as a woman who would speak up only for women's issues, and I steered clear of the Women and Equalities Committee, but I am now extremely

[Lucy Allan]

proud to be a member of it and to have had a complete change of heart. I want to be a voice for other women whose voices cannot be heard.

1.50 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I want to use today's debate to highlight an oral history learned at my mum's knee about the match women of London's east end, who took control of their lives, setting ablaze a fire of trade union activism that not only secured better conditions at work for themselves, but inspired an era of labour organisation that would see workers' rights entrenched and a political party of labour founded.

These courageous, poor, ill-educated women worked in appalling circumstances at the Bryant and May factory in east London. In 1888, they came out on strike to secure safer working conditions. Yet their story has been misrepresented and their impact on the early days of the labour movement has been underestimated—they were not the ones writing the histories. Their victory is attributed to Annie Besant, although not in the version I heard from my mum; in fact, she had never heard of Annie Besant. Let us give Annie her due—she did much to highlight the horrific working conditions at the factory—but she was opposed to the strike. She tried to dissuade the women from going on strike; she feared for them.

The version of history in which the defenceless waifs of London's underclass were rescued by the principled, sympathetic middle-class champions has been comprehensively debunked by the amazing, remarkable, redoubtable author Louise Raw. In her brilliant book "Striking a Light", she meticulously details just how the match women, led by five workers—Alice Francis, Kate Slater, Mary Driscoll, Jane Wakeling and Eliza Martin—knew their own minds, designed their own tactics, led their own movement and forged their own history. They were the true leaders of the match women's strike.

Witnesses at the time were in no doubt of the significance of the event. *The Star* newspaper reported:

"The victory of the girls...is complete. It was won without preparation—without organisation—without funds...a turning point in the history of our industrial development."

But the true story of the match women is so much more than just proud local women's history. These women were and are integral to our national story. History records that it was the heroic London dockers of 1889 who spurred the foundation of the labour movement. But the record needs to be clear that it was London's working-class women, a year earlier, who were the vital spark of trade unionism. The men learned from the women—they learned from their mothers, their wives, their sisters, their daughters and their neighbours. John Burns, a leading trade unionist at the time, told the striking dockers—men—to

"stand shoulder to shoulder. Remember the match girls, who won their fight and formed a union."

Today the leaders' names have echoed in this Chamber. But it ain't enough. We have no memorial to them—their fight, their impact and their place in history. I have asked the Government before, and I ask again: please put pressure on English Heritage. We need to get this changed. I have tried, and so far I have been unsuccessful. English Heritage does not seem the least bit interested,

despite its recent commitment to reflect diversity in its blue plaque scheme. I want a blue plaque on the site to recognise the true leaders of the match women's strike and the 1,400 women who came together to withdraw their labour, demanding and winning safer and fairer working conditions. We need a plaque to remember the women who organised, who fought and who won against massive odds—women who were instrumental in founding a political labour movement that continues to fight for fair pay and conditions for all of Britain's workers.

1.54 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): I am delighted to speak in this important debate and to follow the very powerful speech from the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who can count on my support for her campaign.

The UN's theme for International Women's Day this year is

"Women in the Changing World of Work: Planet 50-50 by 2030" and the global theme is "Be bold for change", but 2030 is only 13 years away, and there is still much to be done. The Prime Minister has called the gender pay gap—the difference in earning power between men and women—a "burning injustice". I could not agree more.

We still have some way to go in the changing world of work in the UK. British women still have 71% of the economic opportunity that men have. Yes, there are other countries that are doing much worse, but the UK should be a leader in this area. Sadly, we are not.

UN sustainable development goal 5 describes gender equality as a world issue. It is a sad statistic that between 1995 and 2015, global female labour force participation decreased from 52% to 49%. Only 69% of women are employed in the UK, compared with 78% of men. The global gender pay gap is 25.5%, but the UK gender pay gap is 19.2%. That is not something to be proud of. We cannot lecture other countries around the world that we have it better. If the current trends continue, it will take 70 years to close the global gender wage gap, but the Government have vowed to reduce it within a generation.

If we are going to be bold for change, we will have to look very hard at where we can make a difference. One way to address that is by looking at older women in the workplace. I want to focus on women returning to work, particularly older women. One of the findings from the gender pay gap inquiry by the Women and Equalities Committee, on which I serve, was that women who have been out of the workplace for more than six months find it difficult to get back into employment. The longer they are out of work, the harder it is.

I set up the all-party group on women and work with the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) to look at the barriers to work. Our group has proved to be incredibly popular—we have standing room only at most of our meetings. There is still a definite need—I wish it were not so—to help women in the workplace. Our first all-party group inquiry was about women returning to work. We published our report in January, and it seems to have struck a chord with employers and women up and down the country.

There are some very good examples of companies that are already doing it, but we need to do much more to get people on board and to see the wisdom of

tapping into the life experience and work-related experience of older women employees who are keen to get back into work. In my view, companies that cannot see the potential are missing a big trick. To put it quite simply, there is a huge pool of talent out there.

People take time out of the workplace for all sorts of reasons. The biggest reason is caring responsibilities, whether for children or for elderly relatives. Some people, including me, took time out because we think that parenting is the most important job in the world and we wanted to take responsibility for bringing up the next generation—there is absolutely nothing wrong with that view. For others, childcare costs are an enormous barrier for women who want to return to work. Having 30 hours of free childcare will help, but I fear that too many men and women are not taking time out to look after their children because they are worried about getting back into work. Taking time out of the workplace is a huge financial commitment, but more would be prepared to make that choice if they knew that they would not struggle to get back into work at a later date. Families would be in a better place to budget, too.

The more social investment and measures that Governments can put in place to balance work and family commitments for both men and women and to recognise the importance of looking after children, the better. I am pleased that the Government have recognised many of those points in their policies, but we need to take it further. For instance, our group's report found that few people were taking up shared parental leave—just 1% of men are taking it up. It is considered complicated and unwieldy.

There is little recognition of the work that women—it is predominantly women—do when they are at home. We have to stop this idea that just because someone has taken time out of the workplace, they are any less capable. My heart sinks when people dismiss mothers or fathers who are staying at home; what is more important than bringing up the next generation? It should be treated as equally important as going back to work.

Many women who have been out of the workplace for some time have lost confidence and do not know how to start, but several organisations are addressing this. We are incredibly grateful for people such as Julianne Miles, the co-founder of Women Returners, who contributed to our report. Companies need to be flexible in their approach and in their conditions. They must not see a gap in a CV as a barrier and show a reluctance to employ someone. Employing older women and men is a huge economic opportunity, especially if we are going to live until we are 90, as the predictions are for South Korea. I challenge all companies: be bold for change and lead the way.

1.59 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I rise to speak as No. 404. Obviously, none of us should simply be a number, but being only the 404th woman to be elected to this place seems astonishing to me, in this day and age, when we would all like to believe that we had moved beyond all that. But we have not. Both at home and further afield, the life chances of women and girls are too often hindered by barriers, sometimes insurmountable ones, that should not be there.

We all know of exceptional and inspiring women in the public eye who have overcome those barriers, against all the odds, but there are many women who plough through more quietly and are just as influential, and who are no less impressive for being out of the public eye; women such as my late mother-in-law, Harbhajan Kaur, who spent her young life in rural India, where she taught other young women, before moving to Scotland and raising her own family, teaching her own girls to be strong, independent women, as she was. Today we must applaud all the individual women around the world who are pushing against the barriers.

I recently saw an Indian television advert about a cheery chap called Gurdeep who ran a sweet shop selling piles of delicious-looking laddoo. His shop was called Gurdeep Singh & Daughters, and the message behind the advert was that girls can do anything that boys can, which of course is true. In some ways it is a great shame that in 2017 we even need to say that. But we do need to say it, and that holds true here just as much as it does in India.

In too many ways we are nowhere near where we should be. Last year, the median average earnings for full-time female employees was £12.82, as opposed to £14.16 for men; less than 27% of FTSE 100 company directors were women; and in this House—well, it has a long way to go. I am pleased that the Scottish Government are very focused on action to make a difference to these and other areas of women's lives, and we do need action. We need action here, too, such as the brilliant work of my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford), who did such a great job in shepherding through her Istanbul convention Bill. We do need frameworks, which is why the Scottish Government's commitment to gender equality is so influential. These commitments, and role models such as our First Minister, make a significant difference to women's lives and the aspirations and beliefs of our girls.

Those things also make a difference to the aspirations and beliefs of our boys. As a mum of fantastic boys, I believe that I would be doing them a huge disservice if I did not spend time ensuring that they understand that girls and boys, men and women, are equal in value, in ability and in every way. So the fact that equality for women is at the heart of our vision for an equal Scotland, and seeing that commitment in action in those who influence us, makes a huge difference. It is important for all our children to see these principles of equality and fairness in action in public life, as well as in their own daily lives.

We all know someone whose commitment to women's issues and to equality has inspired us. We in this place must amplify that, live it every day and show it, so that all our young people have every prospect of success, whatever their identity. When I was a wee girl, I cannot say that I was inspired much by the most famous female politician of the day—even then I knew that she did not speak for me. But I also knew perfectly well that I could do whatever I wanted with my life, and be whoever I wanted to be, because I was inspired by another politician much closer to home: my own mum. She lived a life that was very far from ordinary, and she believed in her girls in a way that every child deserves. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) said, she was the change that she wanted to

[Kirsten Oswald]

see in the world. That is what we all need to do in this place, here in our Westminster ivory tower. We are in the most privileged position. If we do not use it to push the rights of girls and women, we are letting ourselves down, we are letting our girls down, and we are letting our boys down, too.

Let us rise to the occasion. Let us not just come here every year and agree—I think that largely we do agree—that the rights of women really do merit some attention. Let us all commit this year to making a concerted effort to do the big things and the small things, to make the decisions and to change the policies that really will make a difference.

2.4 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): International Women's Day is an opportunity to celebrate the amazing achievements of women around the world. I therefore want to begin by marking some of the great accomplishments of women from my constituency of Ogmore. Norah Isaac, who was born in Caerau, was one of the greatest 20th-century Welsh authors and a passionate advocate of the Welsh language. Norah's accolades include being the first woman ever to be a head teacher of a Welsh medium school, and later, at Trinity College in Carmarthen, establishing the first ever Welsh drama department. Sian Lloyd, from Maesteg, is one of the UK's longest serving weather forecasters, after spending 24 years at ITV Weather. Aside from her meteorology work, Sian is also known for her charitable efforts, including her support for the Prince's Trust.

The achievements of women have built our world to what it is today, but unfortunately so many women are suppressed and limited by a world that still favours men. I want to encourage each and every male Member of Parliament to use the platform that we have been given to highlight that injustice. It is our duty in Parliament to highlight injustices, and one of the greatest injustice that remains in the world today is the barriers preventing women from succeeding.

The situation for women in the UK should embarrass us all. In the workplace, according to the Opportunity Now campaign, for every £1 a man earns, a woman earns 81p. One in 10 women have experienced sexual harassment at work, and over half of tribunals involve some form of sex discrimination against women. There are unfair pressures on women that men simply do not face in day-to-day life. For example, one in five women are carers, and they can face even more significant difficulties balancing work life with other responsibilities.

On a global level, only five countries have gender pay gaps below 10%, and some have a disparity of close to 40%. Internationally, only 1% of land is owned by women, and only a fifth of managers are women, in all walks of life and professions. Progress is being made, but in my opinion the speed is far too slow.

I passionately believe that men must be far more vocal on these injustices. Ultimately, the fight for gender equality should be led by women. However, as allies in the fight, we male Members of Parliament must use the platform that we have been given to highlight the injustices.

I want to focus for a moment on the scale of femicide in the UK. In December I raised in this Chamber the femicide census published by Women's Aid and nia. The

report details the cases of nearly 1,000 women in England and Wales who have been killed by men since 2009, demonstrating the absolute worst product of sexism in the UK. It showed that the majority of women killed by men are murdered by their former or current partner, in what the report says is often "the final act of control" in an abusive relationship. Following the release of those data, Women's Aid and nia called for long-term funding of specialist domestic abuse and sexual violence services, as well as additional funding for specialist projects for women to exit prostitution. The partnership also called for a specific recognition that post-separation is a significantly heightened risk period for women leaving abusive relationships.

That report and the subsequent recommendations were published on Wednesday 7 December. The following day, in this Chamber, I called on the Government to make a statement on what they will be doing to put a stop to any more women being killed at the hands of men through domestic violence. I am disappointed to say that, 12 weeks later, there has been no public response from the Government on those recommendations—I am happy for the Minister to correct me if that is not the case.

I am pleased by the action being taken by the Welsh Government down the road in Cardiff Bay. The Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 improved the consistency, quality and join-up of service provision, introduced a needs-based approach to developing strategies that will ensure strong strategic direction and strengthened accountability, and worked to promote the awareness of, and to prevent, protect and support, victims of gender-based violence, domestic abuse and sexual violence. Since the Act became law, the Welsh Government have consistently looked for new ways of tackling domestic violence.

I started my speech by naming two women who are famous for their accomplishments in various fields of expertise. I will end by paying tribute to the many women in my constituency, and probably in every constituency, who frankly are the lifeblood of our communities, be they the women who run the football clubs, the youth clubs, the scouts and the guides, or the business leaders, the managers, the public servants and the entrepreneurs, and all the women who hold public office, in this Chamber and every council and Assembly Chamber across the land. Their leadership is vital, their achievements are many and, frankly, they do a damn sight better job, often with more complex lives, than many of the men I know who do it.

2.9 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): May I say how pleased I am to represent the Liberal Democrats in this debate on International Women's Day, as the 454th female MP? I am proud to say, in contrast to some previous Members' contributions, that I am not the first, nor even the second, woman to have held my seat. I am, in fact, the third Liberal Democrat woman to represent Richmond Park, and I am extremely proud of that.

One of the advantages of being a London MP is that I get to go home to my family every evening and spend time with them every morning. As the mother of young children, this is a particular blessing to me, but it does mean that I live a life of contrasts. Yesterday, for

example, I spent the first part of the morning trying to get my son to clean his teeth and my daughter to brush her hair. I then travelled into Westminster and challenged the Prime Minister in the Chamber about her spending priorities for education. Of the two things, the latter was more remarked upon—it was heard by Members here, recorded in *Hansard* and shared on Twitter—but getting my son to clean his teeth was the greater achievement in many ways. It took more ingenuity, effort and emotional commitment, but nobody noticed, cared or applauded me for it.

It often sounds ironic or self-deprecating to refer to the tasks of motherhood as being more taxing than tasks carried out in the professional sphere, but in this case, I am not being ironic; it is precisely true. We are so used to underplaying the work we do as mothers and in the home that we do not think anyone will take us seriously if we talk seriously about it. So today, in the spirit of the motion to recognise the achievements of women, I want to celebrate the everyday, unacknowledged, unrewarded and unnoticed achievements of women.

I start with childbirth, which is probably the ultimate feminine achievement. Women are often told not to make too much of a fuss about childbirth, with people saying, “Millions of women all over the world and throughout history have done it, and most of them don’t have access to pain relief,” “It’s the most natural thing in the world,” and so on. But the births of my three babies continue to be the most profound experiences of my life. We do not actually talk all that much about childbirth. Yes, we discuss the timing and order of events such as what we were doing when we went into labour and how long it took, but we have not really developed a language to talk about how it feels or how it makes us feel. We just do not have the words. Although the experience leaves a lasting imprint, it is never fully acknowledged. The memory of childbirth remains with us—unshakeable and unshareable, but never fully expressed. I want to take advantage of this occasion to say what a huge achievement it is to give birth, and how proud we, as women, should be of our capacity to do that.

I also want to acknowledge those first weeks and months of a baby’s life when a woman gives herself over entirely to looking after her child. We all choose different ways to do this, but the achievement is the same. Whether our children are now fully grown adults or still small children, they are only here because their mothers kept them alive in those early weeks and months. Again, the effort and sacrifice that takes is often dismissed or overlooked, so I tell mothers everywhere to be proud of what they did because their children would not be what they are without them.

The long days and short years of childhood that follow are full of minor, unacknowledged successes such as wrestling them into coats, coaxing them to sleep and getting them to eat vegetables—the hard, hard work of persuading resisting children to do what is best for them. Each tiny triumph is a building block to a better person, but the reward is a very long way away, and nobody will remember the battles fought to make it happen. So, to every mother who managed to get her children up, dressed, teeth cleaned and to the school gates on time this morning—particularly in their World Book day costumes—not just this morning, but every morning: be proud and do not underestimate yourself. It is a great achievement to raise children.

I am conscious that people will think I am stereotyping women by referring only to their achievements as mothers. If I am doing that, it is because I want to focus on the things that only women do and only women can do. I am just as proud of women who achieve great things in a professional, creative or sporting field, especially if they do it against a background of gender bias, but I want to focus on the things that only women do. I do not want to ignore the role of men in childrearing. All the fathers I know are as equally involved in the unglamorous, difficult bits of parenting as the mothers, but this debate is about International Women’s Day, and we should acknowledge that, globally, the vast majority of childrearing and domestic work is done by women. The truth is that this is why our achievements in this sphere are so often overlooked and underappreciated. It is because this work is done by women that it is so often ignored or taken for granted.

I am as grateful as any other woman of my age that social progress has enabled me to have a broader life than just being a wife and mother, and I am glad that so many other women are also making the most of opportunities to leave their homes and go out to work. It makes a positive difference, not just to them and their families, but to our economy and society. However, it means that women are not at home to do the unpaid domestic labour that they might have done 30 years ago and have done for centuries. We have found ways to outsource the tasks of childrearing and domestic upkeep, and meet the costs of that from our own pocket, but the job of looking after sick and elderly relatives is now increasingly being met by the state, and we need to find ways to meet the costs of social care that result.

2.14 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I have been absolutely inspired by what I have heard this afternoon. In fact, I have rewritten my speech a good deal as I have been sitting here, but I am going to make the one that I originally started with. When I was asked to take part in the debate, I was also asked whether I could give the perspective of an older woman. I resisted for all of about 10 seconds, because I have now fully embraced my age.

A mother gives her child the best future she possibly can. She teaches her children what her mother taught her. My mother was born in 1919 and was an intelligent, caring woman who only wanted what was best for her three daughters, but she was raised in a time when men ruled. One of her favourite expressions to me was, “Marion, hen, don’t argue with your father. Just know that you’re right.” I could never take that advice and I frequently argued with my father, but I could only actually do that when only he and I were there, because he still had to be seen as the man of the house, and as untouchable and unarguable with it.

My husband was raised by his mother and four older sisters, although women are still a complete mystery to him. His mother insisted that George did not have to do any housework. Why should he? He had four sisters; I have heard frequently over the past 46 years how they felt about that. Many years later, he actually said to our daughter, “Rachel, why haven’t you tidied up?” My daughter said, “Why haven’t you asked my brothers that?” And he said, “Because you’re a girl.” I am not denigrating my husband—I actually asked him whether

[Marion Fellows]

it was alright to tell these stories, because he knew I was going to do it anyway—but I just want to point out how much progress has been made in this regard. My husband would be horrified and absolutely heartbroken if his granddaughters did not receive equal opportunities and pay, and equality across the board. This is how progress has been made. It has not been easy and it is still ongoing work, but we have made progress in the Fellows household.

I have personally been discriminated against in my lifetime. I secured an exciting new job setting up jobcentres across the east coast of Scotland in 1974. When I phoned to confirm the final arrangements for starting, I mentioned I was pregnant and was told, “Goodbye.” I never started that job. It is vital that the kinds of tests that I had to face are never, ever revisited. Although there are laws to protect us, it is attitudes that matter, and attitudes have to change.

When I started working, I actually got equal pay with the men I worked alongside in Midlothian County Council. However, when I was a councillor in 2012, before I entered this place, I found myself on a member-officer working group on equal pay. The women on North Lanarkshire Council who did the best and worst jobs—home support assistants, lollipop women and all that—had fought for 10 years, but only when they went to a woman lawyer, Carol Fox, was their claim finally made. That should not happen.

I realise that I do not have much time left, but the one thing I want to say is that this is not about me, my family or the UK. I went to one.org last night, and I want to say, here and now, that I fully support its “Poverty is Sexist” campaign. It is vital that we educate women across the world. I quote the African proverb:

“If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family”

and a nation. Let us do that. Please Minister, let us make sure that there is absolutely no cut to what we give to women internationally.

2.19 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) on securing this important debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

I, too, would like to address the need for an ambitious change in attitudes and culture, as well as for legislation to protect the victims of rape and sexual violence. There were 35,798 complaints of rape in this country between 2015 and 2016, but just 2,689—7.5%—resulted in convictions. Some 90% of rape victims are female, and 10% are male.

Last week, I was very fortunate to visit Argentina with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. I spoke with Diputada Victoria Donda about the huge protests in the streets last October, following the drugging, rape and brutal murder of 16-year-old Lucía Pérez. According to the popular movement Ni Una Menos, which means not one woman or one girl less, one woman is killed every 30 hours in Argentina, and there

are still protests on the streets outside the Congress today. That is despite the fact that a law was passed in 2012 against so-called femicide.

However, legislation without enforcement, and without cultural change, is not worth the paper it is written on. As today's motto reminds us, we must be bold—bold enough to engender change on all levels, from the attitudes of the police, to the process of the justice system, to, most importantly, outcomes and the experiences of victims. I attended the police parliamentary scheme last summer, and it was interesting to see the work being done with the police to address attitudes. We must not be satisfied that legislation alone will make a difference; we must address the culture in all stages of the criminal justice system, be that the police or the courts.

Following my private Member's Bill last month, the Government have—I am proud to have, I hope, contributed to this—announced a review of section 41 of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999. That is a move I wholeheartedly welcome. The Act sought to prevent rape complainants from being questioned about their previous sexual history with a third party in all but exceptional circumstances. The Act came into effect in 1999, but that is not what rape complainants experience when they go into court. Some 36% of rape trials overseen by the Northumbria court observers panel last year included questioning about the prior sexual conduct of the complainant with a third party. The number of harrowing individual cases I have heard indicates that that draconian tactic is still employed by many defence lawyers across the country.

The brutal cross-examination of rape victims re-traumatises the vulnerable at a time when the system should be protecting them. It is not a matter of proving whether a rape complainant is lying; it is a cynical strategy to discredit complainants' characters by portraying the complainant as promiscuous, in a way that makes them less credible to the jury. Irreparable harm is done to victims under the noses of judges in our courts. The procedures that are supposed to be followed under the 1999 Act are, in many cases, disregarded. This victim-blaming attitude needs to be stamped out in not only the justice process but our society as a whole.

On this, our International Women's Day, we are being reminded to “Be Bold for Change”. At home and abroad, we have an obligation to change not just legislation but perceptions of rape and sexual violence to ensure that all victims, regardless of their gender, have the confidence to come forward and report these serious crimes. I hope all Members in the House will join me as we continue to battle to change not only the laws but the attitudes that fail victims in this society and abroad.

2.24 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow that inspiring speech.

Yesterday, Labour Women made a short film for International Women's Day. One of the things we were asked to do was to complete the sentence, “I want to live in a world where”. I said I wanted to live in a world where violence against women was eradicated and where rape was no longer used as a weapon of war. However, I wanted to go on to say that I also wanted the statistic that every week two women are murdered by their partner or ex-partner to be eradicated. That figure

remains stubbornly the same, and no amount of awareness raising, improving of police handling of complaints and passing of laws, such as Clare's law, appears to make a dent in it.

As we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), those two women per week are not statistics but real people—colleagues, friends, mothers, sisters and daughters. Leading up to their deaths, there is usually a catalogue of assaults—not reported—with partners pleading that they will change, and a repeat of the cycle of violence.

Imagine the trauma of being a child growing up in that situation, seeing the two most significant adults in their life fighting; going to bed at night wondering whether the night will be broken by yet another argument; worrying all the time; and, sadly, in many cases, thinking that all this is normal because it is all that they have experienced, living in a state of permanent high anxiety.

The fallout from domestic abuse is wide, yet the figure of two deaths per week sticks stubbornly. I was pleased to hear our honorary sister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), talk about that issue earlier. We need to do something about the funding of women's refuges. Too many women are turned away, and it is still not a statutory and, therefore, a funded duty of councils to provide domestic abuse services.

As this debate is about International Women's Day, I want to talk about the plight of women around the world. In any conflict, women often have fewer resources to protect themselves. With children, they frequently make up the majority of displaced and refugee populations. War tactics, such as sexual violence, specifically target women.

However, women are almost completely missing from peace negotiations following conflict. The international community has recognised that women's contribution is vital to achieving and sustaining peace. In 2000, the UN Security Council passed the historic resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. It calls for women to participate in peacebuilding, to be better protected from human rights violations, and to have access to justice and services to eliminate discrimination. Yet, almost 17 years on, more than half of peace agreements make no mention of women. We face new threats, including climate shocks, global health pandemics and violent extremism directly targeting women's rights. Now, more than ever, we need the women, peace and security agenda.

I want to finish with these words:

“When you have warfare things happen; people suffer; the noncombatants suffer as well as the combatants. And so it happens in civil war...there is a good deal of warfare for which men take a great deal of glorification which has involved more practical sacrifice on women than it has on any man.”

Those are not the words of our sisters from Nigeria, Iran, Sri Lanka or anywhere else around the world; they are the words of Emmeline Pankhurst in 1913. Yet they still ring true and have relevance to the international community of women today.

This week, it was my pleasure to be able to vote on the design of a statue of Emmeline Pankhurst to be erected in Manchester, as a welcome relief from the many statues of men in our city. In the borough of Rochdale, we recently erected a statue of Gracie Fields, and Bury in Greater Manchester is working on a statue to commemorate the wonderful and much missed Victoria

Wood, so I go back to where I started: I want to live in a world where it is no longer unusual to put up a statue of a prominent woman—not just in Greater Manchester, but the world over.

2.29 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to wind up this debate on behalf of the SNP. As I often say, this Chamber always feels like a different place when there are mainly women in it, not least because we do not hear funny noises or sounds that are unrecognisable to most of us. This certainly feels like a period of reflection.

I pay tribute to the many women MPs who have spoken out in the past year with great bravery, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson), who spoke here a while ago about her rape. Many across the Chamber have spoken of the domestic violence and assault that they have faced. I salute them all, and I am sure that everyone watching does, too. It takes tremendous courage to speak about such personal issues in such a public forum. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), who spoke about mothers. We should remember those who have lost mothers over the past year, as well as how much mothers contribute to what we have to offer our children and the rest of society.

As I said, this Chamber can often feel like a different place. Our levels of tolerance often have to increase depending on who is speaking and what they are saying. I pay particular tribute to our Tory colleagues who, on certain occasions, need to have much higher levels of tolerance than the rest of us, but achieve that with such grace. I am grateful for the many brilliant contributions that they have made today.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who always speaks with great eloquence, passion and knowledge about victims of domestic violence, started the debate with another awe-inspiring speech. The right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) spoke about Yazidi women and brought home the terrible plight that they have to endure, which we really must do something about. The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) spoke eloquently about women in the armed forces, to whom we pay continual tribute.

The hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) spoke about social media. I had the pleasure of being on a programme with her and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley about how social media abuse can affect women disproportionately. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) reminded us about the important—perhaps the most important—job of men and women in bringing up their families. What can seem like small triumphs at the beginning of the day in getting children to do minor things are actually major triumphs, and we should never forget any of them. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who spoke about her husband, George, whom I have met—a wonderful individual. If he is not a feminist through choice, he is certainly one through submission.

We have heard about the main theme of International Women's Day—and, indeed, that of the UN's International Women's Day. We support both excellent themes. I would like to reflect briefly on the achievements of

[Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh]

women in the past year. Since the last time we gathered for this debate, Taiwan, in May 2016, elected its first ever female President, with 56% of the vote. Last year, Afghanistan's first lady, Rula Ghani, officially inaugurated the first ever women-only university in Kabul. Here in the UK, we saw women taking up positions of leadership, not least the Prime Minister.

Progress is being made, but there is much more to do, particularly in the professions. Women remain significantly under-represented, given that they are 51% or 52% of the UK population. Research shows that we have more female lawyers than ever before, but that does not mean that our legal system has a real gender balance. We also see many more female journalists. I pay tribute to Sophy Ridge, with her new programme on Sundays, and Emma Barnett, with her programme on Radio 5. I have no doubt that they face a very different level of scrutiny from that of their male counterparts. I hope that Members will join me in saying that we are with them as they try to deal with all the stereotypes while producing excellent programmes. Again, however, having more women in journalism does not necessarily mean that our reporting of politics is more gender balanced.

I would like to mention some experiences of women in the Chamber. My hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), as usual, made an excellent speech about equality. She mentioned Winnie Ewing, the first female SNP MP, who, after she came down to Westminster, talked about being stalked at night:

"I first noticed the problem in the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs. Wherever I sat this MP sat opposite...Then I noticed that he has started to follow me along corridors, appearing behind me without saying anything...I set through the dark Chamber and into the Public Lobby to go to the stairs leading to the Members' Entrance, from where I could ring for a taxi. However, as I left the Public Lobby, I saw the door swinging in front of me. I felt afraid but I went on through the door and down the steps...As I turned a bend on the stair, there was my stalker right in front of me, looking very sinister indeed. I tried to humour him as I wanted to reach the cloakroom—where there was an attendant—without anything happening. He kept staring and following me, but I made it and breathlessly told the cloakroom attendant what was going on."

That was in 1970, and this is of course 2017, but in 2017 you get barked at in the Chamber. I am sure that I speak for all women in this Chamber when I say that we have had more than enough of this nonsense. While Winnie, Nancy Astor and Barbara Castle were isolated here, I genuinely do feel that if we work together, in our greater numbers, we can make real, positive change. It is not about fighting for equality for equality's sake—it never is—but making sure that this Parliament is more a place of representative democracy. Having a female Prime Minister does not mean that we have a Parliament built on equality, because in 2017, as we have heard, only 30% of the MPs sitting on these Benches are women. However, we have made progress, and we should celebrate that where it occurs.

I would like to speak briefly about violence against women. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on her excellent work on her private Member's Bill to ratify the Istanbul convention. She has demonstrated how working across this Chamber can really make a difference. The debate

on that Bill was one of the brighter days of my time down here at Westminster. Around the world, more than 35% of women have experienced either physical or sexual violence. Intimate partners are responsible for 38% of women's murders. The Honour Based Violence Awareness Network believes that there are 5,000 honour killings internationally per year. Of those, there are thought to be about 12 honour killings in the UK each year. UNICEF claims that at least 200 million girls and women alive today, living in 30 different countries, have undergone female genital mutilation. The World Health Organisation estimates that 3 million girls a year become at risk of this procedure. These are shocking statistics.

Of course 2016 was a difficult year, with our solidarity being put to the test by Trump's election. It is now more important than ever for women to stick together, as we know how to do so well. On next week's agenda for Westminster Hall, we see a debate to which I am very much looking forward on an e-petition relating to high heels and workplace dress codes. I am really interested in whether there can possibly be a contrary opinion to women being able to wear what they want, when they want, whatever that may be, but I have no doubt that one will surface from somewhere.

We can and must continue our work to achieve a gender balance in Parliament, in journalism and in civil society. We need women in all parts of public life, not because that is good for women but because it is good for all society. While we do not agree on everything—and of course we do not—and there is not a singular female view, there are opportunities for those of us from across the political spectrum in all parties, and those who belong to none, to come together about the things that really matter most.

2.38 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to speak in such an important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) on securing it, and thank her for her ongoing commitment to women's equality. Her passion and dedication to women, and particularly to ending domestic violence, is second to none. This House is definitely a better place for having her in it, and I am grateful for her contributions.

Before I first came here I had been blessed, because my previous careers were first in the arts and then in healthcare, which are professions dominated by women. It was therefore quite a shock to come into this place, not just because of the small number of women here, but because our voices are very rarely heard. I came into Parliament to give a voice to those who do not have one, so I was quite surprised to find that our voices were shouted over, and that we were belittled, called hysterical or not engaged with at all. That is something that we have to change, and it is why I am so grateful for debates such as this one.

As a result of that, it is important that I give over most of my time to reinforcing the sisters in this place and giving their voices an extra platform. I start with the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who proposed—perhaps half-seriously—quotas for ministerial appointments. I am grateful to her for talking about the revenge porn helpline. It is superb that the Government have introduced lots of great legislation on

that, but the cash needs to follow the policy. She was right to say that domestic violence is not just physical violence.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) made an incredibly upsetting and powerful speech, which was very appropriate for this Chamber. I hope that we can debate the issue that she raised further. She championed Yazidi women, who are being persecuted, bought, sold, raped, exploited and commodified by Daesh. We need to do more to stop this barbaric form of slavery. I urge the Government to do all they can to prevent it.

The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) was right to give us the history of women's roles in the armed forces and to explain how far we have come. I am grateful to other Members who raised the impact on families.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) spoke about her constituent Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who is imprisoned in Iran and suffering extreme ill health. The Iranian Government are breaching the Bangkok rules that they have signed up to. There are half a million women in prisons worldwide. I also want to raise the fact that Holloway prison is being sold off, which is likely to put pressure on women. I do not think that prisons are the right place for women. The number of women I have met in my constituency who have been imprisoned for evading the TV licence, or for stealing nappies because they could not afford them, shows that there is something very wrong with the system.

The hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) did a good job of giving us the history of women's rights and women's interventions that brought her to this place. I am particularly grateful to her for welcoming all young women and girls into politics, and for telling them that if they come here, we will support them. The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) highlighted the great women who inspired her. It is right that we pay our respects to the women who give us the power to keep going and who inspire us to believe that we can do this.

The hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) has been doing some superb campaigning around child exploitation. She is right to say that we often talk about violence as being gender-neutral, but a lot of it is not. We need to call out gendered violence and name it for what it is.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) gave another powerful speech. It frustrates me that it is down to us to correct history and draw attention to the fact that in 1888, the match women, led by just five remarkable women, changed history. They effectively created the labour movement. The match ladies were—I steal this phrase from my hon. Friend—the spark that started the trade union movement, and yet there is no memorial for them. English Heritage needs to listen, and I support my hon. Friend's campaign. I do not just want a blue plaque; I want a statue. It is only right.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) talked about the gender pay gap. It is so frustrating that we consistently have to go back to the gender pay gap, and to the obstacles that prevent us from closing it as quickly as we would all like. I am grateful to her for raising the issues that prevent women from returning to work and make it much more difficult for them to reach their full economic potential. How

lovely it was of the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) to talk about mothers and boys. She highlighted the importance of inspiring them by demonstrating equality in public life.

I am grateful to have the voice of the honorary sister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), here. I make a lot of speeches about gendered violence and gender inequality, and I tend to speak to rooms full of women. I am looking forward to the day when debates in the Chamber about women are attended 50:50 by men and women. My hon. Friend was right to highlight great local women and to say that men have a duty to combat abuses against women. He was also right to highlight the fact that 12 weeks on, he is still waiting for a response to his questions.

We welcome the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). It was interesting to hear her put a personal spin on the complex balance between parenting and working—one that is not helped by this Chamber, but one with which we in this Chamber have a duty, legally, to help other women. In the contribution of the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), I loved the line: "Don't argue with your father. Just know that you're right." Unfortunately, some of us did not get the follow-on sentence; I am grateful to her mother for saying that. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving living examples of progress. Sometimes, it feels as though we are making achingly slow progress, so I thank her for showing us that progress is being made.

The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) highlighted the fact that only 7.9% of rapes result in successful prosecutions. I commend her for the work that she is doing to try to address that. She is campaigning for changes in the attitude of the police and in the processes of justice. We must, as she rightly says, address culture and not just legislation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) is a great campaigner, particularly around the fact that two women a week are murdered by their partners. I am grateful to her for drawing attention to the impact on children, the broader family and the community. So often their voices are not heard, and there is usually no support for the people who need it the most. I am also grateful to her for raising the fact that funding for refuges is decreasing all the time. It is concerning that because of the funding cuts, local authorities are now using generic providers rather than giving vital specialist support. I agree that the provision of refuges should be done with statutory, central Government funding, rather than being a duty that falls to local authorities.

Finally, I echo the voice of the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh), who saluted all the women—particularly, but not exclusively, those in this Chamber—who have, over the last year, had the courage to come forward and use the horrors that they have experienced to try to change legislation and attitudes.

International Women's Day first emerged from the activities of labour movements at the start of the 20th century. Its roots can be traced back to 1908, when 15,000 women marched through New York City demanding voting rights, better pay and shorter working hours. I can only see it as a sign that this year's International

[Sarah Champion]

Women's Day falls on the same day as the spring Budget, and I urge the Government and the Minister to make sure that this Budget works for women.

2.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and other Members on securing this really important debate, and all the inspiring female MPs—and, indeed, one brave male MP, the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore)—on taking part in today's significant debate, because International Women's Day is significant. It is an inspiring annual event that celebrates the achievements of women, both past and present day. It is a great opportunity to take stock of how far we have come, but also to keep fighting for what we believe in around the world and to look at how far we still have to go in our own country. I am grateful to Members from both sides of the House for their thoughtful contributions.

I am incredibly proud that we now have our second female Prime Minister, and that our Parliament is becoming more diverse. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) said, it has been 700 years in the making, which is painfully slow by anybody's standards. She is right to call on any women watching our proceedings today to come and join us. As my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) rightly pointed out, it is the presence of women in the Chamber that is changing the situation we are talking about. The reason we are having this debate is that there are so many more female MPs, and that is the only way we will make the significant changes we want.

The theme for this year's International Women's Day is "Be Bold for Change", and the Government want to be bold for change. It is only through being bold, being courageous and taking risks that we can create the lasting change we all want. No country can truly succeed while half its population is left behind, and despite the conscious efforts of many men and women over the years, barriers to equality do exist. The Government are committed to tackling such barriers to equality wherever they manifest themselves. That is why International Women's Day is for everyone, and we know that gender equality is not a zero-sum game: true equality enables both men and women to be who they want to be, unconstrained by outdated stereotypes and unconstrained by assumptions about what it means to be a woman, or indeed a man.

I know that Members on both sides of the House share the Government's commitment to driving forward this agenda. I am particularly grateful to the Women and Equalities Committee, which rightly holds the Government's feet to the fire all the time. It is very hard to believe that this Select Committee only started to exist in June 2015, given the breadth and range of its inquiries so far. Its work is rightly recognised and respected, which is why I am very pleased to announce today that the House of Commons intends to make the Women and Equalities Committee permanent. This is a very fitting testament to the energy and commitment of all members of the Committee, but I must pay special tribute to the very dynamic leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). I pay

tribute to her and all the members of her Committee for their work and their amazing achievements in this important space.

Not only is gender equality the right thing to do, but it is good for our society and really good for our economy. It is essential to unlock the potential of women in the workplace. We need to build a stronger economy that fully utilises the talents that women have to offer. I am very proud that there are more women in work than ever before and that the gender pay gap is the lowest it has ever been, but we must go further. The Government are committed to eliminating the gender pay gap entirely, which is why our bold and groundbreaking legislation coming into force next month will require businesses, voluntary organisations and the public sector to publish both their pay and bonus gaps. The regulations will shine a light on the difference between men's pay and women's pay, and we hope employers will lead the way by publishing early. We have also set the standard for highly productive, agile working practices by bringing in shared parental leave, extending the right to request flexible working, and providing 30 hours of free childcare a week for working parents of all three and four-year-olds so that men and women alike can balance work and family life.

My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), who is the excellent co-chairwoman of the all-party group on women and work, rightly celebrated the skills, talents and experience that older women can bring to the workforce. On 2 February, the Government published our "Fuller Working Lives: A Partnership Approach" document, which sets out the key actions the Government are taking to support older workers to remain in the labour market. That is not just great for business. I was struck by the words of one woman who had just gone back into the workplace after many years of caring responsibilities when she told me, "It's the first thing in my life I have ever done for myself." Those words have really stayed with me.

We want to support women and girls throughout their lives, but to get the whole picture we must look at everything—from the classroom to the boardroom and beyond. In education, we are committed to increasing the number of girls studying STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—subjects. We are also supporting girls and boys in school by giving them the tools they need to be safe, confident and able to develop healthy and respectful relationships. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education announced yesterday our plans for 21st-century relationships and sex education. Our proposals will ensure that children of all ages and from all backgrounds will have the opportunity to learn what positive, healthy and nurturing relationships should look like. The building blocks for this will start in primary school with relationships education, and continue in secondary school with relationships and sex education.

We have made great progress at the very top of business, where female representation has gone from strength to strength. We know that companies with more diverse boards and senior executives can access a wider talent pool and that they better represent the society they serve.

To ensure that girls and women thrive, succeed and go as far as their talents can take them, they must have the right to live safely and free from all forms of violence.

The key to that is a strategy to prevent violence against women and girls. Sadly, many Members, like women across the country, have had their lives invaded by the new threat of online violence. There is no doubt that that insidious misogyny limits the benefits women can gain from the digital world, but there should be no public or private space where violence should be allowed to continue. That means eradicating violence and abuse of any kind, anywhere—online, in our workplaces, in our communities, and in every home.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke asked about the future of the revenge porn helpline. I am very keen for its important work to continue and we are looking closely at how we can continue to support it. In addition to the £80 million already committed to provide services and support for victims and survivors, the Prime Minister recently committed to reviewing the legislation on domestic violence and abuse to transform the way we think about and tackle violence, and that basic right to safety. We are determined to ensure that the law is working to protect women and girls so that intervention and prevention, not crisis response, are the norm.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley again this year read out the list of women killed at the hands of violent men since we were last in the Chamber for this debate. This year, the names included, of course, one of our own, Jo Cox. Every life lost is a tragedy; every name is a name too many. No girl should be in doubt of her right to succeed free from fear and the threat of violence.

The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) spoke compellingly about her constituent, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. She drew attention to the plight of women and girls in prisons overseas, but specifically to the tragic case of her constituent, and I will personally take that up with No. 10.

The right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) was absolutely right to outline the pain and suffering that the Yazidi women endured—we should never forget that. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who is a force of nature, spoke about the importance of educating girls internationally, and we are supporting 5.3 million girls in school, including girls from the most marginalised communities. We have also helped 36 million women to get access to financial services and are spending more than any other country on bringing an end to female genital mutilation. Those examples underline our commitment to promoting gender equality at home and overseas. I am proud that we are a world leader in this work.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke asked about the number of police trained in dealing with domestic violence. All new recruits undertake a public protection learning programme, of which domestic abuse is a key feature. New police training called “Domestic Abuse Matters” focuses on recognising controlling and coercive behaviour. That has already been rolled out in five police forces, with many more in the pipeline.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) made an excellent speech on behalf of

women in the armed forces. She is a feisty champion of the armed forces. Despite some excellent initiatives, more remains to be done, but we have raised our target for recruiting women in the armed forces to 15% by 2020.

The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) spoke beautifully about the match ladies. I remember going to see a play about them when I was at school. It was so inspiring and I certainly back her call to have those ladies recognised.

International Women's Day is a fantastic opportunity to take stock, to recognise the progress that we have made and to celebrate the amazing women, past and present, who have fought the battles, and who continue to fight every day all around the world in the name of equality. It is an opportunity to discuss how much further we have to go, and a time to remember that there is so much more to do and to remind ourselves to be bold in the pursuit of change.

2.58 pm

Jess Phillips: I shall be incredibly brief. I thank the Backbench Business Committee—I am thanking myself—for allowing us to have the debate. I thank everybody who spoke in today's debate with much passion and consensus.

One of the names I had to read out today was that of Jo Cox, my friend and colleague. Her voice should always be heard in this place, so I shall let her have the last word. When Jo Cox was asked what sort of feminist she was, with the idea that we are all terribly divided, and that “I'm this sort of feminist, you're that sort of feminist”, her answer was, “a massive one”.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House welcomes International Women's Day as an important occasion to recognise the achievements of women; and calls on the Government to join in this international event and pledge its commitment to gender parity.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This week, the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) was in my constituency. To his credit, he informed me that he was going to be in my constituency for a Conservative fundraiser. I offered to go with him, but he rejected my advances. Today I opened my local paper, the *Camden New Journal*, to read that he had described the “pygmy” nature of the Opposition. Do you, Mr Deputy Speaker, think it was appropriate for him to use the term “pygmy” when he was in the constituency of the shortest MP in Parliament? I await your guidance.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The hon. Gentleman is normally a very courteous Member, and he did give notice. I know the hon. Lady will have a quiet word in his ear, but knowing the Member I am sure there was no intent. If there was, she will need to come back to me.

Welsh Affairs

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): We now come to the Backbench Business debate on Welsh Affairs. I remind hon. Members that the debate is very oversubscribed. If we can try to start off with five-minute speeches, I will try to give everybody equal time. If there are interventions, I will have to drop that straight away.

3 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Welsh affairs.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this debate. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) for joining me and others in putting the case for securing it.

I am proud to be a Welsh MP, proud to serve in the House of Commons, proud to be Welsh, proud to be British and proud to be an internationalist. Wales has made an enormous contribution to Britain and the globe. I was hoping to make my opening remarks as the Welsh team were on the way, as Triple Crown winners, to winning the Six Nations championship. That is not so, but we are still a very united country and it is unity that is the theme of my speech today.

Yesterday, as Welsh people, we celebrated with patriotism. We had an excellent service in the House of Commons, where the Speaker's Chaplain officiated in both English and Welsh. It is now on the record that we are allowed to use the Welsh language in future Welsh Grand Committees. I say to Mr Deputy Speaker that he should take a leaf out of the book of the Speaker's Chaplain. He should attend a Welsh Grand Committee debate and, as a great visitor to my constituency and many other parts of Wales, speak in both Welsh and English.

Before I move on to some of the issues that have shaped the past 12 months, I want to say that there has been some good news. I remind the House of the excellent performance of the Welsh football team in Euro 2016, when we led the way for the United Kingdom. I remind Members, particularly those on the Labour Benches, that Labour was returned to government in the Welsh Assembly and that we again have a Labour First Minister of Wales.

Since St David's day 2016, there have been some issues that have divided the country and the world. Brexit divided many of our constituencies—it divided Wales and the United Kingdom—and Bush was elected President of the United States. To talk of building walls—I said Bush, but I mean Trump. I have made that mistake before, but he is worse than Bush. The serious point is that Trump talks about building walls. To talk about building walls is to ask on which side of the wall people belong. We need to put an end to that kind of divisiveness. Of course we need political debate, critical thinking and broad opinion to shape our future, but we need to stop talking about Brexiteers and remainers. We need to talk about the 100% we are elected to represent. In Scotland, they still talk of the 45%, but if we are to move forward we have to move away from tribalism and towards unity.

As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, Welsh MPs have played a pivotal role in the House of Commons. They have introduced policies and concepts that have united

the United Kingdom. I am talking about Nye Bevan and the national health service—something we all support, because it has helped all our people—and Jim Griffiths, the former Member for Llanelli, who introduced the National Assistance Act 1948, again to give social protection to everybody in the UK. Those things have helped to shape the politics of the UK.

We must now build a consensus across parties on the big themes that can unite Wales and the UK. For one, we must provide social care for all our people, and we should have that debate here in the House as Welsh MPs. Over the last few years, I have been saddened to see divisions over the health and social care service being used politically by parties to divide us, when it should unite us and help the most vulnerable in society.

The digital revolution is something else that can unite us. We need to find 21st-century solutions, and one of those is superfast broadband. [*Interruption.*] Does my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) want to intervene? No? Superfast broadband liberates communities and families—I know of Welsh families with sons, daughters and other relatives around the world who now speak to them regularly because of the digital information technology facilities available—yet many people in rural and peripheral areas of Wales do not have the same facilities as those in larger towns and cities.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for spearheading the effort to secure this debate. Does he agree that it is not just a matter of householders' rights and opportunities? We also need to get broadband right if we are serious about developing the economy in those peripheral areas.

Albert Owen: The hon. Gentleman is right. In fact, I was just coming to businesses. I welcome the Digital Economy Bill. I have been arguing for some time, like many other Members, that we need universal coverage in the UK, and it has been resisted for too long. Now it is in the Bill. United as Welsh MPs, we can take the lead and have the universal service obligation rolled out in Wales first. The Secretary of State, who I know is paying attention on the Front Bench, could be pivotal in taking this up in Cabinet. The Welsh Government, as a single body, are working with BT to roll this out in Wales, unlike in England, where there are several roll-out bodies. We can be ahead of the game, as we have been on many other big issues that have united us, so I hope he will listen and respond positively.

Like many Members, I have worked with BT Openreach and the Welsh Government, and I have worked to get individual businesses connected with fibre to their premises. The Welsh Government are moving forward, but according to the Library, many constituencies in Wales are behind the UK average when it comes to superfast broadband roll-out and the minimum of 10 megabits per second in the universal service obligation. We need to move forward on that. I say to the Secretary of State that we should have a cross-party group. We can be pioneers and lead the way. Wales, with its peripheral areas, rurality and sparse populations, can be a microcosm of the rest of the UK. I urge him to work with me and others on that. Many of the rural areas without superfast broadband also do not have mains gas, pay more for fuel and are greatly disadvantaged and socially excluded, so it is a

serious issue I raise when I talk about broadband being a step forward for those areas. I hope that Members will work with me on that campaign.

We also need a transport system that works for the whole UK. I know that the Government have been pushing the case, with the Welsh Government and others, for better cross-border facilities, particularly in the south and north of Wales. It is important that we are an integral part of the UK network. The Secretary of State will get the backing of the Opposition if he pushes not just for electrification of the north Wales line but for better connections between north Wales and Manchester and Liverpool airports. That is essential. Many of my constituents, such as the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), do not come down to Heathrow or Gatwick if they can get to Liverpool or Manchester. Making that easier for them will be a good deal for the people of north Wales.

I was in the Chamber for the beginning of the International Women's Day debate, and was very moved by the comments in the opening speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) about our colleague Jo Cox. Jo's maiden speech will go down in history, not because she so sadly left us, but because she talked then about uniting people and highlighted that there is more that unites us than divides us. We need to go forward with that as an emblem.

One of my predecessors, Lady Megan Lloyd George, moved the first St David's day debate, and she was one of the first pioneers: she stood up for women across the United Kingdom; she stood up for Wales as an integral part of the United Kingdom; and she was not afraid to talk about high unemployment and to fight for the national health service and social insurance. She had the good sense to move from the Liberal party to the Labour party, and she was a pioneer on those very big subjects. Wales can be very proud that in this House of Commons we have an annual debate, and also that throughout the year we are pioneering Members of Parliament across the parties, and that we work together for the best for our constituents, and work best for Wales within a United Kingdom as outward-looking internationalists. I am proud to open this debate, and—

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab) *rose*—

Albert Owen: I am sure that my right hon. Friend wants to intervene, as he tried to earlier.

Mr Hanson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. He raised a number of issues that he wants to put to the Government, and I want to ask if he would include among them the impact of the revaluation of business rates on businesses throughout England and Wales. The Welsh Assembly Government are helping businesses quite considerably, but I have, for example, only today received notice from one business that its business rates are rising from £22,000 a year to £66,000 from 1 April. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should be looking to address this in next week's Budget?

Albert Owen: I certainly do, and if we had had more time I would certainly have raised the issue, because we did have a revaluation earlier in Wales. We had a transitional period, and now that that has come to an end many of our friends in England are looking to Wales to see what

is happening. We need to work together to help in particular rural businesses that are being evaluated on the size of their premises. There are many horse-riding schools in my constituency, one of which I visited on Friday—I did not ride a horse—and it is suffering due to that.

I conclude by saying that the UK Government must take the Welsh dimension to Brexit far more seriously; I hope, and am sure, that they will. The Joint Ministerial Committee is important in areas that are wholly devolved to Wales. That voice of Welsh MPs and the Welsh people needs to be filtered through to Government level. The Prime Minister is the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and she represents Welsh interests, and it is important that the devolved Administrations have a firm voice in those negotiations going forward.

I will listen to, and respond to, the debate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Gentleman mentioned that I go to Wales; that is true, and I do like Trearddur Bay—I put on record that Ynys Môn is one of my favourite islands, and Holy Island as well.

I should also say that the Wales Rugby League came to Parliament this week to increase the profile of the Welsh rugby league and of this being the week for Wales. I want to make sure that everyone is aware of how important rugby league is, as well as rugby union.

I call David T. C. Davies, and introduce a five-minute limit on speeches.

3.13 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Members will be aware of the plan by the Heads of the Valleys Development Company, led by Mr Michael Carrick, to build a racetrack at Ebbw Vale. Mr Carrick persuaded the Welsh Government to put £9 million into his company, Heads of the Valleys, in order to develop this, but has so far been unable to get the private sector to back the scheme without an assurance from the Welsh Government that they will provide over £200 million as a loan guarantee.

Mr Carrick claims to be an expert in building infrastructure. He has been involved in attempts to set up infrastructure projects in the Shetland islands and the Port of Ardersier in Scotland, as well two biomass projects in Africa and another in Ireland, and a river barrage scheme at Fleetwood. None of these projects has been successful. I have spoken to many involved who say that they feel let down and misled, and in more than one case that they are owed money. I could give some examples, but do not have the time. One that has been in the press, however, involved Mr Bob Long from Fleetwood, who tried to set up a river barrage. Mr Carrick told him that he had the funds available to develop the project, but the money never arrived, and Mr Long claims the project has been almost ruined as a result.

Aventa's website, which Members can look at if they wish to, implies that it is responsible for managing a fund worth £350 million to build UK infrastructure, but Companies House records suggest that it has just £500 in the bank. However, with his £9 million of public money, Mr Carrick decided to buy a specialist motorcycle

[David T. C. Davies]

company based in Buckinghamshire. It was shown in the records as a dormant company until August 2012, after which it sprang into life. By August 2013, it was showing liabilities of £350,000. The losses grew, but when I met Mr Carrick in July last year, he told me that he would soon turn it around, that it would be an anchor business for his site and that it would lead to a Welsh rider winning a Welsh grand prix. A few months later, it was in administration, owing more than £500,000. If Mr Carrick cannot make a success of a small company turning over a few hundred thousand pounds, should the taxpayer be backing him in a venture worth several hundred million?

Mr Carrick's publicly funded company has also bought the rights to hold the MotoGP championships at Silverstone, but so far he has made a loss on that of around £1 million. Many companies, including some local ones, have done work for the project but have not been paid—they have all done it at risk—but luckily, one supplier has been paid in full, again out of public funds. Mr Carrick decided to appoint a financial consultant to give advice to the scheme, and the company he appointed was Aventa, a company that he 100% owns and controls. In effect, he paid himself nearly £1 million of public money to give himself advice. Civil servants in the Welsh Assembly raised concerns about this but were overruled. I have some written material to back all this up, by the way; I have the invoices. Among other things, Aventa spent £35,000 on landscape gardening. Those invoices were made out to the Heads of the Valleys Development Company, but Mr Carrick says that they were paid by Aventa. He also spent thousands of pounds on political events for the Labour party and, he tells me, for the Conservative party, although I do not have those invoices.

When I raised my concerns with Mr Carrick, he told me that he was entitled to spend Aventa money as he pleased and that it had sources of income other than the public money from the Heads of the Valleys Development Company. I asked for examples and he cited GE. I asked him whether he meant General Electric, and he said yes. I then contacted General Electric, which told me that he had asked for money but had not had any from the company. At the same meeting, one of Mr Carrick's associates told me that BMW was planning to build a BMW world theme park at the site. I checked with BMW, which told me that that was absolutely ludicrous and that it had no plans to do so. Again, I have all this in writing.

Mr Carrick's lawyers, who are in touch with me frequently, claimed that I had made all this up, but, fortunately for all concerned, I have a high-quality recording of the meeting, and they have now had to accept that all those comments were indeed made. I can share the transcript of the meeting with anyone who is interested, although I cannot share the recording without Mr Carrick's permission, which he does not seem very willing to give. I asked him about the business plan, and I was told that he would be able to rent out the race track for between £18,000 and £35,000 a day. Industry experts tell me that that is absolutely ludicrous. But even if he did manage to do that, he would be pulling in revenue of only about £13 million a year on a project that is going to cost £430 million to build. I am intrigued

as to why the project keeps increasing in cost, from £200 million in 2011 to £250 million in 2012 and to £380 million when I met Mr Carrick in July. Seven months later, it has risen again to £430 million.

I have two other documents of interest. The first is a quote from a construction company, FC, for £180 million for building the track—a project we are told is worth £430 million. Even with a few hotels chucked in, that would take a bit of explaining. The second is a business plan showing a developer's profit of £13 million.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for his investigation into this episode. What broader lessons does he think should be drawn from this about Welsh Government Ministers' attitudes towards the use of public money in the name of economic development?

David T. C. Davies: The first lesson is that nobody should be able to make £13 million on a project before it has even been built. Secondly, this whole thing is an outrage. People are being sold a pipe dream. Politicians who support it are being taken out for lunch, and those who ask difficult questions are being threatened with legal action by a group of expensive City lawyers. Some £9 million of taxpayers' money has been wasted. The only infrastructure we have seen so far has been the £35,000-worth of work done to Mr Carrick's mansion in Grantchester, and the only sports car in evidence is the Aston Martin that he drives around in. It is time to pull this project.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the Wales Audit Office is looking into the affairs of that company? Has he contributed his valuable information to the WAO?

David T. C. Davies: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Yes, I have contributed quite a bit to the Wales Audit Office, and I am looking forward with great anticipation to the result. It is time to pull the plug on this scheme. If the Welsh Government want to put £200 million of our money at risk, there are better ways of doing it and better people to be doing it with.

3.19 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow my neighbour the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies). I hope that he and I will agree on the principle of the importance of investing and creating jobs in the heads of the valleys.

Economic development will be the focus of my remarks, and we have seen good news in recent days. Yesterday, on St David's day, the Cardiff capital region city deal was signed, which is clearly good news for south-east Wales. However, there are also concerns about Ford workers in Bridgend, which underlines—if there is any need to—the need for a coherent strategy from the UK Government for the years ahead. Whether people voted leave or remain in last year's referendum, nobody voted to become poorer. We must ensure that structural funding continues beyond 2020. Foreign direct investment, which was at a 30-year high last year, must continue, and the Welsh Government deserve great credit for continuing to attract such investment to Wales. Steel, which is a foundation industry, must also be central to Wales's economic future.

The priorities are both immediate and long term. Immediately, we must secure tariff-free access to the single market. Indeed, the Welsh Government's "Securing Wales' Future" document, which was produced together with Plaid Cymru, sets out the importance of participation in the single market, and a balanced migration policy, given that over two thirds of Welsh exports go there.

In the longer term, we need a vision of what a post-Brexit Wales should look like. The European Union currently has more than 50 free trade arrangements, which will clearly need replacing. The Brexit White Paper produced by the UK Government contains a chapter on "Securing new trade agreements with other countries". It has 19 paragraphs, but there is no mention whatsoever of Wales's position or the Welsh perspective on such trade agreements. However, that same document sets out that some of the fastest growing export markets between 2005 and 2014 were places such as China, South Korea, Brazil, and Mexico. The UK Government must work with the Welsh Government, which already have 14 overseas offices ready to assist with the creation of new trade agreements.

Stephen Crabb: My ears pricked up when the hon. Gentleman mentioned that the Welsh Government currently fund 14 overseas offices to assist with international trade. Given the extensive global network of embassies and high commissions that the UK Government fund from Westminster precisely to assist with international development, why should taxpayers fund these duplicate offices?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: In a sense, the right hon. Gentleman makes my point for me: we need a Welsh perspective in the construction of post-Brexit trade deals.

In the teeth of opposition from Conservative Assembly Members, it was very important that the Welsh Government nationalised Cardiff airport, which is crucial to Wales' economic future.

The constitutional arrangements of Wales in 2017 are different from those that existed in 1972 when Wales entered the then European Economic Community. When the rules currently set in Brussels on matters such as agriculture, the environment or certain parts of transport are repatriated to the United Kingdom, we must ensure that they are not exclusively returned to this Parliament when it would be more appropriate to base them with the Welsh Government in Cardiff. It is vital to bear that in mind in the debates to come.

There is a broader point, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), whom I congratulate on leading the campaign to secure this debate, put it well when he talked about working now for the 100%. What is in the best interest of the people? Of course it is vital that we retain workers' rights, environmental protections and consumer protections as we move into a post-Brexit Wales, but let us have the ambition not only to retain those rights and protections but to build on them—to make our consumers better protected, to strengthen environmental protections and to build on the workers' rights that our membership of the European Union established and deepened over the years.

Our focus on Wales' economic wellbeing is vital. It is about ensuring that the voice of Wales is heard loud and clear in the negotiations ahead so that we are able to produce the prosperous post-Brexit Wales that we all want.

3.25 pm

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I shall focus on a number of key areas for Wales and Gower. One thing on which we can all agree is that we are at a historic point for Wales and the United Kingdom, and we must make all our voices heard to ensure that Wales gets the very best representation as part of the Brexit negotiations.

As part of that, the importance of infrastructure in creating economic growth cannot be overstated. If we do not have the right road, rail, freight and air networks, Wales will not fulfil its great potential. We cannot rely on the UK Government to keep supporting Welsh infrastructure while the Welsh Government sit back. Wales continues to grind to a halt every morning and every evening in a dazzling array of brake lights at Newport. Haulage companies carrying goods from our businesses, workers trying to commute and families going about their everyday lives are all bonded by that most Welsh of experiences: sitting in a car around the Brynglas tunnels or the Port Talbot bypass with the handbrake up as high as it can go.

As opportunities disappear to other areas of the UK, the Welsh Government continue to delay traffic relief for the M4 by engaging in a dazzling spectrum of task and finish groups, reviews and endless committees. I would be a very rich man indeed if I had £1 for every time I heard the phrase "task and finish group" when I was an Assembly Member—I certainly heard it more times than I heard any mention of actually undertaking and completing vital work on our infrastructure.

The overcrowded two-carriage train services that arrive every hour or so, the slow and ageing road network and the lack of bus services mean that many people are unable to travel for work or to create the businesses and commerce of which they are capable because the infrastructure is simply not adequate. We need to be bolder and more daring in our thinking.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): My hon. Friend rightly focuses on transport infrastructure, but another key part of the infrastructure that Wales needs is energy infrastructure. He has been a great champion of the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, as have I. Does he agree that it is vital that we keep pressing so that we see the project move forward?

Byron Davies: If my hon. Friend bears with me, I will address that point in a moment.

There are positive points, of course. The Department for Transport has invested heavily in the great western line, and the new intercity express rolling stock, which will shortly be introduced on services to Cardiff and Swansea, will provide passengers on the line with greater capacity, a more comfortable journey and decreased journey times. I have already spoken to the Department, Ministers and others to try to ensure that we look at new solutions to our transport problems, such as greater services to west Wales or a complete reconfiguration of rail services with a Swansea parkway station and other solutions to try to unlock the vast untapped potential in south-west Wales. I implore Members on both sides of the House to work together and lobby so that we can make those positive changes for the people we represent.

[Byron Davies]

On a slightly brighter note, I have previously spoken at length about the benefits of the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon project, but it really is a huge opportunity for Gower, south-west Wales and our nation. It is a world-first pathfinder project that could put Wales on the map as a world leader in renewable energy and its associated skills base. The tidal lagoon is exactly the sort of game-changing infrastructure project that Wales needs, and I know from my many meetings with Ministers across Government that it is being looked at extremely closely.

On a topic relating to the lagoon, it is vital for productivity and for the future prospects of our young people that, post-Brexit, we invest in and encourage skills development. Colegau Cymru/Colleges Wales is doing excellent work to provide skills, training and education for a wide age range that can make a real difference not just to individuals but to families and the country. The lagoon could be the catalyst that unlocks a greater level of skills training and development, which could encourage jobs and investment in engineering, thereby enabling companies to invest in other projects in Wales to benefit all our constituents.

Before I finish, I wish to bring up a local issue that has been worked on across party lines. The decline of the cockle industry has lost the economy around £23 million over the past 10 years. It was once an extremely successful industry in Gower that supported the community and was the livelihood of many people; now, 95% of cockles die at around one year old. The problem has existed for around 10 years, and the cockle beds have not recovered since the mortality started in 2005.

In 2000, the area had the best cockles in Europe and exported to France and Spain, bringing tens of millions of pounds into the region, but the cockles are no longer suitable for the high-end market, and there is a limit to how many small cockles can be sold. The local cocklers are unable to guarantee a regular supply of cockles to the processors. The season starts in May but is finished by July, whereas it used to be a year-round business. The local cocklers believe the cockles are being killed by sewage discharge, although the science around the issue remains a mystery. Natural Resources Wales should be working with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, because the problem affects other parts of the UK as well.

There should be further scientific work, and help from the Welsh Government, to save the cockle industry in Gower. Going forward, we can be hopeful about the future of the lagoon and improve skills in science, technology, engineering and maths, but we must not forget the great artisanship of the industries that our communities were built on. Although we face challenges, I firmly believe that by challenging our institutions to do more to find bold projects that will drive Wales forward, and with us elected representatives fighting the corner of our constituents in common cause, we can forge a better and more prosperous Wales that stands ready to embrace the future.

3.31 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on his opening speech. It is a pleasure to follow the hon.

Member for Gower (Byron Davies); I am a great fan of Swansea cockles, so I was interested to hear what he had to say. I represent the university constituency of Cardiff Central. We have three universities—Cardiff University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, and the University of South Wales—so I shall focus my remarks on the importance of the higher education sector to Wales.

People in Wales have long understood the value of a good education, from the late 19th century, when working men pooled their wages to help to fund some of the earliest Welsh universities, through to today, when our seven universities are thriving like never before. They performed extremely well in the latest research excellence framework audit, when 77% of their submitted research was placed in the top two tiers of world research, and Cardiff University has been judged as the fifth best research university in the whole UK.

Welsh universities now stand at the cutting edge of research into renewable energy, new agriculture methods and new health research. In my constituency we have the brand new Cardiff University Brain Research Imaging Centre, which brings together world-leading expertise in brain mapping with the very latest in brain imaging and brain stimulation. CUBRIC, as the centre is known, plays a pivotal role in the global endeavour to better understand the causes of neurological and psychiatric conditions such as dementia, schizophrenia and multiple sclerosis, and to identify vital clues for the development of better treatments.

The higher education sector now accounts for almost 5% of Wales's gross value added, generating £1.38 billion itself and powering £1.41 billion in other industries every year. Although universities in Wales are often portrayed as urban, they are in fact based in diverse areas and benefit the whole nation. Of the nearly 50,000 jobs created by the higher education sector in Wales, more than 11,000 are in local government areas that do not have a university based within their boundaries, which highlights how success in higher education helps to deliver success not only for its local communities, but for every community throughout Wales.

We know, however, that success is not inevitable. It has taken an incredible amount of work from teaching and research staff, students, administrators, and university managers and leaders to make our universities what they are. It has also taken a lot of hard cash, a major source of which has been the European Union, not only through research programmes such as Horizon 2020, but more generally through European regional development funding.

I am reminded of that every time I drive past CUBRIC, because without the £4.5 million of European funding that Cardiff University received for the building, the land where the centre now stands would have remained wasteland—a home for rats rather than researchers. Such examples explain why, during the referendum, the Welsh Conservative leader pledged that Wales would not get a penny less in funding after we left the EU, yet the Secretary of State has repeatedly refused to guarantee a replacement of the EU funding currently available to Wales and, by extension, to Welsh universities.

Given the Prime Minister's quips about Labour cheques bouncing, it would be bitterly ironic for Wales if we discovered that the Welsh Conservative leader had been writing cheques that his boss could not cash. The refusal

to offer guarantees to future EU students, the nonchalant attitude to pan-European student programmes such as Erasmus, and the general tone struck towards those seen as different echo far beyond our shores, and Wales is already paying the price.

Applications to Welsh universities from EU students are down by 8.45% on the previous year. Those students put more than £130 million into our universities and local economy. The reduction in the number of applications means that some of the brightest people in the world are now not choosing Wales—that is our loss.

The Government could take a simple step now to halt that decline and reduce the widespread and growing perception that EU students are unwelcome here. They could give a guarantee, as they have done for the 2016-17 and 2017-18 student cohorts from the EU, that EU students who start courses next year will have identical tuition fee status and access to financial support. Last week I heard from representatives of university medical students who are really concerned about NHS workforce planning, because while current medical students have been factored into that planning, many of them are from the EU and do not know whether, when they finish their degrees after we have left the European Union, they will be able to stay and work here.

Our ability to attract and retain the best academic talent is at risk. Some 17% of Cardiff University's academic staff are EU nationals, which is why it is essential that the Prime Minister shows some leadership now—

Paul Flynn: Does my hon. Friend believe that the amendment passed by the House of Lords yesterday would be very useful, if it is supported by this House, to help the people whom she mentions?

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said, 17% of Cardiff University's academic staff are EU nationals. Universities across Wales, and indeed across the UK, are concerned that we will lose not only EU national teaching staff, but UK national teaching staff who have EU spouses, because they will leave the UK to work abroad.

The Welsh higher education sector represents everything to which a global Britain should aspire—a world leader punching above its weight, and ready to work with its friends across Europe and the world. We need to applaud this success, but also to recognise that it is not inevitable. We have a responsibility—a positive duty—to provide an environment in which Welsh higher education not just survives, but thrives.

3.37 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): May I say what a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens)? I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Byron Davies) and Opposition Members on securing the debate.

As I was thinking about today's debate, I did a little digging into the life and achievements of St David, and I was amazed by how many aspects I could crowbar into my speech. As we all know, St David was born in Wales, but he travelled widely, visiting Ireland and Jerusalem among other places. However, the "tourist" always returned back to travel Wales more widely, seemingly

preferring it to any other place in the world—and why not? Wales is still the most beautiful place to visit in the world, and my area of Brecon and Radnorshire is still the most beautiful place to visit in Wales. This message is getting out into the wider world, too. Visits to Wales are increasing year on year, with a 3% increase seen in the past year alone.

Byron Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that Gower is also worth a visit as it is the first area of outstanding natural beauty in the UK?

Chris Davies: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. When one stands on the beautiful Pen y Fan in the mountains of the Brecon Beacons, we look down on south Wales to the Gower, and what a pleasure it is to see it from a distance—or, in fact, from near or far.

The Welsh tourism industry provides excellent employment prospects in my constituency and is a great boost to the local economy, but it is under some threat at the moment. Business rate hikes, should they go ahead as planned, will harm the tourism industry's small profit margins, and a number of owners have expressed concerns to me that they might have to close altogether as a result. I therefore very much look forward to hearing any measures that the Chancellor can put in place next week for England that can be replicated in Wales.

It is not just the tourist in St David who is well suited to my speech. As many hon. Members will know, St David set up a number of monasteries around Wales. They were very frugal in their operations; once set up, they farmed the land. Thankfully, farming practices have remained, and produce from Wales is now widely recognised as among the finest products available in the world. Welsh lamb is becoming a benchmark for quality, and our beef is second to none. I am therefore pleased that the Government are supporting Welsh farmers by protecting farm payments until 2020. Furthermore, with Brexit, we have the opportunity to free our Welsh farmers from the shackles of the EU so that we can better compete with produce from around the world.

St David was not just a tourist and a farmer; he was also an inspiration to the warriors of Wales—he was recognised as our patron saint at the height of the Welsh rebellion against the Normans. Support for our military is still very visible in Wales. For many years, we have had a vast number of training grounds and barracks for our military right across our nation, and our communities take great pride in welcoming servicemen and women to their towns. I know that from the infantry training camps in Sennybridge and the Brecon Beacons, and from the barracks in Brecon, in my constituency, which once housed soldiers who fought in the battle of Rorke's Drift, which was made famous by the film "Zulu". That history of community is very important to local people, so I am disappointed that the Government seek to close the Brecon barracks. I hope that they will reconsider that proposal, see how important the barracks is to the military and the wider community, and keep it open for generations to come.

Following my research, I felt that I could not speak in this debate without mentioning St David's great miracle. As he was preaching to the crowd at the synod of Brefi, he raised the ground beneath him into a hill that his sermon could be heard from. There are times when I

[Chris Davies]

wish for just such a power, because of my height—so does the Secretary of State, I am sure. None the less, I was reminded of the beautiful, rolling countryside of Brecon and Radnorshire.

Stephen Crabb: I am enjoying my hon. Friend's speech enormously, but I fear that he has made a slight omission. He has not yet referred to the fact that St David was, of course, from Pembrokeshire, the most beautiful part of our fabulous nation of Wales.

Chris Davies: Just as when my right hon. Friend was Secretary of State for Wales, we are delighted to see Pembrokeshire people ruling over us, but we are also delighted to see them go back to Pembrokeshire on occasions, too—[*Interruption*] Even though he remains a great right hon. Friend.

My right hon. Friend stopped me as I was just about to mention that great institution that we call the Labour-run Welsh Assembly, which is proposing to litter not just Brecon and Radnorshire, but the whole of mid-Wales, with wind and solar farms by imposing measures on Powys County Council's local development plan. Such a proposal would harm not only the excellent tourism industry that I mentioned earlier, but the attractiveness of mid-Wales for locals and those thinking of relocating there. It looks as if we will need one of those great St David's miracles to prevent these plans from going through, but I can assure Members that I shall be fighting them all the way.

May I say again what a pleasure it is to see this House focusing on Wales issues?

Albert Owen: The hon. Gentleman is one of many Conservatives in mid-Wales who do not want wind farms. What alternatives for generating electricity would they like in mid-Wales? Would they like gas power or open-cast coal? What other source of energy do they propose to keep the lights on in mid-Wales?

Chris Davies: We would be delighted to see more hydro, and we are certainly delighted to support the tidal barrage and lagoon down in Swansea. Opposition Members do not seem to acknowledge that the tidal lagoon will benefit the whole of Wales, not just Gower, Swansea or south Wales—[*Interruption.*] I am delighted to have encouragement and support from across the Chamber for an agreement.

It is a pleasure to see this debate being held in the Chamber today. I look forward to working with the Government to build a stronger Wales long into the future.

3.44 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and a belated happy St David's day to you. It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies), but he seems to have forgotten that St David's mother, Non, went to live in Brittany in her later years. I hope that the Government will give some thought to that when they come to the reciprocal arrangements for EU citizens.

As we know, the ground around St David rose so that he could be heard by a crowd. But there is a second David of whom we must speak today: the David who thought that the ground around him would always rise, such was his belief in his great political gift to our country. With what Max Boyce would have called an incredible plan, this second David promised us a referendum on the EU, believing that his promises could never fail. Madam Deputy Speaker, I prefer the first David, our patron saint.

St David was quintessentially Welsh. He was almost always supported by followers, such as Aeddán, Teilo and Ysfael, and of course he also had the support of the great and the good—yes, even in the 6th and 7th centuries we had the great and the good in Wales—such as Deiniol, Dyfrig and the like. Across Wales yesterday there have been eisteddfodau, as indeed there will be today and over the weekend, such as the concert I will be attending in Rhosllanerchrugog tomorrow night, and there will be parades and other celebrations of culture. Let us therefore thank the great work of mentrau iaith, especially menter iaith Maelor across our borderland areas of Wales, for their promotion of Welsh language and culture.

I cannot let St David's day—it is becoming St David's week—pass without expressing my pleasure about the introduction of the Welsh language in this House in our Welsh Grand Committee, which is an historic change. I am pleased because I do not believe that there can be any understanding of Welsh political and cultural life that does not include an understanding of Welsh language rights. I am pleased because I think it goes some way towards righting an historic wrong. I am also pleased because I believe in a Wales that looks outwards, that does not beatify its borders—we hear so much nonsense on that subject today—and that does not want to create artificial walls between what is inside the Welsh border and what is Oswestry or the north-west of England. Those communities have been united with ours and there has been a relationship between the communities, not merely for decades, but for centuries. Let us leave the insular wall-building that separates people to the likes of Donald Trump in the United States, because it is so alien to our outward-looking vision of Welshness.

I know that every Member of this House—certainly every Welsh Member—will have in their constituencies heritage projects that should rightly be showcased and celebrated at this time. There are many such projects across the glorious 240 square miles of Clwyd South, but I will refer to only one today, the Brymbo heritage project, which has been set up by the Brymbo heritage group. The industrial village of Brymbo had a steelworks between 1796 and 1990—yes, its closure was another achievement of the great Mrs Thatcher. Today we are seeing the restoration of those buildings, with jobs being created and the community getting involved through volunteering, with oral histories, educational resources and various events.

I am delighted by the support that has been given to that project by the Welsh Government and the local council. I was even more pleased recently to see plans to convert the former steelworks building into a visitor centre, and a grant to fund architectural designs for an ambitious plan to convert a 1920s machine shop and regenerate the site further. I know that industrial sites in north-east Wales are not often what people think of

when they think of our Welsh heritage. When we celebrate our Welshness, our culture and the two great languages of our nation, let us also remember the industrial heritage of north-east Wales and celebrate it. I wish everybody a happy St David's day—I like saying this—*Dydd Gŵyl Dewi hapus*.

3.49 pm

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): It was a great privilege to pitch this annual debate to the Backbench Business Committee with the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen)—my friend on this occasion—and the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams). I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn not just for leading the charge on that occasion, but for the tone in which he opened the debate, which I want to echo.

It will not be a great surprise to the House that I will concentrate my remarks on the Cardiff city deal. As the Member of Parliament for Cardiff North in our capital city, I think the deal is a great achievement. This is an appropriate debate in which to talk about it because it needs cross-party and cross-governmental co-operation. Ten local authorities got together this very week to show their commitment of £120 million within the overall package of £1.2 billion. That is a great investment fund for south Wales and for Wales because when our capital city and engine house of Wales—the vast majority of the population live in south-east Wales—prosper, Wales prospers.

We have spoken at great length about tourism and the fantastic places all over the country. I have heard champions for Brecon and Radnorshire, Gower, Pembrokeshire, and constituencies represented by Opposition Members. When tourists arrive at our capital city—the international gateway—through the airport in the Vale of Glamorgan or through Cardiff Central station, which I will touch on in a moment, they come through a great, welcoming capital city that prospers through the research of our three universities. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) for championing the universities that cross our city. Only a couple of weeks ago, I visited the very department she mentioned, and I also call for the continuation of programmes such as Erasmus and Horizon 2020 during the negotiations for us to exit the EU. Those programmes, which prosper in our country, are great collaborations for EU states and non-EU states, which it is important to recognise as we go forward.

I mentioned the Cardiff city deal and the £1.2 billion commitment. That is not talk; it is real investment going into our economy now. The local authorities are getting together and agreeing a delivery framework. We need to hear the word “delivery” a lot more in Wales—not just committees or task and finish groups, but real delivery. The M4 relief road is a good example of where we need delivery. While I welcome the collaboration I have mentioned, we need to bring in the third and private sectors to leverage a lot more money than £1.2 billion to fix our infrastructure needs in south Wales. That brings me on to Cardiff Central station, which is our gateway to Wales.

The station is an incredibly important hub for my constituents who commute in to, out of and around Cardiff on a daily basis. I was delighted to join the Secretaries of State for Wales and for Transport in

talking to operators and developers about what we can do there. We need to work together across parties and across Governments to look at the capacity. We are getting new rolling stock. For the sceptics in the House, I do not mean the great Tornado that visited to mark St David's day yesterday, although steam had its time and it was wonderful to see it in Cardiff Central station on St David's day. The new rolling stock is being built now and will be rolled out soon, on top of the electrification coming down the railways. That is huge investment with huge challenges. We should recognise that, rather than, as is traditional, bashing each other on the head about such projects, which take a great deal of thought and money.

I end with another great achievement of working together: securing not only the UEFA Champions League final, but also the UEFA Women's Champions League final. It will be the first time that a city has ever managed to host both events, with one in our magnificent Principality stadium and the other in Cardiff City stadium. We will have the main Champions League final—the biggest sporting function in the world—and the Women's Champions League final down the road. That underlines our nation's potential, the incredible pull of Cardiff, and what we can secure and pay back to the economic development of our great country when we work together. Happy St David's day.

3.54 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I thank the hon. Members for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) and for Gower (Byron Davies) for securing the debate, which is just about spot on, because, of course, it follows on from yesterday's St David's day celebrations and last week's welcome announcement that we will be allowed, under certain circumstances, to address Parliament in Welsh. Mae fy nghyd-Aelodau Seneddol Plaid Cymru a finnau yn edrych ymlaen yn awchus at gael siarad Cymraeg am yr tro cyntaf yn yr Uwch-bwyllgor Cymraeg. It is all right, there is nothing particularly terrifying in that: I am celebrating the fact that we will be allowed to speak Welsh in the Welsh Grand Committee—that is pretty much a spontaneous translation.

There is merit in embracing small victories here in Parliament, but while there is cause for celebration—after all, “*Gwnewch y pethau bychai*”, or “Do the little things”, is what St David advised us to do—I cannot help but think that, in the age of big and bold political decisions, Wales needs more than just the little things. By voting to leave Europe's political union, people in Wales quite rightly voted to uproot the very foundations on which the Westminster establishment has rested so comfortably for so long. Contrary to the long-held small-c conservative belief, people want change—change with a capital C.

On the UK's withdrawal from the EU, powers will be repatriated to the UK. A determination will need to be made about those powers that are to be in devolved areas. At the moment, there is little experience of shared competence as practised in the EU.

A St David's day poll revealed that more and more people in Wales are demanding that power lies closer to them, with 44% wanting a National Assembly with greater powers. Brexit offers a unique opportunity for the Welsh National Assembly to satisfy that demand.

[Liz Saville Roberts]

Let us take this opportunity to rethink drastically the UK constitution in a changing Europe. It is essential that the great repeal Bill, and measures taken under it at central UK level, give appropriate attention to the devolution settlement. It should recognise the continuation of EU measures already adopted in Welsh law for Wales, as well as the competence of Welsh Ministers to pass secondary legislation reviewing the post-Brexit *acquis* in devolved areas. The Bill may significantly impact, intentionally or not, on the legislative competence of the National Assembly for Wales. The UK's exit from the EU must not result in devolved powers being clawed back to the UK Government. Any attempt to do that will be firmly resisted by my colleagues and me.

Managing these newly repatriated policy areas will require much more serious and intensive intergovernmental mechanisms and governance structures than those currently in place—a complete overhaul of the way the nations of these isles co-operate. Let us be frank: the current constitutional structures are already at fault. Dithering on UK infrastructure spend on energy projects, for instance, is serving neither rural communities nor the Welsh economy well. We need to realise the opportunities that await in *potentia* in such enterprises as tidal lagoons and new nuclear energy, and ensure that the people of Wales are equipped with the skills to make the best of such opportunities.

The Plaid Cymru spokesperson for external affairs in the Assembly, Steffan Lewis, has long been an advocate of transforming the existing Joint Ministerial Committee into a UK Council of Ministers covering the various aspects of policy for which agreement between all four UK Administrations is required. We are pleased that the Welsh Labour Government have adopted our position in the paper we worked on together, “Securing Wales’s Future”.

To finish, I will, like many Members today, return to St David. I urge the UK Government to do not only the little things he so famously preached. I urge them to rise above populist politics, just as St David did on the ground he caused to rise when people struggled to hear him preach. I urge them to rise to the challenge of Brexit in a way that will truly empower the Welsh people.

3.58 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): On 8 February, Bridgend College received the Association of Colleges beacon award for the development of transferable skills, in recognition of its amazing initiative “Be all that you can be”. That should almost be the motto of people who live in and around the Bridgend constituency, because Bridgend is a beautiful place. It has beautiful countryside; excellent schools; thriving faith communities; an inventive, creative business community; and wonderful people it is a privilege to live among and represent, and I want to talk about some of them today.

I live on the coast in Porthcawl, protected by our lifeboat station, Coastwatch lookout tower and coastguards, who watch the visitors, who do not know how dangerous the sea can be and who do not know its tides, its moods and its strength. Those visitors include the 31,000 who come for the Porthcawl Elvis festival, which brings in an estimated £6.7 million to our local economy over a weekend. I was never a great Elvis fan, but I must say

that I am converting. I urge Members to visit the Porthcawl jazz festival in April and, while there, come along and see the Porthcawl museum, which is thriving thanks to a partnership between the excellent Bridgend Council, the museum, and the arts society. According to “The Source”, the museum’s regular newsletter written by Ceri, the carnival and Christmas swim committees, the Rotary club of Porthcawl and Porthcawl Town Council have all contributed money to make sure that the museum is a huge success. I know that the Secretary of State knows the museum well.

Drive out of town and come and meet another fantastic local character who, again, the Secretary of State knows well—Gwyneth Poacher at Sandville. This determined, dynamic woman brings love, compassion, care and hope into the lives of people who are very seriously ill, many terminally ill. She and her volunteers, taking no money at all from the state, make life in an impossible world worth living. My communities of Cornelly and Kenfig Hill are not “chocolate box”, but if people go to the luncheon clubs in the community centres, go to the churches, and go to KPC Youth & Community, they will see how strong and self-reliant these communities are. Come to Bridgend and see the local market. Meet the very wicked stallholders like Martin Nagell and Tim Wood, and see the quality of their goods.

Come to Wildmill and meet the fantastic youngsters there, who, thanks to First Great Western, have tickets to come up to see this place. Visit my amazing local schools and see the education that they provide, because they are absolutely inspiring. Come to Bridgend because of our low crime. We have the lowest crime rate across south Wales, and the South Wales police force was today rated as “good”. Come for the *Urdd Eisteddfod* at the end of May, which is expected to bring in 90,000 visitors. Unemployment is low in my constituency: in January 2017, we had 985 claimants. We have a fantastic prison, Parc prison, rated by everyone as turning round reoffending. Reoffending rates among 80 high-risk families have been cut to 10%.

All those things, one would think, would be central to people’s view of Bridgend, instead of which, over the past 24 hours, most people have talked about the Ford plant. I do not underestimate the problems with the Bridgend Ford plant. The fear of job losses there is huge. There are issues that need tackling here in Westminster, particularly in relation to the value of the pound. The exchange rate change has cost Ford \$600 million in lost revenue. The issue of tariffs is absolutely essential for Ford. It is vital to make sure that there is tariff-free access into Europe.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very important speech. She will know that the issue of the Ford factory and the prospect of losing 1,100 jobs there will have an impact right across south Wales. Will she join me in urging the Secretary of State to offer Ford whatever assistance he can, including the sort of deal that appeared to be offered to Nissan? Will she further urge him to make sure that we never see World Trade Organisation tariffs imposed on cars going out of the UK, because that would cripple the competitiveness of our car industry?

Mrs Moon: I have had assurances that Ford will have the same deal as Nissan. I have asked today for an automotive symposium that will involve the manufacturers,

Ministers here in Westminster, the trade unions, and local Members to see whether we can move this forward. I hope the Secretary of State will support that. There are also productivity issues at Bridgend that we must deal with, and the GMB and Unite unions are working on that with the workforce.

Paul Flynn: We are delighted with my hon. Friend's comprehensive invitation to Bridgend. However, she has not mentioned the Emmaus centre, which I think is the only one in Wales.

Mrs Moon: I could spend hours giving Members 101 reasons to visit Bridgend. The Emmaus centre is changing lives. It is offering people who thought they had nothing a chance to get back on their feet, to have dignity and to start giving back to society. It is an amazing opportunity, and I am so proud that it is based in Bridgend.

There has been some discussion about alternative sources of heat coming into Wales. Bridgend is one of three local authorities selected to be deliverers of major renewable energy projects, involving the piloting of the latest heat pump technology through the smart system and heat programme. It is valued at £5.2 million and has been sponsored by Wales & West Utilities and Western Power.

Come and see Bridgend. There is so much there to be proud of—so much that exemplifies the best of Wales and explains why people and companies, once they get to Wales, do not want to leave. Our quality of life is amazing and our environment is fantastic, but, most of all, it is our people whom we should be proud of.

4.5 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): In the spirit of brotherly and sisterly love that characterises this debate, I will advance my main career task of adding to the glittering career of the Secretary of State for Wales. He had the good sense to marry into a family who live in my constituency, which shows that he is a man of ambition.

I urge the Secretary of State to challenge his Cabinet, who seem to use Wales as a kind of Aunt Sally for making comparisons. He could advance his career by promoting some of the great achievements of Wales, and particularly of the Welsh Government. He could start with the Welsh Government's Bill that introduced presumed consent for organ donation, which has already saved lives and proven to be advantageous. There is a Bill to that effect before this House, and I urge him to persuade the Cabinet of the advantages of introducing the same system in England.

I want to ask the Secretary of State about one of the other great successes of the Welsh Assembly, which was buying Cardiff airport for the bargain price of £52 million. That was derided by some of his friends in Wales, but since the airport was bought it has paid more than £52 million in air passenger duty back to the Government. The hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who is next to the Secretary of State, took a great deal of time in our debate on the Wales Bill and seemed to give more support to Bristol airport than to Cardiff airport. I say to him that Cardiff airport is another shining success.

In a Select Committee, I reminded the Secretary of State that he was born four years after Wales started paying double tax on the national road system and the Severn bridge tolls, and asked whether his ambition was

to ensure that those tolls continued until he retired. That is the way that it is going. By next year, however, the bridge will be all paid for.

I asked the Secretary of State how the toll of £3.70 that he proposed at the time was 50% of £6.70. He and his officials went back to the Wales Office and recalculated, and the next figure I saw was £3. Recently, a question was asked here about how the £3 was calculated. The strange answer was that that was something equivalent to the Humber bridge. We are happy for it to be treated in the same way as the Humber bridge, where £150 million of debt was wiped off. That would give us 10 years at least. Now, the only justification for the tolls is that they are a cash cow, and the Government and the Treasury refuse to give them up.

When the Severn bridge was first opened, Harri Webb wrote a poem:

“Two lands at last connected
Across the waters wide,
And all the tolls collected
On the English side.”

If the ghost of Harri Webb is still about, he might write something along these lines:

“Now all the tolls are collected
The debt is paid in full
But Tory snake oil salesmen
Still rob us with their bull.”

The hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) made several interesting observations, and I would like to know how they will be followed up.

David T. C. Davies: Fifty per cent. is better than nothing, and does the hon. Gentleman agree that Mr Webb might have written:

“The Secretary of State
We think no less of him
Because 50%
Is better than dim”—

as they say in Welsh?

Paul Flynn: There is a delightful picture, which I have produced with pride on my website, of the hon. Gentleman, the Secretary of State for Transport and the Secretary of State for Wales—a trio of snake oil salesmen—lined up against the background of the bridge, saying “Well, it used to be £6.70. Now, we're going to make it £3.70.”; “No, we're not—it's £3”; and “We'll charge you each way, so it's £1.50”. These are the techniques of the fairground.

The charge should be nothing because we have already paid the bill. How many Members were in the House for the Severn Bridges Bill in 1992, when we were told by Wyn Roberts, “This is the end of it”? We have already paid £1 billion of public money. We pay our taxes for every road within the British Isles—we have to pay our share of that—and, in addition, we pay this extra tax to get into Wales. It is a barrier to Welsh life and it should go. I am looking forward to hearing how Ministers came up with the idea of charging £3. There is no justification for it. The largest element of it will actually go on collecting the tolls themselves. This is a totally unfair tax on Wales.

[Paul Flynn]

I am sure that the Secretary of State will announce, in under an hour's time, that this is over and that he will now crusade on the issue and build himself up as the new symbolic or legendary figure of Welsh life, so that when he lays down his political role and joins the choir invisible he can discuss with Harri Webb his verses on the Severn bridge and contemplate the opportunities he has had in life, such as the ones I am sure he will take up after today.

4.12 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) for securing this debate.

On 23 June 2016, the UK, Wales and indeed my constituency of Aberavon voted to leave the EU. I accept and respect that result, but not unconditionally. Brexit must be made to work for Wales. That means fighting tooth and nail against a crippling Brexit on WTO terms. The tariff barriers alone would cost £6 billion a year, destroying the automotive sector and crippling our steel industry.

Indeed, just yesterday, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) said, we heard about the job threats at Ford in my neighbouring constituency of Bridgend. This means that the UK Government must protect funding for Wales, so I call on the Government to commit to securing funds through to 2030, on a pound-for-pound match basis, based on current EU structural funding. The current guarantee up to 2020—the year after we are due to have left the EU—is simply not good enough.

The challenges facing my Aberavon constituency serve to demonstrate why the stakes could not be higher, and how desperately the United Kingdom needs a project of national renewal. Such a project must be rooted in the steel industry, because each steel job supports three others in the local community and the country; because each steel job supports a family and the community; and because each steel job supports a way of life and a way of being.

That is why, two weeks ago, the men and women of Tata Steel swallowed a bitter pill to secure the future of their industry, guaranteeing steel production at Port Talbot and across Tata's operations for the foreseeable future. The vote to close the British Steel pension scheme, transferring it to a defined contribution scheme alternative, was a hard decision, but it was one for the workforce themselves alone. That is why Plaid Cymru's crude attempt to score cheap political points, manufacturing conflict between the workforce and the unions with a view to securing votes in May's local elections, was such a shameful spectacle. There can be no excuse for such political opportunism, and I deeply regret Plaid Cymru's attempts to play politics with steelworkers' livelihoods. Thankfully, our steelworkers are far too smart to fall for Plaid Cymru's crass grandstanding and mind games, and they chose to ignore that ill-founded advice.

The workforce have shown their willingness to make real sacrifices to save their industry; Tata has made commitments to secure the industry; and the Welsh Assembly Government have offered £60 million in support and created an enterprise zone to help with business rates, but the Westminster Government have done nothing.

They have done nothing on Chinese dumping, energy prices, procurement or skills retention or training, and nothing to help to secure the deal between Tata and the unions. I therefore ask the Government to commit unequivocally today to heed the cross-party "Steel 2020" report—amazingly, I have a copy here—and to a sector deal for steel.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is talking about the Westminster Government's inaction, but is the position not slightly worse than he suggests, in that when there were calls to reform the lesser duty rule, far from doing nothing, the Government were at the head of a blocking minority, which prevented that reform?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is right. The British Government are notorious for being the ringleader of a group of member states that consistently blocked the European Commission's attempts to give the anti-dumping regime more teeth. That is a matter of great regret, which reflects the "China first" policy, rather than a "Wales first" policy, that the Government have pursued.

A thriving steel industry must also be a catalyst for the regeneration and development that will happen if the Government get on and approve a city deal for the Swansea Bay area. That will help to regenerate and manage the impact of de-industrialisation. It also makes sense for the Government to give the green light to the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, an idea whose time has clearly come. The lagoon would create and sustain thousands of jobs and meet 11% of Welsh energy needs with a clean, green, reliable source of sustainable energy.

The Government's parliamentary boundary review has rather less support in Wales than elsewhere. It disrespects local communities. It proposes to slice Port Talbot town centre in two, leaving the high street and adjacent shopping centre in different constituencies. It is absurd. The review disregards the 2 million people who registered to vote in the referendum campaign and seeks to stifle the voice of Wales by removing more than a quarter of Welsh seats. All that is taking place while the UK Government seem intent on using Brexit to turn the UK into a European version of the Cayman Islands.

Paul Flynn: With all our constitutional problems—a grossly bloated House of Lords, not enough Members in the Welsh Assembly and the constitutional chaos that will flow from Brexit—is it not astonishing that the Government are interested in only one reform, which will give them more Members here?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is right—it is a barefaced gerrymander, which we regret.

I urge the Government to take action on steel and economic regeneration, and to rethink the boundary reviews. I wish all hon. Members a happy St David's day.

4.18 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Today I will talk about two issues that I have raised since I came to this place—I have also raised them in Wales—and the reaction to those campaigns: the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, and children's funerals.

I call upon the Government to stop burying their heads in the sand and do the right thing by all WASPI women. Today I am talking specifically about Welsh WASPI women. Many of them are in work not because they want to be, but because they have to be. Although I agree that working is the ideal situation, the ability to work and the availability of work mean that is not an option for all Welsh women who find themselves in that predicament. As a result, many have to rely on the benefits system. Tens of thousands of women across Wales, including over 3,000 in my own constituency, have been unfairly treated by the changes to the state pension that have led to the birth of the WASPI movement. We on the Labour Benches are a voice for Welsh WASPI women. Indeed, Welsh Labour local authorities are stepping up to the plate and calling on the UK Government to make appropriate provision for the WASPI women. Local authorities such as Caerphilly, Neath Port Talbot, Rhondda, Wrexham and Swansea have all pledged their support for fair transitional arrangements. Many, many more are working towards replicating that pledge.

The Welsh Government give free bus passes to individuals over 60, which puts Welsh WASPI at an advantage in as much as they are able to travel free. This is especially important if they are expected to travel to benefit offices or work trial placements as a requirement of any of the benefits they may have to claim to survive. Talking of buses, next Wednesday the M4 will hopefully be awash with purple as WASPI women from Wales travel to London to join the WASPI demonstration. Women from across the UK will vent their frustration at the Government's reluctance to engage constructively on this issue. There will be many, many Welsh women in that throng, including a coachful from my own city of Swansea.

The last subject I want to mention is a campaign that is very personal to me: the funding of children's funerals. I am very proud that since I first spoke in this Chamber about my own son's passing and the difficulties I experienced in funding the funeral, almost all Welsh Labour local authorities have responded by scrapping fees for children's funerals. To name just a few whose reaction was extremely swift: my own city of Swansea, Torfaen, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf and, just this week, Bridgend.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): Along with my hon. Friend, I welcome the news that Bridgend County Borough Council, and Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council in my constituency, have cancelled child burial fees. Does she not agree that it is very upsetting for families who lose a child that it has taken individual councils to change these rulings, rather than the British Government stepping up to the plate and providing the money to enable all local councils across the UK to do this immediately?

Carolyn Harris: I certainly do, and my hon. Friend will appreciate that it has been very painful for me to expose myself in this way to get the right thing done.

I believe the commitments of those local authorities have been made with compassion. Until I raised it, many local authorities were unaware that the cost of a child's funeral was an issue for many bereaved parents. I was able to expose the elephant in the room, which is that the privacy and intimacy of that situation are a social taboo. Very few people will open a conversation

with an undertaker with the words, "We will have what we can afford." Instead, they want a service and a funeral that reflect the depth of their love for the one they have lost. When you lose a child, there is no consideration of anything, including cost. Rational thought and basic common sense leave you as you try to come to terms with your own grief and how to get through each day. I am so grateful to those Welsh local authorities, as I am to authorities right across the United Kingdom.

Mrs Moon: My hon. Friend will be aware that Bridgend not only discounts or removes costs for children's funerals, but has built a dedicated children's area in the crematorium so that parents have a private place to go. Does she think that that is perhaps the next step for her campaign?

Carolyn Harris: I would of course want that to happen and I will certainly campaign for that, but at this moment I just want the costs to be covered.

The action of some local authorities does not mean that the Government are off the hook. I urge the Secretary of State to speak to the Chancellor. He has the opportunity next Wednesday to do the right thing: take the message back that Wales is leading on this but that the Government now need to act in the same spirit and establish a specific fund that can be drawn on by local authorities to allow them to waive fees for children's funerals.

In conclusion, there are many things in Wales from which I derive pleasure and pride. We are a strong nation with a good heart and we always want to do the right thing, so I plead with the Secretary of State to take these messages back and to ask his Cabinet colleagues to do the right thing on children's funerals: show compassion, show respect and show understanding.

4.24 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I again thank the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) for spearheading efforts to secure this timely debate. If he will excuse me, however, I want to congratulate the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on her campaign and what she has achieved so far. The work is unfinished, and I hope the Government are listening to her words, but no one can doubt her determination, off the back of a terrible tragedy, to pursue this issue. I salute her for what she has done, as I am sure does everyone across the House.

I had a long list of things to talk about, but time is against me, so I shall touch on them only briefly before talking at greater length about my universities—like the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), I represent a university constituency—in a European context.

I seem always to be talking about broadband in mid-Wales, as does the hon. Member for Ynys Môn. People acknowledge the huge achievements that have been gained through superfast broadband, but according to Ofcom, four of the 10 constituencies with the highest percentage of slow connections, and five of the 10 with the lowest fixed broadband speed, are in mid-Wales, and alas Ceredigion is on both the lists. There is therefore work still to do. It is not just about householders connecting either; it is about ridding ourselves of an impediment to business thriving in mid and west Wales. That is why we need more concerted action.

[Mr Mark Williams]

I have not had an answer from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport or the Minister about the DCMS future contribution to S4C's budget. The former Secretary of State promised that the contribution would be frozen pending the outcome of a review, but we still have not had that review. Is there a commitment from DCMS to freeze S4C's budget in the year ahead?

On transport connections, I will only mention the spirited campaign to reopen a railway line between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen. I am grateful that the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), met campaigners last week. On business rates, I endorse what the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) said about how businesses will be grievously affected unless the UK Government, in addition to the Welsh Government, step in.

Liz Saville Roberts: On business rates, will the hon. Gentleman take this opportunity to ask what is being done about the Valuation Office Agency, which is responsible for the means by which the revaluations are done? It is, of course, a Westminster responsibility.

Mr Williams: Indeed. I am not sure if the hon. Lady is alluding to the structures through which it undertakes its valuations, or some of the weird decisions it is coming up with, but a business in my constituency whose business rates have doubled from £12,500 a year to £25,000—this is in a seasonal tourist area of Ceredigion—would be very sympathetic to her question.

Higher education is critical to Ceredigion. We have Aberystwyth University, of course, and the Lampeter campus of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Lots of geographical references have been made to Dewi Sant. When the land rose so that he could deliver one of his great sermons, it was in Llanddewi Brefi, which is famous for other things on television these days, but fundamentally famous for Dewi Sant. Aberystwyth University is one of the top 200 universities in the world for agriculture, English, geography, environmental sciences and politics. Some 95% of our research is of an internationally recognised standard or higher, and the university contributes £250 million to our local economy.

I want to use this opportunity to celebrate the investment that is in place now, which is largely from the EU. Some £20 million from the European regional development fund, which is safe because it will be delivered before 2020, will fund the building of an innovation and enterprise campus at Aberystwyth University. That will provide world-leading facilities and expertise to create market-focused solutions for the agri-tech industry. It will also encourage business and academic collaboration, drawing a link between academic excellence and commercial opportunities. Those are lofty words, but they are valid ones. Academia is often accused of working in a silo—apart from business—but this initiative with Aberystwyth will certainly move away from that.

I particularly celebrate the European money that came in. The project could not happen without Europe and the £20 million from the regional development fund, but it is going to happen. There is no scaremongering—it is going to happen. I celebrate the good work that will take place but, as the hon. Member

for Cardiff Central said, there are huge concerns about future research grants, participation in EU projects and, critically, the status of non-UK EU staff. Countless people have come to my surgeries genuinely fearful about whether they should stay and if they should apply for jobs in the future. That is a real concern. We are missing a trick—a fundamental and humane trick—if we do not allow people to come here in the numbers that they have done in the past to contribute to Wales and our economy.

I should also make a more general point about research funding. There has been a historical concern that Wales has not had its share of research funding. I could say a lot about this, but I will just cite Professor Dylan Jones-Evans, who I think is more known on the other side of the House than on my side, who has said that if research had been “Barnettised”, we would have seen an extra £500 million of research funding in Wales over the past decade. That is very important.

Finally, I want to talk about Dewi Sant—the great, compassionate saint. I think that he would have been alarmed by the direction of immigration policy in this country, and not least what has happened with the Lord Dubs amendment made in the House of Lords. I hope that the Government reflect on that. People in my constituency are very keen that more refugees should come to Wales.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that I now must reduce the time-limit to four minutes.

4.31 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): Happy St David's day, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) and others on securing the debate.

For Wales to continue to thrive and meet its potential, we need continued investment in infrastructure. The Welsh Government are right to be investing in transport, and I am glad that there is a focus on plans for both a north Wales and south Wales metro. World-class public transport is vital for the future of Wales. It can provide a sustainable way forward to attract the brightest and the best to our nation. Through the implementation of the south Wales metro, I hope that we will get much-needed improvements to the level crossing in Pencoed and the half-hourly service to Maesteg, and road infrastructure improvements around the town of Llanharan.

I want to focus on two national campaigns that are often raised in this House but are seldom given a Welsh context. First, I want to draw Members' attention to how much scamming affects people across Wales and beyond. The practice of scamming is on the rise, and each year around 9,000 incidents of fraud are reported to the police. Scamming has an impact on the most vulnerable in society, and at the moment not enough is being done to tackle the problem.

At present, there is not enough recognition of the problem that scamming poses to the most vulnerable in our communities. Awareness of the threat should be more of a priority at all levels of government. If people are aware of the most common scams and the tactics

that criminals use, they will be more able to protect themselves, and less likely to be flustered and rushed by scammers. In the coming months, I will be stepping up a campaign in Ogmore to raise awareness of scams, and I encourage all hon. Members to look into doing the same in their areas.

As with any other crime, it is ultimately the police who do most to protect the people of Wales and elsewhere from scams. Police officers face immense danger in their line of duty, and we must do more to keep them safe. According to data from the Police Federation of England and Wales, over a period of 12 months, there might have been more than 2 million unarmed physical assaults on officers, and a further 300,000 assaults using a deadly weapon. The vast majority of these incidents are unreported, however, so official figures show far fewer instances. We must work together with the police in Wales to ensure that they are safer at work, and we must heed their campaigns for better protection.

Forces throughout the UK have begun to use spit guards as a defence against spitting suspects. If forces in Wales choose to use these guards, we should defend them and show our support for that. Spitting is a form of assault that leaves officers at risk of receiving life-threatening diseases, and if our police forces in Wales can see a way of preventing such assaults, we should stand by them.

There will be opportunities and risks for Wales over the coming years. Our departure from the European Union will bring difficulties for each nation of the UK, but I am glad that we have a strong Welsh Labour Government in Cardiff Bay to fight our corner. The Welsh Government are right to focus on the need for continued investment in infrastructure and public services, and I only hope that the UK Government, and particularly the Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary, will always continue to champion Wales on reserved matters.

4.34 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): This St David's day debate takes place against the backdrop of Brexit and all the uncertainty that that brings, but, like other hon. Members, I want to talk about some of the positive developments that we have seen in the corner of Wales that I represent with my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) in the year since our last debate. On 14 March, it will be 15 years since Newport achieved city status, and it is no exaggeration to say that there is new life in our city centre thanks to the Friars Walk development, which had 8 million people walk through it in 2016. It has brought 1,500 new jobs and attracted £120 million into the city centre. All credit to Newport Council and its leaders, Bob Bright and Debbie Wilcox, for making that happen.

Coleg Gwent is seeking to relocate to a site next to the University of South Wales to create a knowledge quarter on the banks of the River Usk, and work will begin this month on the international convention centre. Last year, the University of South Wales launched the National Cyber Security Academy, which has been part-funded by the Welsh Government and supported by Airbus and General Dynamics. I am really proud that the cyber-experts of the future are being produced in Newport, in the second-largest cyber-security department after Royal Holloway college. These are positive

developments, with Newport Council working with Labour in the Welsh Government and with industry to bring benefits to our constituents.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the Cardiff capital region city deal. The leaders from Newport and Monmouthshire were among the 10 leaders who signed that deal yesterday. The key element in this is the metro. We have had debates in which we have asked the UK Government to guarantee the funding for that, post-Brexit. It is an ambitious project with huge potential for improving connectivity.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The leader from Torfaen also signed that deal yesterday. Does my hon. Friend agree that the crucial element of the deal is its strategic approach to south Wales?

Jessica Morden: My hon. Friend is exactly right, and we look forward to working in partnership.

As the population grows in the areas of Caldicot, Rogiet, Undy and Magor, it is crucial that we have the infrastructure for a new station in Magor, for which a bid has been put in, and better capacity for the commuter services to Bristol and Cardiff. I hope that the Ministers will pursue this with the Department for Transport.

We should also be talking about the Great Western Cities partnership between Newport, Bristol and Cardiff. This is another potential source of growth, and I am keen to hear from Ministers what they can do to engage with and support it. Those great western cities are interdependent and have key areas that could provide economic growth. Initial work has already shown that the economic benefit that could be generated by improving the connectivity between Bristol, Newport and Cardiff would be greater than that generated by similar investment in Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool. This is a huge opportunity and I would like to see Wales Office Ministers engaging with the project. I was going to let the subject of the Severn bridge tolls go, on this occasion—[HON. MEMBERS: "No! No!"] I will just say that the Government have moved some way, following our long campaign, but it is not far enough. We will continue to campaign on that issue.

Finally, I want to highlight some other matters on behalf of my constituents. The first is steel. I have spoken many times about the importance of steel to my constituency, and I have been heartened by the investment being put in by Liberty. The Tata workers in the steel industry have made a difficult decision in agreeing to the pension proposals. They are doing their bit, and it is now up to Tata and the UK Government to ensure that there is a sustainable future for the Welsh sites, including Llanwern and Orb.

The second issue is personal independence payments. The Government's announcement about the changes to PIPs last week has caused huge anxiety out there among constituents who are already struggling with the process. I cannot be alone in seeing surgeries full of people who are waiting too long for assessments and decisions, and long-term disabled people who are getting turned down, with all the distress that that causes. Last week's statement will only add to that distress. Many disabled people who I know feel that they are always in line for cuts and that there are no guarantees that those facing reassessment will not see their awards cut. Will Ministers take back to the Department for Work and Pensions the message

[*Jessica Morden*]

that, rather than making the process more difficult, what is needed are fewer delays, more consistency in decision making and more discussion with disabled people's organisations before bringing forward regulations such as these.

Last but not least: the police. Today's report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary highlights the fact that the police are struggling with cuts and that their response to the public is suffering. Gwent is rated "good" in HMIC's assessment, and I am really pleased that it is in the top 10 best performing forces for cases involving domestic violence. However, the police are clearly struggling to do much more—there are more complex cases—with less. The debates that we have had in this place have highlighted that fact, and I would like to see Ministers fighting the corner for Welsh police forces and the service they provide to our constituents, to ensure that they are properly funded and can do their crucial job well.

4.39 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on securing this important St David's day debate. He is not only a great ambassador for his constituency in north Wales, but an advocate of all things Welsh—he is not a quockerwodger. I echo his calls for unity and connectivity. I live in the Dulais valley of Neath where the signal falls like rain, but we have so much rain that we call it liquid gold.

I pay tribute to the former Father of the House, Gerald Kaufman. I have great memories of Gerald from when he stayed at my house many years ago and played with my daughter Angharad. I still have the photos, which I showed him when I became an MP. We will all miss him so much.

I must also mention the recent tragic death at age 20 of a young Welsh sports star. Elli Norkett was the youngest player at the Women's rugby world cup and had gained four Welsh senior caps by the age of 17. Elli started her career aged 15 at Neath Athletic RFC, and I had the fortune of meeting her and was inspired by the charm, wit, and passion of a young woman who touched the lives of so many. Her smile lit up the room.

It is a privilege to be the shadow Secretary of State for Wales and to hear about the many Welsh issues and causes mentioned by Members today. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) for his hard work in his role as my right-hand man—or perhaps that should be left-hand man. It is great to see the Secretary of State in his place today. He is famous for his sartorial elegance, which is matched only by my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami). I must also mention the great outfits worn by Madam Deputy Speaker, but if she needs some fashion advice, she can call on our fashion guru, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris).

Much has happened since last St. David's day, and it is important to reflect on some of that today. The hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) brought so much energy to his speech, just as he does when chairing the Welsh Affairs Committee and when I see him in the gym every morning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds)—my great friend—talked about economic development, saying that funding should continue beyond 2020 and that steel is central to Wales's future.

The hon. Member for Gower (Byron Davies) spoke about the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon project and the encouraging news that Ministers are looking at it closely. I hope that that is positive news, because we really need that project. He also spoke about the decline of the cockle industry, which we must work together to save.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) talked about the importance of the higher education sector to Wales. Success in that sector breeds success across communities in Wales. She also mentioned Horizon 2020 and the Erasmus programme, stating that 17% of staff at Cardiff University are EU nationals, to whom great consideration should be given.

The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) said that St David travelled widely but came back to Wales. The hon. Gentleman started some sort of contest about who has the most beautiful constituency. Well, it is Neath. He said that he supports the tidal lagoon, but there is no sea in Brecon! One fact that I did not realise until the other day is that St David was a vegetarian.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) said that St David's mother lived in Brittany and urged the Government to think of EU citizens. She also spoke about Welsh language culture, and I congratulate her on securing the ability for Welsh to be spoken in the Welsh Grand Committee.

The hon. Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) discussed the Cardiff city deal.

Byron Davies: Again.

Christina Rees: Again, yes, but he also mentioned Cardiff Central station in his contribution. He pointed out that the Champions League finals for both men and women will be held in Cardiff, but he did not mention the Women's Six Nations championship, some of which is being hosted at Cardiff Arms Park.

The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) spoke to us in Welsh, and she assured us that she said nothing naughty. I cannot speak Welsh, so I hope she is right. She spoke about the importance of looking at how powers are repatriated to devolved areas of the UK and about the great repeal Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) spoke in glowing terms about Porthcawl and the festivals. I have attended all the festivals because I used to live in Porthcawl, and it is indeed a beautiful place to live. She also mentioned Kenfig Hill, where I was born, and the benefits that Bridgend County Borough Council is bringing to the area. I was a Bridgend councillor, and not many people know that I was Carwyn Jones's councillor. I can assure the House that he did not benefit in any way from my being his councillor.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) spoke about the Severn bridge tolls and how they are calculated. He quoted from the poem by Harri Webb and put his own words to it, which sounded really fine to me.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) said that Brexit must work for Wales and that the UK Government must protect funding until 2030.

He talked about the steel industry, about which he has spoken so passionately in the past, and its importance to his constituency and the UK. He also mentioned the cross-party “Steel 2020” report, of which I have a copy. It is a great report.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East spoke about the WASPI campaign, which she has led so well in Wales. She spoke about the unfairness of the pension arrangements and how we need fair transitional arrangements. She said that most of the buses from Wales will be filled with WASPI women coming to next Wednesday’s march. She also spoke of the very personal matter of the loss of her son and how four councils in Wales have already scrapped fees for children’s funerals.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) spoke about the universities in Aberystwyth and St Davids and about superfast broadband.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) spoke about the north Wales and south Wales metro and his level crossing in Pencoed. He also spoke about vulnerable people being scammed and how we should support our police officers, who do a fine job in our communities.

It is 15 years since Newport became a city, and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) spoke positively about the great work of council leaders Debbie Wilcox and Bob Bright and their great vision, together with the Welsh Government, to make the city of Newport a fine place.

I thank all the Members who intervened, too. I look forward to working with the Secretary of State for Wales to make Wales a superb place in which to live and work. I am passionately Welsh and always will be.

4.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): *Rwyf yn ddiolchgar i'r Pwyllgor Busnes*—I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for recognising the importance of holding this debate on Wales near St David’s day and for allocating the time. I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) and for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Byron Davies) for securing the debate on this motion on behalf of Members on both sides of the House. I am grateful for the commitment and drive that has delivered this debate.

I welcome the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) to the Dispatch Box, and I look forward to working closely with her in the interests of Wales and of all the people of Wales. I thank her predecessor for her robust scrutiny when she was in post.

I highlight the importance of the Union to Wales. I will cover as many points as I can, but I need to underline that the Union of the United Kingdom is the most successful political union of nations that has ever existed. It is important that we recognise the precious bond between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. As we leave the European Union, the Union of the UK is more important than ever, and we will seek to strengthen it as the negotiations progress. We want the United Kingdom to emerge from this period of change stronger, fairer, more united and more outward-looking than ever before. We will make sure that no new barriers to living and doing business within our nations are

created. That was the spirit in which the hon. Member for Ynys Môn introduced this healthy debate, and I hope it has been underlined throughout.

By being part of the Union, Wales has prospered and developed, and in turn the UK has benefited from the flow of ideas and innovation from our proud nation. Some issues relating to universities were mentioned during the debate, and the hon. Members for Ceredigion and for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) and others talked about the great innovation and expertise in our universities, from which the Union of the UK benefits. Organisations such as Innovate UK have a key part to play in driving innovation and capturing the expertise that exists.

North and south Wales form single economic regions with the north-west and south-west of England. After all, 50% of Wales’s population and 10% of England’s live within 25 miles of the Wales-England border.

I shall address other points later, but first, there was much focus by Members on funding. I hope we can recognise the funding settlement that was negotiated before Christmas. It puts Wales in a strong financial position as we look forward: it will receive around £120 for every equivalent £100 spent in England. That will fall, over a long period, to £115, which is the funding floor. I hope that demonstrates the positive, open relationship that we want. We want to work with the Welsh Government to secure and bind the Union in the best possible way so that we can benefit from the assets, culture and diversity of all the nations in the Union of the United Kingdom.

There is no denying that, as a Union, we are inextricably linked. Companies in Wales have access to help and support from both Governments, and we are keen to work closely with the Welsh Government to secure further inward investment, as well as to develop businesses and the industrial strategy that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is driving forward. He will be in Wales shortly to ensure that Welsh businesses are playing a full part in the consultation on the recent Green Paper.

There are challenges ahead as we exit the European Union, but there are also some great opportunities. We are working with the Welsh Government and discussing the process and progress in the negotiations on our exit from the EU. Reference has been made to the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU negotiations, which brings together the UK Government and the devolved Administrations to seek to develop a UK-wide approach to the challenges we face and the opportunities we can grasp as we leave the EU. At the last meeting of that Committee, the Welsh Government presented their White Paper, which sets out their priorities for our exit from the EU, and we are discussing their proposals.

As part of the discussions, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union met the Welsh Government Finance Minister yesterday, along with officials from my office and the Cabinet Office. We are having parallel discussions on a whole range of issues to ensure that Wales is at the heart of the discussions. We will intensify our work with the Welsh Government on all aspects of the EU ahead of, and following, the triggering of article 50. It is important to remember that, despite political differences, we share many objectives. The Welsh Government’s White Paper was a welcome contribution, and I believe we have significant common ground from which to work.

[*Alun Cairns*]

We all want the freest possible access to the single market. In that context, the Ford plant at Bridgend was mentioned by not only the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) but several other Members, including the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds). The latter also mentioned steel, as did the hon. Members for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and for Newport East (Jessica Morden).

We need to recognise that, in relation to Ford, there is the natural life cycle of a product, and that we need to be realistic about where we were expected to be at this stage of development. The hon. Member for Bridgend said that there were challenges in efficiency and productivity that the unions and the plant must face. When I met Ford two days ago, there was optimism about a sustainable future, but also a recognition that we need to win further business for when the natural life cycle of the existing engines ends. It is on that basis that I look positively at the challenges that we face in order to make those jobs sustainable over the longer term.

Some of the information out there has been highly selective, and I do not necessarily subscribe to the way in which it has been presented. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and I have already discussed this matter, and I know that ongoing engagement with Ford is something that we want to pursue.

On the points that were made in relation to steel, I do not accept the criticism that the hon. Member for Aberavon made. He talked about trade defence measures. Although I have mentioned them time and again, he fails to recognise them. The 41 trade defence measures that have been introduced have had an effect. Imports of rebar and wire rod into the European Union are down by 99%, as a result of the Secretary of State, and his predecessor, driving that forward to ensure that we have a fair and level playing field for the steel industry. Rolled-flat products and organic coated steel are similarly down by 90%. The hon. Gentleman will recognise that, as a result of the action taken by the workforce and the responsible approach taken by Community union, the Government and the Welsh Government, the steel industry in Wales and across the United Kingdom is in a much, much stronger position now than it certainly was just a year or so ago. I am optimistic about the future. Yes, there are challenges to overcome, but there is a sustainable future that we need to find for steelmaking in Wales.

There are millions of people across the world looking for the skills, expertise, and goods and services that we have in Wales. Through the Wales Office and the Department for International Trade, we can use our exiting of the European Union to exploit those opportunities that exist. We have landed some significant investments, including GE in Nantgarw yesterday and the F-35 global repair hub in Flintshire. Those are just two examples of our recent significant progress.

I am sorry that I have not been able to cover all the issues, including the points about tourism that were made by my hon. Friends the Members for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) and for Gower. They rightly highlighted the value that tourism brings. I recognise the points that they made about the Cardiff city deal. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig

Williams) drives that project with great enthusiasm. My hon. Friend the Member for Gower is pressing the point on the tidal lagoon. It is only right that we give that matter the time that it deserves in terms of examining the numbers and looking at it fairly so that it is right not only for energy production, but for the taxpayer.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call Albert Owen.

4.58 pm

Albert Owen: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. As a Scot representing an English constituency overseeing Welsh affairs, you are most suited to your role. What we have seen today is the eloquence of the Welsh Members who are here today. They have been very passionate and proud of the Welsh dimension of British politics. I had hoped that the Secretary of State would respond to my request that Wales be the first part of the United Kingdom to have the broadband universal service obligation. We can be the pioneers.

It is good to see the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy sitting on the Front Bench for this debate. I hope that he has been able to put pressure on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to announce next week that the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon will be given the go-ahead. That would bring cheers right the way across Wales because we are the pioneers of energy production in this country, and we want to continue to be so in the future. It does not matter whether we are talking about new nuclear, wind, tidal or renewables, we want to be the pioneers in the lead.

On behalf of the Welsh Members, I wish to thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the way in which you have overseen our proceedings, and to thank each and every Member from across the House and from each and every party—it is good to see that the Liberal Democrats have a 100% turnout today from Wales. We work together as a team—Team Wales—and on the closest day that we could get to St David's day, we will shout from the rooftops that we are Welsh and proud, and the rest of the United Kingdom will sit and listen.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Welsh affairs.

PETITION

Changes to funding for 3 and 4 year olds

5 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the Government's consultation paper (Early Years Funding: changes to funding for 3 and 4 year olds 11 August 2016) outlined proposals that will leave nursery schools financially nonviable, forcing them to close; notes that this funding will not cover basic costs, let alone staffing with qualified teachers; and further notes that state nursery schools have very good outcomes with regard to closing the achievement gap and supporting children with special needs, and that state nursery schools are legally required to employ highly-qualified teaching staff, who are proven to give young children the best opportunities for academic achievement and enabling social mobility.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to recognise the school status of state nursery schools and fund them accordingly.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002022]

A petition in similar terms has been signed by 304 people.

A6-M60 Relief Road

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Christopher Pincher.*)

5.1 pm

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to Mr Speaker for granting this Adjournment debate on the need for the A6-M60 relief road. It is particularly appropriate that we debate the issue now, exactly 242 years to the week since residents in and around my constituency first made representations to the House calling for a similar road to relieve local congestion on what was then known as the London road, which is now the A6.

Records in the Library show that on 27 February 1775, a petition was presented to the House from

“the Inhabitants and Owners of Houses and Lands, within the Town and Township of Stockport...Setting forth, That the town of Stockport is very populous, and a Place of great Trade and Business”—

just as it is now—

“and the Inhabitants thereof, and Persons resorting thereto, suffer great Inconveniences...and that the great public Road from Manchester and other adjacent Towns, to the Metropolis, lies through the town of Stockport; and that several Streets and Passages, within the said Town, through which the said public Road runs, are too narrow, and are very incommodious.”

It was

“Ordered, That the...Petition be referred to the Consideration of a Committee”

and that a certain Mr Egerton and Mr Crew were to meet

“To-morrow Morning, at Nine of the Clock, in the Speaker’s Chamber”.

Quite what happened in the Speaker’s chamber the next day is anyone’s guess.

Fast forward nearly 250 years and the inhabitants of Stockport and surrounding towns—including Hazel Grove and Bredbury, both of which are in my constituency—are still suffering the inconveniences of incommodious roads that cause travel and commuting misery for tens of thousands of residents. Of all Greater Manchester boroughs, Stockport has the highest number of daily commuting movements in and out of the city of Manchester. The largest commuting flow between the districts is a broadly north-south movement between Stockport and Manchester, and the largest equivalent flow across the Greater Manchester boundary is a north-south movement between Cheshire and Stockport. Much of this traffic is made up of journeys that start or finish within the borough of Stockport, mostly either accessing local areas off the A6, or using the A6 to access the M60 and the wider motorway network.

More than 30,000 vehicles a day pass through the residential and commercial areas of Hazel Grove. On a daily basis, there are high volumes of slow-moving traffic. Average peak hour vehicle speeds are less than 10 mph. That makes the road network one of the worst congested, if not the worst, in the country. Journey times on this arterial route are longer than in all other large urban areas across the UK, including London. There are particular congestion problems along the A6 and in the urban centres, including Bredbury, Hazel Grove and Offerton. We are at the point where congestion is causing poor and unreliable journey times, and that is becoming a constraint to economic growth.

What is urgently needed, therefore, is a road between the M60 at Bredbury and the A6 at Hazel Grove, following the once proposed alignment for the A6(M). The A6-M60 relief road would remove unnecessary traffic from the A6 through Stockport and Hazel Grove, allow for better connection to the M60, and directly facilitate these two largest commuting movements to support the Greater Manchester economy.

Thankfully, there has been significant consideration of such a relief road since 1775. In 2000, the then Government undertook a thorough study into the travel and traffic issues facing the south-east quadrant of Greater Manchester, in partnership with Stockport Council and its neighbouring local authorities. The south-east Manchester multi-modal strategy—pithily known as SEMMMS—reported in September 2001. It recommended three new highway schemes, including the A6-M60 relief road. Since then, work is being undertaken on the first two schemes, supported by funding from a range of sources, not solely central Government: the new airport road is under construction; and the Poynton bypass is in its planning stages, with construction expected to start in 2018. The A6-M60 relief road is thus the final highway component of the SEMMMS strategy yet to be actioned.

I would like to outline briefly the design and benefits of the A6-M60 relief road scheme. If it is given the go-ahead, it will provide 5 miles of new two-lane 50 mph dual carriageway on a north-south route from junction 25 of the M60 at Bredbury to the A6 near Hazel Grove. It will also provide a short link road to improve access to Stepping Hill hospital.

It will come as no surprise to at least one Member of this House—namely, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley)—that the present scheme is very close in layout, route and objectives to an earlier proposal for a Stockport bypass, and this time that proposal is from a period during my lifetime, albeit when I was a mere 18 months old. Rooting through some old files, I came across a letter from one of my predecessors, Sir Tom Arnold, to a constituent. It declared:

“Go-ahead to End Traffic Chaos.”

Attached to it was a Department for Transport press release from June 1989, which quotes my hon. Friend, who was then the Minister for Roads and Traffic, as saying:

“Good road connections encourage industrial and economic expansion...This further investment for the North West and for South East Manchester will be a major help in encouraging the growth of enterprise.”

In his covering letter to his constituents, Sir Tom added:

“It is our firm conviction that the Bypass will have a profound and beneficial impact upon the future quality of life and the environment in Hazel Grove”—

I could not agree more. Construction of the A6(M) bypass around Stockport was due to begin in 1992; alas, it was never started. As we have seen that improvements to, or a bypass of, the A6 have been proposed in 1775, 1989 and again in 2001, we are now fully up to date with the history.

In the 2015 Budget, the Treasury granted £350,000 to undertake a contemporary review of the case for the road. Stage 1 of that feasibility study concluded that the travel and traffic congestion problems that existed at the time of the SEMMMS publication are more acute than

[William Wragg]

ever. The study found that the A6-M60 relief road would bring about significant improvements in congestion, thereby not only making people's lives easier, but bringing about significant economic benefits. By removing congestion from local roads, the scheme would also contribute towards enabling a better integrated public transport system by improving the reliability of bus journey times. Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you, like other Members of the House, are still composing yourself after the thrilling excitement of yesterday's Second Reading debate on the Bus Services Bill.

As well as considering direct local benefits, it is important to think about the road in its wider regional and national context, and the context of the Government's overall aims. The scheme aligns with several national policy objectives. In recognition of the large increase in traffic on the strategic road network that is forecasted, Highways England is prepared to invest in local road infrastructure improvements that will help. The scheme would also provide improved access and more reliable journey times to Manchester airport not only for airline passengers, but for heavy goods vehicle freight. The scheme would therefore support the Government's freight policy. Furthermore, providing better access to Manchester airport is identified as one of the key components of the northern powerhouse.

Regionally, the A6-M60 road would directly contribute to the delivery of two elements of the Greater Manchester transport strategy 2040: supporting sustainable economic growth; and improving quality of life. The scheme also forms part of the wider SEMMMS, as I mentioned, and would complement the two other road network schemes that are already under way. It is important to note that once the new airport link road is finished, the amount of traffic using the A6 is predicted to increase, which makes the need for the A6-M60 relief road ever more pressing.

I have outlined the benefits of the scheme as I see them, as supported by the feasibility study. However, I am aware that, as with any large infrastructure project, there are important environmental considerations, and a number of my constituents have sincerely held concerns about the environmental impact of the proposed road. I stress that I am not blind to these concerns; this is a major new road scheme that is set to run through some areas of countryside. However, I note that the 2003 environmental assessments found the wider SEMMMS to be acceptable in principle, subject to appropriate mitigation. The environmental impact should be fully examined as part of the process of progressing the business case, and it should accord with environmental protections and legislation. By relieving congestion, the new road would help the environment by improving air quality, which is currently affected by emissions from slow-moving and stationary traffic.

Population growth was identified as a factor in the feasibility study. I am clear that the road is required to deal with the already congested and overstretched infrastructure in the area. It should not be viewed as a catalyst or justification for the drive for excessive residential development that is envisaged in the Greater Manchester spatial framework.

In summary, the problems identified in 2001 are still present. Indeed, worsening traffic conditions mean that the need for intervention that was identified by the original SEMMMS is as great as ever. The scheme would address issues around peak hour congestion, air quality and connectivity. It would also increase the reliability of public transport. It is consistent with national, regional and local transport policies, and the growth aspirations of Greater Manchester and the national Government.

The Government have supported feasibility studies regarding the road up to this point. We now need the stage 2 study to develop a strategic outline business case for the scheme in line with Department for Transport guidance. Further work will be required, based on new traffic forecasts, to take account of the airport link road and environmental assessments, and I will work closely with Highways England on that.

Will the Minister confirm the Government's commitment to investing in road infrastructure as a means of relieving existing congestion and driving economic growth? Does he appreciate and share my frustration, and that of local residents, about the length of time that the scheme has been in the proposal, draft and study stages, and the amount of appalling traffic, congestion, delays, inconveniences and pollution that people have had to put up with during that time? Can he suggest how I might best work with him and others to ensure that this project remains high on the agenda? Does he support progression to the stage 2 feasibility study for the business case? Will he give an indication of when the time for studies and reports may come to an end and the building of this vital and long-anticipated road can begin?

The case for this road has now been made and studied in three separate centuries—the 18th, 20th and 21st—and I am pleased to have been able to make the case yet again today. I hope that the time for studying will soon end and that the time for construction will begin. I look forward to the Minister's answers, for both he and the Government should know that on this issue, much like the traffic in my constituency, I am not going anywhere.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): May I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) on securing this debate about the proposed A6-M60 road scheme, also known as the Stockport north-south bypass? I have to say that 242 years as a local issue is a record in my experience of transport. However, as ever, my hon. Friend demonstrated his passion for the area and his knowledge of it.

I will address my hon. Friend's questions, but I just want to put in a degree of context the underlying point he was making about the importance of transport investment. Transport investment is hugely important to Greater Manchester, as it is, indeed, to our whole country. We agree with local partners that it is essential for growth, and that is why we are investing significantly in it. That includes record spends on rail and road, with £38 billion on rail—excluding High Speed 2—£15 billion on our strategic road network and £5 billion for local schemes through the local growth fund. That investment is designed to drive the economic growth we all want, as well as to relieve communities and the wider economy of the effects of congestion, as was so eloquently highlighted by my hon. Friend.

Through our devolution deals, we are putting Greater Manchester at the heart of the northern powerhouse. As my hon. Friend knows, we are committed to creating that northern powerhouse to rebalance our economy. That is part of our longer-term economic plan, and one we share with the north. We have created Transport for the North to develop and drive forward transport plans that support economic growth. We will invest £13 billion during this Parliament to better connect the region, so that our towns and cities can pool their strengths and work together to create a single economy.

Greater Manchester is right at the heart of this. As my hon. Friend knows, it is a centre for innovation, education, industry and culture. The population is 2.7 million and rising. Greater Manchester generates £48 billion of gross value added—a 4% share of our national economy. It is the UK city region outside London most likely to be able to increase its long-term growth rates, with its access to international markets and its strong connections to the rest of the world, so there is real scale and real opportunity in the Greater Manchester economy.

South Manchester, with key assets such as Stockport and Manchester airport, is a critical element of that success. The airport is the UK's third largest, employing over 20,000 people, and it indirectly supports a further 25,000, contributing £1.8 billion per year to the economy. In addition, the airport city enterprise zone promises to create between 7,000 and 13,000 jobs. That is tremendous news for not just the north and the northern powerhouse but Greater Manchester and my hon. Friend's constituents.

However, to make that growth happen, we need transport infrastructure in place to support it. That is why we are heavily investing in the area. SEMMMS highlighted the significant problems we all know everybody experiences in south Manchester. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that the proposed solutions have sat on the shelf for too long—I was unaware that it has been over 240 years, but I think we can all agree it has been too long.

That is why I am delighted that the Government have been able to approve the first of the schemes recommended in that study—the A6 to Manchester airport relief road. The road is currently under construction, and it is due to open at the end of the year. It is an important scheme, and it will not just bring significant benefits to the residents of south-east Manchester, including those of my hon. Friend's constituency, but have much broader benefits. It will certainly make access to Manchester airport much easier, which will help to drive economic growth, therefore benefiting the whole area.

As my hon. Friend said, initial approval has been given to the second of the three schemes in the SEMMMS report—the Poynton bypass. That is subject only to Cheshire East obtaining the necessary legal permissions and showing us that the scheme is value for money. The funding is available for this scheme, and we want to see it in place.

That leaves the third scheme—the Stockport north-south bypass, which is the topic of our debate. This scheme would build on the other two. It will clearly bring additional benefits to residents of Stockport and Hazel Grove, primarily through the much needed and long-awaited relief from the congestion on the A6 and other roads in the area. Residents will also benefit from airport access and economic growth. My hon. Friend highlighted his

concerns about the time it has taken for the scheme to get to this point. He is clearly correct. As the scheme is not on the strategic road network, it is the responsibility of local partners, and decision making rests with them. It is possible that the high cost of all the SEMMMS schemes, and the many other improvements in the area that have taken place right across Manchester from a transport perspective, will have been a factor in local partners' decisions on which schemes to prioritise for delivery.

I understand—my hon. Friend articulated this with great sensitivity—the concern about the possible adverse effects on the green belt and the local community that could occur with the housing that may be developed in the wake of this scheme. Indeed, he raised this issue with the Prime Minister last week. I would echo the commitment that the Prime Minister made. The Government are very clear that the green belt should be protected. Boundaries should be altered only when local authorities have fully examined all other reasonable options. Any changes should be balanced with improving the quality or accessibility of the remaining green-belt land so that it can be enjoyed. Green belt is a critical part of the protection of our local environments, and I think we are all passionate about seeing it protected.

I am aware that Greater Manchester Combined Authority has recently consulted on its draft spatial framework and that this has stimulated much debate. It will be for the local planning authorities to make sure that the much needed housing will be situated in ways that limit any effect on the green belt. It will also be for the road scheme's designers to be sensitive to the area through which it will pass. I commend my hon. Friend for his work in seeking his constituents' views on how the construction of the A6 to Manchester airport relief road has affected them, and on what lessons Stockport Council and the construction company can learn for future projects. It has to be accepted that there will be some adverse effects on residents while these new transport schemes are built, but every opportunity should be taken to minimise these problems and learn lessons for the future.

My hon. Friend asked whether we support the proposed scheme. Yes, we have shown our support for it by providing Greater Manchester Combined Authority with £350,000 to fund a feasibility study for the route. That study, I understand, is due to be completed in May this year. It will then be for the combined authority and Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council to decide what to do next. They could decide to fund the scheme from their own or from third-party sources, or they could seek access to Government funds. If the study is sufficiently detailed, they could bid for funding from our large local majors fund—the vehicle to support schemes like this through the Department for Transport. That fund is designed to help councils to build transport schemes that are too large to be funded through the usual source of funding—the local growth fund—but not big enough to be classed as of national strategic importance. However, I have to warn my hon. Friend that this fund is very popular and likely to be oversubscribed—and this scheme will be an expensive one. Nevertheless, our support for the scheme shows that we are serious about working with local partners to deliver a world-class transport network to improve the lives of local people.

[Andrew Jones]

I should highlight the fact that we are investing in many other parts of the local transport network. Transport in Greater Manchester is being transformed. Indeed, I have spoken at conferences where colleagues from Transport for Greater Manchester have said that this is a golden age for public transport and investment in Greater Manchester.

On the strategic road network, we are investing £1.5 billion in the north-west to provide the biggest increase in capacity to be delivered there since 1971. It includes an upgrade to strategic roads serving south Manchester, such as the smart motorway on the M60 and the M62; and the A556 Knutsford to Bowdon scheme, which also improves the main southern access to Manchester. Those are live schemes in the plan.

We are also looking at future projects. We are running studies of the case for building a trans-Pennine tunnel between Manchester and Sheffield, and for improvements that could benefit the area of the M60 north-west quadrant and therefore the whole M60 route. The process is now under way to set the next road investment strategy, which will cover the period post 2020.

We are working closely with partners in Greater Manchester and Transport for the North to determine future priorities. I am sure my hon. Friend, with his customary diligence, has raised the matter with them, but I will certainly mention this debate next time I meet Transport for the North and highlight my hon. Friend's concerns, to make sure that they are firmly on its radar.

We also have the biggest programme of railway modernisation since the Victorian era. The north of England rail infrastructure upgrade programme will transform rail in the region. Work has begun, and we are seeing real progress. The first phase of north-west electrification enables electric trains to run from Manchester Airport to Glasgow. Journeys are faster following the completion of track improvements and electrification between Liverpool and Manchester, and Liverpool and Wigan. Particularly topical is the significant progress made on the Ordsall chord. That included last week the lifting into place, using two of the largest cranes in this country, of the world's first asymmetrical network arch railway bridge. That attracted a lot of attention, and some quite good time-lapse photography shows the bridge being inserted into position.

Those are positive developments, but there is clearly much more to be done. Our programme of more than £1 billion includes a substantial electrification programme and other track, signalling and station improvements. They will all increase capacity and the number of services,

making journeys faster and more reliable. We will certainly see transformative change through the Northern and TransPennine Express franchises, which will deliver high-quality services to passengers. The residents of south Manchester will see benefits, which will include significant increases in capacity into Manchester in the morning peak; more trains to a range of major destinations across the north; new and refurbished trains; and—if my hon. Friend's constituency is like mine, this will be particularly welcomed—the disappearance of the outdated Pacers.

Looking to the future, HS2 will be coming into south Manchester—it will go straight through to central Manchester, too—and will be a huge boost to the whole region. It will bring with it jobs, growth, and magnificent regeneration opportunities. Those are big schemes already under way, in planning or in study form, all of which will have an impact on the north-west.

We are not just talking about big national schemes; we are also looking to improve our local public transport network. We should be celebrating the achievements that we have made, which include improvements at Cheadle Hulme and Hazel Grove railway stations; priority bus routes into central Manchester from south-east Manchester; extensions to the Metrolink system—I congratulate Greater Manchester on the opening of the second city crossing this week—and new transport interchanges in Altrincham and Wythenshawe. In addition, £115 million of local growth fund is being invested to improve transport access in Stockport town centre. Those have all received contributions from central Government, so our support for the area is significant at a strategic and a local level.

I hope that I have been able to demonstrate that this Government are committed to improving transport in Manchester as a whole, including in south Manchester and in my hon. Friend's constituency. We have shown that support by providing significant funding for a wide range of improvements, as well as the specific funding for a feasibility study of the A6-M60 scheme. He has made a great case—I would expect him to do so, as a local champion for his area—highlighting the benefits very clearly and showing great sensitivity to environmental concerns. I very much look forward to receiving a copy of the report once it has been completed. Once the promoters have looked at the study, I expect it—should they choose to seek our support—to arrive in the Department, where it will be considered and given a very good hearing.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 2 March 2017

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

Support for the Bereaved

1.30 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Ninth Report of the Work and Pensions Committee of Session 2015-16, Support for the bereaved, HC 551, and the Government response, HC 230.

It is a pleasure to debate under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, not only because of past campaigns that we have joined in together, but because I know you can put aside partial affections and chair our debate properly, fully and impartially. The debate has been called to take note of the Work and Pensions Committee report on bereavement benefits; to give Members an opportunity, from their experiences in their constituencies, to bring the report up to date; and to invite the Minister to tell us, as I hope he will, how Government thinking has progressed. I know that this is not his brief so I, and I am sure all Members who participate in the debate, will be more than happy to have any detailed replies given to us in correspondence afterwards.

Debates such as this give me the opportunity to thank a number of people who are often not thanked. I only too willingly thank the Select Committee staff, on behalf of all the Committee members, for producing a whole series of reports that have tried to influence—and, indeed, are influencing—Government policy and beyond. I am naturally thankful that we have been able to call this debate, which gives us the opportunity to which I have referred. I stress that our Committee's topics are all decided democratically by Committee members, so this one was not brought down from on high by the Clerks or—heaven forbid—just by me as Chairman.

Yesterday in this Chamber, we debated the nature of poverty in Merseyside. Today, we are debating how one aspect of that operates across the whole of our country. We are talking about how poverty can stab at the most vulnerable when they are at their most vulnerable. I have had examples in my constituency of families being unable to claim the ashes of a family member because they could not complete the payment of the funeral bill, and of bodies being frozen as families club together to try to get the sums that would satisfy the undertaker that a funeral could take place.

As I do, I asked Ed in my office what cases of this harrowing topic had been in this week. He reported on a constituent who lost her husband last September, having left work to care for him in the final year of his life. She had never claimed benefits until she left work, but a period of depression in her husband's final few months led her to claim employment and support allowance. All her savings were used in those final months, and she has a mortgage to pay.

After my constituent's husband died, she arranged for the most basic, low-cost funeral to take place. There was never any question of her thinking of having anything else or planning for anything else. She was not informed

at any point about bereavement benefits or other sources of support, such as the social fund funeral payments. Even then, she could not afford the low-cost funeral, so her daughter stepped in to pay what she could, but £1,000 is still owed on the funeral bill. The social fund payments are about £700.

It is almost a year to the day since the Select Committee published our report on bereavement benefits, so this debate is opportune not just because of the constant ticking over of similar horror stories from constituents in all of our constituencies, but because, a year on, the Government have been given a real chance to take measure of the proposals we put to them. We were concerned about bereavement benefits and the reforms the Government are making to them, of which we are supportive, as well as social fund funeral payments, which have remained at £700 since they were last reset in 2003.

Before I put questions to the Minister, which is the basis of my contribution, the latest information we have on pauper funerals—although they have been renamed local authority funerals or public health funerals, everyone locally knows they are pauper funerals—shows that on average our local authorities pay £900 to cover them, yet the Department's grant is of £700 social fund funeral payments, linked to those 2003 prices.

I welcome the Minister and thank him for stepping in at the last moment to respond to the debate for the Government. My questions to him are as follows. One of our recommendations was that the Government should negotiate a reasonable cost for a simple funeral with funeral directors, with the social fund funeral payment reflecting the cost of that total package. We do not think it an unreasonable request for the Government to spearhead those negotiations with the industry. Therefore, what progress have they made in negotiating to get funeral directors and the funeral industry to be much more open and transparent on a decent, average or simple funeral, or whatever euphemism we wish to use for the very minimum of funerals?

Secondly, we recommended that the Department introduce an eligibility checker for social fund funeral payments so that people would quickly know how to make a claim. The Department has said that that is not a road it wishes to go down, but my constituent—the live case I cited from this week that Ed in my office is dealing with—was given no advice about what might be available from either the social fund or, as importantly, bereavement benefits, which she could have claimed in addition to her ESA payments. Has any progress at all been made in giving legs to the idea of some simple tracker mechanism, so that people can quickly see what they are eligible for?

I stress again the important point—I know I do not have to do this for the Minister or for anyone else in the Chamber—that as soon as the phone is picked up to the funeral director, the clock starts ticking on what will be charged to the family. Often, it is quite a long way down the road before they realise the expenditure to which they are already committed and whether they would have faced that expenditure had they known what help—if any—was available.

A third recommendation was to take a leaf out of the Scottish Government's book and see what could come from the Government conducting a cross-departmental review of burials, cremations and funerals.

[Frank Field]

What information out there could we use to simplify this complicated world that families have to negotiate at a time when the vast majority of them are at their most vulnerable?

The Select Committee noted the lack of protection in the funeral market for bereaved customers, particularly for poor families in our constituencies. We heard evidence that funeral directors' fees vary dramatically, and that many funeral directors are reluctant to display their funeral prices without it being shoehorned out of them. It is not good enough to have huge variations in the price of a basic funeral—of 200% or even 300% between providers in different areas and regions—and for there to be no way of getting that information to vulnerable families.

The Committee also made recommendations on bereavement benefits. We welcomed enormously the Government's changes on that and thought they were absolutely the right moves. We made two recommendations in particular. The Government accepted one, which was that bereavement payments should not cease one year after the death of the person whose death triggered the eligibility, but should go on for at least 18 months. I very much welcome the Government's decision to adopt that recommendation.

The Government said that they did not intend to make money from the reform, but that the package of reforms will save in the region of £100 million. Why is it then that they have not agreed to our second recommendation on bereavement benefits? Why have the Government not used some of those savings, which they said they never intended to make, to deliver an extension of bereavement benefits to people in similar situations to marriage, such as those in civil partnerships or who are cohabiting? That would make the benefit more broadly and, I would argue, more accurately reflect everyday life in our constituencies. People's lives are not in old-fashioned, neat little boxes, but come differently. It is a pity that the Government have not used this once-in-a-generation reform of bereavement benefits to bring their eligibility on a par with how people live their lives today.

To conclude, I will again pile the questions on to the Minister. As I said at the beginning, given the circumstances under which he appears before us, we will be happy with written replies if the answers we want cannot be provided now. Do the Government have any plans to extend bereavement benefits to what the rest of us would call "families", even though they do not fit the legal requirement of being married? What plans do the Government have to update the value of, and access to, social fund funeral payments? Are the Government satisfied that a pauper's funeral—for people whose family cannot begin to bury them, who have been deserted or who have no one to bury them—now costs more than what the Government offer through social fund funeral payments? Is that acceptable, particularly when the reforms are making money?

After interviewing a range of funeral directors with the Select Committee, I do not underestimate for one moment the difficulty for the Government in trying to get agreement among funeral directors on what a simple or basic funeral could or should consist of, and what to charge for that around the country. I know that is an immensely difficult task. The Committee has powers of

compulsion to bring people together. I know that the Government do not have to use such powers, but I do not underrate the difficulty of getting the industry to meet and to be transparent about their costs and about how, sadly, a number of them rip off our most vulnerable constituents when they are least likely to have the mental energy to fight back.

My final point to the Government is that our report made a strong plea for families to be able to know very quickly whether they are eligible for the social fund funeral payment and, equally importantly, what that payment will and will not cover. In those circumstances, every family wants the very best for the loved ones they are burying or cremating, but one cautionary note ought to be made: while families will strive for the best and will club together and do all sorts of things, they ought to be clear very early on what the social fund funeral payment pays for and what it does not.

I am grateful for the opportunity to present our bereavement report; it has given me the opportunity to update the Select Committee's thinking and present it to the House. I also welcome other hon. Members, who clearly have a passion for what is happening in their constituency, and I welcome the Minister, who will reply and say where the Government's thinking has got to.

1.47 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to take part in the debate. I would normally have been in the Chamber for the debate on International Women's Day, but I am here to speak about widowed parent's allowance on behalf of two of my constituents in particular. They are here today, and their voices need to be heard in debates such as this.

Theirs are the voices of women who never wanted to be in the position they are in and who never expected to claim widowed parent's allowance—one is not, which I will come to. Tragedy struck their families in the most cruel and horrific way, and their partners were taken from them. The strength and courage they have shown in campaigning on the issue has inspired me as their MP, so I am proud to be here to talk about their experiences and why they should be heard, instead of taking part in the debate on International Women's Day. There are so many challenges when it comes to inequality and we must fight them all. What is happening with widowed parent's allowance feels to me like one of the most basic examples of that and of the unintended consequences of the Minister's and the Government's thinking. In reading into the record some of my constituents' experiences, I hope the Minister will think again about some of the choices the Government have made and the devastating consequences they are likely to have.

I will talk first about Ros. Her husband sadly died in 2014. He had been ill for some time before that, so Ros had given up work to support her children as their father deteriorated. That is an horrific experience for anyone to deal with at a young age. To then have to deal with the financial consequences only compounded her family's grief. Ros suddenly became a single parent to two children and found that widowed parent's allowance was, as she described it to me, a lifeline. The work that she did, in the theatre, was not easy to combine with being a full-time carer for her young children, and she was struggling with the grief of losing her husband.

Ros has done the calculations for what the Government's proposed changes in the scheme would have meant for her and her family. The Minister claims that this is not about making money, but is a fair change in the system. When I look at the figures and how Ros is affected, I do not think that that is the case. I think this is clearly a cut in the budget designed to save the Government money, but it is a short-term saving with a long-term loss.

Ros and her family would, under the new scheme, have lost out on more than £100,000 over the lifetime of her children. That money allows her to look after her children, keep her family and household going, be a mother to two children who are grieving for their father and start to put her family's life back together again. When she looks at what the new scheme would mean, she points out that the new lump sum would probably have been taken up by the funeral costs straight away. That is not a more welcome situation.

The pressure of not having a consistent income and worrying about what would happen after 18 months would have consumed her. As she says, after six months she was still drowning in paperwork relating to the death of her husband and trying to cope with the impact on her children. Grieving does not stop at 18 months, so why should the support that we offer to families affected by this sort of tragedy?

As Ros points out, these payments are a recognition of the contribution her husband made to the system when he was alive, through his national insurance payments. Indeed, as she points out, that creates quirks; a friend who has four children gets £50 less a week than Ros because her husband was 10 years younger. If we accept the principle that these payments are based on what the partner has paid into the system, surely what matters is whether those payments have been made and whether the partner was part of that relationship.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) supports terminating the support at 18 months. I disagree with him. I do not understand why 18 months is an appropriate cut-off date.

Frank Field: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stella Creasy: I am happy to. I was about to say that I do agree with my right hon. Friend on some other things.

Frank Field: The Government's original proposal was to stop the support after a year, and I thought 18 months was better than a year.

Stella Creasy: I understand that. I hope to make the case that we should support families who are in grief. We should not ask them to take on poverty and possible debt on top of dealing with grief, and we should not put a time limit on grief in these sorts of cases. We are not talking about hundreds of thousands of families, but we are talking about families facing one of the most horrific, soul-destroying experiences one can have. I agree with my right hon. Friend about the need to update the way in which our welfare system works.

The second case I want to talk about is, I hope, familiar, because I have written to the Minister before about this lady. Joanna has two beautiful young girls. I am lucky enough to see their pictures on Facebook

and feel as if I am watching them grow up vicariously. One of her daughters was born, sadly, after her partner suddenly died. Joanna had to fight to get her partner's name, David, on to the baby's birth certificate because they were not married. They were clearly in a loving relationship. They had been together for a long period and had chosen not to be married. That should surely be their choice. The state should not use that to penalise Joanna and her family yet, as far as I can see, over the past couple of years we have penalised Joanna in many different ways. She had to pay £1,500 for a DNA test to prove that this gentleman was the father of her daughter and to have his name on the birth certificate. She does not receive a penny in widowed parent's allowance, despite her partner paying into the system, just as Ros's partner did. They are no less a family because they do not have a piece of paper.

In 2017, surely we should recognise those children's need for the support that widowed parent's allowance would provide to their family. That money would help not only to keep a roof above their head but to remove the pressure of debt, so that Joanna could be a mum to her two lovely daughters and start to put their lives back together following the sudden death of their father. It is those sorts of real issues and real people that our welfare system has to be able to work with. The cuts that the Government are making, particularly when it comes to widowed parent's allowance, make no sense to me at all because they do not see the people behind these cases.

I have been lucky enough, through the organisation Widowed & Young, to see other examples that are similar to the stories of my two constituents, Ros and Joanna. Their cases are no less compelling. Will the Minister reconsider this 18-month bar and look again at the actual people behind the statistics by meeting them and hearing their stories, to understand the reality of being widowed at a young age and what impact that has on a family? Will the Minister ask again how we can do what we all want the welfare system to do—to support people and be a lifeline at a critical time, to help get these families back on their feet?

The changes that the Government are making, I fear, will not simply not help; they could actually make things worse for these families. They could bring debt, because the fear of what will happen will force people who are still grieving after a mere 18 months to make decisions that may be against the best interests of their family because they are short of cash.

As Ros said, this money has been a lifeline for her. She is one of the lucky ones because she qualified under the old scheme, but none of these people are lucky, because after all, they have lost a loved one. That is what we are trying to get at here. Ros, Joanna and all the women and men involved in this campaign deserve better from us. I hope that the Minister will at least commit today to meet them, to understand better the situation they will be in when these changes are introduced.

1.56 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I want to begin by thanking the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for securing this debate. I know, and very much appreciate the fact, that he has a long-standing interest in this issue.

[*Patricia Gibson*]

It is quite easy for me to sum up today, because unfortunately we have not had many speakers. The reason I wanted to become involved in this debate is that I grew up the youngest of eight children, and my father died when I was a baby; I was nine months old. My mother was widowed with no support whatsoever. That was partly because her and my father had come over from Ireland in the 1950s, and she had no knowledge or awareness of the benefits system. Even if she had, she probably would have assumed it was not for people like her, because at that time the UK was not a place that was always very welcoming to immigrants—even Irish ones. She would no doubt have assumed that such a system excluded people like her.

I am not saying, “Woe is me!” When I was growing up, I had no idea that we were poor, and that is a huge testament to my mother. Everybody around me was poor, but because of that, nobody realised they were poor. It was not until I went to university in Glasgow and met different kinds of people from different backgrounds that I appreciated, in hindsight, the difficulties and the struggles that my mother had gone through and how very poor indeed we were, but I had no sense of it growing up.

Today, unfortunately, the world is much smaller, and when people are poor, they are profoundly aware of their poverty, even as children. Looking at this issue objectively, we can understand as human beings, even if we have not experienced the loss of a spouse, how frightening and how lonely that must be. We do not need to experience it to understand it. We do not even need to have children to imagine what it is like for the bereaved who have children.

We can appreciate how difficult and challenging it is for someone who has children and is bereaved, often suddenly and unexpectedly. Every single day, despite the awful event and the despair, terror, uncertainty and instability, they have to keep putting one foot in front of the other to make life as normal as possible for them and their children after such a tragic loss. That was set out for us in very human terms by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who told us about her constituents Ros and Joanna.

The hard-headed reality is that when such a loss occurs, the bills still come in. The rent or mortgage still has to be paid. When everything else in the family or household has been thrown into confusion and up-ended in the most profound way imaginable, especially in cases of sudden loss, financial stability—strangely enough, despite the grief—becomes more important than ever.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead pointed out that the Scottish Government have done much work to assist those most in need with regard to funeral costs, but that is really only the beginning, even though meeting those costs is a struggle for so many people. I wrote to the Secretary of State about my concerns over the proposed changes to payments for the bereaved. I am quite alarmed at the so-called streamlining of those benefits, because we know that that will hit families hardest. Disappointingly, the Secretary of State’s response has not allayed my concerns at all. In fact, the letter, detailed though it was, merely restated Government policy.

The fact is that those who are grieving need support, and unless that support is adequate, the social fallout could be quite significant. I would like the Minister to consider the consequences for children—the potential detrimental consequences for their emotional and mental wellbeing, as well as their educational outcomes. There is little point in trying to be penny wise and pound foolish. The bereaved need time, which varies from person to person, to emerge from the fog of bewilderment, shock and disbelief, as well as the pain of grief, that the loss of a loved one brings with it, and how much worse is that for children? With cash payments being limited to 18 months, grief has been given a sell-by date. If only grief were like that.

At such times, parents need to be around to support, listen to and help their children to make some sense of the irreplaceable loss that they have suffered. That is where bereaved parents want and ought to be—not stuck in the office or on the shop floor, having to put in extra hours to make up the income shortfall due to the death of their spouse, and hoping that friends and neighbours will step in.

Make no mistake: the new bereavement support payment regime will disproportionately affect women. Working-age women are more likely to claim bereavement allowance, with 70% of claimants in 2014 being female. Despite bereavement being one of the main causes of financial difficulty, according to research, that support is to be cut. That will directly affect thousands of people throughout the United Kingdom and 40 to 50 newly widowed parents in North Ayrshire in my constituency next year.

Those with children will be hardest hit by the changes, and some families could lose up to £12,000 a year. A working-age parent with children could lose even more—approximately £23,500 on average. Let us imagine the impact that such a financial loss will have on those suffering, and living with, grief. The Government insist that the changes are not about saving money, but the Department for Work and Pensions forecasts savings of £100 million a year because of them. If the changes are not about saving money, why not redistribute those savings to ensure that fewer families are worse off? Currently under the changes, 75% of families will be worse off.

Another concern is that the link between bereavement payments and inflation will be broken, despite the benefit being intended to support people with the additional costs of bereavement. That cannot happen if it gradually loses its value over time. I feel strongly about this issue and urge hon. Members present to sign my early-day motion 959, because it is important to express our alarm in whatever way we can.

Let us not forget—this was mentioned by the hon. Member for Walthamstow and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead—that unmarried, cohabiting couples are not recognised by the DWP, although 21% of couples with children are unmarried, according to the Office for National Statistics in 2016. Not to recognise cohabiting couples is short-sighted and illogical. Children will lose out financially because their parents decided, as they had every right to do, not to marry. There is a problem, because the state treats unmarried parents as a couple for other means-tested benefits or tax credits when both parents are alive. Perhaps the Government can explain why such relationships are dismissed when one of the

cohabiting parents happens to die. I would be most interested to know why that distinction has been drawn in this case.

I will end by simply saying that bereavement support is not a benefit that anyone wants or expects to claim, but when these circumstances arise, it is necessary and extremely important. The savings that the Government expect to make are not worth the misery and the appalling sell-by date that they stamp on grief and cannot be worth the way they punish those in the throes of grief or the potential social fallout that they inflict on families and society. Of course I welcome the simplification of the system, but there are wider concerns, as the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Lady so eloquently pointed out. I urge the UK Government to look at this matter again and to listen to the concerns expressed by so many in this Chamber and so many more outside it. There is concern about the impact on grieving spouses and on families and concern about the lack of financial recognition for bereaved parents who chose not to marry. I urge the Government to listen.

2.5 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on securing this important debate. I also thank the people who have come down to Westminster today to make the case and, in particular, the Childhood Bereavement Network, Widowed & Young and the Good Grief Trust for the work that they do to raise awareness. They do so not for themselves, but for the people who come after them, so it is particularly worth while that they would do that.

My right hon. Friend made a very clear speech and asked specific questions. I hope that the Minister can respond to them all. My right hon. Friend spoke about the real hardship that people go through and described the shortfall between the average cost of a pauper's funeral paid for by a local authority and the social fund funeral payments—a difference of £200.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) spoke with real passion on behalf of two of her constituents in particular. Ros had described receiving the widowed parent's allowance as an absolute lifeline. My hon. Friend also talked about the injustice that Joanna had suffered; she spoke about the difficulty that Joanna had experienced in getting her deceased partner's name on the birth certificate and the injustice of unmarried couples being treated differently from married couples.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) told her personal story and spoke compellingly about the human costs of what we are discussing. She also spoke about the illogicality of the Government's position in not recognising people who cohabit in the same way as they do those who are married.

The Work and Pensions Committee report, published back in March 2016, raised a number of important issues and made considered recommendations. In June 2016, the Government responded to the report, with commitments to look at some of the recommendations more closely. Many months have passed since the Government responded, and six weeks ago we saw a written statement from the Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery, in which the Government committed

to laying regulations to introduce the bereavement support payment. It is therefore vital that we are having this debate today to clarify whether the Government have progressed that agenda and what exactly their plans are for the future.

The Work and Pensions Committee report raises a number of issues regarding social security support in the event of a bereavement that I would like to address. If I may, I shall use my contribution to focus on the adequacy of the social fund funeral payment, the new bereavement support benefit and the need for a strategy to improve the operation of the market.

First, the Select Committee rightly pointed to the increasing gap between the average cost of providing a simple funeral and the support available from the state to do so. The report "Cost of Dying 2014" by the insurer SunLife found that the average cost of a funeral now stands at £3,500. However, figures from the Department for Work and Pensions show that the average award made through the social fund to help to meet the costs of a funeral during 2015-16 was £1,400.

The entitlements available through the social fund funeral payments include provision for meeting the full cost of some services, such as burial and cremation, with other expenses, such as funeral directors' fees and the cost of a coffin, being met up to a capped limit of £700. The capped limit for funeral costs has been fixed at £700 since 2003, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead explained, and has therefore been significantly eroded by inflation over the more than 10 years since then.

With the average award now running at less than 40% of the average cost of a funeral, it is clear that the adequacy of the support provided by the social fund now requires urgent review if we are to act to reduce funeral poverty. That has been raised repeatedly in the exceptional campaigning by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who has courageously shared her own experience.

The Select Committee recommends that the Government revalue the assumptions that underpin the cap, which should then rise with inflation. That appears to be a very sensible approach and is in line with the usual practice in the wider social security system. The Government responded to that proposal by suggesting that they should not prescribe

"what a claimant should expect as part of a funeral".

That is a deceptive answer and it does not address the issue directly. The point is that the cap is now insufficient for even the most basic of funerals. This is not a question of choice or expectation as the Government imply; it is about respect for those who have passed away through the provision of a simple ceremony and proper burial or cremation. Will the Minister agree to look again at the question of cost and indexation, given the overwhelming evidence of there being insufficient support?

There is, of course, the question of the operation of the market that underpins the adequacy of social security support to meet funeral costs. Sensibly, the Work and Pensions Committee suggested that the Government look at the issue through a cross-departmental review of the inflation of funeral costs. The Committee has also sent its evidence to the Competition and Markets Authority in the hope of pursuing that proposal. The Government suggested that they would "consider this recommendation"

[Margaret Greenwood]

in the context of discussions they were already having with stakeholders. Will the Minister update us on whether a review will be brought forward? If the Government are now planning a belated review, perhaps they will state when it is scheduled and outline the terms of reference.

Clearly, one issue with the market for funerals is that people suffering a bereavement are often in a vulnerable position and can therefore find it more difficult to take the sort of steps necessary to take fully informed decisions, as they might under other circumstances. That is currently exacerbated by the Government's numerous failures to provide clear and accessible information in that regard. The Committee made a number of recommendations, including an online eligibility checker, signposting to funeral homes accredited as part of a fair funerals scheme, clearer information on application forms and Government leaflets being distributed more widely. The Government seem strangely reticent about providing people suffering a bereavement with clear and helpful information about how to access funeral provision.

I was particularly shocked to see the Government's claim that an online eligibility checker could only supplement a telephone or paper application and never act as an application in itself. Surely our Government, which placed so much emphasis on "digital by default", must be technologically advanced enough to build a system under which an eligibility check can contribute to an online application? After all, that is possible in almost any other aspect of life. Can the Minister please clarify that?

I turn now to the bereavement support payment. In her written ministerial statement, the Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery announced regulations providing for a single, new payment to replace bereavement payment, bereavement allowance and widowed parent's allowance for those whose spouse or civil partner dies on or after 6 April this year. The Government argue that it will increase simplicity for those who are bereaved and seeking support. We do not support the reforms, which amount to a cut for bereaved children.

Although the Government have responded to criticism from the Social Security Advisory Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee by extending the period in which the bereavement support payment can be accessed from 12 to 18 months, that is still much less than the period of eligibility available under the current system. We therefore have serious concerns about whether it is long enough. Analysis by the Childhood Bereavement Network, for example, suggests that 91% of widows will be supported for a shorter period under the bereavement support payment than under the current system. That really is not acceptable. The network also suggests that 75% of parents bereaved after April will be worse off in cash terms under the new system, some by as much as £17,000. A study by J. William Worden, which is considered the most robust longitudinal survey available, found that the availability and consistent, nurturing presence of the surviving parent was one of the strongest predictors of bereaved children's emotional health and behaviour.

Under the current system, the median claim is between five and six years. What evidence have the Government drawn upon to find that 18 months is suddenly sufficient? Would it not be better for the length of potential provision to be extended to ensure the best possible

outcome for the child in such a tragic and distressing situation? Is it not the case that the current system is more comprehensive in that regard? I await the Minister's response to that point.

Parents who are not married or in a civil partnership are not eligible for the old widowed parent's allowance or the new bereavement support payment, meaning that children lose out on support because of their parents' marital status. We believe that that is unjust and a relic from a past society that, thankfully, we have progressed beyond. It is also the case that those with young children will be disproportionately affected, as they can currently claim for longer. That means that young children are being hit hardest by this cut in the tragic event of the death of a parent.

Finally, for some seemingly unjustifiable reason the Government have decided that bereavement support will not be uprated in line with inflation. That can only be a further way of saving money at the expense of the bereaved, just as we have seen with the social fund funeral payment that I described earlier. What possible justification can the Government have not to uprate this measure, as is standard practice across most of the social security system? This reform appears simply to cut support to those grieving the loss of a loved one; it is, in effect, an attack on those who are already suffering quite unimaginably. Will the Minister commit to publishing a regular, fully updated impact assessment of the changes being made or, better still, follow Labour's lead and commit to scrapping this reform and establishing an independent review of the sufficiency of support for the bereaved?

To conclude, the Government's inaction in supporting the bereaved has gone on for too long, and what little action there has been appears to be to those people's detriment. So far, their action has amounted to a cut in the support on offer to the bereaved—a really horrendous attack that we stand against. I do not envy the Minister the task of trying to justify this so-called reform, so I urge him and the Government to think again about the plans.

2.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for securing this debate; it is not the first debate he has instigated that I have answered on behalf of the Government this week, but as usual the comments in his speech, together with those in the Select Committee report, were very serious and well-reasoned. I also thank the other speakers: the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy); the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), who spoke for the Opposition; and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who spoke on behalf of the Scottish National party. I would like to make it clear that I listened very carefully to everything that they said, and my remarks may be quite long as a result of that. If they feel that their questions have not been adequately answered, as the right hon. Member for Birkenhead said, I will be able to write to them.

I want to pass on the apologies of the Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery. Ironically, she is not here today because she is attending a funeral. I have attended many meetings on this subject and agreed to step in for

this debate. I thought I would make that clear just once; that is the reason why she is not here and I hope that hon. Members, together with the people in the Public Gallery, will accept that.

The Government are very aware—as any of us are as constituency MPs, or just as human beings with our own family and friends—that bereavement is a very difficult time. It is probably one of the toughest experiences we face. Many of these points have been responded to because the same issue was discussed here in Westminster Hall last September. It is perfectly correct that we return once more to this debate, which is about how Government can best support vulnerable people going through bereavement with the practical challenges it can create.

The hon. Member for Walthamstow specifically referred to two of her constituents. I will respond to the other points that she made, but I would certainly be very prepared to meet those two constituents, and I know that I can say on behalf of my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery that she, too, would be prepared to meet them. We can arrange that as soon as possible after this meeting if the hon. Lady contacts us, or I will happily contact her office.

All of us have seen the vital support that funeral expenses payments provide; therefore I fully understand, personally as a constituency MP as well as on behalf of the Government, the importance of providing the right support at the right time. Since the debate last September, a lot of work has taken place on funeral payments and support for the bereaved. In responding to hon. Members' points, I hope also to outline what we have been doing. I will mix responses to their points with a general response on the developments since then.

First, on funeral expenses payments, I wish to put on the record the support that my Department provides for vulnerable people at a difficult time. We make a significant contribution to the costs of a simple, respectful funeral for loved ones of applicants in receipt of qualifying income-related benefits. We meet the full, necessary costs of a burial or cremation, which we know can vary, including the purchase of a grave, necessary burial or cremation fees, the cost of any medical references or the removal of active implanted medical devices for cremations, reasonable costs if a body has to be moved for more than 50 miles and travel costs for the applicant to arrange and attend the funeral. In addition, as has been mentioned, we meet other costs up to a maximum of £700.

In 2015-16, nearly 29,000 funeral expenses payments awards were made—worth more than £40 million—in Great Britain. The average payment has increased by just under 40%—from £1,019 in 2003-04 to £1,410 in 2015-16—reflecting the rise in necessary costs, but not in discretionary costs. That is why in 2012 the Department made interest-free social fund budgeting loans available for funeral costs, in addition to the funeral expenses payments. Last year the average award for all budgeting loans was £418. It is important to emphasise that we made those payments available in 2012, and that they are interest-free. Those loans are crucial for supporting people at a difficult time by removing the need for bereaved families to turn to high-cost lenders and the worry of meeting a funeral director's bill.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that we provide the most generous support for funeral expenses when we are compared with other European countries—we can still compare ourselves with them for the moment, but

that is another debate. Providers of funeral services, including the church, funeral directors, local authorities and crematorium owners, all play a role in ensuring that funerals are accessible to everyone. The Government believe that when a family can take part or all the responsibility for the cost of funeral arrangements, they should. However, there are obviously times when state support is appropriate, and we know that we can do more. Having taken time to set out the facts of what we do, I will turn now to the issues that have been raised during the debate.

On costs and claims, when considering the level of support for other costs, a balance needs to be struck. We do not want the funeral expenses scheme to influence or inflate the prices charged by the funeral industry for a simple funeral, and it must not undermine personal and family responsibility for meeting funeral costs. We have to ensure that the system not only is fair to taxpayers but supports the most vulnerable people. We have been working closely with the funeral industry to discuss how it can improve the transparency of its information about costs and choices. That would help people to make more informed choices and encourage competition within the industry. We remain committed to listening to our stakeholders, as we have been, and to working together to find solutions that are in the interests of the most vulnerable.

For that reason, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery convened a ministerial round table earlier this year, with stakeholders such as the National Association of Funeral Directors, the National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors, representatives from different faith groups and organisations representing bereaved people—in fact, my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) was also present. A lot of topics that are relevant to issues raised today were covered, including transparency and the costs of funerals in the industry. The Under-Secretary of State asked stakeholders to share news and good practice about how they plan to be more open with their online pricing to support vulnerable claimants, and how they can support the rest of the industry to do the same.

We are carrying out a thorough review of the social fund expenses payments and have created a small working group of stakeholders to work with us to identify where regulation can be amended to help to address and tackle funeral poverty issues. We have also improved information about the scheme so that it is easier for people to understand whether they are eligible. That is available online with the application form, as well as through our dedicated bereavement service telephony line, which hon. Members have mentioned.

We know from research that people prefer to speak to someone on the phone when they have suffered a bereavement, instead of using online tools. We have therefore provided a specialist telephony service with staff who are fully trained to support people sensitively. The service has received positive feedback. It includes an eligibility checker, which has been mentioned—I will come on to that in a moment—and we are taking steps to ensure that claims are processed and that decisions can be made more quickly. Our recent improvements include reviewing all claims on the day that they are received to identify those requiring further evidence; and gathering further evidence by telephoning and texting applicants to speed up the process—[*Interruption.*]

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order.

Frank Field: Sorry about that.

Stella Creasy: He is showing how the telephone system works.

Richard Harrington: Yes. Thank you, Mr Stringer. I was able to take a deep breath while the right hon. Member for Birkenhead attended to his electronic device.

Let me get back to the rising cost of funerals. We do not believe that the Government should be mandating or promoting a specific form of funeral provision for benefits claimants. Although my Department does not have responsibility for regulating the funeral industry, we are encouraging it to be more open and transparent in the way that I have explained, because people have to make informed decisions.

A number of low-cost alternative options are emerging in the funeral industry, such as direct cremations and municipal funeral arrangements offered by several local authorities. We recognise that those are not geographically widely available yet, and are not relevant to all religious and cultural practices. However, when it is appropriate, the industry should signpost people to direct cremations schemes and other low-cost alternatives so that bereaved people know they have the choice. We believe that improved pre-planning for funerals is just one way of helping individuals to focus on planning for a life event that is not always considered in advance.

Hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Wirral West, discussed the £700 limit. We know that some people need help with short-term needs, such as funeral expenses. Our priority has been to ensure that the scheme meets the full necessary costs of a cremation or burial for such people. The average payments have increased year on year to meet the necessary costs in full. Although we have had to make difficult choices about welfare spending, we have protected the £700 limit for other funeral costs, and we have continued to give people a choice on how they can spend that money on funeral expenses. However, the majority of funeral cost claims exceed the £700 limit, which is why, as I explained, we make interest-free social fund budgeting loans for funeral costs in addition to the funeral expenses payment.

The online eligibility checker was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead—I think in his second question—and by other hon. Members. As I have explained, the dedicated bereavement service telephone line already offers an eligibility check and research shows that that has been well received by callers. We believe—I accept that hon. Members may feel differently—that an online checker could cause confusion. User research has identified that individuals would rather speak to an individual during these times—that is based on user research, not on cost. At these very difficult times—at one of the most traumatic times in their lives—they would rather speak to a well-trained human being than deal with a website.

We have been working closely with the bereavement service to ensure that the scripts and messaging are incorporated and updated for funeral expenses payments and to ensure that the staff can adequately offer support to a bereaved person or funeral provider when they access our services.

Margaret Greenwood: As well as talking about funeral costs, will the Minister get on to the continuing support that bereaved people need?

Richard Harrington: I hope it will satisfy the hon. Lady to know that I will. I apologise if I have been going into too much detail about other things, but it is important for hon. Members, and others throughout the country and here today, to understand generally what the Government are doing about these issues, in response to the Select Committee's report. Please be patient with me; I will do my best to answer her questions. If not, I know that she will question me afterwards, but I hope that that will not be necessary.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead raised the issue of increasing awareness of the scheme. Information on the eligibility criteria is clearly presented and detailed on the gov.uk website and in the information accompanying a funeral payment application form. The current eligibility criteria ensure that the scheme is administered quickly without additional complex means testing and used solely for funeral expenses payment purposes.

We have received positive feedback from industry representatives on how helpful the bereavement service telephone line is in guiding callers through the application process and their eligibility, and on changes that we are introducing to the application form. We are discussing with third parties such as registrars and funeral directors how we can improve the way in which the Government engage with the bereaved to ensure that information is in the right place and in the right form.

The right hon. Gentleman asked what we were doing to negotiate a reasonable cost for a simple funeral with the funeral industry, as his Committee recommended in its report. We have been engaging with the industry and different lobbies, as I have explained, on how they can make costs more transparent, but we do not believe that the Government should mandate or promote a specific form of funeral provision for benefit claimants. We have encouraged the industry to be more open and transparent about its pricing structure so that individuals can make informed decisions and shop around.

We have engaged with stakeholders to build strong links so that we have the relevant expertise at hand for the first phase of the review, which will visit what parts of the social fund regulations can be amended to help address and tackle funeral poverty issues. We also continue to improve, review and monitor the application process. All that work is being done with the funeral industry and groups that advise bereaved people. In November last year, as I explained, we launched the shorter application form, and we are open to ideas about how we can review the system, in particular the application form for the social fund funeral expenses payment. It has been simplified as much as possible.

On support for child funerals and bereaved parents, I pay tribute to the efforts of the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who is not here; I suspect, knowing her, that she is at the debate in the main Chamber. I speak to her regularly, and she put on record her views on the subject in an Adjournment debate, as I recall, on children's funerals.

Frank Field: Just to put it on the record, she very much wanted to speak, but is in the other debate.

Richard Harrington: I was absolutely certain of it, as the right hon. Gentleman knows.

I confirm that we assign priority to applications received for children's funerals and aim to process them without delay. We have listened to stakeholders' concerns about the need to support bereaved parents of children, and we are currently considering how we can introduce a separate application form and system to help simplify the process in those tragic circumstances. We are keen to know how else to support individuals who require support for children's funerals. The view of most funeral industry representatives at the round table that I mentioned was that the vast majority of funeral directors already waive fees or offer significant discounts for child funerals, although there are no industry-wide arrangements and there is no guidance in place. The National Association of Funeral Directors offered to do a survey of its members on current practice.

Moving on to bereavement support payments, I will respond to the points made by the right hon. Gentleman and others. As has been stated, both Houses of Parliament have approved, under the affirmative procedure, the Bereavement Support Payment Regulations 2017. The new bereavement support payment, which is due to be launched in April 2017, will replace three current bereavement benefits: the bereavement payment, bereavement allowance and widowed parent's allowance.

Losing a spouse or civil partner is obviously tragic, and bereavement benefits provide vital support during this distressing time. Previous reforms have tended to be limited and made in response to specific pressures. No one had really considered how bereavement support fitted in with wider changes to the benefits system, and indeed to the social landscape as a whole. The aim is to provide targeted financial support at the time when it is needed most, without affecting access to additional forms of support that are available through other parts of the welfare system.

Stella Creasy: The Minister just said that the reforms are designed to provide targeted help when it is needed most. On what evidence has the concept of "most" been based, in his calculations? What does he define as a time when less help might be needed, as opposed to the most help? It would be helpful to understand the Government's thinking.

Richard Harrington: The hon. Lady makes a good point. I used the word "most" to refer to the most critical short-term time, which is what I was discussing, but I am prepared to accept her point, without getting into a competition about when "most" is most. It is all the time, and I am happy to say that, but that is not the context that I was referring to.

I hope the hon. Lady will agree that the old system could be unfair and complex, and could act as a trap preventing people from readjusting. Reform is essential to simplify and modernise the system. The history of bereavement benefits is rooted in the Widows', Orphans' and Old Age Contributory Pensions Act 1925. The way that people thought in those days was that most women were wholly dependent on their husband's income. If a woman was widowed, her sole source of income would disappear completely, so it was considered necessary to provide a replacement income for her to survive.

Today, women as well as men actively participate in the workforce, and many households now benefit from dual careers and dual incomes. That is why we are modernising bereavement support into a simple, uniform and easy-to-understand benefit that better reflects society. We listened to the recommendation of the Work and Pensions Committee that there was merit in considering the length of the new bereavement support payment. For that reason, the bereavement support payment is now payable over 18 months.

Patricia Gibson: The Government have said that this is not about saving money but about, as the Minister has said, rationalising the system, bringing it into the modern era and so on. However, the Work and Pensions Committee told us that the changes to bereavement support payments will save £100 million. If this is not about saving money, will that £100 million be reinvested in helping the 75% of people who will lose out under the new measures?

Richard Harrington: If the hon. Lady will be patient with me a little longer, I will mention the financial point that she has made. I am sure that she will intervene to castigate me if I do not.

The new bereavement support payment restores fairness to the system and focuses support during the 18-month period after a loved one dies, when people need it the most. I accept the view of the hon. Member for Walthamstow that "most" can mean a lot of things. If I said "when people need it" without "the most", it would still mean the same thing. People need it in those 18 months. The support is not taxed and is subject to a disregard for income-related benefits. The idea is, hopefully, to help those on the lowest incomes. Those who are least well off will gain the most, as for the first time they will be able to receive payments of bereavement benefit in full alongside any other benefit entitlements.

In her case studies, the hon. Member for Walthamstow mentioned the duration of payment and interactions with universal credit. We do not believe that the period of payment could or should be equivalent to the period of grief following spousal bereavement. As I know from the experience of many people known to me, grief can go on for one's whole life. The payment is not designed for that; it is designed to support people with the additional costs associated with bereavement, rather than providing an income replacement. That is probably the contradiction with the points that she made.

Stella Creasy: I thank the Minister for trying to clarify the Government's thinking, but as he goes along, he is making rather a different case. He says that the changes needed to happen because women are now entering the workforce. The old system was taxed, so if he is concerned that women might have additional income, continuing the old system might deal with that challenge better.

The Minister talks as well about people needing it most, but surely he recognises that although the loss of a partner is emotionally difficult, the practical financial concerns are paramount here. Does he recognise that the picture that he is painting of the issues is slightly askew from the reality of what the issues are for these women?

Richard Harrington: Obviously I do not agree with the hon. Lady's subjective point that I do not recognise the reality of the situation. We are not trying to replicate the period of grief with this benefit. As I have said, it is designed to support people with the additional cost associated with bereavement, rather than providing an income replacement. Her view, from what she has said, is that the support should be an alternative to the other income support systems.

Stella Creasy: Let me be absolutely clear: the support is predicated on the contributions that the partner will have paid into the national insurance system, just as they might get a pension from their partner. We are talking about fairness to the children so that they benefit from the contributions that their father made and about the impact on the family's income. Actually, it is not about replacing income support; it is about the fact that the father has paid in a contribution that should be recognised to the children's benefit.

Richard Harrington: What the hon. Lady talks about is not really what I am talking about, but I accept what she has said. I was actually talking about the bereavement support payment, which is a lump sum payment.

We believe that income-based benefits are more suited to providing longer-term assistance with everyday living costs. Unlike bereavement allowance and widowed parent's allowance, bereavement support payment will be paid in addition to any other benefits the recipient is entitled to, thus ensuring that the least well off receive the extra cash in their pocket to help with those extra financial strains brought about by the unexpected loss of a spouse or civil partner of working age. Long-term ongoing income-related support will be provided through universal credit, which better targets support to those with the greatest need.

The regulations make no changes to conditionality, which has been mentioned. Like the bereavement benefits it replaces, the bereavement support payment sets no work-related conditions. Any obligation to participate in any work-related activity will come from claiming other benefits. That said, it is well known that long periods out of work can have a negative effect on an individual's prospects of future employment. That is why the Government think it is important that people are encouraged to maintain, as much as they can, a link with the labour market.

Recipients of bereavement support payment who also receive universal credit will therefore be able to access Jobcentre Plus support on a voluntary basis from three months after bereavement. They will then not be subject to conditionality for a further three months. Those exemptions from conditionality will also apply after the death of a child or partner, even where there is no entitlement to the bereavement support payment. At the end of the six months, advisers will use their discretion to ensure individuals' capability and requirements are taken into account. That is the best way of ensuring that the support we give is tailored to the individual.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead and others mentioned the extension of the bereavement support payment to cohabitants. That was discussed in detail during the passage of the Pensions Act 2014. Marriage and civil partnerships are legal arrangements that are associated with certain rights, including inheritance and

recognition in the tax system. Extending eligibility to cohabitants would not only increase spend, but be complex to administer. Having to prove cohabitation could be a lengthy, complex process, which could cause distress at a time of bereavement.

Many critics have suggested that it is unfair that those who choose not to formalise their relationship are treated as a couple for income-related benefits, but not for contributory benefits. Income-related benefits serve a different purpose, however: they are for the ongoing day-to-day needs of a household, irrespective of whether the relationship is formal. When assessing entitlement to income-related benefit payments, the state rightly assumes that couples, whatever the legal status of their relationship, have joint outgoings and share resources such as earnings or other income.

The position with bereavement benefits is different, because they are contributory. The founding principle of the contributory benefit system is that all rights to inheritable benefits derive from another person's contributions. That is based on the concept of legal marriage, which has extended to civil partnership in recent times. Unmarried or non-civil partnership couples will, of course, have access to a full range of income-related benefits and will benefit from the removal of conditionality requirements in exactly the same way as those in a legal marriage or civil partnership.

Stella Creasy: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I am not trying to suppress the hon. Lady's comments, but I was about to explain about widowed parents under the new system, which, if I may boldly suggest it, was probably what she was going to ask me about.

Stella Creasy: I was simply going to ask whether the Minister will clarify whether he considers children to be a joint outgoing. If he does, the contributions that a partner would make to a household would also be eligible. The idea that if people are not married, their relationship to those joint outgoings somehow stops at their death seems rather misplaced, does it not? I have certainly heard that children are expensive.

Richard Harrington: I can personally verify the latter part of the hon. Lady's comments on the expense.

The new bereavement support payment restores fairness to the system and focuses support just on that 18-month period after a loved one dies, when it is most needed. It is not taxed and will be subject to a disregard for income-related benefits, helping those on the lowest incomes the most. Widowed parents will no longer lose their benefits if they decide to remarry or repartner. We do not believe that the period of payment could or should be equivalent to the recovery period following spousal bereavement. I am sure most people would agree that that is a totally different amount of time.

Unlike with the widowed parent's allowance, claimants of the bereavement support payment will be entitled to receive all the other benefits at the same time. Disregarding bereavement support payment in the calculation of other benefits will ensure that the immediate additional costs of bereavement are met. Those requiring support will be able to obtain it from other areas of the welfare

system, and I cannot stress that enough. Its purpose is better placed to provide longer-term, means-tested financial assistance.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead, the hon. Member for Walthamstow and other Members made a reasonably cynical, but well-made point about the changes to the bereavement benefit. They basically said that it was just an austerity measure, delivering savings of £100 million to the Treasury after two years. Over the first two years of the reform, we will actually spend an additional £45 million, but any savings, like in anything else in the public finances, will be for future Governments to reinvest as they choose. I therefore cannot undertake, as I have been asked, to ensure that savings are reinvested in this field.

It is important to emphasise for the record that nobody in receipt of the current bereavement benefit stands to lose out as a result of the reforms. Recipients of the current benefit will continue to receive it for the natural lifetime of their award. Furthermore, households with dependent children will receive higher payments in recognition of that fact. Analysis shows that more people stand to gain than to lose from the changes. That is particularly so for the least well off, because—I have made this point several times—bereavement support will be paid on top of any income-related benefits that the household receives.

The Government have been asked here and elsewhere to extend the duration to three years and make the BSP cost-neutral. If we did that, we would have to fund it by reducing other elements of the payments. There seems to be little rationale for reducing the monthly payments for parents to make extending the duration cost-neutral. It would reduce payments to a token amount, which would not meet the intention of dealing with the immediate costs relating to bereavement.

With the introduction of the bereavement support payment, short-term financial support will be provided based on six months of national insurance contributions. The amount and duration of the award will be clear from the outset, allowing people time to plan ahead. Those requiring further support will be able to obtain it from other areas of the welfare system that are better placed to provide longer-term, means-tested financial assistance.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran made a point on uprating. Any decisions on future changes will be taken as part of the annual process in the context of the wider public finances. I cannot say much more on that, other than that section 150 of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 provides for the rate of BSP to be reviewed annually. The Government committed to review the bereavement support payment reform in the impact assessment of 2013, but we cannot do that until sufficient evidence is available to assess all aspects of the policy, including its effectiveness and the impact on different groups of claimants.

The hon. Lady also made a point about the consequences for children of bereavement support payments. She said

that, as a result of the shorter duration of payments, 75% of new claimants with children will be worse off. No one in receipt of the current bereavement benefits stands to lose out as a result of these reforms. As I said, recipients of the current benefits will continue to receive them for the natural lifetime of their award. Furthermore, for those households where there are dependent children, a higher level of payments will be made in recognition of that fact.

In conclusion, let me reassure hon. Members that the Government are absolutely committed to supporting the bereaved and ensuring that individuals have the opportunity to access the funeral expenses payment scheme. Our priorities remain to improve the funeral expenses scheme, to raise awareness of the scheme and to ensure that we are doing what we can to offer a provision of support for vulnerable claimants.

2.50 pm

Frank Field: I am grateful to have had this debate and thank those who have participated. I am also grateful to those who have not participated, but who are a very real part of the debate.

I leave the Minister with one thought. Despite his abilities and his charms, the Government are struggling with this brief. It is simply not good enough for him to say that the promise that the reform would be cost-neutral was made by a previous Government—it was made by a Conservative-dominated coalition Government.

When he reports back to his colleague at a departmental meeting, I plead with him to say that this brief is in some ways easier than others that the Government have. We all assumed that the Government were committed to introducing this reform at nil cost. We have heard about how it does not meet needs. I ask the Minister to say that the Government do not wish to present this harsh face to the public; that they have up to £100 million to spend in this area; and that they did not wish to make these changes to save money, but to bring the benefit up to date. I ask that he and his colleagues at some date soon report how that £100 million will be spent, so that the needs of the two heroines that my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) raised can be met. We are not asking the Minister to conjure up new money or to take money away from somewhere else. We are just saying that we agree. By all means, let us modernise this benefit, but let us do it in a way that spends the full budget and in a way that meets need most.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Ninth Report of the Work and Pensions Committee of Session 2015-16, Support for the bereaved, HC 551, and the Government response, HC 230.

2.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Torture and the Treatment of Asylum Claims[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

2.59 pm

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered UK policy on torture and the treatment of asylum claims.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making time for this important debate. I also thank the co-sponsors of this debate, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the hon. Members for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). I am appreciative of the cross-party support for this debate. This debate on the UK's policy on torture and the treatment of asylum claims is particularly important and critical right now.

Only last weekend we heard from the Home Secretary and from Max Hill, QC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, that the current terror threat is severe. As we are all aware, that will probably continue for some time. My concern about our current level of terror is that there may be a concomitant rise in the idea that torture has a place and a use in our society. That came about, as people know, in January when the President of the United States was heard to comment on what is a deliberate near-drowning technique, also known as waterboarding. He declared his personal views, but used the phrase "fight fire with fire" and entertained the idea that torture can work.

I was therefore grateful that the Prime Minister very shortly and quickly afterwards stated that

"we do not sanction torture and do not get involved in it."—[*Official Report*, 25 January 2017; Vol. 620, c. 291.]

That is a clear statement from this country and its Government. The next day, the Leader of the House also made a clear statement about the Government's position, when he said the Government were "resolutely opposed to torture". Again, it is important right now that the Government are clear and frequently reiterate that. I hope the Minister will take the opportunity today to reiterate our very clear position.

We are leading the way on standards against torture, but our standards can be higher. That means being against torture and all cruel, inhuman or degrading treatments and punishments.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I agree absolutely with what the hon. Lady says. Does she agree with me, however, that there have been occasions in the not-so-distant past when we have allowed our standards to slip? The Government could demonstrate their bona fides for future intentions by taking a more open and transparent approach in settling cases such as the Belhaj and Boudchar case.

Dr Mathias: I thank the right hon. Gentleman very much for that intervention. I am aware of Supreme Court cases, but I do not want to mention specific cases today because I want to find as much common ground

as possible with the Government, and I do not want to presume judgment of any particular cases, but I absolutely agree that the present statements by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House do not match our historical cases. That is why it is important today to be absolutely sure of where our standard is. I absolutely agree that in the past we have not lived up to our standards.

In view of the current global situation, I still believe we are the leaders, whether we choose to be or not. We absolutely need transparency about the past. Like the right hon. Gentleman, I am looking closely at the court cases. However, we must recognise that today we are not only the place to be against torture, but the place that can diagnose torture. People can get the best treatment for torture and can be rehabilitated to return to the community as fully participant members of society. That is the ultimate aim, and I do believe we lead on that.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Is there not a further test for us as a country? Not only should we have the higher standard in terms of rejecting torture and having the best treatment, as the hon. Lady said, but when an asylum seeker comes to this country and alleges torture, it is our duty to take that case particularly seriously. Is the hon. Lady aware of concerns that people from Sri Lanka who have applied for asylum, alleging torture, have perhaps not had their cases inspected as rigorously as they might?

Dr Mathias: Again, I will not comment on individual cases. In my constituency of Twickenham in south-west London, I have come across the Tamil community. I have worked abroad in many countries, so I am aware of countries that have particular cases. I want the people of Sri Lanka who seek asylum to get the gold standard level of investigation and, if they seek asylum here, the best rehabilitation. I hope that answers the hon. Gentleman.

Historically, we have been at the forefront. After the second world war, we were a signatory to the universal declaration of human rights, which includes article 5 against torture. We signed up to the European convention on human rights, which led to our Human Rights Act 1998. We are also a signatory to the UN convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, which the UK ratified in 1988. I thank the Library for pointing out that in our common law we also have what is pertinent from section 134 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988. On torture offences, we state:

"It is immaterial whether the pain or suffering is physical or mental and whether it is caused by an act or omission."

We have signed the European and UN declarations, but our case law also sets a high standard. I said that historically we have done well. The late Lord Bingham mentioned that 300 years ago the English Bill of Rights stated that punishment that is cruel and unusual should not be inflicted. So our history goes back more than 300 years and has been at the forefront.

However, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland has said, our past has not always been adequate and may not be the standard we should attain now. Although the Prime Minister has said we do not sanction torture and do not get involved in it, I want the Minister to be clear today that we do not sanction complicity and are not involved in it. I want the Minister to say,

“We do not sanction rendition and do not get involved in it”—I use the present tense because I do not want to influence the ongoing court cases.

Whether we like it or not, we lead globally against torture. That is important, because about a month ago I met a diplomat from another country and I talked about a torture case that is known to Amnesty International. When I mentioned the torture of sleep deprivation, I was corrected and told, “This is not torture. This is mistreatment.” Then I realised that although our law sets us against such treatment, whether physical or mental, or act or omission, we need to make it clear to other countries that we are absolutely and wholly against using such things as prolonged sleep deprivation, degrading treatment—the case I have referred to involved a fellow doctor in prison being made to eat his own faeces, while another prisoner was stripped naked and asked to crawl on all fours—and mental torture, such as when someone’s relative is executed or subjected to a mock execution in front of them. We must recognise such things as torture and not say that there are sub-levels of torture, or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. We oppose it utterly and will lead in that field. I want the Minister to be clear about that.

Historically, we have done well at recognising and treating severe cases of mental and physical trauma. More than 100 years ago, we became specialists at treating soldiers who were victims of shellshock or who had been buried alive. Our medical specialists became adept at treatment and rehabilitation, and enabling people to be full members of the community. We led in that field. The late Helen Bamber was also a leader, with regard to knowledge of and respect for people who suffered torture, and their treatment and rehabilitation. There was a centre in Denmark, and Helen Bamber made our country one of the leaders in the field. Today we have specialist organisations, such as Freedom from Torture, which specialise in recognising the signs of torture, rehabilitating people who have experienced it and enabling them to be full members of the community. We have many success stories on which to build.

I therefore regret that although the Government have made clear statements against torture, which show the lead we are giving, they can and need to do better with respect to handling asylum cases involving evidence of torture. The Minister and the Secretary of State will be aware of the report “Proving Torture”, released in November, which contained a small number of clear instances where the decision to reject an asylum application, accompanied by a medico-legal report, was overturned by a higher tribunal because, worryingly, of the mishandling of specialist medical evidence. I understand that the Home Office may have done its own sample study. I am sure I have the Minister’s attention, as such instances are a waste of taxpayers’ money; however, the worrying thing is the additional distress caused to people seeking asylum who have been tortured, whether physically or mentally.

Whether the Minister refers to the clear cases presented by Freedom from Torture, or the cases that I believe have been looked into by the Home Office, he will recognise that there is a problem in the system, and that every caseworker needs some training on cases where torture may be involved. It is perhaps somewhat akin to the situation of general practitioners: they are not specialists, but they need knowledge of every specialty to be able to give adequate treatment and make a referral.

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): I shall cover my hon. Friend’s points in more detail when I sum up, but I wanted to point out that just because an appeal or further legal process can overturn the original decision, it does not necessarily mean that that decision was made wrongly on the basis of the facts. It may be that new facts come to light, and the decision can be based on better available information.

Dr Mathias: I appreciate what the Minister says, but I have seen a handful of cases—confidentially, without the names—and, without being a specialist myself, have talked to one of the doctors involved with the charity. From the small number I have seen, the decisions have been overturned not because of extra evidence, but because the evidence presented to the first caseworker was not handled adequately. On appeal, the information given was found to give sufficient grounds for granting asylum. It is not my field, but I have some relevant background and have had some experience in different countries of the simple treatment of people returning to a community having been tortured, so I have a great deal of respect for the specialty. I cannot believe that without training a non-medical caseworker would be able to understand the medico-legal report with respect to the need for asylum. In the 21st century, a specialist is needed to diagnose the invisible mental scars.

I gave an example earlier of the torture of one prisoner of conscience. For me, even saying the words “mock execution of a family member” upsets me. However, if the Home Office is talking about using specialist caseworkers, it must watch out that the specialists do not become hardened by having to hear and read such material day in, day out. Again, there is a similarity to what happens in therapeutic counselling, in which I do have a background. There are models in other fields and professions. It is mandatory for therapeutic counsellors to have regular supervision to check their bias and their own mental health. I do not believe that the Home Office is giving sufficient weight to the needs of the Home Office caseworkers. The great thing is that we have the expertise. Freedom from Torture, a UK-based organisation, is one of the global leaders in the field. The training programme has already been agreed by the Home Office, but just not rolled out for all caseworkers.

Mr Gareth Thomas: I support what the hon. Lady is saying, and it will be interesting to hear the Minister’s response. According to the Freedom from Torture report for this debate, in many of the torture-related asylum cases it examined, where a refusal was overturned on appeal, the immigration judge specifically referred to the strength and high quality of the medical evidence. That suggests that the hon. Lady is right and that if the Home Office asylum caseworker had handled the case better, there would have been no need to go to appeal.

Dr Mathias: I thank the hon. Gentleman and hope that Freedom from Torture and all the staff involved have heard his words. Again, I believe that we are leading. The specialty is a difficult one, so we should be proud that excellence has been attained in it. Asylum seekers should have confidence in our system. However, to refer back to the cases that I saw, without the names, it is depressing when a caseworker questions expertise on that level, with respect to understanding how distressed someone might be as a result of a particular mental

[*Dr Mathias*]

torture. I would not question a specialist in that way if I were not in the field. The hon. Gentleman's point was well made.

Better training is needed for all caseworkers. I am sure that the Minister is aware that many asylum cases do not initially present with evidence of torture, especially if the scars are invisible. It would be advantageous for the Home Office if training were rolled out for everyone. If it wants a specialist unit, it must be very careful about how to protect the members of staff from fatigue and maintain excellence. It takes time to do those small samples, and where the Home Office and Freedom from Torture did some, I believe that the quality assurance and the audit for these cases is lacking.

I fear that in the 21st century the number of cases is not going to decrease, so the Home Office needs to up its game. We have a 300-year history of being leaders on this issue. Right now there is a vacuum in the world for setting the standard. We have to fill that vacuum, because we are able to, and we have shown that historically. We should be transparent when we let ourselves down—it is not just letting down the people who have suffered; it is letting down the United Kingdom. I want the Government and the Minister to reaffirm our position as heading the world in standing against torture and all cruel, inhuman and degrading punishments.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespersons at 4 o'clock, if not earlier. Other speakers should bear that in mind when making their contributions. I remind Members that the principle of parliamentary privilege does not prevail over the requirements of the sub judice rules if they are referring to current court cases. I ask them to take that very seriously in their remarks.

3.21 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Twickenham (*Dr Mathias*) and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (*Dr Cameron*), my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (*Kate Green*) and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (*Mr Carmichael*) for securing this debate on a hugely important topic. I commend the way in which the hon. Member for Twickenham introduced it.

I have the privilege of representing a significant number of residents who were born in Sri Lanka. Over the years, a number of them, particularly those from the Tamil community, have contacted my office or visited my advice surgery for help with their claims for asylum. A number of them have alleged that they have been victims of torture in Sri Lanka. Freedom from Torture has informed me that Sri Lanka remains its top country both for those receiving therapy and for medico-legal reports on torture in custody. That reflects a trend that it has seen over several years. How we treat the asylum cases of people from Sri Lanka who make allegations of torture is surely one of the key tests for how the Minister and the Home Office more generally handle asylum cases involving torture.

In its 2016 annual report, Amnesty International stated:

“Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees—including sexual violence—continued to be reported and impunity persisted for earlier cases.”

That is in relation to Sri Lanka.

“Suspicious deaths in police custody continued to be reported. Detainees died of injuries consistent with torture and other ill-treatment, including beatings or asphyxiation. Police claimed suspects committed suicide or in one case drowned while trying to escape.”

That is a 2016 Amnesty International report describing the situation in Sri Lanka.

In 2012, Human Rights Watch published a report about allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in Sri Lanka. It documented a number of cases of refused asylum seekers who were returned from this country to Sri Lanka to face ill-treatment and persecution. Indeed, the family member of a constituent of mine was returned to Sri Lanka, where he was subjected to torture.

The context underlines the point that it is vital that any claim for asylum must be assessed fairly and thoroughly, given that the stakes are so high. I pay tribute to those who work for the Home Office on asylum cases—it is far from a glamorous job, but it is hugely important to this country—and maintain the integrity of our borders and this country's reputation as a place that takes allegations of torture seriously. We want to continue to be a place where those who have been tortured and have applied for asylum are taken particularly seriously. Thankfully, there has been some political progress and improvement in human rights in Sri Lanka since that 2012 report, but it is not yet enough.

I want to ask the Minister a number of questions about the way asylum claims are processed. The Freedom from Torture report that I referred to when I intervened on the hon. Member for Twickenham certainly fits with the experiences of some of my constituents. At the crux of any claim for asylum is an assessment of the claimant's credibility. To be granted refugee status, asylum claimants need to show that there is a “reasonable degree of likelihood” that they will face persecution if they return to their country of origin. That is significantly lower than the standard of proof in criminal cases. Evidence of past persecution, and particularly of torture, is likely to be a strong indicator of the risk of future persecution, but asylum seekers are unlikely to be able to gather documentary evidence methodically as they flee, so medico-legal reports are among the most persuasive evidence available for the assessment of their claims. However, I have seen cases in which the evidence of a medical expert has been dismissed or questioned by a caseworker who has little or no clinical expertise. I have also seen cases in which one part of the claimant's story is not believed, and is used to argue that their whole claim should be dismissed as incredible. The injuries documented by a medical expert are explained away as having occurred some other way.

Freedom from Torture described five ways in which medical experts work, which are not always considered properly by asylum caseworkers. It is concerning that caseworkers currently receive only a very short, one-hour slot in their induction training on handling medical evidence of torture. That clearly is not enough, given the problems in decision making that Freedom from Torture identified and that others in the House are aware of. Will the Minister respond to the first recommendation in the Freedom from Torture report

and explain why the full-day training module that has been developed has not yet been rolled out for asylum caseworkers? Will he confirm that it will be rolled out as soon as possible?

Getting the decision right first time is clearly better for the claimant and is surely better for the taxpayer, too, as it spares the expense of a costly appeal. Crucially, it allows the claimant to get on with their life. Will the Minister give his view on whether the changes to legal aid in the previous Parliament have affected asylum seekers' access to the legal advice that they might need to obtain a proper medico-legal report?

About 10 years ago, a pilot scheme was set up to try to improve the quality of asylum decision making. It involved closer collaboration between asylum caseworkers and legal representatives at an early stage in the process to ensure that a decision is made after all the facts of the case have been considered. I understand that it was followed up by the early legal advice project under the coalition Government. Will the Minister give his view on why those measures were not pursued further and whether that type of approach may be beneficial when considering asylum claims involving an allegation of torture?

Next week is International Women's Day and so I want to ask the Minister for his views on how claims involving allegations of rape and sexual violence are considered. Does more need to be done to protect some of the most vulnerable asylum claimants, in particular in light of a number of disturbing revelations from Yarl's Wood detention centre in recent years?

Furthermore, it is well known that anxiety disorders or post-traumatic stress disorder are triggered by distressing or frightening events of the sort that the hon. Member for Twickenham outlined, and that they can cause problems with concentration and memory, which may well affect sufferers' ability to present their case properly in an asylum interview, in particular as they are asked to relive and relay those traumatic experiences. Is that proper consideration in the asylum decision-making process? Does more need to be done to give adequate training to decision makers?

Finally, on human rights abuses and torture in Sri Lanka specifically, I ask the Minister to take this away to colleagues at the Foreign Office. At the height of the conflict in Sri Lanka, Britain led the way in Europe on the removal of Sri Lanka from the GSP plus trading arrangements under the generalised system of preferences. GSP plus is granted only to countries in the developing world that have made significant progress on human rights. The European Commission's removal of GSP plus from Sri Lanka signalled Europe's concern, very much including Britain's, about reported human rights abuses and, notably, the use of torture.

Last year Sri Lanka applied to access the GSP plus scheme again. Earlier this year the European Commission found that in its view Sri Lanka now met the criteria. As I said earlier, there has been some progress in addressing human rights concerns in Sri Lanka, in particular following the election of President Sirisena, but significant concern remains that human rights abuses including torture are ongoing in parts of the country and that, in particular, there will be no independent international involvement in the judicial process to examine allegations of such abuses and torture that have already taken place, especially at the end of the 2009 conflict.

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and indeed the Foreign Office's most recent human rights report all state that concerns about human rights abuses in Sri Lanka remain. I will be grateful if the Minister gives his view of what support for Sri Lanka's re-entry to the GSP plus scheme says about Britain's commitment to tackle torture throughout the world, in particular at a time when others, notably our friends across the Atlantic, seem to be stepping back from their leadership on the issue.

3.33 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am grateful, Mr Bailey, that you have found time for me to make a brief contribution to this important debate. I very much welcomed the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias), who spoke eloquently on many of the matters that I might otherwise have covered.

In the United Kingdom it is not new for us to be talking about torture. In fact, we have been talking about torture in this House for much of the past 1,000 years—although we were ordering much of it for an awfully long time, too. Various people including, most famously, Guido Fawkes were taken from inquisitions to appear before politicians, often in the Star Chamber, and ended up being tortured in places such as the Tower. We have long experience of torture in this country.

From bitter experience, however, we know that torture does not work—people get the answer they want, or think they want, rather than the answer they need. That is why sensible countries, ones that realise that the rule of law is about discovering the truth and not about exacting punishment, do not practise torture. I am proud that our country set the model on that through two Acts: the Bill of Rights; and the Treason Act 1708, which included Scotland—I say that for the benefit of the Members representing Scotland, the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) of the Scottish National party and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) from those various islands of our wonderful country.

Those fundamental Acts set out what we now think of as a universal right under the United Nations or European conventions, which is the right not to be tortured. Unlike other rights, that right is completely unqualified: there is no situation in which torture is possible; there is no situation in which a country may derogate from that right; and there is no situation in which torture is ever tolerable. Even the right to life, we admit, is not absolute. If it were, the intervention to prevent people dying would be absurd, or a battle to protect our nation's interest would be impossible. Torture is not like that; torture is an absolute, and it is so because it violates the very principles of a free and democratic society. It violates absolutely the integrity of the individual. It violates totally the right to life and the principles that have grown up in various ways from Judaeo-Christian and Islamic tradition. That is why it is so utterly abhorrent to us.

I am glad that we are holding this debate because it allows us to reinforce those views of torture and, I am sure, for the Minister to reinforce them on behalf of Her Majesty's Government, and to remind ourselves why they matter. Those views are not simply about carrying a banner of principle for us to wave at others in some sort of virtue-signalling way. That is not what

[Tom Tugendhat]

they are about. Our views of torture are about protecting ourselves. The reason why we do not torture is not only a moral but a selfish one. We do not torture because it is wrong to do so, and because it leaves us more vulnerable and not better protected. Torture would leave us more exposed and in greater danger. That is why we do not do it.

The debate today is focused on asylum; that is not only about people coming to us but about stopping people needing to come to us. It is about nations with whom we very often and in many ways have good relations, whether in trade, culturally or historically—we often have very good relations with countries that practise torture. Part of our duty as a responsible, free and democratic state is to help our partners and, yes, even our friends to understand that torture is wrong, not only for moral reasons but because it is bad for them. Torture promotes violence, instability and the very unrest that many countries are seeking to prevent.

I will leave it there, except to pay tribute to some organisations, such as those that the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) mentioned when talking about the forms of torture that often are not recognised or are overlooked. I also pay tribute to an organisation that has done a lot to promote human rights—that is not to say that I agree with every one of the cases it has brought, because I certainly do not. The AIRE Centre—Advice on Individual Rights in Europe—did an awful lot of work with some of the new accession states to the European Union and with some of the states newly freed from Soviet tyranny to help them understand what rights are, why they matter and, in that context, why torture is always wrong. There are such organisations out there, and I very much welcome the work of Her Majesty's Government to support them. I am glad to see cross-party support in the debate on such an important issue that is fundamental to our democracy and our freedom.

3.38 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I, too, express my gratitude to the members of the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us the time to debate this subject. I commend the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) for her leadership in securing the debate. I note that, in a minor way, the pronunciation of the constituency of the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) risks becoming, for some people, an instrument of torture in itself.

The hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) posed some very relevant and pointed questions to the Minister regarding the training of caseworkers in the Home Office. I will not repeat them, but they were pertinent and ones with which I would very much wish to associate myself.

Like others, I place on the record my appreciation for the many non-governmental and campaign organisations that work in this field. Freedom from Torture was mentioned, and I was present in November at the launch of its most recent piece of work, "Proving Torture". I have been associated with Reprieve for many years and have campaigned with Amnesty International in different parts of the world over the years, principally on the abolition of the death penalty but also on human rights concerns more widely.

Whenever I have been in other parts of the world, it has struck me that however much we may beat ourselves up about our past misdeeds, foreign policy failings and other things, we are still seen, by and large, as a force for good in the world. That goes to the point that the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) made about the counterproductive nature of torture. It also touches on the point made by the hon. Member for Twickenham that we are a world leader in this area, and it is more important now than ever that we maintain that position.

At Foreign Office questions some time ago, I asked the Foreign Secretary whether he had raised the possibility of sharing intelligence with the Trump Administration in the event that they reverted to the use of torture, such as waterboarding or, as the President said during the campaign, something

"a hell of a lot worse".

In the House, the Foreign Secretary said that that was an operational matter that he would not comment on—I think it is more a matter of policy myself—but in later correspondence he returned to the quote that the hon. Member for Twickenham offered us from the Prime Minister, who said that

"we do not sanction torture and do not get involved in it. That will continue to be our position."—[*Official Report*, 25 January 2017; Vol. 620, c. 291.]

Those sentences should be on the desk of every Home Office and Foreign Office Minister. I would like to hear a more express statement about the possibility of sharing intelligence with any country in the world that uses torture, both because of our leadership position and because we must atone for some of our quite recent failings in this area.

Tom Tugendhat: The right hon. Gentleman heard me speak, I hope very clearly, about my views. I merely caution that we should use slightly more modified language than, "We share no intelligence with anyone who uses torture." That would exclude so many people with whom we need a relationship built on trust. In many ways, our intelligence services, rather than NGOs or diplomats, are some of the best people to preach the message of freedom from torture.

Mr Carmichael: That is a fair point. I put it in those terms—I know the hon. Gentleman's background—because we have some damage to repair.

I am mindful of your strictures about the sub judge rule, Mr Bailey. We now have the final Supreme Court judgment in respect of the Government's preliminary points in the Belhaj and Boudchar case, which I referred to earlier. I will not talk about the substance of that case, because that would clearly be inappropriate and I would be ruled out of order, but it is a matter of public record that the Government so far have spent £750,000 pursuing those unsuccessful preliminary points. The case will presumably go through the courts to whatever conclusion is reached, but it is worth reflecting that we have got this far at the cost of £750,000 but we are just back at the starting line, and a lot more could still be spent on that case. The plaintiffs have offered to settle for £3—£1 each from the Government, the former Foreign Secretary and Sir Mark Allen, whose involvement in the case is fairly well documented.

The al-Saadi case, which was very similar, was settled out of court without any requirement for the case to be taken. More significantly, Belhaj and Boudchar want an apology as well as their £3. No apology was made in the al-Saadi case, but it cost the British taxpayer some £2.2 million. That is why it is important that as we enter a new phase of international relations with a new Administration in the White House, rightly or wrongly, we should have concerns about their approach to torture and put out there the highest possible standards. We should not forget—the Crown Prosecution Service has already said this—that Sir Mark Allen sought political authority for his actions in the al-Saadi and Belhaj cases, so it is difficult for us as a country to deny any knowledge or complicity in them.

Freedom from Torture's "Proving Torture" report contains several highly concerning statistics from the sample of cases that it examined, and I will remind the House of some of those. Some 76% of the cases that Freedom from Torture studied in preparing that report eventually resulted in successful appeals. I take the Minister's point that new information is sometimes provided on appeal that was not there in the first instance. Appeals may succeed for any number of reasons, but the fact that 76% of cases resulted in asylum being granted on appeal should concern Home Office Ministers. I suspect that if a judge sitting in a sheriff court in Scotland or perhaps a Crown court in England had 76% of his or her cases overturned on appeal, the Lord Chancellor would look carefully at the way that judge went about his or her business.

There is more context in that report to support my contention that the 76% figure is concerning. In 74% of the cases examined by Freedom from Torture, asylum caseworkers substituted their own opinion for that of clinicians, and in 30% of cases, asylum caseworkers disputed or queried clinicians' qualifications or expertise. Those things should cause concern. They give context for the 76% of successful appeals that I referred to and relate to the points raised by the hon. Member for Harrow West.

The hon. Member for Twickenham was absolutely right to say that the Home Office has a duty of care towards people who do such enormously difficult and taxing work, from which significant political pressure is never far away and which is done in the professional context of an occasionally toxic debate. I worked as a public prosecutor for some years a long time ago. No one was supposed to work for more than six to 12 months at the very most on cases involving the sexual abuse of children, because they were such difficult and taxing cases, and the people who were involved in that sort of work ended up being burnt out. For that reason, I suspect that rotation among caseworkers who do asylum work should be taken a bit more seriously than it appears to be.

I am mindful of your strictures about time, Mr Bailey, so although I could probably say a great deal more about this subject, I shall conclude my remarks and allow others to take part.

3.49 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I extend my appreciation to the hon. Member

for Twickenham (Dr Mathias), who, along with other Members, was responsible for securing this important debate. I thank everyone who has taken part in it.

I should begin by stating my party's position. The Scottish National party believes that asylum seekers and refugees must be treated humanely, fairly and with dignity, and that their rights must be upheld at every stage of the asylum process. Indeed, Freedom from Torture has welcomed the SNP's efforts to put pressure on the UK Government to influence immigration and asylum policy to protect survivors of torture across the whole of the UK. We will continue to use our position in Westminster to influence policy areas across the whole of the UK.

Asylum seekers are among the most vulnerable groups in society. Having fled their home countries, often they will have left all of their possessions behind. They may have been subjected to torture or witnessed their loved ones being killed, or sometimes both. Often, their health and wellbeing will be seriously affected. The findings of the recent Freedom from Torture report "Proving Torture" make for tough reading. The organisation's expert clinicians provide in-depth evidence, in line with international standards, documenting torture scars and psychological trauma as part of a torture survivor's asylum claim.

Bureaucracy and poor decision making mean that torture survivors can be wrongly refused asylum and experience months—often years—of disbelief and uncertainty. When a survivor of torture is wrongly refused asylum, they experience unimaginable distress. For many people, it is life or death. They know that when the wrong decision is made, they could be forced to return to their torturers. The hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) mentioned that, after being denied asylum, some of the Sri Lankans who have been returned have faced ill treatment, abuse or worse back in Sri Lanka. Legal appeals are harrowing for these people and, as has been mentioned, let us not forget that they are costly to UK taxpayers.

The precise number of torture survivors seeking protection in the UK is unknown. The Home Office does not collect statistics on the number of asylum claims involving torture allegations. A recent study suggests that 27% of adult forced migrants living in high-income countries such as the UK are survivors of torture. Perhaps when the Minister responds he could expand on why those statistics are not routinely collected. I am very concerned that our system is letting down extremely vulnerable individuals.

What survivors of torture need is safety and access to rehabilitation. That cannot even begin until a sound decision is made on their claim, yet the report found that survivors seeking asylum in the UK can find it almost impossible to prove to the Home Office that they were tortured.

As we have heard, many of the report's findings focus on the role that caseworkers play. I take on board what was mentioned by the hon. Member for Twickenham and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) that caseworkers should not become hardened to the stories of asylum seekers; indeed their physical and mental health should be monitored regularly.

There appear to be so many failures when cases are assessed, with some of the charges being levelled including: failure to apply the correct standard of proof for asylum

[Margaret Ferrier]

claims; caseworkers replacing the expert opinion of a clinician with their own; and taking the wrong approach to medical evidence when assessing the credibility of the asylum claim. That will likely come as no surprise, unfortunately, to any Member who has dealt with an asylum case. There certainly seem to be failings in how asylum seekers are dealt with. I appreciate that there are some fantastic people working for the Home Office, dealing with incredibly difficult histories and vulnerable people. From my experience, however, there certainly seem to be occasions when the process is lacking in fairness and dignity. At the core of the problem seems to be bad practice. I certainly hope that the Minister will seriously address that when responding.

The chief executive of Freedom from Torture has said:

“Most of the bad practice revealed in our research clearly contravenes Home Office policy guidance for asylum caseworkers on the correct treatment of medical evidence of torture. The Home Office has an excellent training programme to help caseworkers implement this policy correctly but has never rolled it out.”

Home Office employees should be adequately resourced to carry out their duties in a humane manner and training should be the cornerstone of that. That training is crucial if guidance is to be appropriately followed.

In a joint letter to the immigration and border policy directorate, signatories from several organisations including Medical Justice, Liberty, the UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group and Women for Refugee Women expressed concern that, in their experience, Home Office caseworkers do not regularly or properly apply the full rigour of guidance in relation to the “very exceptional circumstances” for detention of vulnerable individuals. Those detained individuals are being failed by the system.

The SNP shares the Scottish Refugee Council’s concerns about short-term holding facilities

“which have consistently received poor inspection reports by HM inspectorate of prisons and have been deemed unsafe for women.”

Perhaps the Minister in response would care to address that point and the application of guidance in that regard.

The SNP believes that the Home Office also needs to drop its proposals on the definition of torture for asylum seekers, which further erode safeguards for torture survivors, and institute a process that properly protects vulnerable detainees. The fact that the most recent change in the Home Office rules on definition of torture in December was rejected by the courts after 21 days is yet another example of the Government’s disregard for the treatment of asylum seekers in their pursuit of toxic policies toward refugees.

It is utterly shameful that that was introduced despite mounting criticism of the welfare of vulnerable people in detention, including in the Shaw report, which the Government have yet to respond to. The direction of travel is particularly worrying; the detention of vulnerable people used to happen only in very exceptional circumstances, but now there is guidance that the Home Office should seek to balance risk of harm in detention against the individual’s immigration factors. Again, the principles of fairness and dignity appear to have been all but discarded.

In summary, I would appreciate it if the Minister could address the following. Why are statistics on the number of asylum claims involving torture allegations not available? Will the Home Office commit to rectifying

that? An investigation needs to happen on the allegations of bad practice among Home Office caseworkers. Will he also address the reasons why the training programme has not been rolled out and the Home Office’s intentions in that regard, and the issues with applying guidance on detention of vulnerable individuals?

As the hon. Member for Harrow West stated, the UK takes allegations of torture seriously. It would be good if the Minister would consult with his Foreign Office colleagues on torture happening around the globe and ask them to use their influence positively to try to change the thinking of some of the worst perpetrators of torture throughout the world.

3.58 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) on the persuasive case she made at the start and on bringing the subject to the House today. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the hon. Members for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) on their speeches, too.

As we have seen in the debate, all political parties are united in their complete rejection of torture and mistreatment. Torture is illegal and it is internationally banned. When allegations are made, it is vital that they are fully investigated and that the public have confidence in the process and its outcome. In this Parliament we have seen the pressure mounted by the British Parliament contribute to Shaker Aamer’s release. It is therefore vital that, while we preach that there is no place for torture or mistreatment of detainees abroad, that applies at home to people on British soil. We have moral and legal obligations to asylum seekers. In order to stop torture from happening around the world, it is crucial that Britain sets an example as a country that respects and upholds its human rights commitments.

While the Opposition have a proud record of standing up for the rights of everyone, there are certain slightly worrying developments in the current Government that make their commitment to human rights look a bit more questionable. When the permanent secretary to the Foreign Office appeared before the Foreign Affairs Committee, he said that human rights were “not one of our top priorities.”

That is quite a frightening statement; ethics should be on the Foreign Office’s map. I think that he was attacked by the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) for making that statement. Britain’s voice in the world is a reflection not only of our economic prowess but of the moral leadership that we demonstrate on human rights. If they are no longer a top priority, we cannot lecture the rest of the world about the rule of law and freedoms and rights that every human being is entitled to.

I am relieved and pleased that the contract between the Ministry of Justice and Saudi Arabia to build a prison was cancelled in the end. I understand that the then Foreign Secretary, who is now the Chancellor, accused the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) of being naive on that matter, which gives the impression that perhaps some Government Members do not want to prioritise human rights, which, by extension, include subjects such as torture.

Dr Mathias: I was very happy with the cross-party support at the November presentation of the “Proving Torture” report. I give credit to the Queen’s Counsels from the hon. Lady’s party, who were arm in arm with similar Members from my party. I believe that this has cross-party support from both Back-Bench and Front-Bench Members.

Dr Huq: I do not doubt the hon. Lady’s commitment to human rights, given everything she has said on them in the Chamber. The Home Secretary is due to visit Saudi Arabia later this month; it will be interesting to see if she will use that opportunity to challenge one of our “closest allies” on some of the less palatable aspects of its record on human rights and torture. At a recent Prime Minister’s Question Time, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister to condemn President Trump’s comments on torture. He has supported things like hooding, which is sensory deprivation, stress positioning and waterboarding, which the hon. Lady mentioned. President Trump seems to have a gung-ho attitude to those and does not equate them with torture. I would like to hear stronger statements from our Prime Minister condemning those comments.

Tom Tugendhat: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Huq: I have limited time and the hon. Gentleman spoke at length earlier; I will be happy to speak to him afterwards. I think any special relationship should also be friendly. We can be a critical friend to countries and point these things out; maybe not holding their hand but holding them to account in some way. We are debating the UK asylum system and not any of these other people, so I will get back to that.

We all seem to have seen the same figures from Freedom from Torture’s “Proving Torture” report. Other Members have made those points very graphically. We have to consider the moral dimension to this, as well as our legal obligations; we are talking about protection for the most vulnerable in our society. The statistic just quoted was that 27% of adult forced migrants living in high-income countries have survived torture in their country of origin, yet we continually hear stories of their humiliating treatment when they seek to prove it. The standard of proof seems to be very high, and it is often confusing when they have to prove what happened to them. It is a chicken and egg situation. There is little other than medical evidence to prove their torture, but it is nigh on impossible after the fact to prove that it was torture, even when extensive medical evidence is presented; we hear that medical evidence is often disregarded, mistreated, misinterpreted or ignored by the Home Office. It would be good to hear the Minister clarify how that can be tightened up.

Hon. Members also quoted the fact that 76% of such cases that are unsuccessful are overturned on appeal, which is alarmingly high when compared to just 30% of standard asylum cases and indicates a serious problem in the Home Office’s handling of asylum claims. As the hon. Member for Twickenham pointed out, that requires correction by a judge in a specialist immigration tribunal, which comes at considerable cost to the public purse—UK taxpayers.

Not only is it International Women’s Day next week but apparently March is also International Women’s Month, so it is worth pointing out that rape is shockingly

not recognised as torture for women asylum seekers. I think that will come as a surprise to many hon. Members. Women remain particularly vulnerable to deportation. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West referred to legal aid for asylum cases; I know that that is probably another debate for another day, but I flag it up as it is connected to this debate. I have also had constituents from Sri Lanka pressing me. There was a debate in this place last week that I was unable to attend, but I am glad that my hon. Friend expressed his concern about the Sri Lankan Government’s torture record and that we should treat asylum seekers from that country with the respect that they deserve.

I wanted to be brief, but while I am here I will flag up my concern that we may be led out of the European Court of Human Rights; I believe that the plan has been shelved for this Parliament, but it could still happen. It is a live policy.

Tom Tugendhat: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Huq: I have said that I will press on without interventions on this occasion. The ECHR is one of the most effective torture prevention tools in history, and it was drafted by British lawyers, including Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, then a Conservative Member of Parliament. Having our own, unilateral British bill of rights seems to send the signal to countries with questionable human rights records, such as Russia and Turkey, that international human rights obligations can be shirked or are an optional extra. It also undermines the Government’s foreign policy objective of championing a rules-based international system.

I know that the Minister has received a lot of questions from other hon. Members, but I have one for him. I think the systematic decision-making errors that we keep hearing about in these cases are a matter of quality control and auditing. Will the Minister reaffirm the UK’s position as a champion for the absolute ban on torture? I am optimistic that he will. Will he also implement immediate measures to improve decision making in asylum claims made by survivors of torture to address those weaknesses?

We live in tumultuous times of turmoil and turbulence, when the only predictable thing is unpredictability. The UK has a proud history of standing up for human rights and taking care of people in need, and it has never been more important to reaffirm that commitment and make sure that it works in practice.

4.7 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) for raising these important matters. It is a subject that she rightly says is a global issue, and one which, aside from the academic and clinical debates, has profound human consequences for individual survivors of torture. I am proud to share this Chamber with all colleagues who have spoken today, although I take exception to the use of the word “toxic” by the Scottish National party spokesperson when describing the Government’s policy; I certainly do not recognise that.

I will restate the Government’s position: torture is one of the most abhorrent violations of human rights and human dignity, and we unreservedly condemn its

[*Mr Robert Goodwill*]

use as a matter of fundamental principle. The Prime Minister and the Leader of the House have made that point quite recently. The United Kingdom Government will continue to raise concerns about such flagrant abuses of human rights with relevant foreign Governments at every opportunity. I commend the work of organisations that support survivors of torture, and I believe our policy on handling asylum claims based on torture provides effective protection to those who need it.

All asylum claims lodged in the United Kingdom, including those involving claims of past torture, are carefully considered on their individual merits. Decision makers are fully aware of the importance of making the right decision and the consequences of refusing those who need protection. I assure hon. Members that such decisions are not taken without full consideration. Our published policy on considering asylum claims in which torture is raised and, in particular, when medical evidence is also provided is very clear and requires decision makers to approach such cases with sensitivity, to allow reasonable time for medical evidence relevant to the decision to be provided, and to carefully consider such evidence to reach an informed decision.

Mr Gareth Thomas: Is the Minister satisfied that all asylum caseworkers in the Home Office at the moment have received the full appropriate training for judging whether or not torture has occurred and therefore whether asylum should be granted?

Mr Goodwill: In an area such as this, one can never be satisfied, because that sounds like complacency. Indeed, staff development and training is something we constantly have under review. Some of the points made in this debate show that we do not always get it right. Tribute was paid, I think by the hon. Gentleman himself, to the staff who do this work. It is often a thankless task, and they do it with a degree of professionalism that we can all admire.

Mr Thomas: The Minister will be aware that I referenced a full-day training module that was rolled out to some asylum caseworkers, but not all, when the last asylum policy instruction was issued in 2014. Will he now instruct the relevant civil servant to ensure that all asylum caseworkers benefit from that full-day training module?

Mr Goodwill: I absolutely agree that it is important that staff get the relevant training. It is also important that staff with the most experience are directed to the cases where their experience can be most brought to bear. I will continue to engage with officials to ensure we are doing that as well as we can. I take this very seriously indeed.

When considering asylum claims made in the UK, it is absolutely right that we offer protection to those who face torture on return to their country. However, that does not mean that all survivors of past torture will automatically qualify for protection. An individual needs to show there is a real risk of serious harm or persecution on return to their country. In some cases, the situation in a country can become normalised and change. We welcome it when conflict finishes or particular situations are resolved in countries around the world.

I appreciate concerns about decision quality and how we consider medical evidence in practice, which was highlighted in the Freedom from Torture report published last year. However, I would point out that the sample of cases in that report represents less than 1% of all asylum decisions made last year, and some of the cases used are nearly three years old. That does not mean that I do not take those individual cases very seriously. I must stress that Home Office officials are committed to approaching cases involving allegations of torture with the utmost sensitivity.

My officials have also recently met Freedom from Torture representatives. While we believe the findings in the report are not representative of the wider asylum system, we are nevertheless taking steps to further improve the decision-making process. That will include forming a specialised team who will review and sign off all cases where a medical report is provided. We are also reviewing the training programme delivered to new decision makers. I can assure Members that we are committed to getting decisions right the first time and to working with expert organisations such as Freedom from Torture to ensure that survivors of torture get the support they need.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: I am pleased to hear about the engagement with Freedom from Torture, and I encourage the Minister to consider that. I think that Freedom from Torture acknowledged when it launched the report that it was a small sample of cases. Its finding that 76% of asylum cases involving torture were granted on appeal is something that the Minister's Department should be able to confirm or contradict. Is he able to do so?

Mr Goodwill: I will see what stats we have on that. I am aware that where there are judicial reviews against us in such cases, we win virtually every one—I think the last figures I saw showed that we have lost 45 cases out of 18,000. It is not always the case that cases brought to us are successful.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) mentioned medical reports from specialists. We do not restrict who can provide a medical report for the purposes of submitting evidence in support of an asylum claim. There are accepted international legal standards, as set out in the Istanbul protocol, "Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment", which applies to the documentation of torture. We believe it is appropriate that, as a minimum, those guidelines are followed in preparing reports.

All asylum decision makers receive extensive training on how to consider asylum claims. That includes vicarious trauma training for caseworkers, to guard against hardening. We are well aware of how people can become—dare I say—used to hearing stories such as these, which is really worrying. As previously highlighted, we are committed to continuous improvement.

Let me be clear: torture has no place anywhere in the world, and we must do all we can to stamp it out. The UK Government consistently raise concerns about the use of torture, enforced disappearances and alleged police abuses, and will continue to do so. I am sure Members will be aware that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth

Affairs, the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), regularly raises human rights concerns in his dealings with overseas Governments and officials.

My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham raised the position of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister's position is clear: the UK stands firmly against the use of torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and so-called enhanced interrogation techniques. In no circumstances would we consider approving a request from a foreign Government to conduct an extraordinary rendition through the UK or one of our overseas territories.

Mr Gareth Thomas: I appreciate the Minister giving way again. Does he accept that torture is still a significant problem in Sri Lanka?

Mr Goodwill: That question is probably better directed to the Foreign Office. I know that the situation is much improved in Sri Lanka, which we welcome, but the hon. Gentleman might have evidence that he wishes to make available to Foreign Office Ministers, so that they are aware of it. I am not fully briefed on the situation in Sri Lanka. I know things are improving, which is good news, but from the points he has made, we know there is still some way to go.

We must support those in need of protection to claim asylum in the first safe country they reach. That is the fastest route to safety. International obligations under the refugee convention do not require us to consider claims made outside the UK, but we continue to support refugees in-region through our substantial aid contributions and resettlement schemes.

I will say a few words about the background of our "adults at risk" policy. The adults at risk in immigration detention policy came into force on 12 September and was accompanied by detailed caseworker guidance, following the laying of statutory guidance in Parliament. The policy is based on balancing the risk of considerations against immigration factors and on detaining vulnerable individuals only when the immigration factors outweigh the immigration considerations in any given case. It is part of the Government's response to Stephen Shaw's review of the welfare of vulnerable people in detention.

Measures put in place under the Immigration Act 2016, along with a new policy on adults at risk in detention and other improvements to casework processes, represent a comprehensive package of safeguards for all vulnerable detainees in the immigration system, including pregnant women. Those measures have been developed in response to Stephen Shaw's independent review of detainee welfare. Indeed, I have made a point of visiting some of our immigration removal centres to see the conditions there. I am well aware that many people associate detention with the torture they have had inflicted upon them, and therefore there is a concern that people will see detention as bringing back the terrible experiences they have had.

Dr Huq: The shadow Home Secretary apparently has repeatedly asked since November to visit Yarl's Wood and has had no response. That may not have come across the Minister's desk, but will he look into it for her?

Mr Goodwill: Certainly. We get a number of requests. I know there has also been some discussion with the Home Affairs Committee, and we are particularly keen

to prioritise that visit if we can, because it is important that the Committee sees that as part of its work. However, I will look at that request and see what we can do to accelerate it.

I want to make it absolutely clear that where people are detained, it is for the minimum time possible. The dignity and welfare of those in our care is of the utmost importance. I would like to leave a few minutes for my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham to sum up, so I will make a final comment. We are clear that the claims of those who seek asylum in the UK will be carefully considered by well-trained and conscientious decision makers, who are expected to take into account all available evidence to reach an informed decision.

Margaret Ferrier: I would like to repeat the question I asked earlier about the number of asylum claims involving torture allegations. There is no log of that at the moment. Will the Minister give a clear guarantee that he will look at that and put in place a log, so that we know how many asylum claims involve torture allegations?

Mr Goodwill: Interestingly, I have asked the same question myself, and the answer is not quite as simple as it may seem, because in some cases multiple reasons are given for an asylum claim, and in other cases in which asylum has been refused on one ground, a new ground has then been put forward. Sometimes the figures are not quite as easily come to as perhaps we would like. I will certainly see what I can do, but I have been asking the same question myself and have been told, "It isn't as simple, Minister, as you would like to think." There are often quite complex cases involving a number of different reasons that may have been submitted at different times during the legal process.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: I sense that the Minister is perhaps trying to get to his peroration, but if I may, I shall take advantage of the time remaining. In the course of my remarks, I referred to the Belhaj case. I am mindful of all the strictures on that, but does the Minister agree that it is in the national interest now, given the judgment of the Supreme Court, that we have an early resolution of it?

Mr Goodwill: I am always very cautious about commenting on specific cases. The right hon. Gentleman is smiling, probably because he is getting the answer that he expected, but he has certainly raised the issue, and it is particularly important that we ensure that all the legal processes that we are involved in are conducted in the best interests of the taxpayer and the best interests of those who are vulnerable and need our support.

We are clear, as we make these informed decisions, that those who would face torture if returned will be granted protection here in the UK. I believe that our current policy delivers on these important goals: it supports those genuinely in need of protection in the UK because they are at risk of torture if returned, and it is absolutely consistent with our international obligations.

4.21 pm

Dr Mathias: I thank everyone who has taken part for such a wide-ranging discussion. I appreciate every single contribution.

[*Dr Mathias*]

I express particular thanks to the Minister for his sensitivity and clarity. I note that, on behalf of the Government, he unreservedly condemns the use of torture. I am very grateful to him for being clear about not using even British overseas territories for rendition. I am sure that we will get equally clear statements from the Government about complicity.

The Minister said that the published policy was clear. I hope that he will take back to the Department the information from all hon. Members present that we feel that, in practice, it is lacking. That is a cross-party message. I applaud the fact that the Minister will continue to engage with officials and that he is concerned about the quality of decision making. I reiterate what was said by other hon. Members and, in particular, the point made by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) that we need an audit. We need quality assurance in the Department, and an audit.

Mr Goodwill: I would not go so far as to say I was concerned. I was just making the point that there is always room for improvement in this type of process.

Dr Mathias: I appreciate the Minister's clarity and I urge the Home Office to do a proper audit of asylum claims in which torture is involved or suspected. I am glad that the Minister acknowledges the issue of case hardening, but a strategy needs to be in place. There was mention of claims made outside the UK. The point is that we can be a global leader. We might be able to send our experts and, hopefully, Home Office caseworkers; if they improve their expertise, we can then also guide other countries.

I pay credit to the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas), who expressed concern for constituents with a background in Sri Lanka, which is still of exceptional concern. Unfortunately, I do not believe that we have heard today that the full day's training has been rolled out; that does not appear to be the case.

I appreciate the words of my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat).

I absolutely agree that the right to be free from the experience of torture is an unqualified right; indeed, it is an inalienable, non-derogable right. The point was very well made that we realise in this country that torture actually makes us more vulnerable.

I do not know how serious the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) was, but I think it was a good point that on every desk in the Home Office and Foreign Office should be the words: "We do not sanction torture and are not involved in it". I agree with him on that. He raised a very important point about the ethics of, and clarity about, sharing intelligence with countries that practise torture. I think that shows that we need more time for this debate—I am sure that the Backbench Business Committee will take note of that today. Again, we need auditing; we need statistics.

As the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) said, Foreign Office statements should be clear. I do have some disagreements with the hon. Lady. I do not believe that we should be lecturing the rest of the world; I believe we should be engaging with them and leading. I have really valued the cross-party tone of the debate and I value the Minister's sensitivity. I am sorry, because I have a lot of respect for the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton, but on these policy matters, I do not believe that we will be successful, as a House of Commons, by trying to exacerbate any divisions. Apart from that contribution, I think we have power in this debate.

My final point is to show how the UK leads in this world where torture exists. We beat torture by rehabilitating people and making them full members of our community. I pay respect to those in the Public Gallery. You will not be able to know which one of those people has been tortured, because they are a full member of, and contributing valuably to, our community.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered UK policy on torture and the treatment of asylum claims.

4.26 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 2 March 2017

EDUCATION

Modern Languages/Biblical Hebrew

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): The Government are tomorrow publishing subject content for AS and A-levels in a range of languages with smaller cohorts. This fulfils the commitment made in 2015 to work with the exam boards to ensure the continuation of these qualifications.

The reformed GCSE content for modern foreign languages, published in 2014, is suitable for all the modern languages which have been redeveloped as part of the GCSE review process. These are: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, modern Greek, modern Hebrew, Polish, Panjabi, Russian, Spanish and Urdu. The exam boards have either already developed specifications for these GCSEs, or are currently doing so.

At A-level, we have worked with the exam boards to develop specific content for modern languages with smaller cohorts. These languages are named in the content as follows: Arabic, Bengali, Gujarati, modern Greek, modern Hebrew, Japanese, Panjabi, Persian, Portuguese, Polish, Turkish and Urdu.

The content for modern languages with smaller cohorts is largely identical to the reformed A-level (and AS) content which applies to French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Italian and Russian. This was developed by the independent A-Level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB), appointed by the Russell Group to meet the expectations of higher education, and was published in 2015.

This content for modern languages with smaller cohorts addresses the risks associated with examinations for smaller numbers of candidates, including the challenges of recruiting specialist examiners. The requirement to demonstrate speaking skills is not included in the content, which is consistent with current AS and A-level qualifications in the relevant languages—with the single exception of Urdu (in which speaking skills are currently examined). We have, however, included a clarification that specifications should encourage the development of speaking skills, although those skills will not be formally examined. To secure a level of rigour which is comparable for all modern languages, the Government are introducing a new requirement for modern languages with smaller cohorts. The proposed content requires students to apply language skills (reading, writing and listening) in combination, by responding to spoken and written sources addressing common subject matter.

The A-level (and AS) content for modern languages with smaller cohorts will apply to courses beginning in September 2018. The current specifications for these languages will remain available for courses beginning in September 2017.

The Government are also publishing tomorrow revisions to the ancient languages subject content, at both GCSE and AS/A-level. This was first published in 2014, to apply to all ancient languages. For Biblical Hebrew, however, it has become evident that certain aspects of

that content could not apply directly, or would be inappropriate at this level of study. To clarify how particular requirements will apply to Biblical Hebrew, and whether any requirements will not apply, we have worked with independent subject experts and others with a close interest in the subject. The revised content maintains the overall level of demand of the content while ensuring clarity as to how certain requirements should be met in Biblical Hebrew specifications.

[HCWS515]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Agriculture and Fisheries Council will take place on 6 March in Brussels. I will represent the United Kingdom.

As the provisional agenda currently stands, the primary focus of the Council will be an exchange of views on a regulation establishing a multi-annual plan for small pelagic species in the Adriatic sea.

There will also be an exchange of views on the future of the common agricultural policy post-2020.

There are currently five items scheduled under “any other business”:

Our Ocean conference —An Ocean for Life (Malta, 5 and 6 October 2017) (tabled by the Commission).

G20 Agriculture Ministers’ conference (Berlin, 22 January 2017) (tabled by the German delegation).

European Solidarity Corps (tabled by the Commission).

Dual quality foodstuffs (tabled by the Slovakian delegation).

Update on the animal welfare platform (tabled by the Commission).

Until exit negotiations are concluded, the UK remains a full member of the European Union and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. The outcome of these negotiations will determine the future shape of a new UK-EU partnership.

[HCWS513]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): The General Affairs Council (GAC) on 7 March 2017 is expected to focus on: resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament; preparation of the March European Council from 9 and 10 March 2017; European semester and; inter-institutional agreement on “better law-making”. *Resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament*

The presidency will outline the resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament (EP) at its plenary sessions of 13-16 February 2017.

Preparation of the March European Council from 9 and 10 March 2017

The presidency will present its draft conclusions on the agenda for the March European Council. The agenda will include: jobs, growth and competitiveness; external security and defence; migration; and external relations, focusing on the western Balkans. There will also be two

procedural items on the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) and the election of the President of the European Council.

European semester

The presentation on the European semester is expected to cover: the priorities for the 2017 semester; the implementation of reforms undertaken by member states in response to their country-specific recommendations; and the endorsement of recommendations on the economic policy of the euro area.

Inter-institutional agreement on "better law-making"

Information is expected on the "joint declaration on inter-institutional priorities" signed by the Presidents of the European Council, European Commission and European Parliament in December 2016. The presidency will also present an overview on legislative programming and the latest on Commission proposals regarding delegated and implementing Acts.

[HCWS514]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and the Secretary of State for Defence will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (Foreign and Defence Ministers) on 6 March. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

The morning will start with a joint session for Foreign and Defence Ministers on defence. The foreign policy agenda will feature western Balkans, migration, Egypt and the middle east peace process.

Defence

Ahead of the joint session, Defence Ministers will discuss the strategic outlook for the EU's common security and defence policy (CSDP). EU Foreign and Defence Ministers will then review the implementation of the December European Council package on defence. The discussion and conclusions will cover: improving the functioning of non-executive military (training) missions through the establishment of a military planning and conduct capability (MPCC); permanent structured co-operation (PESCO) for better joint capability development; and the proposed co-ordinated annual review on defence (CARD).

Western Balkans

Ahead of discussion on the western Balkans at the March European Council, HRVP Mogherini will brief Ministers on her forthcoming regional tour and update the Council on the EU-facilitated Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. In her 17 January speech, the Prime Minister identified the western Balkans as a region in which the UK has played and will continue to play an active role in promoting European security.

Migration

There may be a discussion on migration following the Valletta senior official meeting on 8-9 February which reviewed progress against the Valletta action plan. The

UK used its chairmanship of the Khartoum process in 2016 to encourage implementation of the Valletta action plan to tackle unmanaged migration flows from the horn of Africa. The UK provided a total of £4 billion in aid for Africa in 2015-16, with an increasing focus on jobs and livelihoods.

Egypt

Foreign Minister Shoukry will attend the lunch discussion where Ministers will discuss Egypt's relationship with the EU and role in the region. Discussions are expected to cover Egypt's political and human rights situation, including the growing restrictions on civil society. Ministers are also likely to discuss how the EU can best help strengthen Egypt's internal security, co-operate on bringing stability to Libya, and work together on combating illegal migration in the region.

Middle east peace process

Ministers will discuss developments on the middle east peace process (MEPP) and are likely to discuss obstacles to peace, including incitement, terrorism, demolitions and recent settlement announcements.

[HCWS516]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Policing

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): I want to update the House on work by the police to improve transparency on how they use force and on their use of conductive energy devices, commonly known as Taser.

In October 2014, the former Home Secretary commissioned the then national policing lead for conflict management, Chief Constable David Shaw, to carry out an in-depth review of the data that should be recorded and published every time significant force is used by the police. This formed part of a range of work focused on improving the way the police interact with people, in particular vulnerable people, those with mental health issues, and black and minority ethnic groups. A key driver has been to ensure transparency and accountability on the police use of sensitive powers.

I am pleased to update the House on the significant progress made, supported by a diverse range of partners including Amnesty International and BMH UK. Chief Constable David Shaw's review made a number of recommendations, which set out that the police should publish a range of key information in respect of every serious use of force, including the ethnicity, age, location and outcome. The information should report on the situations when physical restraint is used, as well as the type of equipment, such as handcuffs, batons, sprays and conductive energy devices.

The recommendations made by Chief Constable Shaw were agreed by the former Home Secretary, and work has since been undertaken to ensure all police forces are ready for a new data collection system beginning on 1 April 2017. All forces will publish the data recorded locally on a quarterly basis, with a subset of the key information collected provided to the Home Office as part of the annual data requirement for 2017-18.

This data collection will be a significant factor in improving public trust and confidence in the police use of force. Improved transparency will contribute to delivering

a real commitment on behalf of the police to respond to the genuine concerns raised by the public.

For the first time, these data will allow meaningful comparison across the range of techniques and tactics used by the police, and this should in time directly influence and strengthen police training, and operational decisions around the most appropriate tactics and equipment available where needed. It will allow scrutiny of why force is being used, which will provide invaluable insight, particularly in respect of minority and vulnerable groups, and in locations of concern, such as hospitals, mental health institutions and custody cells.

The wide range of data collected will also include information on injuries suffered, by the subject and also by the officers concerned. Our police forces deal with volatile and potentially dangerous situations every day, and these data will allow us to better understand the need for appropriate, justifiable use of force, as well as providing evidence of the tactics and techniques that may be more or less likely to result in injury in different circumstances.

This work is a real step forward. I am particularly pleased with the progress made to ensure the police and the public have the information needed to rightly scrutinise how the use of force is deployed and I am proud that this level of reporting is unmatched anywhere in the world.

This is particularly fitting today as I would also like to inform the House of the Home Secretary's decision to authorise a new conductive energy device (CED), Taser International's Taser X2, for use by police forces in England and Wales. This decision is in response to the formal request from the national policing lead, DAC Neil Basu, on behalf of the police in England and Wales following the end of production of the existing authorised device, the Taser X26, and an open and transparent procurement exercise to identify a replacement.

This Government are committed to giving the police the tools they need to do their job effectively, and where modern specialist equipment like CEDs are used, to ensure our officers have access to the best and most appropriate technology. The decision to authorise the Taser X2 follows stringent consideration of strategic, ethical, operational and societal issues, including an assessment of environmental factors. As part of this process, a full technical evaluation of the Taser X2 has been carried out. The results of this evaluation, as well as user handling trials, and training and guidance materials, were submitted for independent medical assessment by the Scientific Advisory Committee on the medical implications of less-lethal weapons (SACMILL). The Committee has provided a medical statement on the Taser X2 and which confirms that when used by trained operators in accordance with UK policy and guidance, the medical implications of the Taser X2 are in line with those expected of a less lethal weapon of this type.

The decision to authorise the Taser X2 for use by the police also marks the award of a commercial contract with Taser International's UK distributor, Axon Public Safety Ltd. A new national framework agreement will shortly be in place, subject to a 10-day standstill period.

A copy of the use of force data review can be found in the Library of the House, and I will ensure that SACMILL's medical statement is placed there and on gov.uk.

[HCWS517]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will take place on 3 March in Brussels. I will be representing the UK.

The Council will be invited to an orientation debate on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending regulation 883 on the co-ordination of social security systems and regulation 987 laying down the procedure for implementing regulation 883. The Council will also be invited to a policy debate on the European semester and the implementation of country-specific recommendations.

The Council will be invited to adopt draft Council conclusions on the 2017 annual growth survey and joint employment report, and to adopt the draft joint employment reports. As part of this, the Commission will also present the 2017 country reports, published 22 February. The Council will be invited to adopt the draft Council conclusions on enhancing the skills of women and men in the EU labour market.

There will be a joint presentation by the Commission and the presidency on the tripartite social summit.

Under any other business, there will be information from the Commission about the communication on modernisation of the EU occupational safety and health legislation and policy, and information in follow up to their recent communication on investing in Europe's youth. There will be information from the presidency on the state of play of the legislative proposal on posting of workers. The Chairs of the Employment Committee (EMCO) and the Social Protection Committee (SPC) will provide information on their respective work programmes for 2017. There will be information from the European Institute for Gender Equality on the key findings of their study titled "Economic benefits of gender equality in the EU". The Portuguese delegation will provide information on the upcoming UNECE international conference "A sustainable society for all ages: Realising the potential of living longer" (Lisbon, 21 and 22 September 2017).

[HCWS512]

National Employment Savings Trust

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): From 1 April 2017, changes to the National Employment Savings Trust Order 2010 and to the National Employment Savings Trust (NEST) rules will allow individual and bulk transfers into and out of the scheme in prescribed circumstances. These changes will help people who wish to consolidate their savings with NEST or with other pension providers, which is critical to reducing costs in pension schemes and avoiding large numbers of small scattered pots, often forgotten about by savers and hard to trace.

I can now confirm the charge structure that will relate to such transfers. Under the determination made by the previous Government, the trustee of NEST makes an annual charge on funds under management. This has been set by the trustee at 0.3%. In addition, to help

cover the set up costs, the trustee makes a charge on contributions into the scheme from both employers and employees. This has been set by the trustee at 1.8%.

Introducing a new type of charge for transfers in would add complexity for members and be inconsistent with the Government's policy on charges. Therefore the existing contribution charge and annual management charge will apply to funds transferred into NEST. The trustee will set the level of these charges as they apply to transferred funds.

Levying a 1.8% contribution charge in these circumstances would be punitive for members and would discourage pot consolidation. Charges on transfers in are the exception in modern pension schemes and our policy is to discourage such charges. Therefore, I expect the contribution charge that will apply to transfers to be less than 1.8% and place no lower bounds on its level,

which is to be set by the trustee with due regard to the impact on members and scheme finances. The trustee will also be able to set a minimum transfer value.

In the case of bulk transfers, the trustee will also have the option of recovering the costs of administering the transfer from the employer.

The Government aim to achieve a balance between delivering good value to NEST's members, managing impacts on the wider pensions industry and ensuring affordability for the taxpayer. I have been assured by the trustee that, in setting the level of the charges to apply to transfers, it will take into account its target market and public service obligations and am putting in place arrangements to enable me to keep this under review.

[HCWS511]

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