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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 6 March 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Terrorism: Armed Police Protection

1. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase the level of armed police protection to counter the threat of terrorist activity in the UK. [909046]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): We are providing £144 million over five years, of which £32 million will be provided between 2017-18 to enhance our armed policing capability and capacity to be able to respond more quickly and effectively to a firearms attack. This means that the number of armed police will increase by more than 1,000. Additional round-the-clock specialist teams will be created outside London and 41 additional police armed response vehicles will be on the streets.

Michael Fabricant: I am concerned by the fact that a number of armed police officers have said to me, both here in the Palace of Westminster and in Downing Street, that they do not feel they have the freedom to act that they should have because of the rules of engagement. Can the rules be changed to make them fit for purpose?

Amber Rudd: I recognise that this is sometimes a difficult issue. We have been reviewing the support we provide to our firearms officers so that they can carry out their crucial duties without fear, while ensuring there is necessary scrutiny. My hon. Friend has specific concerns about automatic suspension and firing first. I can confirm that only in exceptional circumstances would someone be automatically suspended for using their gun. There is no rule prohibiting officers from shooting first. Their decision is and must be based on an assessment of threat to life, including their own. I would be delighted if he would like to meet me or the Minister to discuss this matter further.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary join me in commending Mark Rowley and the counter-terrorism team on the announcement today that 13 terrorist threats have been thwarted in the past four years? Does she agree that this is not just about

arming the police; it is about the public being vigilant and ensuring sufficient resources for the counter-terrorism unit to engage with communities? That is the way we deal with this threat, as well as arming the police.

Amber Rudd: I happily join the right hon. Gentleman in commending the announcement made by Mark Rowley and the work done in general by our counter-terrorism police officers in London and beyond. He is absolutely right that it is essential we do not think we can solve this issue simply by putting more money into it. We need to work closely with local communities, so that everybody plays a part in countering this vile crime.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The armed response capability of the British Transport Police is a relatively new function, yet the prospect of a mass casualty attack at one of our major transport interchanges is probably one of the more likely scenarios. Can the Home Secretary assure me that there is maximum integration and co-operation between the British Transport Police and local territorial police forces?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the local transport police and local police forces will always work closely together. We are very mindful of where the likely places might be for any attack. He is right that that will often involve large transport hub areas, so we are careful to give specific advice to those areas where necessary.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary agree that countering the terrorist threat begins with preventing radicalisation? She will be aware of the case of Tanveer Ahmed, who is in prison for murdering the peaceful Ahmadiyya shopkeeper, Mr Assad Shah. From his prison cell, Mr Ahmed is using the phone and letters to continue to radicalise people against Ahmadiyya Muslims. Given the increase in anti-Ahmadiyya extremism, is the Home Secretary confident that she has enough Urdu speakers in the entry clearance section at the high commission in Islamabad and here in London?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady raises counter-radicalism, which is a very important element of our counter-terrorism and counter-extremism strategy. I can reassure her that a lot of additional work is going on in prisons to ensure that counter-radicalism takes place. My right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary has taken additional steps to work with people who are being radicalised or are the sources of radicalisation. I hope that that will yield positive results.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Will the Home Secretary join me in praising the work of the east midlands operational support service, which places armed officers in the smaller cities and towns of the east midlands, and will she ensure that smaller cities have the resources they need? A terrorist attack is just as likely to happen in a city like Nottingham or Derby as in London.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will join him in commending the work of the east midlands service. We are mindful of the fact that, although London can be the central target, other cities

could also be a target. We are mindful that our counter-terrorism efforts go way beyond London to other cities, but they are always intelligence-led.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary knows that many of our constituents are saying that they see fewer police in their towns, on their streets and indeed on their roads. The Budget is coming up, so surely we should have some commitment to making the level of policing for counter-terrorism in our communities as high as possible.

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that there has been a 30% increase in the budget for counter-terrorism and we expect that to continue. When it comes to ordinary policemen, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will, like me, welcome the fact that crime has fallen by 25% since 2010. The key element is that our police forces have the tools to deliver that reduction in crime, and I believe that under this Government they do.

Retail Crime

2. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the level of retail crime. [909047]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): I very much welcome this question from my hon. Friend, who is chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on retail crime, which recently launched a report on this very subject. I can assure him that we take retail crime very seriously. I am co-chair of the National Retail Crime Steering Group with the British Retail Consortium, which brings together retailers and the police to understand the challenge and take effective action.

Martin Vickers: I thank the Minister for her reply, but she will be aware of growing concern among retailers about levels of both physical and verbal abuse. Will she do something to ensure that police across the country prioritise this issue sufficiently? Retailers are worried that different areas receive a different response from the different forces.

Sarah Newton: Let us be absolutely clear: violence or verbal abuse of any kind is simply not acceptable for any workforce in our country. I shall take this issue forward through the national steering group, and will draw particularly on the very effective work that has been done between the police and forecourt retailers, where we put in place measures that are really improving police response around the country.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): On that very point, the Minister will know that as well as seeing an increase of crime carried out on shop workers, we have also seen under-reporting of that crime. Will she urge businesses to encourage their employees to support the campaign of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers on freedom from fear and indeed to report these crimes?

Sarah Newton: The right hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point, and we very much work alongside USDAW on the national steering group that I

mentioned. I absolutely back up his call that everybody should report crime. There are some excellent initiatives in town centres all over the country through which businesses and the police are working well together to ensure that such an increase in reporting happens.

Controlling and Coercive Behaviour

3. **Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): What assessment her Department has made of the effectiveness of current legislation on controlling and coercive behaviour; and if she will make a statement. [909048]

Mr Speaker: I call Minister Newton.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): Mrs Newton indeed, Mr Speaker.

We introduced the new offence of controlling and coercive behaviour to shift the focus of the criminal justice system from single incidents to identifying and addressing patterns of abuse. The Home Secretary will chair a working group to drive change in how we think about and tackle domestic abuse, and this will include closely monitoring the implementation of this new offence.

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank the Minister for her answer, but existing police powers to remove perpetrators of domestic violence from a property are tremendously under-used, largely because costs and cuts in police funding have made the situation worse. What is the Minister going to do to help protect women affected by domestic violence?

Sarah Newton: This new offence was brought in right at the end of 2015, so the Office for National Statistics will not report on the level of uptake of the new police powers until later this spring. From my conversations with the police up and down the length and breadth of the country, I know that they are making very good use of the new powers.

20. [909066] **Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): May I commend the Government for their recent action to combat coercive or controlling behaviour by creating this new offence? Will the Minister outline the work that police forces are doing up and down the country to combat crimes that disproportionately affect women, such as stalking?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is quite right to talk about stalking, which can be a truly devastating crime. This Government are placing an absolute priority on keeping women and girls safe across our country through extra resources, extra training and new forces so that they can go after the perpetrators of these terrible and devastating crimes.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Opposition welcome the introduction of this legislation—it was, after all, Labour party policy—but when are the Government going to put their money where their mouth is on domestic violence? We know that local authority spending cuts have severely impacted on specialist domestic abuse services, which has meant cuts and closures. Women and children are being turned away daily at the point of need. Data from the Women's

Aid annual survey showed that on just one day in 2015, 92 women and 75 children were turned away from a refuge. When are the Government going to address the financial pressures on women's refuges?

Sarah Newton: This Government have done more than any other to keep women and children in our country safe. It is very disappointing when the right hon. Lady takes a partisan approach to something that should unite the House rather than dividing it. As she knows, we have committed £20 million to refuges, and we have an £80 million transformation fund. Grassroots organisations throughout the country are benefiting from our record level of investment in services to keep women and children safe.

Ms Abbott: It is very disappointing that the Minister is not prepared to accept that, as a result of local government cuts, services are being reduced and refuges are closing. As for the question of resources, Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary recently flagged up failings on the part of the police when they were dealing with the most vulnerable victims. In at least two forces, domestic abuse risk assessments were being conducted over the telephone. This is a consequence of trying to deal with increasing levels of demand with few resources, and if the Government are serious about combating domestic violence, they must make those resources available.

Sarah Newton: I very much welcome HMIC's work in inspecting the police response to domestic abuse and violence. It is making excellent progress, as we saw in the police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy programme—PEEL—reports last week. However, the right hon. Lady is right to point out that some force areas have more work to do. That is why we are helping the College of Policing to ensure that training is available, and why we are investing record amounts in the police transformation fund, which is enabling more organisations to provide the services that women and girls all over the country deserve.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Coercion and controlling behaviour take different forms. Will the Minister undertake to extend the legislation to the postal voting regime? At every election, the votes of thousands of women are stolen through abuse of the postal voting system during so-called community voting, largely in the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities. That is not acceptable, and the Government need to act now.

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend has raised an incredibly important issue. What could be more important than people's fundamental right to express their opinions at the ballot box, and to elect representatives to town councils and the House of Commons? We shall be taking a very close look at what more we can do to use those powers, and any others, to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to vote.

Leaving the EU: Policing

4. **Byron Davies (Gower) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the relationship between British police forces and their counterparts in EU countries. [909049]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): As the Prime Minister made clear in her Lancaster House speech in January, our commitment to co-operation with European partners on security and law enforcement will be undiminished by our leaving the European Union. The Home Office is working with operational law enforcement partners to examine all the different ways of delivering that result, and to find a practical, co-operative way of supplying certainty as we leave the EU.

Byron Davies: The sharing of intelligence with our European counterparts is vital to the work of our police forces in keeping our citizens and country safe, and data-sharing underpins that co-operation. How will the Home Office meet the challenge of maintaining those arrangements when Britain has left the European Union?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The use of data is critical in our fight against cross-border crime and terrorism, and will always remain a priority for us. We value the co-operation that we have at present through the European Criminal Records Information System and the Schengen Information System. We want our future relationship with the EU to include practical arrangements so that we can engage with it on that basis, and I can reassure my hon. Friend that that is also what our EU partners want.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary's predecessor, now the Prime Minister, said that ditching the European arrest warrant would make Britain "a honeypot for all of Europe's criminals on the run from justice".

Can the Home Secretary guarantee that we will continue to participate in European arrest warrant co-operation?

Amber Rudd: I certainly agree with the principle that the European arrest warrant is an effective tool that is essential to the delivery of effective judgment on the murderers, rapists and paedophiles on whom we have managed to seek judgment. It is a priority for us to ensure that we remain part of the arrangement, and I can reassure Members in all parts of the House that our European partners want to achieve that as well.

Police National Computer

5. **Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con):** What procedures have been put in place to prevent errors in the recording of licence conditions on the police national computer. [R] [909050]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): The PNC central bureau is operated by the Metropolitan police, and it processes all licence notifications on behalf of police forces in England and Wales. A sample of transactions in the bureau are checked daily for accuracy by supervisors.

Johnny Mercer: I understand from Ministers that this problem was rectified last year, which I am happy to learn. However, is there any more the Department can do to work with families like the one here with me today whose son was murdered by an individual on licence? I pay tribute to Andrea Sharpe on her efforts to close this

gap. Will the Department work with families to ensure that they get the support they need so that cases like that of Tanis Bhandari cannot happen again?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Fortunately, very few of us in this House can ever understand or will ever have to go through what the family of Tanis Bhandari had to go through; that was a tragic incident that we all wish would never happen to anybody. My hon. Friend is right that the process around post-sentence supervision has changed following the implementation of the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014, but I am always willing, as, I know, are colleagues at the Ministry of Justice—I think my hon. Friend has arranged for the family to meet the Secretary of State for Justice later today—to look at what more we can learn from the experiences of today and the past.

Leaving the EU: Residency Rights

6. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If she will make it her policy for non-UK EU citizens resident in the UK to retain full residency rights after the UK has left the EU. [909051]

10. **Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): If she will make it her policy for non-UK EU citizens resident in the UK to retain full residency rights after the UK has left the EU. [909055]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Prime Minister has made it clear that one of her 12 negotiating priorities is to secure the status of EU nationals already living in the UK as soon as possible, once formal negotiations have begun. She has also made it clear that she seeks a deal based on reciprocity, which also secures the status of UK nationals living elsewhere in the EU.

Martyn Day: The cross-party Exiting the European Union Committee published its second report yesterday. It unanimously agreed that the Government should make a unilateral decision to safeguard the rights of EU nationals living in the UK. Will the Home Secretary now commit to doing so?

Amber Rudd: I will of course read the report with the respect and interest that it deserves. Nevertheless, I feel that reciprocity is an important part of securing the position not only of the EU nationals, who add such value to our economy and are so welcome here, but the UK citizens who live their lives abroad in the EU.

Brendan O'Hara: This weekend, Rita Windham-Wright, a Hungarian national living in Oban told me that she and her family were considering leaving Scotland, Celia Krezdorn from Helensburgh, a Swiss national married to a German, whose children are Scottish, told me they have no idea what the future holds for them, and Jean Michel Voinot from Lochgilphead asked whether his family will be able to hold together. Given that the Exiting the European Union Committee said it would be “unconscionable” if such people were to be denied clarity about their future, how do the Government intend to—

Mr Speaker: Order. That is too long, I am afraid. We have got the gist of the question, and we are grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but we have a lot to get through and not much time in which to do so.

Amber Rudd: I urge the hon. Gentleman to reassure his constituents, if that is what they are, about how valued they are for the contribution they make to the UK economy. I also point out that the recent immigration statistics show that we remain just as popular a destination as ever for EU nationals.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We cannot even deport convicted criminals. The reality is that even if we wanted to, which we do not, we are not going to deport a single EU national. It seems to me that we might as well acknowledge this fact now, while reserving the right, in the extremely unlikely possibility of our EU partners deporting any UK citizens—which they will not, for the same practical reasons—to change our mind. But let us at least reassure these people now.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend makes a very fair observation about the reality of the situation. I point out, however, that as he seeks the assurance and certainty that the EU citizens who are here want, I seek it, too, for the UK citizens who are in other parts of the EU. It is a priority; the Prime Minister has said that she will move on to that as soon as negotiations begin.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Does the Home Secretary agree that the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) could refer his constituents to the acquired rights EU citizens might have under the Vienna convention? Those same rights might not be available to UK citizens abroad, who also need our protection.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend makes the very good point that EU citizens here have existing rights and that we need to ensure that equivalent rights are extended to UK citizens in the EU.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The Home Secretary advises Members to tell their EU constituents that they are safe, and many of us have been doing that, but, frankly, they need to hear it from her and from the Prime Minister. We really need the Government to step up and say to those individuals that their lives here in Britain are secure, at the same time as trying to ensure that the people who went from Britain to Spain will be equally secure.

Amber Rudd: I understand the concerns that the right hon. Lady has raised. We have all experienced this as MPs in our surgeries. My point to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) was that as MPs we can give that reassurance that EU citizens are valued here and that it is the Prime Minister's intention to do that. We will make it a priority as we begin the EU negotiations.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): If we are to be accused of using EU nationals as bargaining chips, could the same accusation not apply to the attitude of other EU 27 nationals towards British citizens abroad?

Amber Rudd: Which is why I would refer to this as a reciprocal arrangement, which we hope to complete in parallel with the EU.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Home Secretary talks about reciprocal arrangements, but when she gets round to reading the report from the Exiting the European Union Committee, she will see that representatives of UK citizens living abroad, to a man and woman, gave evidence to the Committee that they want the British Government to give a unilateral guarantee to EU citizens living here because they think that it will benefit British citizens abroad. Will she listen to the voices of UK citizens living abroad and give that unilateral guarantee?

Amber Rudd: There are more than 1 million UK citizens living in the European Union, and they are not all represented by the groups that gave evidence to the Brexit Committee. I care about every one of those UK citizens, and I repeat that it is incumbent on the Government to ensure that we protect their position as much as we protect that of EU citizens.

Joanna Cherry: Last week, the chief executive of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce pointed out that Scotland relies heavily on EU residents for the supply of labour. She said that business in Scotland wants a separate deal for immigration in Scotland. The Exiting the European Union Committee has said that the UK Government should respond fully and speedily to the Scottish Government's proposals for a differential immigration policy for Scotland. Will the Home Secretary listen to the voice of business in Scotland and give a guarantee that that full and speedy response will be given without further delay?

Amber Rudd: The Scottish Government already play a full role in the negotiations and planning for the EU exit, and I am sure that that will continue over the next few months.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Does the Home Secretary agree that we can reassure EU nationals that their rights to remain in this country are guaranteed in our law and that it would require an Act of Parliament, at the very least, to remove those rights?

Amber Rudd: Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right. There will be a moment to have a full debate on that, and that will be in this House when those rights are changed.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware that British public opinion increasingly thinks that the Government are being callous in continuing to seek to use EU nationals as bargaining chips? Is she also aware that, given the cloud of uncertainty hanging over EU nationals and their families, employers in sectors that rely on their labour—notably financial services, health and education—want that uncertainty to be removed?

Amber Rudd: It is because we care about employers and the jobs that they provide that we will be consulting during the summer on the right form of immigration process to put in place as we leave the European Union.

There is no question but that this Government are going to continue to listen carefully to the employers who have provided so many jobs to people in the UK and quite a few in the European Union as well.

Unaccompanied Refugee/Asylum-seeking Children

7. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What discussions she has had with local authorities on their capacity to support unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children. [909052]

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Government undertook a comprehensive consultation with local authorities in order to assess their capacity to accept unaccompanied children. This consultation included 10 regional events in each part of England, and events in Scotland and Wales, which were attended by representatives of more than 400 local authorities.

Alex Cunningham: When the Calais camp was cleared last year, 550 of the 750 children who came to the UK did so under an accelerated process based on the family reunion criteria of the Dublin regulation, which has since been discontinued. How will the Minister ensure that refugees in Greece, France, and Italy, including unaccompanied children with family members in the UK, can be reunited with their families?

Mr Goodwill: The Dublin process works well and is well established. Indeed, a member of the Home Office staff is embedded in Athens, helping the process to work. Although we had a fast-track system during the Calais clearances, it is important that, first, we identify that the children are who they say they are and, secondly, that they can be properly cared for by the family they are placed with.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Prime Minister did much to lead the campaign against human trafficking, and we are undoubtedly the best country in Europe at countering human traffickers, but I am still concerned about one area in which the traffickers operate: children who are given to local authorities and then re-trafficked. Will the Minister assure us that the Government are following up on children who have been placed in care to ensure that they are still in care?

Mr Goodwill: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's long campaign on this issue. He is right that it is a concern that children placed with local authorities may abscond due to traffickers wanting their pay day—for want of a better phrase. It is absolutely right that local authorities understand their responsibility to care for those children and to ensure that their safety is maintained.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Minister will have seen the Home Affairs Committee report, which is out today, that sets out the evidence we heard from charities and the Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner about the increased risk of child trafficking if the Dubs scheme closes, from councils about their extra capacity, and from the Local Government Association that thousands more places could be available if the right funding is in place. New clause 14 to the Children and Social Work Bill, which is before the House tomorrow, has cross-party support, so will the

Minister agree to seek further evidence from the Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner and from local councils on their capacity, rather than rushing to close the Dubs scheme?

Mr Goodwill: I certainly look forward to appearing before the right hon. Lady's Committee to give the Government's side of the story. I do not recognise the figures that I saw, and I suspect that some of the methodology behind them will not bear too much scrutiny. If spaces are available with local authorities, it is important that they are made available for the national transfer scheme. Kent County Council, for example, has 400 surplus children over its normal capacity—Croydon is another—which makes things difficult.

15. [909060] **Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am pleased that Cambridgeshire County Council has accepted people from the unaccompanied asylum seekers dispersal scheme and that Cambridge City Council, together with East Cambridgeshire and South Cambridgeshire District Councils, is welcoming 100 refugees. Does the Minister think that councils should do what they can and, more importantly, that we should properly welcome the people who come and integrate them into our communities?

Mr Goodwill: I pay tribute to local authorities such as Cambridgeshire that not only take in children under the national transfer scheme but make families welcome under our scheme for the 20,000 children and their families coming from the camps around Syria and the 3,000 children and their families from the wider middle east and north Africa area.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): On Holocaust Memorial Day, Michael Brown movingly described his experiences as a child refugee fleeing Nazi Germany in 1939 and advocated the need for Britain to be open to children from Europe fleeing atrocities today. Numerous local authorities, such as Ealing, Hammersmith, and even Hastings—the Home Secretary's backyard—are willing to take more, so why are the Government pulling the plug on the world's most vulnerable by closing the Dubs scheme?

Mr Goodwill: If any parallels are to be drawn between Nazi Germany and the situation nowadays, they would be in the situation in Syria, not in our European neighbours and partners. I point out for the record that of the 750 children we took from Calais under both Dubs and Dublin fewer than 10 were actually from Syria. We should concentrate on the children and their families most in need, and they are the ones in the refugee camps in the region.

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Stephens.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): My constituent, Basher Nedari—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is a case of mistaken identity on the part of the hon. Lady. I had another Member in mind, but patience might be rewarded in due course.

Immigration Rules: Spouse Visas

8. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Whether she plans to review immigration rules for spouse visas. [909053]

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Supreme Court has now endorsed our approach in setting a minimum income threshold for spouse visas to prevent burdens on the taxpayer and ensure that migrant families can integrate into our communities. That is central to building an immigration system that works in the national interest.

Chris Stephens: The Supreme Court has described the financial threshold that forces UK citizens to choose between their country and their family as being “particularly harsh.” Will the Minister put families and children ahead of the illogical and arbitrary net migration target, ditch the £18,600 threshold or, at the very least, consider the circumstances of those in low-paid employment?

Mr Goodwill: It is important that family life must not be established here at the taxpayer's expense and that families are able to integrate. That is what our family immigration rules achieve, an approach that the Supreme Court has now endorsed.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Minister intend to use the same minimum income threshold for EU spouses as he currently uses for non-EU spouses?

Mr Goodwill: We have not even sat around the negotiation table, so that question is probably slightly premature.

Refugee Camp: Calais

9. **Rob Marris** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What discussions she has had with her French counterpart on another refugee camp forming in Calais. [909054]

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): Both countries are alive to the risk of new camps forming in northern France and are continuing to work together to combat the criminal groups that facilitate people smuggling. The UK Government are contributing up to £36 million to support the situation in Calais and ensure that the camp remains closed in the long term.

Rob Marris: Many economic migrants dispersed from Calais refuse to apply for asylum in France, so they are not fingerprinted there: thus they can get smuggled to the UK and claim asylum here. Has the Minister urged upon the French authorities the desirability of all such individuals being fingerprinted in France and the records exchanged?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The principle of first safe country is central to the asylum policy. If people are in France, they should claim asylum in France and have their fingerprints taken. We can then use those biometrics in the Dublin process to ensure that the people are dealt with properly. We certainly urge our French friends to ensure that that can be done, and we encourage asylum seekers in France to go through that process.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I urge the Minister to do all he can to make sure that a new “jungle” does not form at Calais this year. It is not just about the humanitarian squalor to which 10,000 people were shamefully condemned. It is also essential that we stop the terrible pull factors that draw people on these terrible and dangerous journeys across Europe.

Mr Goodwill: The site of the former Calais camp remains clear and there is ongoing work, supported by UK funding, permanently to remove all former camp infrastructure and accommodation and to restore the site to its natural state. That work will help to prevent any re-establishment of squats or camps in the area.

Mr Speaker: I would not want those who use a “v” in the surname Stevens to feel disadvantaged by comparison with those who use the “ph” variant on the theme. I call Jo Stevens.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Thank you for the second opportunity, Mr Speaker. My constituent Bashir Naderi came to Cardiff as an unaccompanied child refugee aged 10. Two months ago, Bashir and I personally delivered to the Home Secretary my letter and a petition against his forced removal to Afghanistan signed by more than 14,000 people. I have had no acknowledgment from the Home Secretary, never mind a response to the letter or the petition. When will she reply to me?

Mr Goodwill: I certainly hear what the hon. Lady says. Of course we care for people who come here as children, but they would then normally make an asylum application when they reach the age of 17 and a half, which is dealt with in the usual way.

Police and Security Services: Terrorist Prevention

11. **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that police and security services have the powers necessary to apprehend people planning terrorist attacks in the UK. [909056]

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): The UK has one of the world’s most effective legal regimes to empower our law enforcement agencies and security services to tackle terrorism. The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, the Terrorism Act 2000 and, more recently, the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 form the foundation of our continued strategy to counter terrorism in the 21st century.

Mr Jayawardena: Given what the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) said earlier about the excellent efforts of our security services to protect this country, it is clearly not just about powers but about people, too. To that end, will my hon. Friend the Minister join me in commending Hampshire constabulary for its excellent progress on recruiting firearms officers to work with our security services, and will he confirm that the recent Government funding allocation has made provision to train more firearms officers?

Mr Wallace: I ask my hon. Friend to reflect on the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, but I put on record our appreciation of the extra efforts of forces across the country in delivering the extra

£144 million armed uplift that, as my right hon. Friend has said, will see an extra 1,000 armed officers and additional round-the-clock specialist teams operating across the whole country.

Non-UK EU Nationals: Status Regularisation

12. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): How many non-UK EU nationals have applied to regularise their status since the EU referendum took place; and what application fee is charged by her Department for such regularisation. [909057]

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): The latest data show that in the two quarters following the referendum 136,479 applications for residence documentation were received from EU nationals and their family members, and the application fee for this documentation is £65.

Chi Onwurah: Three per cent. of Newcastle’s population are EU nationals, and be they in our hospitals, universities, restaurants or high-tech start-ups—or in our championship-topping football team—they are an integral part of our lives. Does the Minister realise how insecure they feel as bargaining chips, and how does he justify charging them for the privilege?

Mr Goodwill: I would certainly pay tribute to the contribution that EU nationals make in all spheres of life, not least football, but particularly in the health service and our public services. While they are here and we are members of the European Union, they can exercise their treaty rights. As the Home Secretary has said, we wish to sort this situation out as soon as possible, and of course we also need to recognise the status of UK nationals elsewhere in the EU, who deserve and want the same protections.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): What procedures are in place to enable the Government to check that EU nationals have been here lawfully and continuously for five years?

Mr Goodwill: Many people will have documentation already available, for example, their national insurance or tax forms; they may appear on the electoral register. All sorts of documentation could be relevant in this case, but I must stress that nobody needs to get any additional documentation at this stage. We are absolutely happy that people continue making a contribution, and they should not be worried about their future here in the UK.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I have been contacted by constituents who are British citizens married to EU nationals. What compassion are the Government showing to those people by using their futures as a bargaining chip in our future European relations?

Mr Goodwill: I urge caution about describing these people as “bargaining chips”. It is absolutely right that we are keen early in the negotiations to secure the status of EU nationals living here, but at the same time we do need to ensure that British nationals living elsewhere in the European Union get that same protection.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Some EU nationals—for example, Roma or those from central Europe—find it particularly difficult to produce documentation, as they may have been in insecure employment, have ended up sleeping rough and so on. Following on from the Minister's answer to the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall), what can be done to ensure that those who have lived, worked and contributed here but who struggle to produce documentation will also receive a fair hearing?

Mr Goodwill: I stress again that there is no need for EU nationals who are living here and exercising their treaty rights to make any change in their status; there is no need for any further documentation. As we quickly get into the negotiations after triggering article 50, I hope that this will be resolved very quickly.

Metropolitan Police Funding

13. **Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of her Department's funding for the Metropolitan police. [909058]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): I will not comment on the first part of the hon. Gentleman's point, but I would say that we can be very clear that the Metropolitan police has the resources it needs to police London. It is the best-funded force in the country in terms of direct resource funding per head of population, and it also has the most officers per head of population.

Wes Streeting: Ilford North residents worried about bread and butter crime and policing on issues such as burglary feel unlucky because the average London taxpayer pays £61 a year to subsidise the national work of the Metropolitan police. Given that, will the Government accept the recommendation of Sir Richard Mottram's panel and provide an additional £107 million a year to fund the vital national work of the Metropolitan police?

Brandon Lewis: Clearly, the Metropolitan police have a role to play in that national context that is different from other police forces. The review of the NICC—national and international capital city—contribution, which the Metropolitan police has outlined in conversations about the police funding formula review, will be done in line with that funding formula review.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Of equal importance to ensuring adequate funding for the Met police is ensuring proper funding for West Yorkshire police. There are real concerns about the use of firearms in my constituency, where firearms offences have risen by a third during the past four years. Will Ministers ensure that West Yorkshire police have the resources necessary to get these weapons off our streets?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady just highlighted the cross-party calls from across this House to see that police funding formula review work done, ensuring that we are properly reflecting things. The current formula is immensely out of date, and it is well known and well accepted that that needs to be reviewed. I therefore look forward to her support in that review work.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Just over a year ago, the Chancellor promised real-terms protection for police funding, but the Met faces real-terms cuts of £47 million, Manchester faces a £12 million one and West Yorkshire faces a £9 million one—England and Wales as a whole faces a massive £200 million cut. That has consequences, with violent crime deprioritised, domestic violence victims ignored and neighbourhood policing eroded. All of that has been evidenced by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary, yet we have heard nothing from the Minister except complacency. Who should the public believe: the Minister of broken promises or the independent HMIC?

Brandon Lewis: I appreciate the tone in which the hon. Lady has asked the question. If she actually looks at the HMIC report, she will see that it is clear that this is not about levels of funding; the report is very much about how the police use the funding they have. I gently point out to her that, if they are using the precept abilities they have, not only is every single police force in the country, bar one, protected, but indeed, this year overall we are seeing an increase in the resources for police forces. Even in London, the police have seen a £30 million increase in their reserves, which means there has been money that they have not used.

Immigration: Indefinite Detention

14. **Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): If she will make it her policy to (a) end indefinite detention for immigration purposes and (b) introduce a maximum time limit of 28 days for such detention. [909059]

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): Detention and removal are essential parts of an effective immigration control system, but it is vital that they are carried out with dignity and respect. When people are detained, it is for the minimum time possible. We take the welfare of detainees very seriously, which is why the Government commissioned Stephen Shaw to carry out an independent review of the welfare of vulnerable people in the detention system.

Caroline Lucas: Numerous reports suggest that the Government are using indefinite detention. I commend to the Minister a report by Women for Refugee Women that sets out practical alternatives to detention as a routine part of asylum policy. I would like to see the reality for myself, yet my application to visit Yarl's Wood as a party leader appears to have been blocked. Can he tell me the status of my application, which was first made in November and has, I understand, been referred to his office? When can I expect to get clearance?

Mr Goodwill: We are still considering that suggestion. I know that the shadow Home Secretary would like to visit as well.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) *indicated assent.*

Mr Goodwill: We did wonder whether the Home Affairs Committee would like to take precedence on a visit of that sort, but if it does not want to go, we will certainly look into the matter more urgently.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): When will the current system of detention reviews be replaced by the individual removal assessments and reviews, and when will the plan for the future of the immigration and detention estate, promised by the Minister's predecessor last year, be published?

Mr Goodwill: We seek to minimise the time for which people are kept in detention, and that is done for the purposes of removal. We have, of course, introduced a new adults at risk policy, which seeks to minimise the use of detention for those considered vulnerable.

Refugee Support

16. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What steps she is taking to support refugees in the UK and other European countries. [909062]

18. **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): What steps she is taking to support refugees in the UK and other European countries. [909064]

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): The UK provides protection for refugees here, in accordance with our international obligations. The Government have established a £10 million refugee children fund for Europe, provided significant assistance via the European Asylum Support Office, and allocated up to £39 million to the humanitarian response in Greece.

Stuart C. McDonald: Why is it that only a solitary Home Office official in each of Greece and Italy is working on the Dubs and Dublin schemes? According to non-governmental organisations on the ground, the result is that the schemes are barely functioning there at all.

Mr Goodwill: We work very closely with our colleagues in France, Greece and Italy. We committed 115 staff into Greece, 75 of whom are already there, including one embedded member of the Home Office staff who is helping with Dublin applications in Athens. Of course, we also have our Border Force commitment in the Mediterranean, which ensures that we save people's lives should they make that perilous journey across the Mediterranean.

Margaret Ferrier: Home Office guidelines recognise that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender refugees are at serious risk in Afghanistan, but also suggest that if the individual did not attract or seek to cause public outrage, they would avoid persecution, so could be returned. Will the Minister tell us why the Home Office has decided to depart from the UN guidelines on refugees?

Mr Goodwill: We aim to process all asylum claims sympathetically. Our staff are trained in interviewing asylum seekers who may have LGBT issues or, indeed, who may have converted to Christianity and find it difficult to express some of their feelings during those interviews.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Bath and North East Somerset Council has one of the best relocation programmes for unaccompanied children and for refugees

in the country. However, it is struggling to enable more to come to Bath and North East Somerset due to a range of different safeguarding risks. What more support can the Government give to councils such as Bath and North East Somerset that are really struggling on safeguarding issues? Perhaps I could meet the Minister to discuss those issues.

Mr Goodwill: We recognise the challenge that many local authorities face in dealing with some of these particularly vulnerable children, which is why we have increased the funding up to £40,000 for the under-16s, and to around £30,000 for 16 and 17-year-olds. I hope that will help them find the resourcing that they need to deal with those particular children.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Kent continues to be on the frontline when it comes to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving in the UK, with more than 3,000 arriving each year. Given the interest in the matter across the House, will the Minister outline what steps are being taken to ensure that local authorities across the country are helping counties such as Kent and sharing the burden of these children no matter how they have come into the UK?

Mr Goodwill: That is precisely why we have set up the national transfer scheme for local authorities such as Kent, which have 400 more children than the 0.07% allocation would indicate. It is also why we have encouraged local authorities that say that they have spare spaces to participate in that scheme and take the pressure off counties such as Kent and Croydon.

Mr Speaker: I call Graham Jones. Where is the fella? Well, the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) is here and he is waiting patiently, so let us hear from him.

Online Radicalisation

19. **Craig Williams** (Cardiff North) (Con): What steps she is taking to safeguard vulnerable individuals from online radicalisation. [909065]

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): We are taking robust action to tackle radicalisation online and to counter the poisonous ideology that is promoted by terrorists and extremists. In 2016, our police Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit secured the removal of more than 120,000 pieces of terrorist-related content. We work with communications service providers to tackle proactively terrorist use of their platforms and we support community-based initiatives that challenge terrorist propaganda and provide credible counter narratives.

Craig Williams: I thank the Minister for his answer. I pay tribute to the Home Secretary and her ministerial team for all they do to protect the values that we all hold so dear. With Cardiff in mind, may I ask what the Government are doing in particular to tackle extremism in this country?

Mr Wallace: In October 2015, the Government published a comprehensive new strategy to tackle all forms of extremism, including both Islamist and that from the far right. The strategy sets out an ambitious programme

to deal with those who promote hatred and intolerance, which can cause real harm in our communities. When it comes to Cardiff, my hon. Friend will be aware of the extra efforts going into the Prevent programme in his local authority, and I would be delighted to visit the Prevent providers with him should he wish to make such a visit.

Mr Speaker: Phil Boswell. Not here.

Topical Questions

T1. [909036] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): On Wednesday, we celebrate International Women's Day when we recognise the achievements of women internationally and acknowledge the real challenges still faced by so many. One of my priorities as Home Secretary is to ensure that all women are protected from violence. Since 2010, we have done more than ever before to tackle gender-based violence. Last year, we launched the ending violence against women and girls strategy and pledged increased funding of £80 million in support. We have strengthened the laws and provided agencies with tools to support victims and bring perpetrators to justice. We know that there is more that we can do to bring those crimes out of the shadows, which is why the Justice Secretary and I will be leading a comprehensive programme of work to combat domestic abuse, including considering a new domestic violence Bill. The Government will continue to take steps to achieve our ambition that no woman should live in fear of abuse, and that every girl should grow up feeling safe and protected.

Diana Johnson: Parents will be shocked to know that, under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, youth leaders and sports coaches are not included within the definition of a "trusted position", which means that they can legally have sex with 16 and 17-year-olds for whom they are responsible and whom they supervise. Will the Home Secretary work with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to close that loophole in the law?

Amber Rudd: I will certainly look at the situation that the hon. Lady raises and, if necessary, talk to the NSPCC. I will invite her to participate in those discussions as well.

T3. [909038] **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the £10 million of investment that has been spent refurbishing Southend police station, and does he agree that the extra investment and better technology should result in improved crime detection and crime prevention?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): My hon. Friend gives a really good example of a very forward thinking police force in Essex. Credit must go to the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable for the work that they are doing to use modern techniques and good technology to drive forward and

to be efficient and effective. That is a good example of why we are increasing the police transformation fund to some £175 million this year.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary really believe that the 45 days of support for suspected victims of trafficking is adequate, given that the organisations working at the coalface of the problem, such as the Human Trafficking Foundation, the Salvation Army, the Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, the Snowdrop Project, City Hearts and ECPAT, all say that it is completely unrealistic to expect to deal with the immigration, psychological, economic and housing issues that these vulnerable individuals are experiencing in 45 days? All those organisations also agree that this lethal combination is exposing victims to the real possibility of being re-trafficked.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): I think that it is important to remember that the Prime Minister has led a global challenge to crack down on slavery. We now have some of the best anti-trafficking legislation in the world, and really excellent protection for victims. What the hon. Lady said is not actually correct, because the average time that people receive through the national referral mechanism is 90 days. We are working on reforms to the system to ensure that it is absolutely the best in the world.

T5. [909041] **Craig Williams** (Cardiff North) (Con): I welcome the Minister's visit to Cardiff, particularly to discuss with South Wales police the security for the UEFA champions league final—the most watched sporting event in the world—which is taking place in Cardiff on 3 June. What is he doing to focus minds on security?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; arguably that will be the most watched sporting event in the world this year. It is an opportunity for the United Kingdom, and indeed for Wales, to show clearly what we have to offer. I was delighted to accept his invitation to go and meet the team down in Cardiff. We will keep a close eye on them to ensure that they have all the structural organisation they need to give everyone a fantastic event.

T2. [909037] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In October, baby monitors were hijacked by organised crime for cyber-attacks. Last week, the secrets that children whisper to their teddy bears were to be found online. This Government have ensured that responsibility for cyber-security is literally all over the place. Does the Home Secretary realise that when there is a devastating attack by an internet-connected device—and there will be—she will be the one we blame?

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): The hon. Lady makes an interesting point—and a few wild allegations. It is this Government who set up the National Cyber Security Centre to ensure that we correctly align our response to cyber-attacks, getting it out through Cyber Aware and a range of cyber awareness campaigns to ensure that people are properly protected, working alongside manufacturers, and using the full weight and

expertise of GCHQ to counter cybercrime. That is making a difference, and I hope that people are more aware, rather than scared by her allegations.

T6. [909042] **Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary recently rated Essex police as good, which represents a significant improvement. Although there is still work to be done, will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the hard-working officers for that amazing achievement?

Brandon Lewis: Yes. My hon. Friend's question backs up the earlier comment from our hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), because Essex police have done some phenomenally good work, as we can see in HMIC's report. I congratulate everybody at Essex police on that. I will urge one note of caution, however, because there are still areas that need improvement, and I expect to see the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner focusing on those to deliver for the people of Essex in future. But it is good news, so well done to them.

T4. [909039] **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): On a previous attempt to recalculate the national police funding formula, Lancashire police was set to lose £25 million a year. That was revised down to £8 million in year when inaccuracies were identified. That is on top of the £76 million that it had already saved since 2010. What steps is the Policing Minister taking to ensure that the national police funding formula will not repeat the same mistakes and will accurately reflect the demands on police forces?

Brandon Lewis: I can assure the hon. Lady that there is a substantial piece of work going on, with academics, police chief constables and police and crime commissioners across the country working to feed in and ensure that the police funding formula review takes account of everything it needs to take account of. A lot of people in the sector are outlining to us how pleased they are with the process. We are determined to see that through. We will see where it goes for all forces in order to get a fair formula in future.

T8. [909044] **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to crack down on cyber-terrorism, given that business is increasingly being done online and in the light of the recent announcement from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport of a new digital strategy to encourage even more businesses to have the skills and confidence they need to make the most of digital technology?

Mr Wallace: The Government take cyber-security extremely seriously, which is why we have committed to spending £1.9 billion on cyber-security over this Parliament. The newly created National Cyber Security Centre is at the forefront of driving forward the Government's national cyber-security strategy, which will include working with businesses and the private sector, and developing an ambitious skills programme.

T7. [909043] **Mr David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): As the price of scrap metal rises, so, sadly, does the number of scrap metal thefts. Will the Minister say when the

Government intend to produce a response to their consultation, which ended in January?

Brandon Lewis: The Government will respond to that consultation in due course—to the House—once we have had a chance to go through all the replies.

T9. [909045] **James Berry** (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government remain committed to resettling 23,000 of the most vulnerable children and adults directly from Syria, the middle east and north Africa over this Parliament, in addition to asylum seekers and family reunion cases? Will she update the House on how many people have been resettled in the past year?

Amber Rudd: I reassure my hon. Friend that we remain committed to those numbers, ensuring that we protect and move people over from the region. We have, in fact, brought over 4,369 in the past 12 months. The last Labour Government capped their figure at 750 per year, and we are pleased to be doing five times that every year.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Further to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and others, the report of Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary that was published last week found that a third of police forces required improvement or were inadequate, that there was a national shortage of detectives, that neighbourhood policing is being eroded and that there is no coherent strategy for the threat posed to communities by organised criminals. Will the Home Office respond to that damning report and outline what impact the findings will have on the police funding formula review, which we expect to see in the next few weeks?

Brandon Lewis: The response is for police forces, and I look forward to all police forces responding with the outcomes for their areas. I will write to all those forces that were found to require improvement. Straight after the report came out last week, I met the chief constable of the only one that was found inadequate, and I was impressed with their response to want to deal with the issues. Ultimately, there has also been a big improvement on previous years, which is good news, but the police need to respond and do the work to deliver.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I thank the Fire Minister for his intervention, which has seen Staffordshire fire authority cancel a £4 million life-skills centre. Does he agree that the fire authority was right to review the scheme as we need to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent wisely, and that there are other ways to deliver all-important fire prevention work?

Brandon Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for her very kind comment. Importantly, the credit goes to a really good fire authority that has looked at the programme and taken a proper view on using taxpayers' money effectively. I congratulate the authority on and thank it for that work.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): My constituent, Robert Makutsa, who is a well-known figure on the Scottish music scene, has now been in

detention for 38 days, which is taking a brutal toll on his mental and physical health. I wrote to the Minister for Immigration on 16 January, but have yet to receive a response. Will he now meet me to discuss Robert's ongoing detention?

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): We do not, as a rule, comment on individual cases, but I would be more than happy to meet the hon. Lady as soon as possible.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that looking after adult victims of human trafficking through the Salvation Army is the best system in Europe? Will she also confirm that the 45 days mentioned is the minimum period, not the maximum?

Amber Rudd: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. I pay tribute to the incredible work he has done in helping us to put the system in place. We use third parties such as the Salvation Army, which does a fantastic job looking after people who have been trafficked. He is right that 45 days is a minimum. Quite often, we look after people for much longer, but we will always keep that under review because we want to help these vulnerable people.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): At the weekend, I heard the heart-breaking story of one of the children, who has only ever known her father as a face on a laptop. When he stood up to walk away during a Skype call, she shouted, "Mummy, look! Daddy's got legs too." Does the Home Secretary find that as distressing as I do? If she does, and given that I have no power to do anything about it but she does, what will she do?

Amber Rudd: I am not entirely clear what the situation is, but I will meet the hon. Lady, or she can meet the Immigration Minister, to discuss it.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): Will the Home Secretary give an absolute guarantee that there will be no changes in the rules relating to EU migrant labour this summer, so as to allow fruit pickers in my constituency to implement the contracts they have already entered into?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to remind everybody that while we are members of the EU that situation is unchanged—that position can be guaranteed.

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): My constituent Mr Kreem was empowered by, and worked with, coalition forces in Iraq post the 2003 invasion to set up an academy to train security forces in Mosul. That work put his and his family's lives in probable danger, particularly

post the invasion of Mosul by Daesh. In 2014, the family claimed asylum, and they have still not heard back, despite numerous interventions by their previous MP with the ministerial team. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me to discuss this special and urgent case?

Mr Goodwill: I would be more than happy to have such a meeting.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Trafford Council has already received 10 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and is supporting two more. The council and the community are keen to support more such children in need, but they are finding it difficult to establish with the North West Regional Strategic Migration Partnership the exact numbers they can expect over coming months. Given the uncertainty local authorities face in planning to receive such vulnerable children, what assurances can the Home Secretary give?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The fact is that it is sometimes uncertain when we are able to bring the children over to the UK. When we had the situation with Calais, we were told x number by the French one day, and it moved very quickly the next. We will always do our best to give councils as much notice as possible, but sometimes the numbers change at very short notice.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): My constituent Barrie Smith was born in Dumfries, was raised in Dumfries and is 100% Scottish. Due to a mistake with his mother's maiden name on her marriage certificate, he has been denied a passport and been told that he will need to reapply for British citizenship at the cost of £2,000. Will somebody from the Home Office meet me behind the Speaker's Chair so that we can discuss this hideous case?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman does not need to make it sound quite so furtive. It can be behind the Chair, but it could be in quite a large number of other places on the parliamentary estate, or in a ministerial office for that matter. There is nothing odd about it.

Mr Goodwill: Mr Speaker, it sounds like I am going to be quite busy having meetings with colleagues from the SNP, but I am more than happy to have that meeting as well.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we must move on. I think I have called everybody who had not previously asked a question.

Speaker's Statement

3.37 pm

Mr Speaker: On 22 February, the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) raised a point of order about correspondence from the Department for Work and Pensions informing Members of new arrangements for accessing information about constituents' universal credit claims. The same matter had been raised by the hon. Members for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) at Department for Work and Pensions oral questions on 20 February. I undertook to investigate and to report back to the House.

I can confirm to the House that there is no requirement in law for the Department to obtain explicit consent before releasing information on constituents' universal credit claims to Members. The Data Protection (Processing of Sensitive Personal Data) (Elected Representatives) Order 2002 provides that a data controller may, in reliance on the order, provide sensitive personal data to a Member about a constituent, if the Member has been asked by the constituent to take up an issue on his or her behalf and the information is necessary for the purposes of that request. The Leader of the House has written to Members to confirm that position, and I am most grateful to him for doing so.

I am assured that the Department for Work and Pensions is continuing to look at how the security requirements of the new universal credit system can be made compatible with the needs of Members to act on behalf of their constituents. I would hope that Ministers will update the House as soon as possible. I hope that that is helpful to the House.

Opel/Vauxhall: Sale to PSA Group

3.39 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the sale of Opel/Vauxhall to PSA Group.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): This morning the boards of General Motors and PSA Group announced plans for PSA to acquire GM's Vauxhall/Opel operations. The proposed deal is expected to be completed by the end of this year.

The Prime Minister and I have been engaged in discussions with both GM and PSA, and with the French and German Governments, to ensure that the terms of the agreement can give confidence to Vauxhall's UK workforce now and for the future. Vauxhall is an iconic, important and successful British car manufacturer. Vauxhall cars have been made in Britain for 113 years, and we are determined that that should continue to be the case for many years to come.

The car plants at Ellesmere Port and Luton have a proud record of being among the most efficient in Europe, with workforces that are skilled, committed and flexible. Both PSA and GM have confirmed to the Prime Minister and me a number of important commitments, including that the company will honour its agreements with the Vauxhall workforce; that Vauxhall pensioners will be in at least as good a position as they are today; that the treatment of the UK division will be equal to that of other countries in the Vauxhall/Opel group; that the identity of Vauxhall will continue to be distinct and prominent; that the strategy of the new company will be one of building on existing strengths and commitments, not on plant closures, taking opportunities to increase sales around the world; and that the company will work with me and the rest of the automotive sector to ensure that it can participate in a substantial programme of research and investment for innovation in areas such as electric vehicles and battery technology, which is part of our industrial strategy.

This morning I had a further conversation with my French counterpart the industry Minister, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Climate Change and Industry spoke again to his German counterpart to agree a consistent approach. I speak frequently with Len McCluskey, the general secretary of the largest trade union at Vauxhall, and I have kept, and will keep, colleagues with particular constituency interests up to date at all times.

It is in everyone's interests that Vauxhall should look forward to a successful future. A generation ago, the British car industry epitomised our economic woes; today that industry is a beacon of success. Companies invest in Britain because our automotive sector has a high-quality workforce and world-class efficiency, and is part of one of the most exciting places on earth for innovation and research in new technology. The future of the motor industry is bright in Britain, and we will be active at all times in doing everything that we can to make it brighter still.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the Secretary of State for that positive response, but I would like further clarification on a number of issues.

First, although I welcome PSA's promise to honour existing contracts, I am deeply concerned about the 40,000 workers who are currently employed at Luton and Ellesmere Port and in the wider supply chain, who will be worried about the future of their jobs. What assurances has the Secretary of State personally received about the future of Vauxhall's plants and the wider UK workforce beyond existing contracts? During his discussions with PSA, did it confirm that the production of the new Astra model would take place in the UK?

Secondly, there has been some discussion about the £1 billion deficit in General Motors' UK pension scheme, with some commentators stating that it could have jeopardised the deal. The scheme has 15,000 members and is one of the largest in the UK. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that the pensions of the UK workforce are guaranteed in full?

Thirdly, it is increasingly clear that the Government have little power to ensure that certain corporate takeovers are in the public interest and accord with Britain's industrial strategy. Existing legislation allows intervention only when matters relate to national security or media concentration. Does the Secretary of State have any plans to broaden the definition of public interest, for example to serve stakeholders and not just shareholders? If so, when will he publish the draft legislation?

Finally, what support has been offered to PSA following Britain's exit from the European Union? We welcomed Nissan's decision to remain in the UK as a result of assurances provided by this Government. Has PSA been offered the same deal? If so, would it not make sense for the Government to set out their strategy for this sector as a whole, rather than enlightening businesses one crisis at a time?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her questions. The last two weeks have been worrying times for the workforce. The statements that have been made by both parties today have been welcomed—not just by me, but by the trade unions—as steps in the right direction. It is important that we should hold the company to account on that.

On the points that the hon. Lady mentioned, PSA has said that it will honour GM's agreements with the unions, which extend to at least 2021. In the motor industry, as she will know, new models come in at various points. We are fortunate that both the principal models in the UK are at quite an early stage in the cycle. I want, as I am sure she does, both plants to be competitive in expanding their production in the years to come.

I have discussed pensions regularly and in detail with GM and PSA. They have given an absolute commitment that no pensioner—current or prospective—will be worse off in any way. Of course, the Pensions Regulator, which is independent of the Government, is required to confirm any changes in pension arrangements.

In terms of the takeover regime generally, the hon. Lady will know that, in this case, one overseas-owned company is being taken over by another; we are not talking about a listed UK company that falls within the UK merger regime. In discussions with my counterparts in France and Germany, I have agreed that we should

take a consistent approach on the assurances that are needed. The trade unions are equally in contact with their opposite numbers in other countries.

In terms of the support available to the automotive sector, as I mentioned to colleagues a few moments ago, that sector has been a great success in this country. One of the foundations of that success is the co-operation that we have had—Government to sector, and within the sector through the Automotive Council—to invest in research and development, particularly for electric vehicles and battery storage, and to make sure that we have institutions to train the future workforce. That has been a great success, and I hope that the future owners of Vauxhall will participate in the same way as other successful UK motor industry players have done.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and his engagement with those of us who represent employees in the areas concerned—in my case, Luton. I would be grateful if he indicated what reassurance has been given to PSA in recognition of the fact that part of the strength of the Luton plant arises from the quality of the supply chain and the investment that has been made in it over recent years. I hope that he can give us some reassurance, because an understanding of that position will help to secure jobs not just at Luton, but in the supply chain, which is so important to the home counties area around Bedfordshire.

Greg Clark: I agree with my right hon. Friend. We are talking about both the workforce directly employed by Vauxhall and the substantial employment in the supply chain. Both are very important, so this has been part of our discussions. I think that there is every opportunity—I will be vigorous in pursuing it—to expand the supply chain that supplies not only the Vauxhall plants, but other plants in this country. In the context of our industrial strategy, that is one of the avenues that we intend to expand on during the months ahead.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) on securing this urgent question. I welcome the Secretary of State's initial comments regarding guarantees on pensions and short-term jobs, which are welcome. Even then, we have to appreciate that workers are clearly experiencing some uncertainty.

I know from manufacturing plants in my constituency that being efficient does not necessarily protect them from wider politics. It is quite clear from media vox pops that some of the workers are concerned about the future impact of Brexit, given the wider European plants that they are combining with. To repeat the earlier question, what guarantees has the Secretary of State got for the wider supply chain for components, given that we are now talking about a much bigger multinational company? Has he had any discussions about the effect that the UK being outwith the customs union would have on costs and component supply for UK plants? What discussions has he had with the Chancellor about the provision of R and D money out of the £23 billion so-called investment fund, which is clearly needed to do what he talked about—to support these plants, and continue the development of electric vehicles and battery storage?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. On the first point, it is evident that these discussions are about the restructuring of GM's operations and are not tied to Brexit. With regard to the supply chain, there are opportunities. It is very clear that PSA has been talking about expanding its production, and that should create further opportunities for the supply chain, which I intend to pursue in this country. Research and development has been an area of success for us, as is recognised by companies in the sector. With the industrial strategy challenge fund, which was announced in the autumn statement, we made a specific commitment to expand our research into battery technology in particular, and that will be very attractive to suppliers in this sector.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May I ask the Secretary of State what he has learned about PSA's plans to build ultra-low emission vehicles in the United Kingdom—whether electric, hybrid, hydrogen or indeed liquefied petroleum gas—all of which there will be increasing demand for in the future, not least as we meet our air quality objectives?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have had many discussions about opportunities for expanding the manufacture and provision of ultra-low emission vehicles. This country has a very good reputation as a hotbed of research in that area, and PSA wants to expand its exposure to that and is doing so. I am determined that we should seize the opportunity that that gives us for our sector to go from strength to strength.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): The plants at Luton and Ellesmere Port are productive and efficient. They have a highly skilled workforce that any company would be proud to employ—this is not a basket-case industry—but in the face of strong foreign Government support, we need an active and interventionist Government who are determined to safeguard these competitive skills and manufacturing assets for Britain. If the new enterprise plans to become profitable through the development of products and the supply chain, and by moving the production of Opel cars on to PSA assembly lines, what specific things will the Government pledge to do both to win the new model Astra for Britain and to develop this country's automotive supply chain?

Greg Clark: The Chairman of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee is absolutely right. I do not think that anyone in PSA and GM, or in the French and German Governments, would think that we have been anything other than completely active in promoting the strengths of the UK. He is absolutely right: the presence of those factories in this country is not a matter of altruism; they are efficient and they make a great contribution to the performance of the company. We will build on that through the industrial strategy. I have mentioned research and development on electric vehicles, and the training and development of the workforce is a very important asset. We have a good workforce there, which we need to keep equipped for the future. He will see in the industrial strategy, as it develops, a renewed commitment to research and training in the auto sector.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): My right hon. Friend outlined how the UK automotive industry has been a huge success in recent years, and he has

mentioned the industrial strategy a number of times. Will he provide a little more detail about how the industrial strategy will help us to ensure that the automotive industry continues to develop and grow?

Greg Clark: I will, indeed, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. I have mentioned two areas in particular. On research and development, bringing together our universities and research institutions with the companies in the sector through the Automotive Council is very important. On the training of people who are going to work in the sector, I have had the pleasure of visiting the campus of Warwick University, where the automotive innovation centre is being built with a school for apprentices that will train 1,000 apprentices a year to work in this sector, and those are important developments. I have mentioned the supply chain, and through the industrial strategy we will make Britain even more attractive, particularly for smaller and medium-sized enterprises to service the major companies.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for keeping colleagues informed as matters have developed. It is clearly good news that we have a guarantee that production will continue until the end of the current Astra run at Ellesmere Port, but there is a deep concern in the community about what will happen after that. The noises that we have heard from PSA so far have been about plants being judged on their efficiency. I am very confident that, with the track record we have at Ellesmere Port of unions and management working together, we can put a very good case forward. However, there are things beyond their control, which is where the Government can step in, whether on business rates, procurement or the supply chain. I would like assurances from the Secretary of State that he will do everything in his power to ensure that we have a competitive environment for the Ellesmere Port and Luton plants.

Greg Clark: I will indeed. I will work with any hon. Member who has an interest in securing the future of this company and others in our economy. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The fact that plants will be judged, as they tend to be in the automotive sector for new models, on the basis of competitive efficiency is a strength for us in this country, because our automotive plants are the strongest in the world. I would rather we competed on efficiency. I will work, through the Automotive Council and our industrial strategy, to ensure that all the competitive elements that have been so successful to date will continue and increase.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): Like my right hon. Friend and other Cheshire Members, I want to ensure that the renaissance we have seen in the automotive sector in recent years continues for decades to come. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what steps he will take to improve technical skills and apprenticeships to ensure that automotive manufacturers in Cheshire and elsewhere in the north-west get the support they need in the years ahead?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I pay tribute again to the workforce in both plants and in Vauxhall's other operations in this country. They are efficient and highly committed, and they have been very

[Greg Clark]

flexible. As technology changes, we need to keep their skills up to date. The automotive sector is aware of that and is working with the Government on institutions to train not just apprentices, but other people in the industry. That will have my full-hearted commitment.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that the Luton workforce are brilliant. They produce a superb vehicle. Today's news is very positive, but Britain is still a net importer of motor vehicle products, in particular high value added components. Will he discuss with PSA the possibility of developing more high value added production in the supply chain over here, particularly in view of the recent depreciation of sterling, which looks likely to be permanent?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his engagement over the past few weeks. He knows the workforce in Luton well and what he says about them is absolutely right. There is a big opportunity across the automotive sector to increase the supply chain. It is one of the areas where we can make further progress in what is already a successful sector. We will do that through the industrial strategy and it will have my personal engagement.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Might that opportunity to increase the UK component of the component supply chain be increased if there is to be a change in our relationship with the internal market?

Greg Clark: We want to make sure that we have the best possible trading relationship with the rest of the single market, but whether we were leaving or staying in the EU the opportunity to get more suppliers in this country is there, and I am determined that we should take it.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I have constituents who work in the Ellesmere Port plant and many others are reliant for their employment on local supply chains, so this is causing huge worry in the area. What can the Secretary of State say to reassure my constituents about the future, particularly given that our employment laws make it easier to sack workers in the UK compared with those who work in France and Germany, which puts them at an immediate disadvantage? What can he say to reassure them about the fact that we are leaving the EU and the single market, which again potentially puts them at a disadvantage in the competition to come?

Greg Clark: What I would say to the hon. Lady is, first, that the reason we have a successful record in this country is that our car plants and their workforces are highly efficient, and we should not forget that. Secondly, the commitments given—they have been shared with the trade unions—are to honour agreements that include the trade unions, which I think she will welcome. In the long term, we want to expand the industry. We want to take every opportunity to work with the automotive sector to increase the number of good jobs available to her constituents and people across the country.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): I welcome PSA's assurances that it will continue to respect the commitments made by General Motors to Vauxhall's employees and, very importantly, Vauxhall's pensioners. Can the Secretary

of State assure us that he will continue to engage and work with PSA in the weeks and months to come to ensure not only that any assurances are kept, but that PSA will continue to build on the success of both plants for the long term?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. As soon as we heard about these proposals, my colleagues and I engaged immediately with the management and the unions of this country and with our counterparts. My engagement in our activity will not let up in the weeks ahead. These assurances are welcome, as everyone has noted, but we need to make sure that they are implemented in practice.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I echo the thanks to the Secretary of State for his efforts to keep those of us with a constituency interest involved. I am most grateful to him. Does he accept that our car industry is at a competitive disadvantage compared with those in other European countries because of the way that business rates operate, and that when new plant is installed, it increases business rate costs? Will he speak to his colleagues in the Government to see if we can find a way around this disincentive to invest?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words, but I remind him and colleagues that this country is a competitive place in which to do business, including in the car manufacturing sector. Different countries will have different policies. I am determined to make sure that we are competitive and that we remain competitive so that we can expand our production in the future.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update us on any discussions he has had about this takeover with specific reference to steel supply chains?

Greg Clark: I have talked about the supply chain in general, and I think that there are opportunities right across the supply chain—from individual components to materials—and I want to make full use of that. We are discussing with the steel industry a steel sector deal, part of which is to make sure that there are bigger opportunities, especially by UK customers, to make greater use of steel products.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware that the reassurances he has obtained from Peugeot, welcome as they are, are very limited in extent and duration, and that it would probably not take much longer than that if it were decided to close one of the British factories, which is exactly what happened at Ryton in Coventry, as the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) would confirm? Is it not therefore the case that he cannot rest on the assurances at this point, such as they are, but must push and continue to push for the only reassurance that we really have, which is replacement models for the plants in the UK?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is right that we need to stay engaged and to make sure that these commitments are delivered. I will make sure that we do that, as will colleagues in the trade unions and others. I think the hon. Gentleman will agree that it is important that these commitments have been given very clearly in writing today, which is far better than the opposite.

As for the experience of Peugeot in Ryton, he will know that I have raised the matter with the management of PSA in the past. They describe a very different strategy from that which they pursued at that time. It is a different management, and their strategy now is based on expanding production, not closing plants, which again I welcome.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Secretary of State is right to draw attention to the transformation that has happened in the motor industry since the days when PSA was running and operating at Ryton. We now have an industry with world-leading expertise in autonomous vehicles and electric technology, which my right hon. Friend saw from Jaguar Land Rover on his recent visit to Warwick University. Does he agree that this merger provides the PSA Group with an opportunity to access the innovation and creative thinking of our designers, and the flexibility and quality of our workforce?

Greg Clark: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. One of the big advantages of locating in this country is that manufacturers can join a vibrant consortium of people collaborating in a network, as at Warwick, which is recognised as a world-leading place to do automotive research. We want to build on that and attract more businesses to support it.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I support the Secretary of State's approach. He is demanding of PSA, so he will understand if we are a little demanding of him when it comes to what he is going to do. May I ask him again—as did my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson)—about the business rates regime as it relates to investment in plant and machinery? Has he asked the Chancellor to change it, yes or no?

Greg Clark: As I said to the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), the competitiveness of our automotive sector is high. I will ensure that, across the board, we retain a world-competitive—not just European-competitive—sector, and I will look into any aspect of that if it is brought to my attention.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am sure that the whole House would like to thank the excellent Secretary of State for his efforts on behalf of Vauxhall. It was reported today that the chief executive of PSA had said that there would be no plant closures, and that jobs would be protected. He pointed out that he had never closed a plant in his life, and that he was actually seeking expansion. Might not the merger be good news for Vauxhall and its future?

Greg Clark: I hope that it is, and we should do everything we can to make sure that it is. A company that is committed to expansion has an opportunity to ensure that that includes the expansion of UK plants. It is an area in which we are strong and in which we have a high reputation, and this should be an opportunity for us to make what is good even better.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I cannot help feeling that the Minister is being a little bit complacent. Some 76% of cars produced at Ellesmere Port are exported, but many of them are left-hand drive cars for Europe.

Would it really make sense to Peugeot to continue left-hand drive production outside the EU, and not in Poland or Germany?

Greg Clark: I persuade companies to invest in Britain; I think that the hon. Gentleman is thinking up reasons for them to be put off. I believe that the efficiency and the innovation that we have in this country are what cause people to invest here, and I will do all that I can to make this a positive and expanding industry in the future.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right to acknowledge that today's announcement underlines the importance of reinforcing the UK's role as a centre for research, innovation and the development of connected and ultra-low emission vehicles. What more can be done to ensure that PSA and other manufacturers—I hope the Minister will pardon the expression—take a leaf out of Nissan's and Jaguar Land Rover's book, and make those vehicles in the UK as well?

Greg Clark: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I have enjoyed working with him to promote the automotive sector. I think that this is an opportunity for a company—PSA—that has not had the same footprint in Britain in recent years to join in and benefit from the advantages that accrue to those that participate in our industrial strategy through the Automotive Council, prominent among which is the opportunity to participate in our research programmes, in relation not just to electric vehicles but, as the hon. Gentleman says, to autonomous vehicles as well.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Secretary of State must support the long-term future of these very efficient plants and their highly qualified workforces by backing new models. Does he accept, however, that the long-term prospects of the plants are weaker as a result of Brexit and French ownership, and that he may have to offer an even better deal than the one that he offered to Nissan to secure their futures? Will he make that deal public, so that other industries that are also badly affected by Brexit can know what level of financial support they can expect from the Government?

Greg Clark: I am disappointed that the right hon. Gentleman began by, again, talking about negatives when there are big opportunities for the sector. In fact, Mr Tavares himself said today that opportunities were arising from Brexit. I have made absolutely clear what is available to any automotive manufacturer and member of the supply chain in this country: working with us through the sector and investing in research and development, the development of skills, and the expansion of the supply chain. That is an invitation to manufacturers throughout the world to come and invest in Britain, and if they do, they will find a ready partner in all of us in the House and the country.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It was reported recently that the Government had offered the new owners of Vauxhall assurances similar to those given to Nissan. Will the Government commit themselves to full transparency in that regard,

[Margaret Ferrier]

with full disclosure of promises made to PSA, and also place copies of any correspondence in the Library of the House?

Greg Clark: We could not have been clearer: we have said that all companies that are part of the UK automotive sector will be able to enjoy all the benefits of that in terms of research and development, trading and the expansion of the supply chain that we will see through the industrial strategy.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Hundreds in the excellent workforce at Vauxhall's Ellesmere Port and many in its supply chain reside over the border in north-east Wales. Will the Secretary of State ensure that he liaises with the Welsh Government on one of their primary objectives, which is to ensure that we have tariff-free access to mainland European Union markets?

Greg Clark: I will work with our colleagues in Wales through the Secretary of State here and the Welsh Assembly Government. I and my Ministers will shortly meet Ministers in Wales to discuss the industrial strategy, and I imagine that Ken Skates and others will want to have those conversations with them.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I commend the Secretary of State for his dialogue with the trade unions and hope he is able to give us a commitment that he will continue that. Interestingly, he does not seem to be answering the questions on Brexit head-on. Many of my constituents work at Vauxhall's Ellesmere Port plant, and they are very concerned about this. Given the risk that thousands of high-skilled jobs of the future may go, and given the importance of the plant to the region's economy, what are the Government doing to ensure future EU market access for this industry and other important exporting industries?

Greg Clark: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's kind words. We have made it very clear that our objectives as we start the negotiations—which obviously have not commenced yet, because we have not triggered article 50—are about making sure that we can have access to the single market without impediments and without tariffs. But in any case, we are determined that our industry, whether the automotive sector, advanced manufacturing generally or the whole economy, will be competitive. The head of PSA himself said today that Brexit actually offers some opportunities, but the hon. Lady can have my assurance that I will do everything within my power to make sure that the terms of trade that we secure through our negotiations are as advantageous as possible.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his kind offer after last week to meet me later today along with colleagues representing seats along the south Wales M4 corridor to talk about what happened with Ford in Bridgend last week, but today we have another announcement. It looks as though we are going to have drip, drip, drip announcements, causing great anxiety to people in the automotive industry. I asked the Prime Minister if we could have a summit involving MPs, manufacturers and the trade unions; is it not now time to call such a summit, so that rather than companies being taken apart one by one, we can discuss this as a whole House?

Greg Clark: I am looking forward to meeting the hon. Lady with her colleagues later today, but I do not think that is the right way to think about what has been proposed between the two companies today. It is a transfer of the assets of GM in Europe to PSA. What is needed is activism and alacrity on every one of these investments. I make that commitment to the hon. Lady with respect to Ford, and when we meet later today we can talk about what is required in terms of those discussions.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows that the efficiency of the plants is down to the industry and the policy is down to him. Does his activism go so far as he having yet instructed his officials to have conducted an impact assessment of the impact on the automotive sector of leaving the customs union?

Greg Clark: As the hon. Lady well knows—I can tell from her smile—what she asks applies to the debate in general about our negotiating position. Of course, as a member of the Cabinet I am a part of the discussions about our negotiations, but she will know that, in terms of the automotive and other sectors of the economy, I will do what I can to ensure not only that we get the best deal in our negotiations, but that we are a competitive force in the world whatever the result of them.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement, but I would also add a word of caution. We had this situation in Coventry, in Baginton, in 2005. The then Government intervened and tried to do their best, and the workers were promised new models, but they never materialised. Jobs were brutally cut and the factories were totally cut. I do not want to pour cold water on the Secretary of State's announcement, but he needs to be very careful, given what he is dealing with.

Greg Clark: I accept the hon. Gentleman's advice, based on his experience. As I said earlier today, I am cautiously optimistic. I think that the commitments go in the right direction. Actually, the language that I have used is the language that Len McCluskey has used, and I dare say that he is a veteran of negotiations such as these. I think we all need to welcome a positive future for Vauxhall, but we also need to do everything we can to ensure that it is delivered.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that he has twice—twice!—praised Len McCluskey in this House, and that he has mentioned the trade unions as though they were part of the CBI five times? Is this the same Minister who walked through the Lobby to attack the trade unions' authority and introduce that lousy Act of Parliament?

Greg Clark: I am not sure that Len McCluskey would want me to praise him. I think I acknowledged that we had been working together on this, as I hope the hon. Gentleman would expect. I hope that the hon. Gentleman, and every Member of this House, would want us all to put party political differences aside and to do what we can to secure jobs in every constituency in this country represented by colleagues here.

Sky/21st Century Fox: Proposed Merger

4.16 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): Before Christmas, I promised to give the House an update about progress on the process for the bid by 21st Century Fox to acquire the 61% share of Sky that it does not already own. I can confirm that formal notification for the proposed merger of Sky and 21st Century Fox was lodged with the European Commission on Friday 3 March and that I wrote to the parties on Friday to inform them that I am minded to issue a European intervention notice on the basis that I believe there are public interest considerations—as set out in the Enterprise Act 2002—that may be relevant to this proposed merger and that warrant further investigation. To be clear, I have not taken a final decision on intervention at this stage, but I have indicated what I am presently minded to do. In line with the guidance that applies to my quasi-judicial role, I will aim to come to a final decision on whether to intervene in the merger within 10 working days of Friday's notification. Before I make my final decision, and in line with statutory guidance, I have invited further representations in writing from the parties and have given them until Wednesday 8 March to provide them.

In December, I made it clear that I would make this quasi-judicial decision independently, following a process that is scrupulously fair and impartial, and as quickly as possible with all the relevant information in front of me. To enable this, I instructed my officials to commence work to analyse the relevance of the public interest considerations relating to the merger and to consider the available evidence. Since the 9 December announcement, I have received representations from the parties to the merger, as well as representations made in writing to the Department from a range of people and organisations. This includes more than 8,700 responses made in connection with the Department's consultation on the Leveson inquiry and its implementation, which referred to the merger. Given my quasi-judicial role, I can only consider evidence that is relevant to my decision.

On the basis of this preparatory work, I have issued a "minded to" letter to the parties on two of the public interest grounds specified in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002. The first public interest ground on which I am minded to intervene is media plurality—that is, the specific need for a sufficient plurality of persons with control of the media enterprises serving audiences in the UK. My concern here is that the merger will bring under common or increased control a number of significant news sources, including Sky News and News Corporation's newspaper titles. As a result, I have told the parties that I am minded to ask for a report from Ofcom on the impact of the merger on media plurality before considering the matter further.

The second public interest ground on which I am minded to intervene is commitment to broadcasting standards. That ground relates to the need for persons carrying on media enterprises, and for those with control of such enterprises, to have a genuine commitment to attaining broadcasting standards objectives. As I have indicated to the parties to the merger, I am concerned about the nature of a number of breaches of broadcasting standards by 21st Century Fox, as well as the behaviour and corporate governance failures of News Corporation

in the past. In the light of those matters, I am minded to intervene on this ground and to ask Ofcom to investigate them further.

I want to be clear on what this means for the overall process. My decision on whether or not to intervene is not the end of the matter. Instead, it would recognise that the public interest considerations may be relevant to the merger and will trigger action by Ofcom to assess and report to me on them and for the Competition and Markets Authority to report on jurisdiction. There would then be a further decision-making stage for me to undertake in the light of those reports, but we are not yet at that stage. As I said at the outset, I will aim to take the final decision on whether to issue a European intervention notice within the 10 working days set out in the guidance and will return to this House to notify Parliament of the decision.

I am today, as I said I would, keeping this House appropriately informed of developments on this important matter, and it is right that I continue to do so. However, given that this remains a quasi-judicial process in which I retain a decision-making role for the next 10 days and potentially beyond, it would be inappropriate for me, or any other member of this Government, to comment on the substantive merits of the case. I hope that this update is helpful to right hon. and hon. Members and that this statement gives an opportunity to debate an important issue, but at the same time I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will respect the limits of what I can say given my ongoing decision-making role.

4.21 pm

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of this statement and for writing to me on Friday setting out her intentions. I am also extremely grateful that she has come to the House at the earliest possible opportunity following notification of the bid. I understand that she is in quasi-judicial mode and what that means. I hope, however, that she will listen carefully to the concerns about the merger that are being expressed both inside and outside this Chamber. The company names may have changed since the previous bid for Sky was withdrawn in 2011, but we are still dealing with media plurality, misconduct and the Murdochs.

The Secretary of State said that she is minded to intervene first on media plurality grounds. The bid would put an even greater amount of UK media power in the hands of the Murdoch family. It would make the Murdoch empire even bigger—we might call it empire 2.0—and Ofcom should look at the whole group of Murdoch-owned and controlled companies in assessing whether the Sky takeover would threaten media plurality.

The second ground on which the Secretary of State says she is minded to intervene is commitment to broadcasting standards. We need to be satisfied that the merged company would comply with the broadcasting code, just as we need to be confident that it would not be used by Rupert Murdoch or his family to promote their political views and interests. However, the most troubling issues raised by the proposed merger are not about the content of James Murdoch's programming; they are about the content of his character.

The Secretary of State rightly referred to failures of corporate governance during the phone hacking scandal, but it is unclear whether those failings strictly fall under

[Mr Tom Watson]

the heading of broadcasting standards, even though they are central to whether the merger should be approved. A commitment to a broadcasting standards test is not a fit and proper person test. Will Ofcom's assessment of 21st Century Fox's commitment to broadcasting standards include in its scope the following facts? Six senior employees of News International have been convicted of phone hacking and another of perverting the course of justice. Over 30 police and public officials have been convicted of accepting corrupt payments from employees of News International that were approved at a high level. One News International journalist has been convicted of making unlawful payments and another of handling stolen property—namely, a mobile phone belonging to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), from which private information was taken unlawfully by *Sun* journalists at the request of several *Sun* executives. The former editor and the former head of legal affairs at *News of the World* were held in contempt of Parliament for lying to a Select Committee during its investigation into phone hacking. The Standards and Privileges Committee cast further light on the culture of paying hush money to employees guilty of criminal offences to deter them from co-operating with the police and prosecution authorities. It therefore seems likely that a number of News Corporation employees gave false information under oath to the Leveson inquiry. News Corporation has admitted to another conspiracy to hack phones between 2005 and 2006 and a journalist has been convicted. News International has admitted phone hacking in several hundred claims so far and has made payments to victims and lawyers amounting to \$600 million. And that is without mentioning the many outstanding civil claims against newspapers owned by News International, or the fact that allegations have been made in open court that James Murdoch was involved in the email deletion programme at News International that has made it more difficult to get to the truth. If those facts cannot be included in Ofcom's assessment, the Opposition are ready to work with the Secretary of State to make sure that she can find a solution that deals with the gravity of wrongdoing in companies controlled by the Murdoch family.

Will the Secretary of State ask Ofcom to clarify whether it will conduct a full fit and proper person test before the merger is approved? Ofcom has already made an assessment of James Murdoch, in 2012, and found that, in relation to his time at News Group Newspapers during the period in which phone hacking took place, his conduct

“repeatedly fell short of the conduct to be expected of him as a chief executive officer and chairman.”

But Ofcom also said that

“the evidence available to date does not provide a reasonable basis to conclude that James Murdoch deliberately engaged in any wrongdoing.”

Why did Ofcom not have enough evidence to draw conclusions? Because the Leveson inquiry was not in a position to gather evidence.

If the Secretary of State is concerned about the past behaviour and corporate governance failures of News International, any case for not going ahead with part 2 of the Leveson inquiry collapses because the behaviour that she is so concerned about and that she wants to be

investigated is precisely the behaviour that part 2 of Leveson is supposed to look into. We are still awaiting the results of the consultation on whether Leveson part 2 should go ahead, but I hope that the Secretary of State's words indicate that she will show some courage by standing up to vested interests, doing the right thing and allowing the inquiry to proceed. She must not ask Ofcom to do its job with one hand tied behind its back.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his response and assure him that Ofcom will not be doing any work with one hand tied behind its back.

I will address the Leveson inquiry and the consultation first. It is important to put it on the record that the consultation has closed but is subject to judicial review, which makes it difficult for me to make any further comment at this stage. On the evidence that Ofcom will look at, I make it clear that I am not ruling any evidence in or out. If I do decide to intervene, Ofcom will report to me on any matters it considers relevant. On the commitment to broadcasting standards, there is no exhaustive list of evidence—Ofcom can look at whatever it thinks right.

As I have said, Ofcom has sufficient powers and can investigate anything it thinks appropriate. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising his points, which I am sure will be considered by Ofcom. Ofcom has a fit and proper person test for broadcasting licences. That test is different from the one that will be considered for the merger, but the same evidence may be relevant to both.

Finally, my letter sets out a number of matters that I consider relevant and as warranting further investigation, which includes facts that led to the Leveson inquiry, such as on corporate governance at *News of the World*. It will be open to Ofcom to look at all relevant areas, and I will not rule out any areas if I decide to intervene.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her letter to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee on Friday setting out the case she made to the House today. Can she confirm that the fit and proper person test is rightly a matter for Ofcom and that Ofcom can initiate a fit and proper person test at any time and consider any evidence it thinks relevant to making that determination?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is right; the fit and proper person test that Ofcom has is different from the grounds on which I can intervene under the terms of the Enterprise Act 2002. However, as I said in response to the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson), the evidence may well be the same.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement and am encouraged to hear that she is minded to intervene in the proposed merger of Sky and Fox. Asking Ofcom to investigate the deal and file a report on media plurality and on commitment to broadcasting standards would be a welcome step in ensuring that this proposed merger is robustly scrutinised. The merger is likely to increase the influence of Rupert Murdoch and his family in the media in the UK, and Fox already has a controlling stake in Sky, as we all know. Another Murdoch company, News Corp, runs newspapers, through

News UK, and radio stations, through the Wireless Group. At a time when smaller titles are struggling with poor circulation numbers and established newspapers are having to rethink their business models to survive, giving yet more power to the already dominant media giant seems counter-intuitive, to say the least.

Yet, it should also be acknowledged that television is adapting to changes in viewing habits and competition around the world. Many will argue that the investment in Sky might allow the UK to thrive in the international arena and to continue to compete with competitors such as Netflix. On this issue, it is important that the Secretary of State clarifies whether she will prioritise domestic or international plurality and competition when she makes a final decision on this merger. Furthermore, she rightly highlights a number of breaches of broadcasting standards by Fox and the behaviour and corporate governance failures of News Corporation in the past. The National Union of Journalists and victims of the phone hacking scandal have expressed concerns on how this deal can take place when part 2 of the Leveson inquiry has yet to be commenced. Does she agree that we should remain acutely aware of the reasons why past attempts to buy Sky were so fiercely resisted last time?

Finally, it was proposed that Sky News could be spun off to preserve its independence. Would the Secretary of State welcome such a move? After all, I presume that she, like the rest of us, is far from convinced that Fox is committed to the required editorial standards, such as on accuracy and impartial news coverage, that we expect in this country?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman has asked a number of detailed questions on the merits of the bid, but I am not able to comment on those at this stage. What I can say is that I am minded, based on the evidence I have seen so far, to refer the matter to Ofcom. The referral would be on the basis of the rules set out in the Enterprise Act 2002, and I look forward to representations from all parties in determining whether or not to take a final decision to intervene. I can assure him that I will return to this House, as and when I make that decision, to tell it first.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I begin by declaring my inherited interest in this subject, but perhaps also jog the mind of the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) on the half a million pounds he received from Mr Mosley, which may have some bearing on these matters? What I want to ask my right hon. Friend is whether she will be certain not to involve herself in this socialist witch hunt against Mr Murdoch and News Corporation/Fox News, which has done so much, both through newspaper publishing efficiency after Wapping and through the launch of Sky News, to increase plurality in the media in this country. This wonderfully successful company should not be persecuted because the left does not like it.

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before the Secretary of State responds, may I just say to the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) that I am sure he is not suggesting—and I hope he will take the opportunity to make this clear—that pecuniary gain has influenced a Member in his thinking or statements in the Chamber?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Most certainly not. I was merely declaring my own interest and it occurred to me that it was only fair to remind the hon. Member for West Bromwich East that he had not referred to his interest in the half a million pounds he received—I am absolutely certain it was an inadvertent oversight.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he said, but I would just say—I do so on advice—that he has, uncharacteristically, over-interpreted his responsibility. It is his responsibility to declare his own interest, but he does not have to declare and should not declare, whether out of a spirit of altruism or otherwise, another Member's interest. It is that Member's responsibility so to declare as he or she thinks fit. We will leave it there.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am now better informed. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his characteristic good grace.

Karen Bradley: Perhaps I can reassure my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). I am, in a quasi-judicial capacity, looking at the rules as set out in the Enterprise Act 2002. I am very much aware of those rules and I am sticking to the letter of those rules. I want to make sure that the process is scrupulously fair and that all parties have the opportunity to make representations before I make a decision.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's coming to the House and her apparently robust intentions. Nevertheless, like my Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson), I am worried about the issue of the fit and proper test, and I wish briefly to explain why. The key thing about the test is that it is wider than the test on broadcasting standards. Many of us believe that the Murdochs are in no way fit and proper to have full control of Sky, given their corporate record. Can the Secretary of State clarify something I have not been able to establish on the basis of my correspondence with Ofcom? First, will the fit and proper test that Ofcom is going to conduct take place before the bid can be completed? Secondly, if there is no clarity on that, why does the Secretary of State not do what she can do under the Enterprise Act, which is to specify fit and proper as a third ground for referral to Ofcom, to make sure that such an assessment takes place?

Karen Bradley: The Enterprise Act is clear about the grounds on which the quasi-judicial decision can be taken. I can intervene on the grounds of media plurality, range and quality, and genuine commitment to broadcasting standards. The right hon. Gentleman will know that fit and proper is an ongoing test for Ofcom to apply to the holders of broadcasting licences. Although many of the issues that Ofcom would consider in reaching a judgment are also relevant to me in considering genuine commitment to broadcasting standards, the tests are different and apply at different points in time.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the House with the statement. On the basis that the merger would put the ownership of a large proportion of the UK media into one

[Mark Pawsey]

organisation, my constituents would want to know what she is able to do make sure that such an organisation is run by people who are appropriate and suitable.

Karen Bradley: I note my hon. Friend's comments and will bear them in mind when making my decisions.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The thing is, we already know that under James and Rupert Murdoch's leadership, the companies they controlled bribed and bullied their way around British politics. They poisoned the well of British political engagement, used anti-competitive practices at every possible turn to try to destroy competitors, and made it impossible for media diversity to flourish in this country. Why on earth would anybody think that they were fit and proper people to take over now? Their only excuse, when they lied their way through their evidence to Parliament, was that their company was far too big for them possibly to know what was going on in some small outpost in the United Kingdom. That does not suggest that they would be any good at running things now, does it?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman has put his views on these matters on the record on several occasions. I am sure his points will have been heard.

Mr Speaker: No one could accuse the Secretary of State of overstatement.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Even if the notorious phone hacking had never taken place—if we were totally unaware of such events—is the Secretary of State aware that such a concentration of media ownership as is being proposed would be simply unacceptable? Also, is it not interesting that although reference has been made to some kind of witch hunt by Labour Members, there do not seem to be many Tories, except one, willing to defend Murdoch?

Karen Bradley: I have come to the House to be as open and transparent as possible about my position in this decision. I have set out the terms and look forward to receiving representation so that I can make a final decision on the matter.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State not agree that the fit and proper person test referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) a moment ago is, as she put it, an “ongoing” process? Surely that must mean that past behaviour is also taken into account. Without compromising her quasi-judicial position, will she say whether the previous behaviour of the Murdoch family in running their companies is also taken into account?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is right. The fit and proper person test is an ongoing Ofcom test, but I am here today to consider under what grounds in the Enterprise Act 2002 I can intervene on a media merger. I have set out my current thinking to the House, and I now await representations.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that the principles of competition and media plurality are vital in a modern democracy? Will she confirm that, when Britain leaves the European Union, we will continue to apply those principles and regulations to avoid the unfair concentration of media ownership in the UK?

Karen Bradley: The Enterprise Act is a piece of UK legislation and I am not aware of any intention to change it as a result of leaving the European Union. UK legislation will remain in place as will those grounds in the Enterprise Act.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State said that she was “minded to report” in her oral statement, but does she not agree that part of the process should be waiting for Leveson 2 to complete so that we can look at the issues of corporate governance to which she referred in her statement, as they are very worrying and concerning to the public at large?

Karen Bradley: I must look at the evidence that is presented to me on the basis of today's information using the rules set out in the Enterprise Act 2002. I will repeat the comments that I made to the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) that the consultation on the Leveson inquiry is subject to judicial review and that therefore I can make no further comments.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. This merger appears to operate against the public interest. She has outlined the steps that she has taken in her departmental intervention. I have had lots of correspondence from constituents on this very issue. Does she agree that, as there has been no dramatic changes to the issue that led this House to reject the bid five years ago, there are no grounds whatever to indicate that a merger should now be acceptable?

Karen Bradley: I am not in a position to make that judgment. I have come to the House to let Members know that I am minded to intervene, but that I await further representations before I make a final decision.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Secretary of State is handling this matter in a very careful and considered manner. On Leveson 2, is she saying that she is now legally constrained there as well and that she cannot simply decide to go ahead, which is what many people think she should be doing?

Karen Bradley: Let me repeat that the public consultation, which was closed in January, is now subject to judicial review and therefore I cannot comment further on that matter.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): As I mentioned during the urgent question on 20 January, a “substantial number” of my constituents have contacted me to voice their concerns over this proposed merger, particularly with regard to media plurality. Does the Secretary of State agree with them, and indeed with the previous Prime Minister, that we should not let any one media group get too powerful?

Karen Bradley: Based on the evidence that I have seen so far, I am minded to refer this matter to Ofcom on the basis of media plurality, but I await further representations before making a final decision.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): More than 8,000 people work at Sky's head office and broadcast facilities in my constituency. When the original bid was abandoned in 2011, David Cameron said that it was the "right decision" for the country. Will the Minister ensure that this deal receives the fullest possible scrutiny?

Karen Bradley: I have come to the House today to say that I am minded to refer the matter to Ofcom. I await further recommendations, which I will look at carefully, and I will return to this House when I have made a final decision on whether to intervene.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Many constituents have contacted me, too. I understand that the Secretary of State cannot talk about the substantive issues, but can she give an estimate for when a final decision will be made? Also, if the merger is refused, will it be open to the Murdochs to keep coming back again and again on the issue?

Karen Bradley: I do not wish to detain the House, so perhaps it would be helpful if I wrote to the hon. Lady to set out the precise details of the law, as set out in the Enterprise Act, and the various stages that apply to media mergers.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. With regard to media plurality, she might be aware that 18 academics from across the UK have written to *The Guardian* today to express their concern about what the merger would mean. We know that Fox News has given rise to fake news and feeds the ramblings of a madman across the Atlantic, so we certainly do not want to go down that road. I welcome her comments about News International's governance and James Murdoch's past behaviour. I look forward to her coming back in 10 days' time to say that she will intervene and refer the merger to Ofcom. Hopefully she will remain robust when it comes to any representations she might receive.

Karen Bradley: I note the hon. Gentleman's comments. I, too, look forward to coming back to the House with the final decision.

Points of Order

4.45 pm

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Well, it would not be a Monday afternoon without a profusion of points of order.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. A constituent contacted me last week to tell me that a friend of his had been prevented from entering the House because he was wearing a "Free Palestine" badge. After discussion with the security staff, he removed the badge and was allowed access to Parliament, only to come across a large exhibition that featured one poster that was about Zionist diplomacy. We all respect the important work that the security staff do in keeping us safe, and we are hugely grateful to them, but I wonder whether you could give some guidance on the wearing of small badges, because my constituent is a bit confused by the situation his friend encountered.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of it. I think that it is fair to say—I say this en passant—that the presence of the poster, to which he elliptically eluded a moment ago, is irrelevant for the purpose of his point of order, because I think that it formed part of an historical exhibition. I am sure that an historical exhibition would be of great interest, possibly to the hon. Gentleman's constituent, but almost certainly to the hon. Gentleman.

So far as the point of order is concerned, what I would say is as follows. Under what are now long-standing instructions, members of the public wishing to visit the House are not supposed to display clothing with slogans or badges that might cause controversy. Of necessity, that has to be interpreted case by case by individual members of staff, and they might get the balance wrong. For my own part—I have not been encouraged to say this, but I am entitled to say it and I intend to say it—it seems to me that we should err on the side of caution and, where possible, of non-intervention in these matters, rather than on the side of being too prescriptive or officious. I sense that that is probably the wish of the House.

I will of course convey the hon. Gentleman's concern, which has been expressed with his usual restraint and courtesy, to the Serjeant at Arms. I hope that, in turn, the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I gently suggest to him, as I have been encouraged to do, that he could have sought such a meeting himself, rather than bringing the matter to the Chamber, but he has done so, and he has done so with fairness, and I hope that I have responded accordingly.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your advice on the timely response of the Home Office to MPs' offices. I made representations to the Home Office on 18 January on behalf of my constituent Iryna O'Reilly, who had been informed by the Home Office at the end of October 2016 that she would be notified by the end of the year of whether her spousal visa had been successful. At the beginning of last week, despite numerous phone calls from my office, neither she nor I had heard from the Home Office. As a consequence of those delays, she lost the job that had been held open for her since the beginning

[Debbie Abrahams]

of this year. As you know, Mr Speaker, Government Departments are meant to respond to MPs in a timely manner. Please will you advise me on how we can ensure that the Home Office is held to account on this matter and that this situation never happens again?

Mr Speaker: It is a point of order. I have no direct responsibility in relation to such a matter, but I do understand the serious concern that the hon. Lady feels. I have often made the point that responses to parliamentary questions should be both timely and substantive. However, I think it is fair to say that the same principle applies to ministerial responses to colleagues who write letters to Ministers; responses should be timely and, preferably, substantive. When, for some reason, which Members can probably fathom for themselves, it is not possible for a Minister to give a substantive response at that point, my human sense—leaving aside my role as Speaker—is that a void is always undesirable. There is nothing more infuriating than hearing absolutely nothing and finding that one's follow-up letters, emails or telephone calls are simply ignored. It is deeply dissatisfying and, frankly, somewhat discourteous. I hope that this situation does not arise again. I would only gently say, in the direction of Ministers, that I have come to know the hon. Lady over the past few years, and she is a very persistent parliamentarian and campaigner, so if people think that she will go away, that is an extraordinarily misguided view. There is not the slightest prospect of that happening. The hon. Lady will keep burrowing away on behalf of her constituents until she receives a response, and rightly so.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My constituent, Michael Gibson, was alarmed last week when he looked on the

website of the Boundary Commission for England, and could not find evidence of the petition that he had supported, calling for one Member of Parliament for the Heysham, Morecambe and Lancaster area. It further transpires that the data had, in error, been added to a petition in opposition to such a seat. I am grateful for the fact that the Boundary Commission has today informed me that it is now correcting that error. Would you advise me, Mr Speaker, how I could make other Members of the House aware of the situation, because they might like to check their local areas to see whether any data have been entered incorrectly in other parts of the country?

Mr Speaker: Although I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, my advice is that, if she feels strongly that other Members may have been similarly misrepresented, or that their constituents may have been misrepresented or disadvantaged, she could usefully—colleagues may not appreciate my suggesting this—email her colleagues in order to advise them of the risk. That would certainly be a public service discharge of duty on her part for which they may, or may not, be grateful.

So far as the hon. Lady is concerned, may I sympathise? Clearly the error was an innocent one, but it was peculiarly unfortunate, as it had the effect of very fundamentally misleading quite significant numbers of the hon. Lady's constituents, who were doubtless very irritated. She has now had to help to put the record straight, but she has the benefit both of the Boundary Commission's intended correction and of my recognition to her, in the form of this exchange, that she is an innocent party in these matters who has been inadvertently disadvantaged but, none the less, disadvantaged. I hope the matter can be clarified for the benefit of all her constituents sooner, rather than later.

Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill

Second Reading

4.53 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Government recognise the value of investment. The Prime Minister has made clear her intention that this country should be the best place in the world to develop, test and deploy cutting-edge transport technology. We have already established ourselves as one of the world's best places in which to research and develop next generation technology, but we also need to act to ensure that the UK benefits from the economic opportunities that those technologies provide. The Bill will help to ensure that the United Kingdom is ahead of our European and global competitors by creating the right balance of an open and permissive regulatory framework that keeps safety and consumer needs paramount.

There are enormous possibilities ahead with these technologies. In a few years, we will all increasingly have the opportunity to use semi-automated and automated vehicles. While amusing and novel for many of us, that will revolutionise the way many people live their lives; in particular, it will make a huge difference to the disabled and the elderly. However, to make these technologies a reality, we need to act now. We need to create the regimes that will help developers to bring their products to market in a safe way that protects consumers.

The Bill that I introduce to the House today is forward-looking, urgent and ambitious: urgent because we need to maintain and lead the modern transport revolution by attracting inward investment and becoming a hub for researching and developing the next generation of transport technologies; ambitious because we are establishing the right regulatory framework in advance to spur innovation in a safe manner.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way so soon in his speech. Is he aware of a company called Dearman, which produces clean engines for use on refrigeration units? I am a bit disappointed there is nothing in the Bill that relates to that. The engines on these units normally use red diesel, and they are incredibly dirty. Although that technology is not in the Bill, I hope he will consider it, as a technology of the future. May I also just remind him that I invited him to come for a cycle ride around London with me, and I am still waiting for his response?

Chris Grayling: I am not aware of the technology the right hon. Gentleman refers to, but we are very interested in seeing this country be a real success in developing new technologies. The issues of clean-engine technology affect not just this country but many countries around the world, and any country that has a breakthrough in that area has a real opportunity worldwide. Of course, the Department for International Trade is focused on trying to help not just our biggest businesses but smaller businesses to exploit the opportunities that are out there.

Advances in data science, connectivity and automation are converging to bring about the biggest changes to mobility since the internal combustion engine. Automated vehicle technologies will have a profound effect on how we get around.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State tell us what progress has been made on batteries for electric cars and on any infrastructure those batteries might need?

Chris Grayling: I will talk in a moment about electric vehicle technology. We are certainly seeing a transformation in battery technology. I expect the new generation of battery vehicles—we expect a new model of the Nissan LEAF to be selling in this country over the coming months—to take a real step forward. Of course, the longer the range of a battery and a vehicle, the more that vehicle becomes a realistic alternative for those driving around not just cities, but the country more broadly.

We need to ensure that the benefits of a shift towards intelligent mobility are felt far and wide, with journeys that are easier and more fuel-efficient; transport networks that are more accessible and responsive to the needs of those who use them; and, of course, new, high-value jobs in the technology and automotive sector, where we already have a number of businesses that are pathfinders in the field of developing autonomous vehicles.

We are embracing these developments. We are acting to position the United Kingdom as a global leader in automated vehicle technology, building on our heritage as a nation of entrepreneurs.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am delighted to hear what my right hon. Friend is saying, and I fully support the Bill he has brought before the House. In Norway, around a quarter of all vehicles are electric or hybrid electric. On maintaining our leadership position, by what date does he think the United Kingdom might be on a parallel with the proportion in Norway?

Chris Grayling: Well, I would not put a forecast on it. Suffice it to say to my hon. Friend—he has been a diligent follower of this issue and is keen to pursue it, and he has been engaged in discussions with my Department about it—that our ambitions remain strong. We have good incentives in this country. We have measures in the Bill to make an electronic vehicle charging network much more transparent and visible. These things will accelerate the production and sale of these vehicles in the United Kingdom. Of course, with the Nissan LEAF in Sunderland, we have the world's first mass-production car of that kind.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): Car sales are projected to rise from somewhere in the region of 74 million today to 100 million in 2030, helped not least by the launch of the fourth-generation Range Rover, the Velar, which my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department for Transport, saw with me last week. The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) made a good point about the infrastructure being in the right place for the battery technology and the plants to be developed. We need that infrastructure in place near Jaguar Land Rover, so will the Secretary of State please tell me what his plans are for that?

Chris Grayling: Indeed, we do need that infrastructure. As I have said, I am excited about what JLR is doing in the field of electric vehicles. The Government car service is already a customer of the company, but I look forward to it also becoming an early customer of those electric vehicles as they are manufactured and sold. The company

[Chris Grayling]

has specifically said that it needs infrastructure improvements to help it with those developments and its ambitions for electric vehicle manufacturing in the United Kingdom. I assure the House that it will receive that support. The autumn statement provided extra funding for electric charging points. This Bill provides for much greater transparency of data, making it much easier for those who own and drive electric vehicles to identify the locations of the best charging points. That is part of a strategy that will, in my view, drive forward substantially the sales of those vehicles in this country.

We should not, however, be entirely technologically biased. We will also take further steps to encourage the development of hydrogen vehicles in the United Kingdom and, of course, we provide tax incentives for hybrid vehicles. We must drive for a higher quality of vehicle in this country when it comes to the propensity to pollute, and we must provide the right support for that market to emerge. However, we must allow the technologies to win those battles themselves, rather than have the Government winning them for them.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): This is not only about electric vehicles and almost zero emissions. There is an interim stage: in some places, we could convert lorries and diesel vans to liquid petroleum gas to get those NOx levels down in the hot spots quicker than if we tried to convert everything to electricity straight away.

Chris Grayling: Indeed. I know that my hon. Friend has been determined to push that argument, and rightly so, because that technology could make a difference to emissions. I absolutely support those who seek to transition vehicles to LPG, but the Government should not focus on one particular technology. We need to create the right environment for all technologies to compete to deliver the cleanest possible vehicles for the future, which is in all our interests.

I will talk about electric vehicles before turning to autonomous vehicles. The Bill creates the right environment for those markets to develop. We have a clear goal that by 2050 nearly all cars and vans should be emission-free, but we want to accelerate that transition. That will happen partly through giving financial help, through grants and the tax system, to motorists choosing a cleaner vehicle, and we are also supporting local authorities that provide incentives through free and cheap parking to those who move down the road towards acquiring a cleaner vehicle.

We have also helped develop a network of more than 11,000 public charge points in the UK; as I have said, significant funding is in place to allow more of them to be developed. We want the uptake in electric cars to continue, whether they be hydrogen fuel cell or battery powered, and for them to break into the mass market. The Bill introduces a number of new powers that will help make that possible. In particular, it enables common technical standards and better interoperability, and it will ensure that consumers have reliable information on the location and availability of charge points. We will also be able to accelerate the roll-out of electric vehicle infrastructure at key locations, such as motorway service areas and large fuel retailers, and make charge points ready for the needs of the marketplace.

Of course, we will then see further technological developments with hydrogen and, I suspect, and as my hon. Friend says, more developments on the LPG front. The Bill will create more of the necessary powers to drive forward the ambition of getting a much cleaner fleet of vehicles on our roads.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I welcome the Bill and the news that the registration rate of ultra-low-emission vehicles is rising rapidly. Two-tier local authorities can work better on issues relating to air quality and the Bill will enable them to reduce air pollution. Will the Secretary of State make a commitment that, where wider infrastructure investment is needed for roads such as the Botley bypass and the Chickenhall link road in my constituency—they are well known to the Department—it will come hand in hand with the Bill's provisions?

Chris Grayling: Today is probably not a day for going into the detail of schemes, but I give my hon. Friend an assurance that we see easing congestion as part of the solution. Emissions are generated not just by dirty vehicles, but when cars are stuck in traffic jams or crawl along slowly for long periods. The Government's investment in the road infrastructure will therefore ease emission problems in areas in which congestion is the principal cause.

I will talk briefly about automated vehicles. The Bill sets in motion the first steps towards the use of such vehicles on UK roads. They are a way to improve the situation regarding both congestion and air quality, because they will drive in a more efficient and effective way without creating the congestion to which human driving habits sometimes contribute. We will not wake up tomorrow to find a fleet of automated vehicles, but we will see rapid change. Technology will proceed step by step as our cars become more and more automated, and not too many years ahead the use of automated vehicles on our roads will start to become widespread. We will act to remove safely any obvious barriers to that happening.

We want journeys to be easier and more fuel efficient, and we want transport networks to be more accessible and responsive to the needs of those who use them. One part of achieving that is to deliver for the first time an insurance framework that makes it possible for automated vehicles to operate on our roads, and that is what the Bill does. You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that your insurance policy on your car is for you, the driver. It is not for the vehicle. The Bill will allow the creation of two-dimensional insurance policies that cover you when you are driving the vehicle and that cover the vehicle if it is being driven autonomously. That will make it possible to move towards a framework in which insurance companies can provide cover for the vehicles of the future.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Surely, on occasion, the technology in a car that is being "driven autonomously", to use the Secretary of State's words, might be at fault. In such circumstances, surely the insured person would not be covered.

Chris Grayling: I think that the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood the point. The two-dimensional insurance policy will cover both the vehicle and the driver. If the driver is at the wheel, the insurance policy will cover the liability of the driver, but if a car is driving itself,

the insurance policy will be extended to cover the vehicle. In that way, we cover all eventualities and make it possible for those cars to operate on our roads when the technology is ready for them to do so. That important step has been welcomed by the insurance industry. It opens the door to a new generation of vehicles on our roads, and it sends a message to the automotive industry and the world that we in this country are going to make sure that we have the right regulatory framework to enable those vehicles to operate.

I now change modes and move on to aviation.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Before my right hon. Friend changes modes, I know that he would be very disappointed if I did not mention motorcycling. I notice that the word “motorcycle” does not appear in the document “Pathway to Driverless Cars”. That initially pleased me because, as he will realise, an autonomous motorcycle would be entirely pointless, but I am slightly concerned about whether we have adequately considered the ability of driverless cars to coexist safely on our roads with motorcycles. Since I am on my feet, may I also say that many of his objectives could be achieved with a small modal shift to motorcycling?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is a great champion of the motorcycle, and I cannot for a moment imagine him wanting to have anything to do with an autonomous motorcycle. Given the pleasure that he derives from motorcycling, I cannot imagine him sitting on the back of his bike and reading the paper while the vehicle drives itself along.

One important part of the insurance changes for which the Bill paves the way is ensuring that the insurance framework gives comfort to all on the roads, and that proper insurance is in place if there is, God forbid, an unfortunate “non-interaction”—in other words, not the sort of interaction that we would wish—between any vehicle and an autonomous vehicle, and certainly between a motorbike and an autonomous vehicle. It is really important to get that right. Of course, the technology is some way from being sufficiently clearcut and dependable to enable such vehicles to operate freely and openly on our roads as a matter of daily routine, but that day will come.

Victoria Borwick (Kensington) (Con): Before the Secretary of State moves on to aviation, and while we are still talking about vehicles, insurance and safety on the road—I very much welcome his comments about that—may I ask about pedicabs? They are not of course licensed, regulated or insured, and they cause tremendous grief in central London in that they are not seen as safe. Transport for London does not have any method of regulating them, and we have no way of making sure that they are insured, so will my right hon. Friend consider them when thinking about other aspects of insurance in the future?

Chris Grayling: I am aware of that issue. I am happy to give my hon. Friend such an assurance and to discuss the issue with her.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I want to probe the Secretary of State on this business about autonomous vehicles and the responsibility of the passenger—or the driver, who is I suppose a passenger in this respect—while the vehicle is in autonomous mode. When the driver is

not in control of the vehicle and the vehicle is in autonomous mode, is the driver exonerated of all legal responsibility? Is that the principle of the Bill, because surely it cannot be as simple as that?

Chris Grayling: The measures focus on insurance. If the vehicle is under its own control, the insurance principle is still applicable. If the insurance policy applies to the driver and the driver is not driving the vehicle, by definition the driver cannot be at fault. Under the provisions in the Bill, it will be possible to have an insurance policy that covers both eventualities of something going wrong: when the driver is driving; and when the vehicle is in autonomous mode. That is one of the key changes necessary to create an environment in which such vehicles can operate freely on the roads.

Andrew Selous: The Secretary of State will be aware of the prohibitive cost of insurance for young drivers. Does he foresee a time when autonomous vehicles might help young people to have the freedom of a car at a much more affordable cost?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. I think that this might help not just younger drivers, but elderly and disabled drivers. Once vehicles start to operate autonomously in a controlled environment, it will become much easier for people who struggle to get out on to the roads today to do so. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that that is one of the possible future benefits.

Chris Bryant: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Chris Grayling: I will give way for the very last time before I move on to planes.

Chris Bryant: The Secretary of State does have plenty of time, but I am grateful to him for giving way. One of the outcomes over the next 20 to 25 years might be that the number of taxicab drivers this country needs falls very dramatically, because people will be able to get an automated car to pick them up and take them somewhere. What planning has the Department done on the challenge that that will pose to employment in this country?

Chris Grayling: The Government certainly think all the time about the impact of future technologies, of which there are many. We are a considerable number of years away from the situation the hon. Gentleman envisages, as most of the cars bought today will still be on the roads for a decade or more. It will probably not be an issue for this Parliament or the following one, but it will certainly be a genuine issue by the 2030s, and he is right to identify it as one.

We have of course seen throughout modern history how changes in technology alter ways of working—we will see more of that in the future. It is up to us as a society, and us in this Parliament and our successors, to make sure, none the less, that this country is a dynamic, entrepreneurial one that takes advantage of new technologies and creates job opportunities off the back of such changes. We are certainly doing that, and we will continue to do so. One of the ways in which the Bill will help is that if we set ourselves at the forefront of the development of such technology in this country, that will create a new generation of job opportunities that simply did not exist before.

[Chris Grayling]

I will move on to talk briefly about other aspects of the Bill. There are two key innovations in the aviation sector, which is crucial and a key part of our economy. Our air traffic control is provided under a licence held by NATS. It oversees 6,000 flights every day and develops innovative solutions that are used around the globe. It is essential that its licence is fit for purpose and that consumers are at the heart of the regulatory regime. The Bill will modernise the licensing framework for the UK's en route air traffic control, which is currently undertaken by a subsidiary of NATS and overseen by the Civil Aviation Authority.

We propose to update the licensing framework in three ways. First, we will change the way in which licence conditions can be modified by the regulator. Currently, the CAA needs to get the agreement of NATS before it modifies the conditions. The Bill will give it more flexibility to make changes when they are necessary without going through a long negotiating process. The provisions will make sure that the CAA always acts solely in accordance with its duties while ensuring that the licence holder is also able to appeal modifications to the Competition and Markets Authority.

Secondly, the Bill clarifies the power to amend the length of the licence term. Currently, the licence termination period is 10 years, which sits uncomfortably alongside the average 15-year asset life of NATS investments. We think that exercising the power to extend the licence termination notice period will increase NATS's finance ability, which in turn will lead to more efficient services being provided to users.

Thirdly, we are enhancing the enforcement regime, which is currently bureaucratic and inflexible. We will ensure that the CAA is accountable for enforcement decisions through appeal rights, but there will be a staggered approach to enforcement. Instead of having a situation in which there is no middle ground between serious action and a slap on the wrist, this will allow for a staged penalty regime that should give the CAA a clearer power to drive better performance in the management of our air traffic control systems.

The second aviation measure concerns consumer protection for holidaymakers. By its very nature, there are a number of risks in the holiday market. It is common for consumers to pay upfront on the promise of a holiday that might be many months away. As we have seen all too often, the financial stability of individual holiday providers can be shaky and sometimes the system lets down holidaymakers. In the rare event of a company failure, consumers may experience financial loss from a cancelled holiday or difficulties due to being stranded abroad. That is why the air travel organisers' licence scheme was introduced back in the 1970s. It is the primary method by which the travel sector provides insolvency protection within our packaged travel regimes.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will know that the way we book holidays is changing, so we need to adapt the schemes and regulations that protect people. The Bill will enable the ATOL scheme to respond to innovation in the travel sector, as well as enhancements to the UK and European consumer protection rules. It extends ATOL protection to a broader range of holidays and makes it easier for UK businesses to trade across borders, ensuring that the scheme remains fit for today's world.

There are two or three final measures to explain to the House, first on vehicle testing. We already work in partnership with the private sector to deliver bus and lorry MOT tests at private sector sites. Such tests used to be delivered from Government sites. Of course, the testing of cars is done by private operators around the country. Through the Bill, we want to extend the partnership with the private sector to deliver specialist vehicle tests from those established or additional private sector sites, thus providing services that are convenient and local. The Government will benefit because we will not have to pay for the upkeep of Government sites. That will help to keep down the cost of vehicle tests, which will still be delivered by Government examiners who will travel to those private sites.

We will not compromise on vehicle safety and nor will we remove any Government sites from operations until a suitable private sector site has been established. Such private sector sites are inspected and appropriately approved. This partnership approach has worked well and has been popular with industry. We will introduce a statutory charge for the site owner to make for the use of their premises and equipment. It will be known as the pit fee, and it will be capped to avoid any unreasonable charges.

One of the highest profile issues that has faced the aviation transport sector, in particular over the past few months, is the misuse of laser pointers. The penultimate measure in the Bill should bolster safety across all transport modes and deal with the problem properly. Each year there are approximately 1,500 laser attacks on aircraft. Those incidents pose a threat to the safe operation of aircraft, risk causing eye damage to pilots, and put the lives of passengers and crew in danger. This is an issue for not just aircraft, but other modes of transport.

We will create an offence of dazzling or distracting the person in control of a vehicle. It will be triable either way, and will allow police to enter a private property for the purposes of arrest and to search for a laser pointer. It will be a clear deterrent to would-be offenders, with unlimited fines and a potential five-year jail sentence, sending a clear signal that using laser pointers in this manner will not be tolerated.

Mims Davies: The act of shining or directing a laser at the eyes of a person in control of a vehicle that is covered by part 4 is a cause of great concern at Southampton airport, and its impact has been raised through consultative committees. The problem is particularly bad at regional airports. Many of my constituents work for NATS and report how dangerous these incidents are. They are also very concerned about drones. Is there scope to include the misuse of drones in this part of the Bill?

Chris Grayling: We are consulting on a new regime for drones, but the measures do not all have to go into primary legislation. I assure my hon. Friend that we are looking carefully at how to provide proper protection for airports and others from the use of drones in our society.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I am sorry that I was not in my place at the start of my right hon. Friend's speech on this important Bill. I am delighted that the Government are taking such action on lasers.

Although, according to the eminent eye surgeon, Professor John Marshall, who is my constituent, irreversible damage is unlikely to be caused because of the distances at which these lasers are operated, the risk to pilots is nevertheless very serious indeed. As my right hon. Friend knows, I am a pilot, and the thought that passengers could be put at risk makes it imperative that we take a decision on this. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the laser manufacturers? May I also encourage him to take action on drones quickly?

Chris Grayling: I know that my hon. Friend is a committed aviator and that he understands these issues. My Department has had a broad range of discussions about the impact of lasers. We think that the risk of a five-year jail sentence is a pretty strong deterrent that will, I hope, focus the minds of those who might be tempted to use, in such a dangerous way, something that should be a simple and innocuous tool for making presentations in a conference room. People who act in such a reckless manner should expect a very serious penalty indeed, and I hope that they will think twice before doing so again.

Lastly, I come on to the issue of courses. When drivers and motorcyclists transgress, but not excessively, the police have the discretion to offer them an educational course as an alternative to a fixed penalty. Such courses are valuable. They help to remind participants about the consequences of inattentive driving. Drivers pay to attend the course, but they avoid paying the fixed penalty fine or having points added to their licence.

The Bill clarifies the basis on which police have the authority to charge for such courses. For the avoidance of doubt, we are providing a simple statement that the power to charge exists, together with technical arrangements for specifying its scope. This technical measure will not affect road users; it simply clarifies the legislative position, and provides greater transparency and police accountability regarding the way in which these charges are set.

The Bill contains a number of measures that are designed to improve the way in which our transport system works. Above all else, it paves the way for what is going to be a revolution on our roads. As we see the emergence of connected and autonomous vehicles, our lives will change—I think that this will be a change for the better for many in our society. This is one of the most exciting technological developments that mankind has produced for a very long time, and we want this country to be at the front of the development and trialling of the technology, and then at the front of experiencing it. The Bill paves the way to achieve that. It brings into play a number of improvements across our transport system. More than anything else, I hope that it will start this country down the road towards an automotive revolution that will transform everyone's lives.

5.22 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): We were here last week debating the Bus Services Bill, when I said that another transport Bill would be along in a minute—and here it is. I thank the Secretary of State for his summary and account, and I wholeheartedly agree that the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill—VTAB from now on—presents an opportunity to put the UK ahead of the curve on transport, will encourage research and innovation that will shape how we travel in the

future and will create the high-skill jobs that our economy needs, as well as tackling our environmental and climate change challenges.

Let me take this opportunity to place on record the Opposition's thanks to the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), for his collegiate attitude and co-operation. We share his objective of making this the best possible piece of legislation as it passes through the House. The Opposition are not opposed to the Bill; we are broadly very supportive of it. There are, however, some concerns about the impact of some parts of the Bill, so we shall press the Government on some issues and table amendments in Committee. Of course, the Bill alone is no substitute for the wider policy framework required for the UK to take advantage of the opportunities presented to us, but it is an important Bill that we wish to support.

Part 1 deals with automated vehicles and insurance. We expect ultra-low emission and connected and autonomous vehicles to play an important role in our country's transport in the years to come, so it is right that the Government are seeking to address some of the issues relating to autonomous vehicles. Last year the UK automotive industry added some £18.9 billion in value to the UK economy. It supported 169,000 people directly in manufacturing, and some 814,000 across the industry and throughout supply chains. Forecasters have estimated that the overall benefits of ULEVs and autonomous vehicles are in the region of £51 billion a year, creating an additional 320,000 jobs.

If we are to build on that—which is increasingly important following the UK's decision to leave the EU—it will be necessary for the UK to take advantage of the economic and social benefits that those vehicles present. Their uptake will play an important role in the tackling of the air quality crisis which leads to 40,000 premature deaths each year as well as hundreds of thousands of cases of respiratory illnesses, which is choking many of our towns and cities, and which the Government have hitherto failed to address. Such vehicles will also be vital to the UK's meeting of its climate change objectives, for which the Government currently lack a clear plan.

In recent years, the Government have failed to reduce the number of casualties on our roads, against a backdrop of cuts in road policing and the scrapping of road casualty targets introduced under Labour. Those are pressing issues which the Government need to address here and now, but the potential 25,000 casualties a year that could be avoided by 2030 represent a significant opportunity to make our roads safer.

It is vital for us to introduce the legislation that is needed to facilitate and encourage investment, innovation and the uptake of vehicles of this kind, but if that is to be possible, a definition of autonomous vehicles will be necessary. At present, there is no clear distinction between advanced driver assistance systems and fully automated driving technology in UK policy, standards and legislation. The Bill requires the Secretary of State to prepare, keep up to date and publish a list of all motor vehicles to be used on roads in Great Britain that are deemed to be

“capable...of safely driving themselves without having to be monitored by an individual”

[Andy McDonald]

for some or part of a journey, and the definition of an automated vehicle will be a vehicle that is included in the list drawn up by the Secretary of State.

There is a need for collaboration between the Government, manufacturers, insurers and consumers to develop a viable and practical system of classification to identify when a vehicle is deemed to be “automated” or “autonomous”. The dividing lines between automated and autonomous vehicles are not always completely clear. The Government must give more details of their plans to classify vehicles as “automated”, and consult widely on the definition and criteria for adding to the list of AVs in the Bill. In Committee, we will be pressing the Government for that to be subject to secondary legislation.

Resolving the issue of how automated vehicles can be insured is essential if they are to become a feature on British roads. We therefore support the Government’s action to ensure that vehicle insurance policies facilitate that in the future. We are, however, concerned about the potential costs to policyholders, and contention over liability between manufacturers and insurers. It is imperative that, in the event of technological failure in an AV, it is easy for consumers to establish quickly where liability rests, and are able to make a claim as appropriate. At present, insurance law in the UK is driver-centric. Drivers must have insurance in order to provide compensation for third parties for personal injury or property damage.

The Government’s intention is to emphasise that if there is an insurance event, the compensation route for the individual remains within the motor insurance framework rather than through a product liability framework against a manufacturer. However, the Bill does provide insurers with the capability to claim against manufacturers of vehicles if the automated vehicle was driving itself and was deemed to be at fault for the incident. But this is not clear-cut, and the Association of British Insurers has expressed concerns that existing insurance practices would need to be significantly altered to deal routinely with road traffic accidents involving automated vehicles. The Government themselves acknowledge this in their impact assessment for the Bill and say this might result in increased administrative and procedural costs for insurers.

Although the Bill does enable insurers to claim from the manufacturers where the vehicle is in automated mode and deemed at fault for an incident, the Government acknowledge that there could be significant teething problems with this system, particularly with early disagreements between the parties about liability. As such, it is difficult to estimate how different insurance premiums will be when automated vehicles are fully functional and on the road.

The roll-out and proliferation of autonomous vehicles should produce significant safety benefits, with driver error being either significantly reduced or eliminated. While that should consequently lead to reduced premiums, a great deal of work will be necessary as we prepare for this new environment, to better assess whether that will in fact be the case. If there are increased procedural and administrative costs for insurers, there could be higher premiums. If that is the case, there would be a severe impact on the uptake of AVs in the UK, making the Government’s actions self-defeating. We believe that the

Government must review at regular intervals how the insurance for AVs is working, so Labour will be pressing for a review date on the face of the Bill.

Let me now move to the second part of the Bill relating to electric vehicles, charging and infrastructure. Electric vehicles and alternatively fuelled vehicles are key to reducing air pollution and meeting the UK’s climate change objectives, as well as presenting economic opportunities. The uptake of electric, hybrid and alternatively fuelled vehicles is already under way and increasing, yet we note that the Government are still 1.5 million vehicles short of their 1.6 million ULEV target for 2020, so it is imperative that action is taken to encourage their uptake.

The section of the Bill on EV-charging infrastructure is largely about enabling secondary legislation and will not have significant impacts in the short term, but if the UK intends to be a global leader, we agree that we need to take broader action sooner rather than later. Given the importance of future-proofing the legislative framework in this area, Labour recognises the need to use secondary legislation, but we will be seeking commitments from the Government to consult properly and widely throughout the process.

We will also be seeking assurances and a review from the Government of how the provisions of the Bill fit within a broader strategy for reducing harmful vehicle emissions and promoting a switch to ULEVs and EVs. For uptake to be encouraged, electric vehicles need to be practical, affordable and convenient for users, which means putting in place the necessary infrastructure. There are currently nearly 12,000 charging points for electric vehicles in the UK, but at present there are multiple charging point operators, each with their own plugs, software, customer charges, billing systems and payment methods. They are also unevenly distributed: as reported in *The Times* last September, there are more charging points available on the Orkney islands than in Blackpool, Grimsby and Hull combined. It is therefore welcome that this Bill seeks to increase the number of charging point facilities and to address their harmonisation and standardisation. The Bill will allow the Government to require co-operation and the sharing of facilities, and information from operators allowing the Government to ensure interoperability for charging regardless of what specific EV a person might have, if necessary.

Clause 11 gives the Secretary of State the power to introduce regulations that require operators to provide information about public charging points, such as location, operating hours, cost and interoperability, and these too are welcome. Of course it is right that this legislation should be put in place, but it alone will not be enough successfully to encourage the uptake of electric vehicles. It was counterproductive of the Government to slash the grants available for ultra-low emission vehicles and electric vehicles and to cut the plug-in grants for EVs and for home charging. In May last year, the grant for purchasing an electric vehicle was cut from £5,000 to £4,500, and the grant for hybrids was cut from £5,000 to £2,500. The electric vehicle home charge scheme grant was cut from £700 to £500 per installation.

There are further issues that are not addressed by the Bill, which the Government must get right. They must ensure that the grid is capable of meeting the additional demands that electric vehicles will bring. That must be planned for and closely monitored as electric vehicle use

becomes more common. The Government must also develop a strategy to tackle the skills gap, because without training the necessary personnel, we as a nation will not be able to support the growth of this new generation of vehicles and will miss out on the benefits that they present. On infrastructure more broadly, the Government must ensure that regulatory divergence does not develop between the UK and the EU as a result of Brexit, and that regulation and standards are maintained. This is essential if the UK is to be the vehicle manufacturers' location of choice for the development, testing and deployment of automated and electric vehicles.

The third section of the Bill relates to aviation, and Labour broadly welcomes the proposals to strengthen the role of the Civil Aviation Authority in respect of seeking licence modification changes. We recognise the need to implement the ATOL reforms in order to comply with the EU package travel directive. We also note that stakeholders are supportive of the proposals in the Bill. The proposed changes will allow the Civil Aviation Authority to modify licences more quickly. This is in line with recommendations from a report on NATS and will give NATS greater financial certainty. However, we are keen that the Government restate their commitment that the licensee will not find it unduly difficult to finance its activities and that these proposals will not be a subtext for the sell-off of NATS.

Clause 18 will bring ATOL up to date and ensure that it is harmonised with the latest EU package travel directive, extending to a wider range of holidays and protecting more consumers as well as allowing UK travel companies to sell more seamlessly across Europe. Labour welcomes the extensions, which will ultimately help to protect more holidaymakers, but we want clarity on how UK consumers will be protected by EU-based companies, as they will no longer be subject to ATOL but to member state equivalents. The implications for ATOL after Brexit are also a cause for concern. Hidden in the Bill are proposals that the Secretary of State will require only an affirmative resolution to significantly reform ATOL and the Air Travel Trust fund. Labour recognises the merits of some reforms, but we believe that an impact assessment, full consultation and full scrutiny will be required before any fundamental changes are made to this well respected consumer protection.

These issues bring to the forefront uncertainties over the future of UK aviation following the decision to leave the European Union, and Labour has been clear that whichever framework is chosen, the Government should prioritise retaining an essentially unchanged operating environment. They should prioritise air services agreements as part of the exit negotiations, and, as is customary, such agreements should be negotiated separately from and prior to the UK's negotiations on trade with the EU.

On the three miscellaneous clauses in part 4 of the Bill, I shall deal first with clause 21, which relates to powers to designate premises for vehicle testing and to cap testing station fees. In principle, we do not oppose the changes that would allow Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency testing to take place on private premises, but we believe that the Government should provide further details as well as reassurances that the changes will not adversely impact existing testing facilities and staff. While an increase in the number of testing facilities across the country is to be welcomed, and while the Government

have intimated that existing public sector facilities will not disappear before alternative facilities are available in the vicinity, we want more detailed assurances.

Secondly, in part 4 of the Bill, we are pleased to see in clause 22 that the Government are now beginning to tackle the dangers of lasers that present hazards and the offence of shining or directing a laser at a vehicle, which could result in terrible consequences if left unaddressed. It has proved too difficult to enforce the existing offence of endangerment by shining a light, so we support the creation of a new offence for the act of shining a laser beam, which could carry a maximum penalty of a fine and five years' imprisonment. While that is to be welcomed, we encourage the Government to look at the ready availability of such devices and how that might be curtailed. When we heard from the Secretary of State, there was some confusion about the change of offence from endangerment to the act of shining a light, so it would be appreciated if the Minister clarified that.

On aviation safety, the lack of action on drones in this Bill is a concern, as hon. Members have already indicated. There were 70 reported near misses with aircraft in 2016. The Government are not addressing the problem at the required pace, and Labour will seek to amend the Bill in Committee to regulate drones in order to address aviation safety concerns.

Turning to clause 23 and the courses offered as alternatives to prosecution, Labour broadly agrees with the Government's proposed measures on diversionary courses, which clarify the basis on which diversionary courses can be used as alternatives to fixed penalty notices and be charged for. However, the Government should bring forward an assessment and review the effectiveness of such courses. It is imperative that there is some basis on which to establish that the programme is worth pursuing, but there appears to be little evidence at the moment. It is important to remind the Government that legislation alone is not enough to keep our roads safe at a time when police traffic officer numbers have been cut by a third and when progress on reducing deaths and casualties on our roads has ground to a halt.

In conclusion, Labour broadly supports the Bill, which marks the beginning of an exciting new era in transport technology. We are committed to securing the best possible framework to ensure that the sector flourishes.

5.42 pm

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I welcome the Bill and congratulate the Government on introducing it. I also congratulate the Department for Transport team. From time to time, we have had something of a mixed bag of Ministers at the Department, but we now have one of the best teams ever. Long may they stay in office. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary historic vehicles group and the owner of a number of historic vehicles. It may seem a little odd to some that I, with an interest in historic vehicles and dedicated to preserving old vehicles and to ensuring that all are free to continue to use them on public highways, should welcome a Bill that seeks to take a step forward. However, I see nothing unusual in that because motoring has always been about pushing forward the frontiers. We can preserve the past, while embracing the future.

[*Sir Greg Knight*]

Only a decade or so ago, referring to driverless cars would have felt like something from a sci-fi comic to many people, but the very invention of a moving vehicle powered by a machine was revolutionary in its day, and the motor car has always had its detractors since those early days. In 1899, a Member of this House, John Douglas-Scott-Montagu bought his very first motor car—a 12 hp Daimler vehicle. He acquired the car in May, and in the summer of that year he drove it to the House of Commons for the first time, being the first parliamentarian to do so. When he got to the House of Commons, he was prevented from entering the precincts by a policeman on duty, who warned him that he thought there was a very real risk of the contraption blowing up the Palace of Westminster. So Mr Douglas-Scott-Montagu did what any good MP would and should do and appealed to the Speaker, one William Gully, who looked at the evidence, read up about this new-fangled thing—a car powered by a machine rather than a horse—and decided that the Member could bring the car into the precincts, so the very first spat between the police and a motorist was decided in the motorist's favour.

As the Secretary of State and the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) have said, the Bill primarily but not exclusively addresses the advent of automated vehicles. Public transport is not an option for everyone, but neither is driving. Having automated vehicles on our roads will provide an opportunity to liberate people, particularly in rural areas, who are not able to use public transport and who cannot drive but who will grasp the opportunity to use an automated car. However, I will probably be one of the last people to switch to using an automated vehicle, because I enjoy driving. The most recent car I purchased has an intelligent cruise control system, and the car applies the brakes on its own if someone pulls out in front of me. I find that most infuriating because, time after time, the car applies the brakes when I can see that the motorist who pulled out in front of me is accelerating and I would not have applied the brakes. At the moment, I am not a fan of driverless cars. I cannot ever see myself owning a driverless car, but I can see that they will fill a niche in the market and that they will become invaluable to some people.

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough raised concerns about insurance costs, and the Department's figures indicate that about 97% of all road accidents are caused by driver error, not by vehicle condition. If the software is anything like competent, it should lead to a reduction in the number of accidents and, one would hope, a reduction in insurance premiums.

Mr Baker: My right hon. Friend says that he will never buy a driverless car, and we are of one mind. I cannot imagine buying a driverless car, and my first question would always be, "How do I turn these things off?" Does he share my concern that, as more driverless cars become available, there will be an increasing pressure on us all to drive up safety by getting a driverless car and that the great hobby of motoring, which he and I enjoy, might come under increasing pressure as the years go by?

Sir Greg Knight: Coming under increasing pressure, particularly from the Whips, has never bothered my hon. Friend, so I cannot see that it will be a problem in this instance.

I have a number of questions for the Minister. I think it is self-evident, but I presume that clause 1, which gives the Government power to list automated vehicles for the purpose of approved road use, also includes the right to delist any model that is shown to be unreliable or more susceptible to accidents than other models that are allowed to operate.

Clause 2 contains details on the liability of insurers where an accident is caused by an automated vehicle, but those provisions raise a number of questions. Clearly, the Government think that, if an automated vehicle in automated mode is involved in an accident due to a problem with its manufacture, the insurance policy taken out by the owner will cover the costs of any damage caused in the accident but that, at a later stage, the insurance company will be able to pursue the manufacturer. That is my understanding.

I want to know what happens when no accident is caused but the law is nevertheless broken. Let me give the House an example. I assume that if a driverless car is travelling on the M1, the software would know that the vehicle is on a road where the speed limit is 70 mph. However, some stretches of the M1 are what the Government call "smart motorways", where a Highways England official has the authority to turn on flashing lights and lower the speed limit to a speed the official thinks appropriate for the road conditions. Let us suppose that a driver in full automated mode on the M1 comes to a stretch of smart motorway and finds that Highways England has suddenly switched the speed limit down to 50 mph. If a police car is travelling behind and the automated car is slow in responding to the reduced limit, the police may stop the automated car and issue a speeding ticket. Who would then be responsible for the speeding ticket and who, if anyone, would take the three points that normally go with a speeding offence? If the owner, who would otherwise be the driver if the vehicle was in manual mode, was relying entirely on the car, he should not be guilty of the offence of speeding and should certainly not have his licence endorsed. The Bill says nothing about this, and I hope the Minister will give us some clue about what the police would be expected to do in that scenario.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is raising some important points. I would hope that if a speed limit was changed on a stretch of motorway, signals would be sent out and would be received by the automated vehicle, automatically causing it to change speed.

Sir Greg Knight: I accept that completely, but the scenario I am painting is one where the software is slow to respond, although it responds eventually. The police will follow a driver who is speeding for only three-tenths of a mile, which is not very far if someone is doing 70 mph. Who would then be responsible for that offence of speeding?

In opening the debate, the Secretary of State did not mention the Motor Insurers Bureau, which plays an invaluable role in guaranteeing funds that protect victims of uninsured drivers. What will be the status of the MIB when the Bill becomes law? Will it be able to recover costs from manufacturers where it is deemed that the software was defective? Will the Minister say something about the Vnuk case, which took place in eastern Europe?

It involved a farmworker being knocked off a ladder by a farmer driving a tractor and then suing the insurance company for damages. The court held in the first instance that, as the tractor was on a farm, it did not need to have insurance, but the European Court of Justice overturned that and found in favour of Mr Vnuk, with the implication now that vehicles not on the road and not being used on the road may have to carry insurance. I know that there is concern in the motor racing fraternity about whether motor vehicles taking part in a race have to have insurance. This is not mentioned in the Bill. It may well be that Ministers are planning their response to this Court judgment and will announce it at a later stage, but I would welcome hearing anything that the Minister can say about this case.

The Bill envisages data sharing—the sharing of the driving log and data of automated vehicles. Will that apply only when an automated vehicle is involved in an accident or can data be obtained even where there is no accident? For example, would an employer be able to analyse the data from a self-driving company car to see where the employee went when he was sent out on a mission? Would a divorce lawyer be able to demand to see the data log for the driverless car of a husband if it was thought he was having an affair in another part of town? Who could access the data? I can understand that the data for a driverless car would be recorded to establish who was at fault in any accident, but who would have the right to seek to access that information?

Part 2 deals with electric vehicles and charging. The Secretary of State said in his opening remarks that the Government take the view that nearly all cars and vans should be zero-emission vehicles by 2050. What does he mean by that? Does he mean that by 2050 nearly all cars and vans that are then being manufactured will be zero-emission vehicles? Will he confirm that there is to be no attempt by the Government to force vehicles with some exhaust emissions off our roads at a future point in time?

I accept that it makes sense to increase significantly the provision of the infrastructure required to support the charging of electric vehicles. The Bill will impose on the large fuel retailers a duty to provide public charging points, which is good and to be welcomed. Why are we not also going to require large fuel retailers to do other things for the benefit of all motorists? For example, why are we not going to require fuel retailers to continue to provide fuel with an ethanol content of less than 5% for those who have not updated or cannot update their vehicles?

I understand that, under the Renewable Transport Fuel Obligation Order 2007, at some point in time E10 fuel—that is, fuel with 10% ethanol—will be on sale on forecourts in this country. Experiences in France and Germany have shown that E10 fuel is incompatible with vehicles manufactured before 2000. It has the potential to dissolve petrol tanks, in some cases, and certainly to dissolve gaskets; to cause vapour lock in warm weather; and to cause starting difficulties. While we encourage people to move to the new technology, it is important that we do not leave behind a class of people who for the moment cannot afford to update their vehicles and need to go about their daily lives and to go to work. There should be a guarantee that they can still buy fuel with a lower ethanol percentage.

I have no comments to make about part 3, which deals with civil aviation. As has been mentioned, part 4 deals with vehicle testing, the shining of a laser at a vehicle and speed-awareness courses. I note that an offence is committed only if

“the laser beam dazzles or distracts a person with control of the vehicle.”

Could that ever apply for someone who is being driven in an automated vehicle? Clause 22(7) anticipates that the offence would apply in the case of a pilot in a plane, even if that plane is on autopilot, because it refers to someone

“monitoring the flying of...the aircraft”.

Why is there no similar provision for the driver of an automated car who will often be monitoring the progress of his vehicle? Is there any specific reason why the Bill covers only laser beams and not other high-intensity beams?

Speed-awareness courses have been running for several years. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough asked what evidence we had that they are effective. Having spoken to constituents and friends, I have considerable anecdotal evidence that they have been effective and that it was a good day when they were introduced. There is an incentive for an erring motorist to take part in such courses, because by doing so they avoid getting points on their licence. As these courses have been running for several years, why are we only now seeking to regulate them? Are Ministers aware of some legal challenge or some bad practice that we now wish to eliminate? There seems to be an air of mystery around this matter. Why, if these courses have been working well for so long, we are now about to say that we need the law to intervene in this area?

In addition to the new technology, I hope that the Government will look at a number of other common-sense measures. I am talking about following what happens in some American states where, at non-rush-hour periods, traffic lights are switched off or are switched to shine amber in all directions, thereby preventing vehicles from having to stop when there is absolutely no traffic coming in the opposite direction or across the junction.

Reference has been made to air quality. Do Ministers know when they are likely to publish the air quality plan? Is there not a case—I say this with respect—for making local authorities take into account the congestion effects of their crusade to remove road space in favour of wider pavements and more cycle lanes? Someone said to me the other day that there are fewer cars entering central London but that pollution is going up. Well, obviously it is going up because pavements have got wider and road space is being turned over to cycle lanes. The Mayor of London cannot have it both ways. If he wishes to reduce air pollution, he and others need to take care when they are seeking to remove highway lanes.

I started by saying that I welcome the Bill, which I do, and I applaud the Government for introducing it. Clearly, it is intended to address a number of market failures thus far, and I hope that it will enable the UK safely to take advantage of and benefit from new technologies and their use. I hope that it will help consumers in the UK to be among the first in the world to reap the rewards that improved transport technology will surely bring.

6.2 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Bill that we debate today is important, but our discourse on it focuses on existing, not future, technology. The Scottish National party welcomes the fact that we can support the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill in its general direction of travel, but we will suggest some helpful adjustments to its navigation if we feel that a wrong turn is being taken. We will also be ready to give the Minister a push if he looks like he is discharging badly.

If we are to change public perception and fully enjoy the benefits of new technology, we need to talk about how we move people not just physically, but emotionally. The reality is that planning for transport should be about planning for the future of people. Accepting only what we are presented with here and now misses the mark. If we are to make a success of the Bill, it is vital that we seek not only to address the known practicalities of the technology as they are presented today, but to have a vision for the way in which the future of transport can make life better for people. I am talking not just about those in the urban areas and those who are well off, but about those who constantly find themselves as an afterthought, be it through geography, different levels of deprivation, disability or lack of opportunity. The Bill must develop a more rounded and inclusive vision as it progresses through this House.

We welcome the sensible measures in the Bill. We will offer our views on those that need more work or more thought with regard to the future, and we will work constructively to progress the legislation. In return, we hope that our points will receive positive consideration.

Common ground can immediately be established on a number of current issues. I am talking about measures that encourage development of economic opportunities for growth and technology in autonomous and electric vehicle sectors; that simplify insurance processes and measures to keep people safe; that match the Scottish Government's proposals to phase out all petroleum and diesel-fuelled vehicles by 2050; and that curb the malignant use of laser pens on all vehicles, including aircraft.

As has been intimated, there are many questions to be answered and much to add to the Bill to make progress successful. Let me start with autonomous vehicles. This is a global market that presents significant opportunities. KPMG estimates the value to be around £900 billion by 2025, so maximising advantage means acting with pace, but decisions should include ensuring that there are positive outcomes for people beyond the short-term economic reach. We advocate that there is an imperative to ensure that as many people as possible benefit.

There is the potential for a step change in transport for those with disabilities and those suffering from social exclusion as a result of mobility issues. We would also seek to ensure that, even if they do not live in a city, people are not left out and that those in rural areas are enabled to take part meaningfully. Thoughtful consideration must therefore be given to rural areas for the use of autonomous vehicles, and discussions should take place with organisations that represent disabled people to seek their views on the matter.

The Government must also take action to ensure that they grasp the opportunity to promote training and skills and create well-paid jobs. The employment

opportunities within the technology and autonomous vehicles sector are new territory. We must therefore ensure that more people can access those opportunities, especially the still disgracefully untapped resource that is women. If the promised bounty is to be properly realised, work must be done to encourage girls and young women to be central to it.

Back in 2015, the Government provided £19 million to launch four driverless car schemes, based in Milton Keynes, Bristol and London. If further testing is to be undertaken, Scotland must be included in the next round. Similarly, although we welcome the industrial strategy in relation to an autonomous vehicle hub, we would look for co-operation between the UK and Scottish Governments to find suitable sites in Scotland.

Road safety is of paramount concern, as is clarity over responsibilities for insurance claims, and there is much work to be done to provide reassurance and put in place the safeguards required to create public confidence in driverless technology. It would be helpful to consider the needs as they will develop and provide guidance on aspects that may not yet be at the forefront of consideration, such as the possible certification of vehicles without steering wheels or control pedals. The right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) made an interesting point about responsibility. What will autonomous vehicles mean for drink-driving regulations, for example? In all circumstances, will a sole passenger be considered just that—a passenger—with those responsibilities, or will they be considered to be jointly responsible?

Consideration will need to be given to future support networks. Autonomous vehicles will need specialist test centres, which should be equitably located around the nations of the UK, and people deserve to know how that will work in future. There will of course need to be strong mobile 4G and 5G signals for the technology to operate properly, so yet again we call on the Government to ensure that the next spectrum licensing auction is conducted with a rural-proofing measure, or an “inside out” policy that has been shown to work in other European countries.

Of course, with the guidance systems also will come a huge amount of data. Vehicles will, by virtue of their use, be tracked and records of journeys will be collated. The data can be enormously useful for improving performance, but there is the potential for it to be misused, so what measures will be put in place to protect the rights of our citizens? A right, except in circumstances of investigating an accident or offence, should be given to the public to own the data and actively authorise any non-performance-related use.

On electric vehicles, we welcome the plan to make every car and van zero-emission by 2050, as that now complements the Scottish Government's plan to phase out all petrol and diesel vehicles by that year. Encouragement for the public to use electric vehicles must now be stepped up. Incentives such as the grants to purchase vehicles, free installation of home charging points, no road tax and no company car tax for pure electric vehicles should be continued while new incentives are developed. At the start of 2015, Scotland had already seen the uptake of more than 200 electric vehicles across our local authorities. The Scottish Government invested more than £11 million to develop the ChargePlace Scotland network of more than 900 publicly available charging bays, and a £2.5 million grant has been offered

to each of the 32 community planning partnerships to help them to buy or lease electric vehicles. That is in addition to the £13 million provided over the past five years to support bus operators to bring in new low-emission buses. Those are great incentives and, as I have said, more can and should be done to encourage further uptake.

Of course there are other zero-emission technologies. Hydrogen is of growing interest in the field, so I was glad to hear the Secretary of State say earlier that there would be encouragement to support alternative fuels such as hydrogen. Scotland already has the Aberdeen Hydrogen Bus Project—the Scottish Government are a key funder—and now Aberdeen has Europe's largest fleet of hydrogen-powered buses on two routes within the city.

On civil aviation and ATOL, although we welcome the extension of the ATOL agreement, there is a pressing need for the Government to start addressing the questions posed over the UK's leaving the EU. Will the Secretary of State now give an assurance that the EU package travel directive will be continued? There are similar concerns over passenger rights and compensation, and no word as yet from the Government about whether they will be maintained. I am happy to allow the Secretary of State to intervene if he wants to make comment. No?

UK travellers currently benefit from a huge range of protections. The collapse of Lowcostholidays last summer made the value of the EU package travel directive crystal clear. Given that 76% of UK holidays abroad are outbound to the EU, what will the Government do to guarantee that they will not cave in to the lobbying demands of companies such as Thomas Cook, which said that rights had "gone too far" in favouring passengers?

On vehicle testing, we will be seeking assurances over safety in future operations of DVSA functions. We have concerns over the relentless way in which the UK Government have sought to divest publicly owned and managed facilities. It is clearly an ideological approach, but public safety must be paramount and guarantees are needed that examiners will be regulated and must adhere to procedures at least as strict as those already in use. Will the Secretary of State commit to that?

We welcome clause 22, which makes it an offence to shine a laser beam at any vehicle to dazzle or distract the driver or operator. Laser pen incidents are on the increase. In Scotland, there have been more than 150 incidents in the past 18 months, and 24 at Glasgow airport in February alone. The Scottish National party and the Scottish Government take very seriously any actions that could endanger aircraft, crew and passengers. We strongly support the Civil Aviation Authority's efforts to publicise the dangers, and Police Scotland's efforts to prosecute those who maliciously threaten lives in this way. Shining lasers at pilots or drivers could prove fatal, and these moves give clarity over the offence and should greatly improve safety.

While talking about road safety, I urge the UK Government to follow the example of the Scottish Government by taking the opportunity to lower the drink-drive limits. In December 2014, Scotland introduced a blood alcohol limit of 50 mg per 100 ml—lower than the 80 mg per 100 ml in the rest of the UK—resulting in a 7.6% reduction in drink-driving in 2015 compared with the previous year.

In conclusion, we welcome the aims of the Bill, and will work constructively to ensure that it is strengthened and improved. We seek assurances that communities at the periphery in both geography and opportunity are included, that the benefits of the technological advances in vehicles and fuels are shared fairly among all our citizens, and that positive outcomes for all communities are the Government's first consideration. We want to see clarity and vision in the regulation and public safety issues arising from new vehicles, to give the public the confidence to embrace this step change in transport.

We must now, finally, also have answers to the questions on what happens to the rights of our citizens travelling in Europe following the triggering of article 50. We need a commitment to continuing all of the raft of benefits currently enjoyed by our people.

6.15 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in support of this important Bill. I shall restrict my comments to parts 1 and 2—I have no concerns about parts 3 and 4. I wish to speak about the first two parts partly because of my role on the Transport Committee—we have considered these matters before—and partly because of a constituency interest. As has been referenced, Milton Keynes is at the forefront of developing and testing autonomous vehicles and a comprehensive charging network for electric vehicles.

The Bill is timely. The technology for autonomous and electric vehicles is quickly being developed and will be on our roads soon. I am talking not just about the experimental autonomous pods that Milton Keynes is innovating—the Secretary of State has just left the Chamber, and I was going to reference the maiden voyage that he and I took in the latest RDM UK Autodrive pod, somewhat bemusing shoppers in Milton Keynes shopping centre a few weeks ago, when I am happy to report that no injuries were sustained and that the technology worked splendidly—because established vehicle manufacturers and new entrants, such as Tesla and Google, are also developing cars that will be wholly or partly automated.

As the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), mentioned, we already have cars that are partly autonomous, given the technology they have on board, whether that is a self-parking mechanism or intuitive cruise control, and I will return a little later to a concern I have about those. The Government are therefore absolutely right to be addressing now how this changing technology has moved ahead of existing regulations on insurance and other matters.

The intelligent mobility market will be huge. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said that it could be worth £900 billion by 2025. If he has not already read it, I urge him to read the "Intelligent Mobility Skills Strategy" produced last autumn by the Transport Systems Catapult, which is based in Milton Keynes. It identifies a possible skills gap of 750,000 people by that same year. The skills debate is for another time, but I mention this issue just to indicate the potential scale of what we are debating. It is absolutely essential that we get the basic parameters correct.

[Iain Stewart]

The Government are right to address the gap in insurance legislation that autonomous vehicles will produce. It was with some amusement that I read the Bill's impact assessment—perhaps that is not the most appropriate name, given that we are dealing with possible vehicle collisions, so the Department might wish to rephrase its title—but it did contain some important points. As has been said, insurance is traditionally driver-centric, and we need to set a framework for what happens when an accident is caused by the machine or the software that governs it.

I agree entirely with the clauses, as far as they go, but I wish to highlight a few concerns, which I hope the Minister will be able to address in his response or in writing, if he does not have the answers immediately to hand. My first concern relates to clause 4, which deals with accidents that result from unauthorised alterations to the software or failures to update it. It is absolutely right, as far as it goes, but is there sufficient clarification of where liability would lie should there be an accident resulting from a failure caused by external tampering with the software, be it deliberate or accidental? Tests of autonomous vehicles and their technology, and even of other vehicles, have shown that their intelligent connections can be hacked. There are examples of that having happened in the United States, and it could lead to clashes. Lots of clever criminals have scammed the traditional insurance market by faking accidents or somehow causing them to happen, and then claiming the insurance premiums. If someone were maliciously to hack the smart technology, where would the liability lie?

I have another example of a more accidental nature. If a car with autonomous technology goes in for a service and the garage makes an error when that car is under its supervision and the driver has no knowledge of it, where would the liability lie? When my previous car was serviced, the garage messed up the software that governs the engine, and when I took it away the engine misfired and the car would not accelerate properly. That did not cause an accident, but it was an external intervention. I would be grateful for clarification on whether such instances are covered by the Bill or other legislation. If not, what further measures might be needed in the future?

My second concern relates to where the onus of liability lies when a car is partly autonomous. As I said, we already have such technology, which includes adaptive cruise control and self-parking. Existing legislation is clear that the onus of liability lies solely with the driver, but I can foresee a time when technology will develop to the point when the driver will be able to switch off his or her control of the car, leaving the car in control. Although the Bill covers liability when a car is in its autonomous mode, is there an onus on the driver to switch off the autonomous controls when he or she perceives a danger? If a driver is part of a motorway car train in which all vehicles are autonomously controlled and they spot an external incident that would make the continuation of that train dangerous, will there be an onus on the driver to switch off the autonomous controls? I would be grateful for clarification of whether that is already covered by law, or if it will need to be addressed at a later point.

I appreciate that it is difficult to give specifics at present, because the technology is not in operation, but we will have to think about this. In particular, as other hon. Members have said, we need the insurance market to work speedily in the interests of consumers. We cannot have a situation in which the consumer is the innocent party yet different insurance companies are fighting out where the liability lies. It would be helpful to have some clarification.

My third concern about insurance relates to practicalities and costs for the insurance policy holder in a changing mobility market. At present, most insurance is perfectly simple: the individual is insured either for a specific car, or comprehensively to drive any car. However, we will increasingly be moving towards MAAS—mobility as a service—products, whereby the direct ownership of vehicles will probably decline and people will buy a comprehensive package that covers train fares, buses, hiring a car and summoning an electric pod. The insurance market will become much more complex, and new products will have to be innovated to reflect the fact that one person may, over a relatively short period of time, drive all sorts of vehicles—from a simple city runabout right up to a high-performance sports vehicle, which they may wish to hire for a weekend. My question is: are existing regulatory frameworks for insurance companies sufficiently flexible to allow for the innovation of these products, or do we require further clarification? It is important that we make the regulations as watertight as possible because the market will be huge, and these developments will come sooner than I suspect many of us believe.

Although part 2 of the Bill deals with electric vehicle charging, it is not unrelated to autonomous vehicles, because such vehicles will be electric. The more automated features cars have, the more power they will need to derive from the electric power supply, so it is important that we look at these things in tandem. The Government are right to take a broad-brush approach. Various manufacturers are innovating different types of technology, from wholly electric cars to hydrogen vehicles, and I think that the hybrid market will be particularly important. Over the past few weeks, I have had the opportunity to travel in the BMW i3 and the Volkswagen Passat hybrid, which can be run fully on electric power but contain petrol engines to extend their range, for recharging, and to provide an alternative to the electric drive when the charge runs out.

I would not like the Government to have to make a call about which technology will become most prevalent, in the manner—if I may show my age here—of VHS and Betamax. We have not yet reached the tipping point of consumer behaviour that will indicate which technology will do so. People still have what is called “range anxiety”—they are fearful of switching to a wholly electric car because they might get caught out mid-way through their journey. Although they feel that such a car is appropriate for urban driving, they do not want to take it on a longer journey in case no charging point is available. I think that the tipping point will come when improvements in battery technology bring the range of electric cars up to a level comparable with that of petrol or diesel cars, and/or when charging an electric car becomes as easy and convenient as going to a filling station for petrol or diesel.

I do not have any concerns about the provisions in this part of the Bill. The one concern I have—it has been referenced by other Members—is outwith the

scope of the Department for Transport, namely the demand that electric charging will place on the grid, especially if we do not find a way of smoothing out that demand. If everyone comes home at 6 o'clock and plugs their car in, causing a huge spike in demand, will we have the capacity in the grid and the generating capacity to meet that? That is relevant not just in this country but right across the developed world. I wish to see a cross-departmental approach. The Government are finally taking some initiatives in developing nuclear power, which I think will provide the necessary resilience in the grid. I urge them to look at nuclear fusion to provide a plentiful supply of electricity in the years ahead. That is a matter for another Department, but it is important that the Government operate in a joined-up way on these matters.

Let me conclude by congratulating the Government again on their foresight in bringing forward the Bill. It is important that the United Kingdom is a world leader in the technology and the regulatory framework for these new products. As I have mentioned, the market is huge. We want Britain to have a good share of that market, and the Bill will certainly help us along the way towards doing so.

6.30 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), who is a fellow member of the Transport Committee. He was educated at a good school in my constituency—for those who may be wondering, it was Hutchesons' Grammar School—and his remarks show that that obviously paid off.

I want to recommend a book by a man called Alec Ross, who was the innovation and technology adviser to President Obama during this election campaign. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) has obviously read it. Alec Ross was also the innovation and technology adviser to Hillary Clinton when she was at the State Department. The book is called "The Industries of the Future", a large chunk of which is dedicated to the issue of driverless cars. It also looks at other issues, and it provides some context for what we are discussing today.

The book looks at how the rise in the use of robotics helps not just in the vehicle industry, but in the provision of services. For example, a remarkable part of the book talks about how robotics are used to deliver some social care services in Japan. Hon. Members, if they take the time to read it, will find that absolutely remarkable. It looks at the use of robotics in the classroom, and at how young children who cannot get to a classroom can take a full part in the education system.

The book looks at the rise in the use of genetic code, the codification of money and markets, and the weaponisation of code—I am sure that that is very much on the Minister's mind as a former Minister with responsibility for cyber-security—but it also looks at the use of big data, which was briefly touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). Just as land was the material of the agricultural age and iron was the material of the industrial age, so data must surely be the material of the new information age that we find ourselves in.

As has been mentioned, this country is driving the innovation in driverless cars, but let us be entirely honest with ourselves: we are slightly behind. I accept that the Bill goes some way to bringing us up to speed and, indeed, getting us into a position from which we can lead, but self-driving taxis have already been used in Singapore, Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh. It has been said that the technology has become mature over time, and that we can get to the position in which driverless cars are a thing of the mass market. I hope we do get there, because the last thing anybody wants is for such cars to become a plaything of the rich. The technology must be something that really drives big changes in all areas of our society.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very fine speech on the nature of innovation. Is he going to touch on the very radical change that the driverless technology that he is talking about could make to our entire economy? For example, if one thinks that the average car is in use only about 10% of the time—often even less—driverless technology could allow that figure to rise to 90%. However, that would of course mean fewer cars, fewer auto workers and less need for road space, which would be a huge transformation for our economy.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I will come on to mention some of those things.

I am keen to hear more from the Minister about testing, and not just about where it will take place. As we have heard, there has not been any testing in Scotland yet. May I make a punt for my own fair city of Glasgow? Given that it was designed on the grid system, it would actually be ideal for testing driverless cars. I also want to hear more about the conditions in which the cars will be tested, because very few driverless cars have been tested in snow. In that respect, anyone coming to pretty much anywhere in Scotland at any time of the year will find some snow somewhere.

These are important issues, and although companies are developing driverless cars that can recognise the difference between a pedestrian and a cyclist or between a lamp post and another vehicle in front of them, it is quite clear that there is still some way to go. In that endeavour, the Government have my support.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman touches on such an important area that I know he will be aching to speak about: the ethics of the decision-making process. If a driverless car in his fair city of Glasgow has to make the awful decision of whether to hit a lady with a pram or to hit two nuns, which should it hit? That is a terrible and very difficult ethical choice to make, but I am sure he will guide us.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am not going to suggest it hits either, but the hon. Gentleman hits on an important point. Alec Ross travelled to 41 countries during his time at the State Department. He found that the suspicion of robotic technology is actually greater in developed western economies than it is in the east. In reality, I suspect that driverless cars will be the first major robotic that people learn to trust. If we are going to trust them, they will have to be tested so they do not hit the lady with the pram or the two nuns.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): If I may say so, the hon. Gentleman is making an extremely thoughtful speech. The socialisation of the inanimate depends on understanding the interface between the robotic technology he describes and human beings, as the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said. Understanding the impact it will have and the benefit it might bring allows the acceptance of the inanimate and socialises it accordingly.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The Minister is absolutely right.

In his first intervention, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling asked about the change this will bring to our economy. The big technological change that stands before us will perhaps bring us some unintended consequences. For example, if driverless cars become a thing of the mass market, what of the future of car parks? Local authority car parks are worth over £1 billion to the economy according to the British Parking Association, and that does not take into account private sector car parks. Mr Deputy Speaker, if you can get your car to take you to the airport and programme it to pick you up after your two weeks in Salou—though I am sure you would not be away for that long—or wherever you have chosen to spend your time, why on earth would you pay the fees, which are in some cases exorbitant, for your car to sit in the car park for a fortnight? It also raises questions about what it will mean for the workforce who drive taxis, buses or HGVs, who, it has to be said, in most cases do not have the education or qualifications to go into other skilled parts of the economy.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman is making such a fine speech that I feel I am only adding the smallest of cherries on the top of his extremely fine cake. In any moment of transition there is always a danger that some people will be left out of the moment of transformation. However, I am sure he shares my confidence that should a moment of transition happen—I look forward to it happening—there will be an opportunity for people in one form of employment to be employed in other areas, for example the caring sector. He mentions a car sitting idly in a car park for 14 days; it could instead ferry people to and from medical appointments or liberate the infirm. This is an amazing opportunity.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I welcome all the cherries the hon. Gentleman has been throwing at me from the other side of the House. He is absolutely right. In considering the workforce and the change we will be presented with—this is perhaps less for the Minister's Department and more for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy or the Department for Education—how will our education system deal with it? How do we need to restructure vocational education? As some people will win, some people will inevitably lose. I hope that Ministers, including the Minister here tonight, are heavily engaged in these discussions; otherwise, we risk protests like those we saw in Seattle in 1999 with regard to the free trade agreement. If this big technological change—I cannot wait to see it happen on the scale that will inevitably occur—is to mean anything, it must mean that it does not leave out those who hang around the bottom end of society, constantly looking to this Government and indeed to all Members of Parliament to make sure that the future belongs to them as well.

6.40 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak on the Second Reading of the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill and to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). As the Minister said, the hon. Gentleman gave a very thoughtful speech about the way forward, which saw a great number of interventions from my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat).

Before dealing with clauses 8 to 15 on the electric vehicle charging points, I want to raise some more general issues. It is good to see the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), in his place, and I echo the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) who commented on what a wonderful team of Ministers we have. When this particular Minister came before the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, he dealt with issues of air quality. Although the Bill will not in itself solve all the problems relating to air quality, many parts of it could help. What we need to do is to target these electric vehicles very much in our inner cities and our hotspots where there are high levels of NOx emissions.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): On the particular point about air quality, I understand the need for it to be improved in cities, but does my hon. Friend believe that with electric vehicles, which will need the electricity to be produced somewhere, we might end up moving the problem of the pollution of energy production to the rural parts of our country?

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend raises a very interesting point, to which I have given much thought. I think that in the real world we have to accept that the highest levels of pollution that prove to be most detrimental to people's health are mainly in inner-city areas. The electricity will have to be produced somewhere, and unless it is going to be done entirely through green technology—we will move towards that in the longer term—it will cause some pollution. We have to accept that to reduce inner-city NOx levels, there might need to be a little bit of pollution across the country. We cannot allow individuals to suffer from the high levels of nitrogen oxide that are currently in the inner cities. I have to accept that there will be some pollution somewhere else; otherwise, we will not be able to reduce the levels of pollution in our inner cities.

This is why charging points for electric vehicles are so important. It is not just this Bill that is relevant, because there may be something in the Chancellor's speech later this week. If we are to have any sort of scrappage scheme through which people could convert to electric vehicles, we need to try to target it towards our inner cities in particular, because the need to reduce pollution is at its greatest there. We can use hybrid vehicles and other types to bring us to the cities; when we are in the inner city, we will need not only electric cars but electric taxis, and we shall need to convert many of our lorries perhaps to liquid petroleum gas or something that will reduce the current levels of NOx.

Unless we do something really serious to deal with pollution in the inner city, the Government are going to be in the dock and DEFRA will sit in the dock. It is possible to reduce a little of the nitric oxide that comes

from farming, but it is not so easy to cure the problem in the inner city. That has to be done mainly through transport measures and perhaps by local government.

I had better move on to the Bill's clauses, Mr Deputy Speaker; otherwise, you will get agitated with me for going beyond what the Bill contains. I shall speak mainly to clauses 8 to 15, which deal with electric vehicle charging. I shall outline the benefits of electric vehicles in the specific clauses in order to incentivise their use. Electric vehicles are on the verge of a massive expansion in the UK, and the potential benefits are enormous, as many Members have said this evening. However, the figure for new registrations in this country is less than 2%. The figure in Norway is some 25%, so we have a little way to go, although I am sure that, in the safe hands of the Minister, it will happen overnight.

Electric vehicles mean better air quality. Toxic gases from combustion engines are linked to more than 40,000 deaths in the UK, and road transport is responsible for about 80% of nitric oxide in our inner-city hotspots. A move away from combustion engines and towards electric vehicles would cut levels of nitric oxide in the air, and would reduce the number of early deaths. British motorists currently face some of the highest fuel prices in Europe, but an electric vehicle that achieves 3 miles per kWh can cost about 4p per mile. Ultimately, that really will encourage people to buy electric cars. The AA has estimated that they are about five times cheaper to run than the average petrol car. The Chancellor may miss a little bit of fuel tax, but I think that, in terms of air quality, this is a step in the right direction. Transport produces higher carbon emissions than any other UK sector, including power generation. Moving vehicles from carbon to electric will help the UK to slash its carbon emissions further, especially as renewable energy is rapidly rising in the UK.

How can we boost electric vehicles? Although the market has grown rapidly in recent years, ultra-low emission vehicles still account for only 1.2% of new car registrations in Britain. The Government's own research shows that one in five Britons has considered buying an electric vehicle, but the biggest barrier to uptake is the lack of availability of charging points and the lack of knowledge of where to find them. I am glad that the Bill seeks to deal with those problems.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I agree with my hon. Friend about the lack of availability of charging points, but may I also ask him to join me in urging the Minister to start this project at home, on the parliamentary estate? We have only two charging points, which means that those of us who have plug-in electric cars often have to compete for a space, or cannot find one.

Neil Parish: That is a very good point. We should lead by example in the House, and if more of us have electric cars, we shall need more electric charging points. I look forward to hearing the Minister respond to my hon. Friend's point—

Mr Hayes *rose*—

Neil Parish: And I see that he is just about to do so.

Mr Hayes: I think that is an excellent point, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I know you will think so too. We will get on to it straight away. I will ask my officials—indeed,

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am asking them now, through you—to bring me some reports, as a matter of urgency, on how we can do something about the matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): It will probably be done overnight.

Neil Parish: I am sure that it will, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have every faith in the Minister. Speaking as his former Parliamentary Private Secretary, I am absolutely certain that he can achieve this—probably through his PPS. No, I must not say that; I was only being facetious.

Charging points are necessary, but we must also ensure that fast charging points are available. We do not want to leave our cars charging for a long time; they need to be charged reasonably quickly.

Clause 9 gives the Government power to require operators to provide an appropriate uniform method of accessing public charging points. People need to know that their vehicles fit the chargers. I hope that the Government will take that opportunity. There are currently myriad charging structures, memberships and prices. Clear and uniform charging structures, so that the public can plan their bills and do not feel ripped off, will boost electric vehicle take-up. Clause 10 makes it a requirement for large fuel retailers to install electric charging points. That is a common-sense change, which we have been calling for since last year. We will never boost electric car numbers to diesel or petrol levels until we have parity in refuelling infrastructure. Are there enough incentives for large garages to provide charging points when they like to sell us petrol or diesel?

Clause 11 is particularly important. It requires public information on the availability of public charging points. We need a public awareness campaign on exactly where the electric charging points are. The public need to have confidence that if they buy an electric car, they will have charging points in the vicinity. This is absolutely fundamental.

Clause 12 sets the minimum standards for charging points, including the ability to transmit data to the user, energy efficiency requirements, and the ability for data to be accessed remotely. It is a good start, but I would like the clause to go further: I would like to see minimum charging speeds as a requirement for new charging points. We need more rapid DC charging points that can charge a car to 80% capacity in 30 minutes. I am sure that the Minister is more than capable of that. This will help EVs to properly compete with petrol and diesel vehicles. I hope the Minister will consider this change, because until we can charge our EVs quickly, we will not be able to cover the distances, and that is partly what stops people getting electric vehicles. I also say to the Minister that ULEVs currently make up only 6.3% of the Government car service fleet, so the Government must get their own house in order.

The Government have the laudable aim that every new car in the UK should be an ULEV in the next 25 years. The Business Secretary says that he wants Britain to be the world leader in EVs; this is a big step in the right direction. We should be bold with our electric charging infrastructure and give the public the confidence to buy an electric car. The tangible benefits are within our grasp, and I look forward to backing this Bill in the Aye Lobby this evening.

6.51 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Just last week, I was complimenting the Government on introducing an amendment for talking buses in the Bus Services Bill, and now this week I find myself in agreement with another Bill, so I am greatly looking forward to Wednesday's Budget, when normal service will be resumed.

In this Bill, the measures on autonomous vehicle insurance are certainly a welcome look ahead; they are just a small step on the way to the future outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), but they are a welcome step nevertheless. However, we also need to start planning the necessary mobile infrastructure to allow these vehicles to be fully rolled out in the future.

Scotland must not be left behind on AVs, and, as we have heard from my hon. Friends, we must ensure that Scotland is involved in future trials of these vehicles. I am thinking here in particular of our country and rural roads. Scotland is still unique in that in many areas there are single-track roads with passing places, and it is not unusual for people to become involved in a Mexican stand-off where two vehicles come head to head and the question is which will reverse first. I would like to see how AVs tackle that dilemma; that is not quite the dilemma of the nuns or the mother and the baby in the pram, but it still needs to be overcome.

Tom Tugendhat: I would like to hear how they settle that in Glasgow.

Alan Brown: The hon. Gentleman does not want to know how they settle that in Glasgow.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) about our wish for a hub for the development of AVs in Scotland. That covers AVs from our perspective, but I particularly want to focus on ULEVs. Part 2 is okay as far as it goes. Greater clarity and consistency is undoubtedly required in information on charging points, and it is welcome that the Government are going to clear that up. That will lead to improved customer and consumer confidence, because many people are clearly still reticent about buying EVs, as they are concerned about how far they can actually travel journey-wise. Clearer information on charging points and the type of charging points will clear that up.

The key questions for the Minister, however, are whether the Bill goes far enough with respect to charging points and the roll-out of infrastructure and whether there is enough strategic thinking on this matter across Departments. The reason I pose those questions is that the Scottish Government and the UK Government share the target of all vehicles being ultra-low emission vehicles by 2050. That target exists because of air quality issues and greenhouse gas emissions. At present, transport contributes 23% of carbon dioxide emissions—it is the joint largest contributor along with power generation—so the decarbonisation of transport is absolutely vital. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) pointed out that there are 44,000 deaths a year as a result of poor air quality. That underlines the need for action in this area.

Recently, the United Nations special rapporteur on hazardous substances and waste stated:

“Air pollution plagues the UK”,

and particularly affects children. He also said that there was an

“urgent need for political will by the UK government to make timely, measurable and meaningful interventions”.

I should point out that, in November 2016, the Government lost a court case relating to their proposals to tackle air pollution for the second time in 18 months. There is no doubt that more needs to be done to improve the roll-out of ultra-low emission vehicles. In January last year, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), suggested that the sale of ULEVs had reached a tipping point, and a Department for Transport press release last September trumpeted the fact that there had been a 49% increase in registrations of such vehicles compared with the previous year. The reality is that the registration of ULEVs represents only 1.2% of vehicles, and a 50% increase on 0.8% of sales is not really a tipping point. We have a long way to go.

This Government have to do more. They should copy some of the initiatives that the Scottish Government have undertaken, including the low carbon transport fund, which offers interest-free loans of up to £35,000 for new hybrid and electric vehicles, with a repayment period of up to six years. Businesses can access loans of up to £100,000. However, even that is not enough. At the moment, we have the paradox of low oil prices keeping fuel costs down, making a switch to electric vehicles even less attractive in the short term.

I have touched on air quality. The bottom line is that need to get diesel vehicles off the road. The UK Government must be bold in that regard. I also suggest that those who have already bought diesel vehicles in good faith should not be penalised. I have been contacted by constituents who are concerned that they will be penalised for having bought such vehicles, even though they did so in good faith. Do the Government have any plans to help those people and to truly disincentivise the purchase of diesel cars, rather than simply leaving that to local initiatives? A wee, independent, oil-rich country called Norway has managed to achieve a market share of 18% for electric vehicles. What lessons are the Government learning from Norway?

As I have said, the switch to ULEVs is moving at a snail's pace. However, while we can get fixated on the roll-out of electric cars, the biggest polluters are large diesel vehicles. We have started to see real progress with buses, and the Scottish Government are leading the way with the hydrogen fleet in Aberdeen. We are also seeing buses switching to biofuels, which is welcome. But the elephant in the room is heavy goods vehicles, particularly transport refrigeration units. Approximately 50% of TRUs, which keep goods cold in transit, are powered by a secondary diesel engine. These small engines emit 29 times more particulates and oxides of nitrogen than the vehicle's main diesel engine. The main engines are governed by European standards, but those separate refrigeration units are not regulated at all. There is a huge disparity there.

Also, those secondary units can use red diesel, so the Government are providing a subsidy that is enabling the units to pollute the atmosphere and cause the kind of air quality issues on which the Government have already lost court cases. The Government need to rethink how they handle the regulation of secondary units. To be fair, they have invested in research and development to

fund the development of zero-emission refrigeration units, so it makes sense for them to provide more funding to allow haulage company owners to upgrade their units, which would improve air quality and, in the long run, provide health benefits and reduce costs for the health service. Providing funding would lead to a virtuous circle.

I touched on research and development and, going back to strategic thinking, the Government need to provide better joined-up thinking on R and D for low-emission transport and renewable energy. We should bear in mind that this Government have wrecked the renewables sector with a 95% reduction in investment by 2020, with one in six jobs in the sector being under threat. The Government have also withdrawn funding for carbon capture and storage. If we truly are to meet our green energy targets by 2050, the Government need to rethink their policies as a whole. I welcome the Bill, but the Government need to consider things across the board rather than in isolation.

7.1 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I rise to support the Bill with a mixture of joy and apprehension. I feel joy because I see foresee the great things that it will bring to people's lives. If those who would otherwise not be able to drive find themselves with the liberty of independent travel, that will be a very good thing indeed. I think particularly of people who may be disabled or blind. Also, given the commute I had this morning—I happened to drive in—I think how much it would have been improved if I had not had to drive along the A40. I do view the development of automated vehicles with a degree of joy, but my apprehension, as I indicated earlier, is that I do not want conventional driving to be banned. Some of us enjoy driving or riding a motorcycle as a thing of pleasure and take some joy from the skill of driving for ourselves.

Although a ban may seem a preposterous, ludicrous suggestion, I raise it because an enthusiast for the policy and for driverless vehicle technology took some pleasure in telling me that motorcycling would have to be banned one day because motorcycles cannot, or ought not, to be made autonomous because they would be dangerous alongside self-driving cars. I therefore view such developments with a degree of apprehension.

Tom Tugendhat: Coming all the way from Wycombe, my hon. Friend will know that not only is there the possibility of having driverless vehicles, and therefore autonomous vehicles, but horses could have been abandoned and yet have not been. Despite the fact that technology has moved on, horses have never been more popular than they are today. I hope that my hon. Friend is not assuming that we have to abandon all legacy technologies just because technology moves on.

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend is right. We still enjoy our bicycles and all the rest of it. Should the dread day come that driving is banned, I do not doubt that things would continue on the racetrack, but my point is that an enthusiast for these new technologies—a member of a Conservative party policy group—put it to me with some joy that motorcycles would have to be banned because he considers them dangerous and incompatible with self-driving cars.

Karl McCartney: I thank my hon. Friend and fellow enthusiast for giving way. As someone who has never ridden a horse, a donkey, or even a pony, I can say that some of us already view horses as autonomous vehicles.

Mr Baker: Not only are they autonomous, but I would argue that they are even more dangerous for that very reason. However, that is by the bye and perhaps a diversion from the Bill.

As I said, I am a self-declared petrol head, but we have nothing to fear from electric vehicles. If anyone wants to check my YouTube channel, they will find a review of the Agility Sietta R electric motorcycle—a vehicle with excellent torque—and that brings me on to the idea of charging. It is not a market failure that there is diversity in the marketplace. Competition is not a failure but the way by which we make progress, so I encourage the Government not to stamp out competition and experimentation as we make progress with this new technology and in this new market.

Kit Malthouse: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should also encourage competing technologies? One issue with electric vehicles is the method of power storage and, historically, the Government and this House have put a huge amount of effort, resources and subsidy into the battery, and little comparative resource into hydrogen, as a store of power. The fuel cell is the technology of the future, and the battery is possibly a temporary technology like the fax machine. The Government should be allowing such competition, too.

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and makes a good point. As an idea, the fuel cell's time is still to come. He makes a wise intervention.

On the substance of the Bill, I exercise my pedantry as an Oxford-educated software engineer—not something I have been able to do recently—by saying that in clause 4, on accidents resulting from unauthorised alterations or failure to update software, subsection (1)(a) addresses “alterations to the vehicle's operating system”.

If there is one group of people more pedantic than software engineers, it is lawyers and courts. Should an accident arise because of a failure to update software, that definition would be tested in court.

Underneath the operating system is firmware in non-volatile memory within hardware. The operating system is loaded on to volatile memory, and on top of that is application software. A self-driven or autonomous car will probably run on that application software. If it were to be tested in court, I fear we might find problems if the Bill, as enacted, talks about a vehicle's operating system.

I encourage the Government to consult specialists in the industry, rather than only taking the advice of an out-of-date software engineer, but it is important that the Bill uses the right terminology to ensure that the right software is updated and that, therefore, the law meets its intended purpose of ensuring that people are insured and that liability falls where it should when there has been a failure to update software.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is perhaps trying to get at the lack of detail in the Bill about the regulation of that software. Given what he has just said, such regulation would surely be enormously important.

Mr Baker: That is interesting, and I love the way the hon. Gentleman has framed that for me. The point I was trying to get to is the one I made, which is that the language of clause 4 must be tight enough to ensure that, should it be tested in court, we do not find that the law fails as a result of describing software as the “operating system”, which is the wrong term. I dread the day that this House starts regulating how software is written. Much as I respect my colleagues in this House, the last thing I would want to see in legislation, having been a professional software engineer, is detail of how to write software, particularly safety-critical software. I will be grateful for having done my MSc in computer science when the House is able to have a detailed discussion of Object-Z, but that day is far off. We should not be legislating for how safety-critical systems should be engineered.

I have two other points on the Bill. I am glad we are now legislating for offences relating to the use of lasers. I was an engineer, rather than a pilot, but I can see the issue. The Government are wise. If anything, I would ask whether the penalty is harsh enough given that we could be talking about airliners with large numbers of passengers.

My final point is about drones. Having looked at the legislation on remotely piloted vehicles, I think there is a danger of constraining things not just too tightly but quite wrongly. If we were to regulate drones such as the DJI Phantom, which are hobbyists’ toys for taking video footage, as if they were aircraft, we could end up ruling out perfectly legitimate uses—for example, the man who uses a drone to inspect tiles on rooftops so that he can reduce householders’ bills because, by doing so, he can avoid the expense of putting up the scaffolding that he is now legally required to use before going up on a roof. By investing in a drone and flying it near someone’s home, this person saves the householder a fortune, without endangering them. Were we to regulate these things as aircraft, he would not be able to do that.

Mr Hayes: Let me reassure my hon. Friend that we are consulting on those matters, and his contribution to that consultation is eagerly awaited and most welcome.

Mr Baker: I am grateful for the addition to my workload.

I wish to make a final point about diesel, which has been mentioned. I drive a diesel vehicle, and I am conscious that there is a good argument to say that so many of us are in diesel cars because Governments encouraged us to drive them, in the interests of reducing CO₂. Let us not compound one bad incentive with other poor incentives. Let us just be a little more humble about what we encourage people to do in large numbers and leave room for experimentation and for markets to work, provided always that people carry the costs of their own decisions.

7.10 pm

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): This modest Bill is clearly uncontentious. It seeks to adjust legislation to new technology, but from the red flag Acts onwards the House of Commons has not been great on anticipating either the potential or pitfalls of technological advance. Victorian Members used to fulminate against the railways, on the grounds that they led to revolution and moral torpor.

In truth, it would have been hard for those Members to have anticipated the astounding success of the internal combustion engine, and the huge behavioural, commercial and social change that flowed from it.

Cars are potential killing machines driven by millions of people, of a variety of dispositions and intelligences. The fact that the car does not simply create havoc is due to intelligent legislation which has evolved over time. As I am sure the Minister would agree, it is always better to have legislation in place before we get to the problems, rather than after. I apologise if at this point I sound like a petrol head—the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) has confessed to being one and I must, too—but I am sure that we have not quite sized up all the problems relating to these new cars and new technologies. Indeed, we probably cannot do so. I recognise that autonomous cars and electric cars exist as developed technologies and will only improve, and that we already have satisfactory transport in the sky and on the rails which is almost autonomous. We also know, and we all agree, that human error is the principal cause of accidents. However, successfully trialling a few vehicles on an open road in California or in dedicated areas in the UK does not enable us to figure out, in any easy way, the consequences of their mass adoption, especially within a heavily congested network with a mixed ecology of driven and autonomous vehicles. Sure, we need to get insurance for those that exist and charging capacity for electrics, but what will mass roll-out look like? What desirable and undesirable behavioural changes will result?

I am sceptical about the mass adoption of electric vehicles, which may be a strange thing for a Liberal Democrat to say, as the party has always been massively enthusiastic on this score. However, there are big implications for the grid; for greenhouse emissions, as this depends on how we actually generate the electricity and how clean that is; for the streetscape and for planning authorities; for the world’s resources, given all these batteries which, to some extent, use rare elements; and for the second-hand market, which is not doing so well in electric vehicles, and on which I heavily depend.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman is making a fine speech, from a luddite perspective. I appreciate that he was instrumental in passing the red flag Acts through this House in the early 1900s, but surely he can see the liberation of resources and of planning-scape, the reduction of the impact of the vehicle and the liberation of the citizen that all that can bring.

John Pugh: Not necessarily, but I did listen to the hon. Gentleman talking about the Deputy Speaker’s voyage to the airport and saying that he would not need to leave his car in the car park. The hon. Gentleman was looking on the positive side, but we can also look at the negative side: the Deputy Speaker’s car has had to travel back to parts of Lancashire and then come out to get him again, so he has filled up the road more. We can spin these things either way.

Tom Tugendhat: I am terribly grateful that the hon. Gentleman is giving me the opportunity to reply, but he is assuming a level of ownership of today’s vehicle that is simply not relevant. If one looks at a vehicle as a means of transportation and sees it more in the form of a train, one sees that Mr Deputy Speaker uses a vehicle to get him to the airport and then gets out and gets on

his plane, and somebody else gets in the vehicle and goes all the way back to Lancashire. Lucky Lancashire, to have spared the use of two cars.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The good thing is that I do not have a plane, either.

John Pugh: We invented the train some time ago; there are trains available, even in Lancashire. My fundamental point is that electric vehicles are probably a less flexible technology than either the internal combustion engine or the hydrogen fuel cell, and the technology is wholly inapplicable in the case of heavy goods vehicles, in which they surely do not have much of a place. Even if I am wrong about that, there are some legislative problems if we anticipate a silent city of electric vehicles moving about at pace and the hazards that that may present for pedestrian safety.

What would prevent drivers of ordinary cars from bullying autonomous vehicles in the knowledge that they must give way? They might cut out at junctions, as I believe they already intend to do. What responsibility does a driver or owner have when he initiates a journey? He may be tempted to plan a journey much longer or more hazardous—for example, at night—than he previously might have done, or more frequently than if he had to drive himself. Would he have to nominate a co-pilot, and what would be the safety protocols there? Can the roads cope with possible additional vehicle use? People have anticipated elderly people who had given up using their cars returning to them, and the use of cars by disabled people becoming far more common.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I fear the hon. Gentleman sounds as though he would have argued, when the lightbulb was invented, that candle makers would be put out of business. I hear a lot of negatives, some of which I accept are entirely valid concerns, but can he enlighten us as to the Liberal Democrats' vision for this new, innovative technology, on which we cannot be left behind?

John Pugh: I am presenting my personal observations. The hon. Gentleman has acknowledged that there are problems and I am simply alluding to them.

Alan Brown: Did the hon. Gentleman not make the case for autonomous vehicles when he talked about people potentially making long-distance journeys when they are tired? The whole problem with drivers at the moment is that they fall asleep at the wheel and lose concentration. Autonomous vehicles must be an improvement on that.

John Pugh: We are just looking at different sides of the same problems. It is quite obvious that people will not get tired in autonomous vehicles in the same way, but they will then perhaps make longer journeys than they otherwise might have. Both points remain valid.

If people are going to go along the motorways in convoy and at the right speed all the time, have we not considered the thought that everybody could get into the same vehicle? Have we not, through a back door, invented the bus all over again?

There are imponderables from a manufacturers' side. It is easy enough to insist on technology that does not let people drive if it is unsafe, but once they are on the road, vehicle failure midstream is always a possibility,

even if the software is up to date. There might be unexpected damage to sensors or equipment because of conditions such as bad weather or through accidental damage. In responding to a change of circumstance mid-journey, at what point is it the driver's responsibility? If road signals fail, road markings are obscured or traffic is unexpectedly redirected in a haphazard fashion, at what point does the manufacturer, the council or the passenger take the blame should an accident occur?

We can leave out all the hypothetical moral dilemmas involving nuns or how a vehicle would distinguish between a black bin bag waving and a child frozen in terror when collision is inevitable. Machines would make different calculations, and I am sure there would be solutions. I suspect that with the development of artificial intelligence, machines will better reflect our moral preferences and become smarter. The other day, I was torturing myself by thinking about what would happen if two autonomous vehicles met on a single road, on which one could not pass the other, and one had to give way but both systems predicted that the other would. One would have a sort of parallel to the Balaam's ass dilemma.

The Bill is a modest attempt to tackle the issues I have outlined. The pious hope behind it is that the tricky issues will eventually be ironed out in court. But courts can operate only within the law they have, and my expectation is that technology will move faster than the law and we will be back here soon.

7.19 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I am generally supportive of the aims of this Bill, not least as the mother of an 18-year-old son who has just passed his driving test, as insuring him is almost impossible. The cheapest quote we have had so far is £1,700. Autonomous vehicles will offer young people and those who have given up driving—the elderly and the disabled—an opportunity to get into vehicles.

I am excited by the technology surrounding autonomous vehicles because much of it is powered by the photonics industry. It is really quite fortuitous that, only a few months ago, we set up the all-party group on photonics. I am delighted to be standing here as the chair of that group. It is almost as if the timing of this Bill has been set especially for us. Driverless cars are operated by light detection and ranging—LIDAR—technology, which allows for smooth traffic flow and reduced fuel consumption. Ultimately, the technology leads to safer transport.

The UK is perfectly placed to develop this technology. We have a world-leading photonics industry. In particular, I wish to highlight the photonics companies across the central belt of Scotland. I also want to mention a group at Oxford University that is developing a low-cost autonomous navigation system. A robot car will navigate using lasers and cameras linked to a computer. A horizontal laser on the number plate detects obstacles and halts the car to avoid a collision, while a vertical laser casts a curtain of light on the surroundings to make a 3D model of the environment. When the car takes the same route the second time, it recognises where it is and can drive accordingly.

A road train, which is a convoy of closely packed vehicles, might be one of the first applications of driverless cars. It is likely that it will appear first on motorways. The hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) raised

[Carol Monaghan]

concerns about his ability to continue to use his motorcycle, but I am sure there will be plenty of roads available that can be used by vehicles operating in a less autonomous fashion. There is certainly a real potential to get traffic moving on our motorways.

We have talked about the possibility of trials and pilots, and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) mentioned the grid system in Glasgow. I will add to that by saying that Glasgow is a perfect urban setting in which to hold a trial.

In Scotland, we have some difficult issues to overcome. We have heard about single-track roads, and while I will not talk about nuns and prams, there are often obstacles such as cattle grids and sheep that these cars will have to take into account. The bigger problem for rural Scotland, and for rural areas across the UK, is how these cars will communicate. Driverless cars have to communicate with their surroundings. If, as is the case in some areas, there is not a 3G network available, how will these cars be able to proceed?

Drew Hendry: I raised the subject of mobile connectivity earlier. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that the UK Government take an outside-in approach with new licensing for the mobile spectrum auctions?

Carol Monaghan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. There is real concern that a lot of the spectrum that has been licensed before has been licensed for the benefit of companies, not consumers, and this is an ongoing problem for many people not just across Scotland, but in rural UK generally.

One of the challenges that we will face as this technology develops is dealing with our massive skills shortage in engineering and photonics. We currently have a huge number of EU nationals working in those fields, but we are yet to see any guarantees for those workers from the Government. We are talking about unilateral guarantees because those highly skilled workers have job prospects worldwide. We should be rolling out the red carpet for them, rather than for a certain President.

I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) that women are a massive group who are ignored in STEM careers. Someone once asked me why I keep going on about getting more women into STEM careers and whether it is just about gender equality. Yes, gender equality is important, but we also have massive skills shortages and a huge group of people whom we are not tapping into. We need to start taking advantage of that raw potential.

Drew Hendry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is being generous in giving way. Is it not an absolute scandal that 50% of the potential workforce we need in that industry are not being encouraged in—girls and young women?

Carol Monaghan: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. One of the big challenges we face as a society is the need to look at the signals we give not just to girls who are considering their career options, but to parents. What are we saying to wider society? An engineer is not just somebody who wears an oily overall; an engineer can also be somebody working in the field of

photonics and developing driverless technology. We really need to plug that. We need to see female engineers on programmes such as “EastEnders”, and then we might start to see some progress.

The industrial strategy Green Paper that was published a few weeks ago referred to key enabling technologies. If autonomous vehicles are to progress at a pace that keeps us up to date with the rest of the world, we must ensure that we properly support the photonics and engineering industries and ensure that enabling technologies are given proper priority.

Let me move on to low-emission vehicles. We have heard a few comments today about charging points. What will happen to the national grid when we all arrive home in the evening and plug in our electric vehicles? We already know that the national grid has certain peaks, for example during advert breaks in particular programmes. We can look at smart charging technology that will have different cars charging at different points, but we are still talking about a much higher current being drawn from the national grid, and the source of that energy will be power stations. Are we simply switching from dirty fuel in our cars to dirty fuel in our power stations?

Drew Hendry: Again, I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous in giving way. Is not it true that the use of renewable energy is the way ahead to ensure that we can cope with those loads? UK Government policy, by stifling renewable energy, is hampering a technology that could solve that very problem.

Carol Monaghan: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He has just taken my next point—thanks very much. Once again I will use the phrase “untapped potential”. Renewable energy really is the way ahead. I do not want to get pollution out of our cities only to put it into industrial areas with power stations, whether they are coal, oil, gas or nuclear.

Karl McCartney: The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and touches on a point that I raised during an intervention. She took an intervention about renewable energy from the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), but renewables might not be the way forward. It is not just industrial areas that may experience an increase in pollution. Rural areas such as Lincolnshire, or the east midlands as a whole, where lots of power is currently generated, will have to generate even more power to create that electricity. In cities such as Lincoln, companies already have to pay extortionate amounts for electricity between the hours of 4 o’clock in the afternoon and 8 o’clock in the evening because of the peaks, and there is no way that we will ever be able to charge a multitude of electric cars with renewable energy.

Carol Monaghan: I disagree. Has the hon. Gentleman visited Scotland at any point? I struggle to go out in Scotland on a day when it is not windy, so we could be tapping into that potential. There is a huge possibility there. Nuclear is often billed as the clean energy source, but tell that to the workers in India who are mining the uranium ore—it is certainly not clean for them. The Bill needs to cover different forms of low-emission vehicles, such as hydrogen fuel cell vehicles. That technology has been pushed aside to a certain extent, but we need to ensure that there is a possibility to develop it.

In conclusion, I generally support the aims of the Bill and I am excited by the technology. However, we need to ensure that we are enabling that technology to progress, that we look after EU nationals working in science and research, and that we consider how various types of fuel can be dirty.

7.31 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in this Chamber, whatever the occasion, and we have heard some valuable contributions today. There has been a consensus in support of the Government. While we often support the Government, we also criticise them when things are not done right, but today we have not had the opportunity to be as critical as we might normally be. As the Democratic Unionist party's spokesperson for transport here, it is always a privilege to speak on any Bill of this sort and to highlight its issues, some of which are pertinent to Northern Ireland. Hon. Members have spoken about Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom.

This wide-ranging Bill covers many issues, with some of its measures simply providing clarity. The Government have done well to bring those forward and we thank them for that. Clause 22, which will ensure that the use of a laser pen that dazzles a pilot becomes a criminal offence, is common sense. It is good to see that that measure and the cap for vehicle testing are in the Bill.

I have a particular interest in insurance for self-driving cars. Hon. Members have given us examples about that—plenty of them. Indeed, one way of shortening the winter was to listen to all those stories—I could almost feel my beard growing—but they were a useful way for hon. Members to raise important points about insurance.

In my youth—I suspect like others in the Chamber—this concept was something for sci-fi stories or Batman films, but we are living in times when technology is taking us forward with great leaps and bounds into the future. This technology is so advanced that it might be possible—and, indeed, probably a lot safer—to put a destination into the system and let the car take us there. If this technology is available, it is clear that we must legislate to ensure that protection is still available for those involved in accidents, which might well still occur. The staff in my office often say to me that technology is great. Well, it is, when it works, but when it comes to controlling a vehicle, protection for other drivers must be in place. I certainly agree with the Government's approach on that.

The hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who has just left the Chamber, always espouses the enjoyment he gets from riding motorbikes. I get the same pleasure from driving a four-wheeled vehicle. There is an enjoyment in driving. Having a driverless car is not everybody's cup of tea, but we have to accept that technology moves forward for a reason.

The Bill will enable a driver involved in an accident to claim compensation if the incident took place when the car was driving autonomously. Under the rules, insurers would be able to try to recover their costs from the vehicle manufacturers. I have noted that there are a few exclusions—namely, that drivers involved in an accident while the vehicle's self-driving system was in control would not be covered if they had made unauthorised changes to its software or failed to install an update.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) referred to the insurance premiums needed for her son to drive a car, and I remember when my boys were growing up. I am a member of the Ulster Farmers Union, which gives exceptionally good premiums for insurance. They were much below the cost on the market, and my three boys were able to take advantage of that. However, the question I want to ask about the legislation the Government have brought forward is, what is the Minister doing to ensure that premiums for driverless cars are monitored and that competition rules ensure that prices are kept down? It is important that we do that.

There are multiple levels of vehicle automation. The proposals state that the Department for Transport will be tasked with determining what is classified as a self-driving car. There is still work to be done on ensuring that those responsible for these cars know exactly where they stand, but the Bill provides a structure, and it is welcome to those who use these vehicles and to other drivers on the road.

Many Members have spoken about electric car-charging points, and I have asked many questions about them in the years I have been in the House. The Government have made money available centrally for the devolved Administrations, including the Northern Ireland Assembly. That money enabled the Assembly to introduce charging points across the whole of Northern Ireland. Perhaps the Minister could inform us in his response what discussions have taken place with the Northern Ireland Assembly that those grants will continue.

With those grants, we have been able to ensure that electric charging points could be introduced, incentivising people to drive electric cars. The competition seems to be moving in the right direction, but take-up is low. Again, what are we doing to ensure that it increases?

The other point on electric charging points is where they are located. They have to be on the high street and at the shopping centres—they have to be where the cars are. That is important. Again, the Government are going in the right direction, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

The other clauses that are of interest to me concern ATOL protection. Clauses 18, 19 and 20 in part 3 enhance protections. Again, I welcome those protections, which the Secretary of State referred to in his introduction, so they are clearly a core issue for the Government. It is good to see that and the Secretary of State's ability to provide regulation through clauses 18, 19 and 20.

There are very many travel websites available, and the difficulty lies in ensuring that holidays are protected should difficulties arise. With the ash cloud in Iceland a few years ago, we saw the importance of protecting a holiday. Indeed, I had staff members at the time who travelled to Belfast City airport in the mornings to speak with the team there to try to get constituents home from Iceland at a time of extreme difficulty. Their money was running out, and they did not have the insurance to cover them.

The ability to repatriate holidaymakers in the event of unforeseen circumstances is vital. The enhancements the Government have brought forward seek to provide for that where people use websites to book their holidays. My office staff always encourage people to ensure that their holidays are ATOL-protected, and the Government do as well.

[Jim Shannon]

In conclusion, these enhancements are necessary. The wisdom to bring us in line with the EU, but also to have the freedom to alter things to suit our needs outside the EU, is what is needed. We must provide in Bills in this House for what future technologies will change. I welcome the protection that has been offered, and I hope to see the Bill progress in a timely manner. Well done to all those who have been involved in it and who have made valuable contributions today.

7.38 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I, too, thank all those hon. Members who have contributed to today's debate: the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), who leads for the Scottish National party, the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), and the hon. Members for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker)—a self-confessed petrol-head—and the hon. Members for Southport (John Pugh), for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). All of them, in different ways, made highly perceptive speeches and posed questions it will be important for the Minister to pick up in winding up the debate. Indeed, many of them also raised issues that we will need to pursue further in Committee.

We have been waiting patiently, for some months, for the Bill to make its way to its Second Reading, although when we talked about it in the past, it was known as the modern transport Bill. Apparently its name had to be changed because the word “modern” is not considered a parliamentary term. Make of that what you will, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I can understand if the original title created difficulties for the Minister of State, given his love of classics and his disagreements with what he described last year as modernist determinism. Whatever the Bill is called, I can confirm that Labour will not oppose its Second Reading. Indeed, we broadly support its aims. May I add my thanks to the Minister of State for the collegiate way in which he has approached it so far? I am sure that that spirit will continue throughout its Committee stage.

I am sure that the parts of the Bill that will attract most attention, in Committee and during its other stages, and as has happened today, are those concerned with automotive issues. Before I come to those, though, I will say a few words about some of the other things that the Bill covers.

The Bill clarifies the basis on which diversionary courses that are used as an alternative to fixed penalty notices can be charged, and in another section and other clauses it proposes greater use of the private sector to carry out a number of the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency's vehicle testing duties. Both of those changes may make sense, but we will want to be assured in Committee that neither of them will have adverse effects. It is timely to remind the Government of what the Transport Committee and so many others have told them, namely that however valuable diversionary courses are, they are in no way a substitute for the proper enforcement of the laws that we have passed in this

place to keep our roads safe, and that cuts of up to a third in traffic police numbers are incompatible with that effective enforcement.

The changes that the Bill makes to the licensing relationship between the Civil Aviation Authority and NATS appear to have widespread support from stakeholders. I hope that Ministers will confirm, in response to the question asked by my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State at the start of the debate, that they have no plans to pursue any further privatisation of NATS. There will, of course, be questions to address in Committee about the impact that Brexit may have on the safe and efficient management of our skies.

Likewise, the Bill's provisions relating to the air travel organiser's licence arise from a European directive and offer the prospect of better protection for holidaymakers. Again, however, in Committee we will want to press Ministers for more detail, both on that directive and on the implications of Brexit.

I am pleased that the Government are taking action to address the problem of lasers being shone at aircraft and other vehicles. We do not, however, understand why Ministers are not using the opportunity presented by the Bill to introduce proposals to ensure safety and better regulation with regard to the use of drones. I know that they are consulting on that issue, but the timetable for that consultation and for the Bill is entirely in their hands. The Bill could be an important opportunity to sort out that matter, but it has not been included, so we put Ministers on notice that we want them to act. We will pursue that in Committee.

I now turn to those parts of the Bill that deal with automotive technology. We are living through a fourth industrial revolution, which is transforming our horizons in automotive technology and automotive travel. Connected information systems are already starting to enable us to make smart choices about how and where journeys are most appropriately taken by car and when other forms of mobility are more appropriate. There is no more powerful example of why we need to be better at making those smart choices than the 40,000 people who die prematurely every year because of the air quality crisis that is choking our towns and cities, and to which emissions from road transport are a major contributor—a theme that has come up several times during this debate. But the choices we make will not simply be about the journeys for which we use cars or the kind of engine that powers the car. We will also be talking about how and when the driver wishes to be in control of the vehicle, and when to switch control to the technology in the vehicle. It is an exciting prospect, which potentially has huge benefits for road safety. It is also a very challenging prospect, not least in relation to liability when something goes wrong. That is why the Bill is right to mandate insurance for a vehicle when it is controlled by its technology rather than by its driver. As we have heard in many contributions today, however, that equation is far from simple and that aspect of the Bill requires scrutiny.

The problem with the Bill is that Ministers seek to future-proof the legislation by giving themselves very wide-ranging powers not only to determine the rules but to define even the vehicles to which the rules will apply. Of course, none of the technology stands still and it will be impossible to cover everything in the Bill, so we accept that many issues will have to be covered by

secondary legislation. But that cannot mean that Ministers should be given a blank cheque. We want to know the criteria by which Ministers will make decisions; we want to know whom they will consult and how; and we want to make sure there are regular reviews of progress on the effectiveness of the measures in the Bill and the rate of technological advance in the areas that it seeks to regulate. If the Bill ends up being behind the curve, and if it leads to spiralling insurance costs for automated vehicles, it will be self-defeating.

The Bill is also right to mandate improvements in the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles across the UK. For that infrastructure to be fit for purpose, moreover, it has to be of sufficient scale, the charge points have to work with a range of different vehicle makes and the pricing has to be clear and transparent. I welcome the fact that the Bill tries to address all those things. Once again, however, it concentrates on giving Ministers powers to develop regulations covering the charging infrastructure through secondary legislation. I can see why an element of that is required to future-proof the legislation, but this cannot simply be blank-cheque land. Ministers need to be clear now that they will carry out meaningful consultation as they devise their plans, and that the plans, once introduced, will be open to the scrutiny they deserve.

Motorway infrastructure is not the only issue, but several comments have been made on Second Reading that deserve attention, not least those about the impact on the national grid of the extension of charging point infrastructure envisaged in the Bill. Expanding infrastructure for charging electric vehicles on motorways is a key part of creating the conditions for many more people and companies to switch to ultra-low emission vehicles in future, but it is only part of the picture. Electric vehicles will be an important part of that future but so, too, as we have heard, will hydrogen fuel cell and other technologies. In the journey towards an ultra-low emission future, intermediate technologies such as LPG are also important. Our infrastructure strategy must reflect all those things.

The capital cost of buying an ultra-low emission vehicle and uncertainty about residual values and battery ranges are significant barriers to more rapid expansion of the market in electric and ultra-low emission vehicles. It will be for the industry to deliver solutions to the technological aspects of those issues, and rapid progress is being made, but Government can help to accelerate the pace of change by encouraging more active procurement of ultra-low emission vehicles by public authorities and putting in place the right consumer incentives. It is difficult to know how the cuts that the Government have made to grant support for plug-in vehicles are compatible with the consumer incentives that are needed.

At a broader level, an active industrial policy is vital to make sure that the UK is in pole position in developing and making the connected, automated and ultra-low emission vehicles of the future, and in creating the highly skilled jobs that a modern economy needs, as well as in boosting the market for the vehicles themselves. If ever there was a day when it was appropriate to emphasise that, it is today, when PSA has announced its purchase of Vauxhall/Opel from General Motors. We cannot afford to relax and let someone else do the driving on that.

We also need a laser-like focus on building our skills base, as people in the automotive industry have urged us time and again. The hon. Member for Glasgow

North West (Carol Monaghan) was right to emphasise the gender dimension to building such a skills base. Let us remember that we are not only talking about the skills in automotive research development and manufacturing, important though those are. If people need a CORGI—Council for Registered Gas Installers—certificate to repair a gas boiler, is it not time we had proper accreditation of qualifications for maintaining and servicing the new generation of sophisticated, connected and automated vehicles?

This is a worthwhile Bill, but the transition to a low-carbon, low-emission and sustainable future is a journey in itself. The Bill is a contribution to that, but the Government need to do much more to make it happen.

7.51 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): I have just over two hours in which to sum up this debate, and it will not be easy. It is with great pleasure that I close the Second Reading debate on this Bill. It has been an excellent afternoon's and evening's debate, without a glimpse of animus, a hint of acrimony or a moment of contumely. In that spirit, I thank very much all who have contributed to the important consideration of this important subject.

The Bill is not politically charged or partisan. We act in the national interest and for the common good. I am grateful to Labour Front Benchers for their kind comments about the spirit in which we have embarked on this process. They can be assured that that will continue during its scrutiny. By the way, as they have said, it is right for the Opposition to hold us to account and that they should critique the Bill. I look forward to such discussions and debates in Committee and beyond, because I know that the Bill will be improved with that kind of considered and measured scrutiny.

As many of those who spoke have said, the Bill is certainly prescient, pertinent and, I might even say, pellucid—pearl-like—in its quality. However, that does not mean that we should not listen and learn from its further consideration. As well as the Government, other parties will help to frame the shape and form of the legislation; it is right that they should because we are preparing, together, for the future. As I have said, this has to be driven by the wellbeing of all our people. We share a commitment—do we not?—to ensuring that the UK remains one of the best places in the world for the research and development of the next generation of transport technology that is fit for those to come.

As the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said, these things must be shaped by the influence they have on people's lives and life chances. It is true, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) described so eloquently, that technological change is rapid, dramatic and—as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) said—perhaps even revolutionary. However, it has to be measured against the difference it makes to those who enjoy it, and those who do so must not be limited to the privileged few; it must be for the many. It is also true that the Bill must ensure that the UK benefits from the economic and social opportunities that the next generation of technology will provide. This is not a Bill that tries too hard to do too much, but instead a Bill to pave the way, carefully, to the future.

[Mr John Hayes]

Winston Churchill once said that the future is unknowable but the past should give us hope. The lesson of the past is that good government must always attend to the future, a future with all its potential and pitfalls, as the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) described it. It is the Government's ascription of value to the future, as well as to the present, that motivates us in putting this proposed legislation before the House. Putative technology is rapidly changing, but we cannot predict exactly how it will develop.

Let me say what the Bill is not. It is not prescriptive. It directs us to the future, but it does not try to dictate it because we simply cannot. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield said in his summing up, that presents a dilemma for the Government. Should we delay to be certain and risk falling behind, or legislate now with the risk of error? It is true, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said, that these matters are changing rapidly. By the way, I would be delighted to attend her recently formed all-party group. That sounds as though I have invited myself, but I am sure she will accept my suggestion in the spirit with which it is offered to talk through some of the drama of the rapid changes she described.

In truth, we must do what we can now and leave what we could do for the future. This measured approach characterises the Bill. I recognise that, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield said, no one in this House, particularly the Opposition, would want to give the Government what he described as a blank cheque. It is right that we consult properly and fully and that we set out as much as we can about how further developments will happen. It is true that the Bill paves the way to the future through a series of powers taken by the Government, but it is right, too, that those powers should be framed in a form that the House will respect, as a means of further scrutiny and shared consideration. I understand that call and will respond to it.

The Bill, as the Secretary of State set out, will do a number of important things. It will make it compulsory for drivers of automated vehicles to have insurance that covers innocent "drivers" who are legitimately disengaged from the driving task, as well as any innocent third parties involved in a collision. The Bill will give the Secretary of State powers to improve the charge point infrastructure for electric vehicles, powers to create technical standards, enable interoperability and ensure consumers have consistent information on pricing, location and availability.

The need to ensure that the charging infrastructure is reasonably and fairly spread lies at the heart of our ambitions. As was said by many contributors to the debate, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), it is right that rural areas across the country should have access to charging points. We do not want them to be focused entirely on urban areas, a point raised by other hon. Members, too. My hon. Friend also made a point about the rapidity of charging vehicles. It is important that we not only accelerate the roll-out of electric vehicle infrastructure at key locations, such as motorway service areas, but make charge points modern and flexible and take advantage of technological change, so that people can charge their vehicles more quickly.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) said, it is important that we take account of the regulatory environment, both in respect of electric vehicles and automated vehicles, and we will do so. He is right to suggest that that will change as the technology changes, and I understand his call perfectly.

Our management of those providing our air traffic services will be improved through more appropriate control of the licences under which they operate, including enforcement tools and unlocking access to more efficient forms of finance. Holidaymakers will see their protection against the insolvency of travel companies extended to cover a broader range of holidays. Protection will also be aligned with that offered across Europe to allow UK-established companies to sell more easily throughout Europe and across borders.

Commercial vehicle owners will be given access to a greater range of sites to undergo their mandatory tests, and controls will be put in place to ensure fair prices for using those sites.

The shadow Secretary of State raised the issue of employment. We will address that. I appreciate and understand his concern about jobs, so I will come back to that issue when I have concluded these brief introductory remarks and move on to the main part of my summation.

The legislation will make it an offence to shine a laser at an aircraft or any mode of transport, so improving the police's ability to maintain the safety of our transport network and safeguard wellbeing. This has been widely welcomed across the House, as I think we all recognise the risk posed by these devices getting into the wrong hands and the need to act now to deal with that risk.

The Bill will provide greater transparency and police accountability in the way in which fees are set for courses offered as an alternative prosecution for driving offences.

We have heard so many interesting and thoughtful contributions to this debate. I shall try to respond to some of them now, but I give this, perhaps unusual, commitment, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I hope will be welcome: I shall respond in writing to every point that has been raised. There have been numerous points and I would tire Members if I were to go through them religiously and in detail now, but I will commit to respond to each and every one of them, following today's debate.

Let me therefore in this short peroration—[*Interruption.*] I hear someone behind me saying "all too short". [*Interruption.*] Welcome to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was just saying that in this perhaps all too short summation I shall have time to deal with only some of the contributions, but will deal with them all subsequently in writing.

On the points made about insurance, I appreciate that, as suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey and others, people are keen to make sure that the insurance industry responds in a way that is appropriate and protects the interests of drivers and those who might suffer as a result of accidents. As it is important that we do not over-regulate, we are consulting; we have been in discussion with the industry; but the critical point is that no one must be worse off than they are now in respect of liability and that people's interests are protected. Frankly, I accept that different insurance models will develop—different products are bound to result from these changes—but I am more

than happy to discuss this during the passage of the Bill and outside it. We will have to deliver those objectives through the Government working with the insurance industry to guarantee absolutely the commitment that no one will be worse off and that people will be properly protected.

I think that Members have been right to suggest that it is possible for changes in technology ultimately to drive premiums down. The safety that results from automation might well reduce risk, and if risk is reduced, it is likely that the vehicles will become easier and less expensive to insure. I do not want to give any guarantee, but I think that change is most likely in that direction. Let us take the steps we need to take now, so that we do not constrain or inhibit these developments. Let us do so without dictating the future but simply by pointing towards it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) was understandably concerned about older vehicles. I understand that, as an owner of many of them, he speaks for many others who share his concern. I want to be absolutely clear, although I think that he knows this already, that vintage and classic car drivers have nothing to fear while the Secretary of State and I are in post, because we appreciate their perfectly proper concerns. They have a particular interest, which should be neither ignored nor disregarded. My right hon. Friend can be sure of that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South made a good point about the protection in place to prevent hacking cyber-security on automated vehicles. It is clearly vital that security is designed for these systems from the outset. We are actively shaping the agenda to deliver outcomes on those important issues at the relevant international forums, including the European Union and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. We shall be chairing a technical working group with the aim of developing internationally harmonised guidance, standards and regulations.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) raised the issue of consistency and pricing in the context of electric vehicles. I shall be taking action in that regard. It is only fair for drivers to be charged the market rate for the electricity that they use. Electric vehicles will still offer significant savings in running costs, especially given that most charging takes place at private charge points—for instance, at home or at work—but we want to ensure that the market is competitive, the costs are fair, and the consumer's interests are protected. We plan to introduce new regulations this year, under existing powers, consulting further when necessary, to improve the consistency and comparability of pricing information. Everyone is familiar with the price of petrol being given in pence per litre, and with the clear, simple signage at petrol stations. It should be just as easy to shop around and get the best deal for electric vehicle charging, and we will make sure that it is.

The hon. Member for Southport and the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, and other places—[*Laughter*—]—not that those other places are any less important than Inverness or Nairn, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be quick to point out—raised the issue of hydrogen, and how that technology fits into the Bill. I know that I have talked a great deal about charge points and automated vehicles, but the Government must have a technology-neutral perspective. In achieving our goal of zero road transport emissions, we must rule out no emerging

technology. Hydrogen fuel cell vehicles are at an earlier stage of technological development and market roll-out than battery electric vehicles, but, as has already been said, they can offer a useful alternative, particularly in certain settings. We are supporting the early market for those vehicles and the development of an initial refuelling network, and we are excited to see how the market is developing. We also recognise the wider economic and decarbonisation benefits that hydrogen, as a flexible energy source, could provide.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield spoke briefly about NATS. The Bill does not include privatisation measures, and, as the hon. Gentleman will know, the measures that it does include have been widely welcomed by those who felt that the regime needed to be updated and to become more practicable.

In the context of the air travel organisers' licence, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey made a good point about how the Bill would help UK businesses to trade in the European economic area. UK-established businesses licensed under ATOL will no longer need to comply with the different insolvency rules in other EEA states, which will make cross-border trade easier. It will give such businesses more opportunities to sell to a wider consumer base, and to grow.

The hon. Gentleman also said that he wanted to ensure that British consumers were safe post-Brexit. Far be it from me to anticipate the negotiations—that would be well above my pay grade, and outside my orbit—but it is important for us to continue to co-operate in these matters, and of course it is right for us to continue to take into account holidaymakers and other consumers throughout Europe. I have no doubt that there will be many opportunities to debate such issues as the Bill progresses, and I do not want to anticipate those exciting opportunities this evening.

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough asked whether staff would lose their jobs when we closed Government-owned sites for vehicle testing. The answer is plain: no. The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency will still employ the examiners who deliver the vehicle tests at private sector sites. Staff who maintain the facilities do so under a contract with a total facilities management provider, and are responsible for a number of different facility contracts as well as the DVSA contract, so they will be redeployed on those contracts. That will include the maintenance of local driving tests centre under the same contract with the DVSA.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) raised the issue of lasers, so let me be clear again about that. Under the new offence, the police will have the power to search after arrest on suspicion. Creating a laser-specific offence will bring consistency across all modes of transport, give police the powers they need to investigate the offence fully, and carry penalties that reflect the seriousness of that offence.

As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield raised this point, I emphasise that diversionary courses are not an alternative to proper enforcement. He is right to emphasise that, and I do so too from the Dispatch Box in accordance with his request.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked for a reassurance that we will work with colleagues in Northern Ireland. I can confirm that we will and that we have been in close contact with devolved Assemblies

[Mr John Hayes]

in respect of this Bill. I have both spoken to Northern Irish Ministers and received their communications, which have allowed the further development of the Bill. Indeed, I have spoken to Scottish Ministers too, to ensure that they, the Welsh and the Irish understand what so many contributors to this debate tonight have grasped: this Bill is important, non-partisan, vital for our future, and measured. The Government understand that as the Bill develops it will evolve and change as the technology changes. That is the approach that we are adopting, and I am very grateful for the welcome that that approach has been given.

Jim Shannon: I am very pleased to have the Minister's reassurance in relation to the Northern Ireland Assembly, and in relation to the Scottish and Welsh as well. The Government have given a certain amount of financial assistance, certainly for electric cars and ensuring there are charging points. Is it possible to confirm for *Hansard* today in this Chamber what that financial commitment will be to the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Mr Hayes: As many more issues to which I wish to respond have been raised in this debate, I suggest that I add the hon. Gentleman's request to the list and make sure I satisfy him, as far as I can, in respect of the matter he has raised.

It is a consequence of our knowledge of the past and our assiduous stewardship of the present that we can now prepare for a presently unknowable future. I was challenged by one of my hon. Friends to introduce some poetry to my peroration, and I did not want to let her down. As T. S. Eliot wrote in the "Four Quartets":

"Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past."

I thank all who have spoken for their contributions, and anticipate further consideration of the Bill without fear of contumely or animus, but rather with confidence and enthusiasm. In particular, I am grateful to the Opposition for their sedulous and thoughtful approach. Change and challenge face us all; Government must meet both with foresight tempered by care, and ambition softened by humility. We cannot be certain of all that will come, but we can certainly ensure that all we do is driven in the national interest and by the common good. I therefore commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

VEHICLE TECHNOLOGY AND AVIATION BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 23 March 2017.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—(*Chris Heaton-Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

VEHICLE TECHNOLOGY AND AVIATION BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the charging of fees for courses offered as an alternative to prosecution for road traffic offences;

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(*Chris Heaton-Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

VEHICLE TECHNOLOGY AND AVIATION BILL (CARRY-OVER)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 80A(1)(a)),

That if, at the conclusion of this Session of Parliament, proceedings on the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill have not been completed, they shall be resumed in the next Session.—(*Chris Heaton-Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

Young-onset Parkinson's Disease

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

8.15 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): During the 2015 general election campaign, I attended a concert in my constituency in aid of Parkinson's. It was organised by a constituent of mine, Len Burbidge, and I want to pay tribute to the tremendous work that Len does on this issue locally. That night, I signed a pledge to raise awareness of Parkinson's in this House, should I be elected, and I have sought to do that in parliamentary debates and as a member of the all-party group on Parkinson's. I pay tribute to the group's chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), for the work that she does, and to the work that is done for the group in the other place by Baroness Gale of Blaenrhondda.

I am delighted to have secured the debate this evening, particularly because it is now 200 years since Dr James Parkinson published his famous 1817 essay "An Essay on the Shaking Palsy". Some 60 years later, a French doctor, Jean-Martin Charcot, spoke about "la maladie de Parkinson", from which we have coined the term "Parkinson's disease" to describe the condition. According to figures from Parkinson's UK, some 120,000 people are affected by the condition in the UK today. We know about the three principal symptoms—the tremor, the muscle stiffness and the slowness of movement—but unfortunately there is still no cure 200 years later.

When I talk about the number of people affected by the condition, I must point out that the data available on those with Parkinson's are perhaps not as accurate as we would like. We know that several thousand people of working age have the condition. I want to pay tribute to Gaynor Edwards from the charity Spotlight YOPD for the work that she has done to raise the profile of this issue. She has guesstimated that there are 6,500 people affected who are under the age of 50, but it would be a significant step forward if we could accurately estimate not only the prevalence of Parkinson's in the population as a whole, but the number of people of working age who have the condition. I would be grateful to the Minister for some assurance that we can look at how the data are collected.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter to the House. We have 4,000 sufferers in Northern Ireland, one in 20 of whom was diagnosed with Parkinson's when they were under the age of 60—in other words, still of working age. He spoke about the importance of finding a cure, but in order to do so, we need a research programme. Does he agree that the Government should be placing more emphasis on early diagnosis and finding a cure?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

I have been provided with a number of emails by the charity Spotlight YOPD, and I have permission to use them in this debate. Interestingly, one of those contributions is from someone with Parkinson's who is based in Edinburgh. They say:

"My main concern is the lack of clinical trials to participate in, compared to many other conditions, there's hardly anything at all going on for PD."

I will talk in a moment about the care that people receive, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that research into a cure is absolutely central to this debate.

I want to talk about a constituent of mine, Hayley Huxley, to whom I have been speaking in recent weeks. She was diagnosed with Parkinson's at the age of 25. She is now 30 and has two young children. I want to reflect on what she set out in an email to me, because it is indicative of what people go through. She says:

"It all started when I was 24. I went back to work after maternity leave on my first child and noticed I couldn't use my right hand properly to write. I went to the doctors 3 times and they just put it down to carrying a car seat, pulled muscle, etc. The 4th time I went I got referred to a specialist and went for tests", and she was diagnosed at 25.

Hayley speaks movingly of the challenges that she has faced, such as working part time due to fatigue and having to "fight my way through the PIP assessments".

In the end, she was able to get the appropriate number of points. She also speaks about access to a neurologist, saying that she has not seen one since she was diagnosed five years ago. Indeed, she has not seen her Parkinson's nurse since July 2015. She speaks about managing her medication, going through childbirth without taking medication for eight months, the rigidity in her right arm and leg, and the restless leg that she gets.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of the Parkinson's KinetiGraph watch? It is new on the market and was developed by Global Kinetics Corporation. It monitors the medication taken by a Parkinson's patient and will send a message over the internet to a consultant with information about whether the medication is at the right level and has been taken at the right time, thereby enabling people to stay in work longer and to control their tremors much better.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point. The device sounds remarkable and could assist people with the condition.

Hayley spoke about the restless leg she experiences if her medication is not taken at the right time or if she is under stress. The way in which Hayley has dealt with the condition is inspirational. When I saw her yesterday in advance of this debate, she said that while those who fit into what is called the young-onset group have particular needs, there is a collective sense of need for everyone with the condition. The photographer who was with us yesterday, Ron McCann, also has Parkinson's and is aged 69. Over the course of the weekend, I was contacted on social media by a member of the male voice choir in my hometown of Blaenavon, who spoke about a chorister in his 80s who is battling the condition and has found that singing has assisted him.

While there are issues that unite all with the condition, including access to the drug Duodopa, which was the subject of a recent debate in Parliament, those who are diagnosed at a younger age have specific needs. The first issue is with being diagnosed in the first place, because the condition can go undiagnosed. Those who have contacted Spotlight YOPD talk movingly about what happens at that moment of diagnosis. Keith from Newark says:

"Parkinson's for younger people (under 50) is a different kettle of fish...It completely changes your life but you don't know at the time and no one actually tells you."

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

Gaynor from Rye says:

"I've never felt quite so lonely as when I was diagnosed. Mourning for the future I thought I had—suddenly old before my time with a fear of dependency—and no one there to gather me up; no one to depend on."

Jordan, 21, an MSc student in Liverpool, says that

"the GP kept saying, 'He's too young, he's too young,' and said it was a psychological problem."

Even when the diagnosis is established, there then comes a whole set of new challenges. On top of dealing with the condition, there are all the pressures of family and working life.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am a huge admirer of the hon. Gentleman's speech and I commend him on bringing this matter before the House. Does he agree that cases such as those that he has outlined can often be helped if there is a local support group? Such groups provide a lot of information and can effectively lobby local health services on matters such as Parkinson's nurses? Would he recommend the setting up of such groups around the country?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that local support groups are hugely important, which leads me on to the mental health issues that often come with Parkinson's. Although access to a neurologist is highly important, we must not neglect access to mental health support.

Prescription charges remain a bone of contention in England. Pre-payment certificates are available to reduce costs, but there is still a cost. England could do with following the lead set by the Welsh Government in 2007 by abolishing prescription charges altogether.

There are also issues of engagement with medical services. Again, I can refer to specific cases. Jon, a father of three who was diagnosed at the age of 49, says:

"People with Parkinson's can often have problems in hospital." Why? People with Parkinson's are often deprived of their medication because, obviously, they hand in their medication when they go into hospital, yet maintaining a regular medication regime is very important and the person themselves is often best placed to do that.

I spoke a moment or two ago about access to neurological services. Alison, a mother of three based in Cheltenham, says:

"I feel let down by an NHS system that offers me one 10 minute appointment with a neurologist each year and I have to chase this to get it."

Neurological services clearly need to be more accessible than that.

I do not make my next point in an ideological way, and I am pleased that the former Minister with responsibility for disabled people, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), is in the Chamber. Irrespective of political views, I want to address the efficiency of the social security system as it actually works. I pay tribute to the work of Parkinson's UK, and particularly to that of Natasha Burgess. On employment and support allowance, for example, which will involve a work capability assessment, the problem with something like Parkinson's is that it is a variable condition.

Mrs Moon: Unpredictable.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Precisely. A work capability assessment might not be the best way to assess people with a fluctuating condition. Additionally, on the personal independence payment, there are far too many people at my surgeries who end up having to go all the way to a tribunal to be awarded what they should have been given in the first place.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work recently said during a debate that she would be talking to the Treasury and Motability about letting PIP claimants keep their vehicle while they appeal decisions that have gone against them. The removal of Motability vehicles has affected people with young-onset Parkinson's. Does my hon. Friend agree that we deserve to hear what progress has been made on that issue?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. That point is particularly pertinent because of the number of people who are succeeding on appeal.

I have an email from Phil from Kent, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's at the age of 45. He says:

"In...2015 I was awarded 17 points (the Higher Rate) for the Daily Living Component and 10 points...for the Mobility Component of Personal Independence Payment."

He felt that that was accurate, but the assessment was downgraded when he was seen a year later. He has an appeal ongoing, but he simply says this:

"I want the DWP to understand that Parkinson's disease is a degenerative condition...It does not get better!"

That is precisely right.

The Government have the laudable aim of halving the disability employment gap.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Before the hon. Gentleman comes off the subject of PIP, I wish to pay tribute. He is making a really important speech, and it is a real credit to Parkinson's UK, which was one of the most engaged groups during my time as Minister for disabled people—I thank the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) for arranging the initial introduction. I urge the Minister to take the opportunity to meet Opposition Members as soon as possible to explore all these constructive options, which are so typical of the hon. Gentleman. I also wish to thank my local Parkinson's UK members, who are now holding regular coffee mornings in my office as a way to engage, to share best practice and to continue to highlight the improvements that we all, collectively, need to make.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful for that intervention from the former Minister. He takes a constructive approach, for which I am very grateful.

The aim of halving the disability employment gap is laudable, but I have a slight concern, in that we also have to recognise that people with Parkinson's will need support when they leave work, at which point returning will, sadly, not always be a realistic option.

As I sum up, I want to speak about the people who battle this condition. Pete from Brighton says:

"At heart...we YOP suffer a triple indignity: the disease itself, with all that it entails; our not being considered disabled enough by the system; and the lack of awareness ensuring that we are considered to be practically useless by society at large."

Karen from Birmingham says:

“my medication is not helping me through the night and sleeping is impossible. I am literally paralysed during the night.”

We should not forget the daily battle that people with Parkinson's face, but nor should we forget where we started this debate—with Dr James Parkinson and that essay of 200 years ago. In addition to having medical expertise, he was also something of a political activist, writing leaflets under the pseudonym “Old Hubert” and speaking about those who lived in poverty. He argued for political reform, and I am convinced that if he was still here today, he would be speaking up for all those who have Parkinson's, who suffer and who battle with this condition every day. I hope that this debate has at least gone some way to raising awareness of the particular problems that people face.

8.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): Let me start by congratulating the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) on his speech, which the former Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), called an important one. It is just that, as this is an important subject. It is salutary to think that it is 200 years since this terrible disease was first discovered and we are still some way off finding a cure for it. I know that over the past year or so the hon. Gentleman has asked many questions in Parliament, both written and oral, on this subject. I congratulate him on doing that, because it is only by people doing that that we will continue to keep awareness high.

I also thank the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) for the work she does on the all-party group and for demonstrating the kinetic watch. I had not seen one before this evening, but I look forward to seeing it perhaps after this sitting.

Mrs Moon: I met people from Global Kinetic on Friday, when they gave me the watch. In September or October, this watch will also have a docking station, which will mean that on a daily basis the consultant neurologist will be able to get a pattern of sleep, movement and medication consumption from a patient. We hope that will cut the need for neurologist appointments, as is happening in some areas, and I hope that the Minister will want to meet Global Kinetics.

David Mowat: Indeed. I am sure other brands are available—

Mrs Moon: No, they are not.

David Mowat: Well, as I was saying a few moments ago, there is no cure for this disease but it is possible to manage the symptoms and alleviate them. However, to do that we have to have a diagnosis, and that is the issue we are talking about today, particularly in the case of early-onset Parkinson's disease.

On the prevalence of the disease, something like 130,000 people suffer from it—that is likely to be 160,000 by 2020—and 95% of them are over 60 years old. Because of that fact, there is a tendency in the medical profession and, indeed, in society at large, to think that it is a disease of older people. To an extent that is true according to the statistics, but we also know that something like 5,000 or 6,000 people under 50 have the disease.

I will talk about the statistics a little more later, because the hon. Member for Torfaen did challenge them, and it is true that the numbers are all estimates. Nevertheless, the number I have is that something like 400 people under 40 have the disease. Incredibly, it is thought that a few dozen people get the disease under the age of 20, which is a terrible thing as it means that it is with them for their entire working lives.

Parkinson's is a progressive disease caused by the death of cells containing dopamine. As we have heard, it causes tremors, slowness, speech impediment and gait disorder. Its severity varies, as recognised in some of the points made about the Department for Work and Pensions. There is no cure; the best we can do is to manage the symptoms by trying to address the lack of dopamine through techniques such as brain stimulation, and apomorphine is the most commonly used drug. The hon. Member for Torfaen mentioned the recent debate on Duodopa; I do not intend to go over that in detail, other than to say that it is very much a minority treatment, with something like 75 people receiving the medication. It is typically used when other treatments are not successful.

We all—the Government and the country more generally—need to build awareness of the prevalence of early-onset disease. The NHS Choices website has information on the local and national support groups we heard about a few moments ago. Parkinson's UK does a huge amount of work in this area, and I would of course be happy to meet it and the hon. Member for Torfaen.

Justin Tomlinson: I am delighted that the Minister has agreed to meet Opposition Members—that will be a really worthwhile meeting—but in that vein, as I host our local Parkinson's group, would he be willing to come to Swindon to meet its members?

David Mowat: In principle, I would be delighted to come to Swindon, or my hon. Friend could join the meeting with Parkinson's UK. I am sure there is a way forward.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: It would also be extremely useful for the Minister to facilitate a meeting with another charity called Spotlight YOPD, which has done tremendous work in this area.

David Mowat: I heard that charity mentioned and yes, that would of course be a sensible thing to do; the focus of this debate is on YOPD, so that would be appropriate.

There is an issue with GP awareness and diagnosis, partly because there is sometimes an assumption that if someone is young and has dizziness, aching muscles and some of the other early symptoms, those can be symptomatic of more benign conditions, and it is genuinely quite hard to diagnose young-onset Parkinson's disease. It is important to note that the Royal College of General Practitioners' neurology training emphasises that all GPs must have a knowledge of the epidemiology of Parkinson's. The applied knowledge test, which all GPs, wherever they come from, have to pass before they can be a GP, has modules on Parkinson's and the fact that it can potentially come to people before they are 50 years old, even though it does not usually do so. It is important that we continue to focus on that.

[David Mowat]

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has guidelines on Parkinson's. Most relevant is the guideline on the best practice on the diagnosis and management of the disease. The draft is currently out for public consultation and will be updated and reissued in April. That guideline also emphasises the fact that early onset is possible and that if patients present with stiffness and slowness of movement, Parkinson's needs to be considered, because quite often it still is not.

A second NICE guideline, which is also being worked on, is on the more general theme of suspected neurological conditions, with a particular focus on people outside the normal age ranges presenting with symptoms. That applies to children, young people and adults. Such a focus is potentially useful in the identification of early-onset Parkinson's.

Once the condition is diagnosed, it is obviously important to start treatment. That tends to imply, in England at least, referring a person to one of the 25 neurological centres around the country. A management plan should be put in place by a multi-disciplinary team, consisting of neurologists, neuro-surgeons, nurses and psychologists. Once that plan is in place, treatment can take place through normal primary and secondary care pathways.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Minister mentioned psychologists in that list. Does he agree that mental health is a vital part of that package?

David Mowat: I heard the hon. Gentleman say that in his speech, and I agree with him. We know that we have some work to do in our health system generally in getting mental health to catch up with the rest of the ways that we treat health. I use the phrase "parity of esteem", and that is something that must happen. Younger people with Parkinson's are unlikely to be in a major support group of others who have the disease at their sort of age. They can feel lonely, isolated and all that goes with that. In particular, the hon. Gentleman mentioned Hayley and her young family. Yes, he is absolutely right to emphasise that issue, as we do need to have much more mental health provision in our GP practices. We are determined to achieve that by 2020, with 3,000 mental health therapists in GP practices in England.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the workforce and 10-minute appointments. We have increased the number of neurologists working in NHS England by something like 30% since 2010. The figure has increased to 1,300, so something like 300 more neurologists are needed in NHS England. As the incidence of neurological conditions continues to increase—Parkinson's will continue to increase as the population ages—we will need to continue with that expansion. That is clearly a priority.

I wish briefly to talk about the new neurology advisory group, which was set up in September 2016 and is led by Professor Adrian Williams, a neurologist. A member of that group is Steve Ford from Parkinson's UK. The group's role is to better align services across the country. Currently, there is a disparity in treatment between different clinical commissioning groups and different GP practices. To an extent, that disparity is inevitable, but we need to do what we can to minimise it, and that group will be looking to do that. It will also be responsible for working as part of a neurology intelligence network, which is all about getting data. The very first challenge from the hon. Gentleman was that the figures that I had quoted and that he had quoted were all estimates. We do not gather data in the format that can be used. The estimates came from a report of Parkinson's UK, and they were based on 2009 data. We need to do much better than that. It is only by having more reliable data that we can track the way in which the disease is developing and can ensure that we have adequate and effective treatments and networks in place.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned research. Yes, in the end, research will help us to find a cure. We spend something like £1 billion a year through the National Institute of Health Research. Of that, the spend on neurology has increased over five years from £30 million—it is not the biggest area—to something like £55 million this year. That is something that we should continue to press for, and I am sure that both the hon. Gentleman and Parkinson's UK will do that.

I agree with the thrust of what the hon. Gentleman said about the DWP. Indeed, the Government's Green Paper, which was published in October 2016, talked about removing continuous assessment processes for people with progressive diseases, such as Parkinson's. I understand that the DWP is working towards developing the criteria for switching off assessments, and I think that he and I would both agree that the sooner that is applied in this case, the better.

In conclusion, early-onset Parkinson's is a very tough condition that around 5,000 or 6,000 people across the country have. It is tough to diagnose and there is no cure, although it can be partially managed. I congratulate the hon. Member for Torfaen again on raising awareness of the condition, both today and over the past year or so through the campaign. I also thank Parkinson's UK for the work it does. I hope that this discussion has been helpful. I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman, the hon. Member for Bridgend, Parkinson's UK and perhaps even my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon to talk about how we can take this forward.

Question put and agreed to.

8.45 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 6 March 2017

[MR DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

Workplace Dress Codes (High Heels)

4.30 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 129823 relating to high heels and workplace dress codes.

It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hanson. I also wish to discuss the joint report by the Petitions Committee and the Women and Equalities Committee on the same subject.

Hon. Members here will remember how the petition came about. Nicola Thorp, who created the petition, worked for an agency called Portico. In December 2015, she was sent for a job as a temporary receptionist at the headquarters of PricewaterhouseCoopers in London. When she arrived, she was told that the smart black shoes she was wearing were unacceptable because they were flat; at the time, Portico's dress code specified a heel height of between two and four inches—for women, not men. She was offered the opportunity to go out and buy a pair of high heels. When she refused, she was sent home without pay.

Two things immediately struck me about that story. First, there was never a suggestion that Ms Thorp was not smartly dressed; anyone who knows her knows that she is impeccably turned out at all times. Secondly, it was clear that wearing high heels was a requirement that impacted far more on women than on men. In fact, most of Portico's dress code at the time—to its credit, it has since changed this—was about how women should look. Not only were women to wear high heels, but they were compelled to wear make-up. It was specified that they should wear a minimum of foundation, powder, light blusher—I am not sure whether "light" referred to its colour or its application—mascara, eye shadow and lipstick or tinted lip gloss: not just any old lip gloss, but tinted lip gloss. Make-up was to be regularly reapplied throughout the day, and women were excused from wearing it only if they had a medical condition.

Women also had to wear what were described as skin-coloured tights, but the sort of skin-coloured tights that I would wear—taupe, natural tan and so on—are not at all suitable for women of colour. In fact, at one time, a black woman who turned up in black tights was told she should change them for a flesh-coloured pair, which were, of course, not the colour of her flesh at all. Portico even specified the acceptable shades of nail varnish; there was a colour chart.

The Petitions Committee decided to investigate these issues, and asked the Women and Equalities Committee to join us; I am very grateful to members of that Committee for their help and support on this. We took evidence from employees and Portico, the TUC and the Institute of Recruiters; the Confederation of British Industry declined to give evidence—an attitude it might want to rethink in future when dealing with my Committee.

We also heard from barristers who specialise in employment law, and most importantly from women themselves; we set up a web forum on which they could tell us their experiences.

It is fair to say that what we found shocked us. I was going to say that we found attitudes that belonged more in the 1950s than in the 21st century, but the 1850s is probably more accurate. We found that women—especially young women in vulnerable employment—were exploited at work and threatened with dismissal if they complained. They were forced to bear pain all day, wear totally unsuitable clothing for the tasks they were asked to perform, or dress in a way that they felt sexualised their appearance and was demeaning but which they had to put up with if they needed a job. For that reason, I am very grateful to the women who came forward to give evidence to us in public, because that took a great deal of courage—courage that I would probably not have had at their age.

Let me deal with high heels first. There are people who think that we should not have investigated this at all—in fact, they think it is a bit of a joke. Yes, it is true that women sometimes wear high heels, but there is plenty of evidence about the damage from wearing heels long term; that is well known and has been for some time. We received written evidence from the College of Podiatry and individual podiatrists on our web forum setting out just what that damage is. Wearing high heels long term alters balance, reduces flexion in the ankle and weakens calf muscles. Over time, that can make women much more prone to a number of problems, including stress fractures, Morton's neuroma, ankle sprains and bunions, and it causes a reduction in balance that lasts into old age, putting people more at risk of falls.

Most importantly, we heard from women who told us that they were forced to wear high heels even during pregnancy; that their feet hurt so much at the end of the day that they could not walk; and that their feet bled while they were working. When they tried to raise those issues, they were dismissed. Nicola Thorp told us that:

"Girls would be in tears because their feet were bleeding...and you'd just get laughed at".

That is not a joke for any woman—it is particularly not a joke for older women who may not be able to wear heels or for women with disabilities. In fact, many women gave evidence that they were put off applying for certain kinds of jobs because of the dress codes. That evidence was confirmed by the director general of the Institute of Recruiters, who told us that such dress codes "definitely" reduced the pool of women applying for jobs. We also heard how unsuitable being made to wear heels was for the tasks that those women were expected to perform at work, such as moving furniture, walking long distances—we heard from people who had been in cabin crew and had to walk long distances in airports—standing all day and even climbing ladders. It was not funny.

We discovered that few employers carried out a health and safety assessment on this issue. Portico told us that it had not done so, and it is not alone. We heard evidence from both the TUC and the Institute of Recruiters that there is very little information available to employers about this kind of footwear problem; there is plenty of information online and on the ACAS website about when people should wear steel-toe-capped boots and so on, but there is not very much on the health and wellbeing issues surrounding footwear.

[Helen Jones]

Dress codes that impact more on women go much further than making them wear high heels. We heard from women who could not even travel to work without wearing full make-up or else they would be disciplined. We heard from cabin crew who were all forced to wear the same shade of lipstick. We heard from women who were told near Christmas to unbutton their blouses a bit when selling to male customers. We even heard of a woman being told to dye her hair blonde.

The problem with these issues is not just that they are discriminatory and impact more on women; it is that they both stem from and feed into an attitude to women in the workplace that is totally reprehensible and concentrates on a stereotypical appearance, rather than on skills that women can bring to the job. Our witnesses told us how demeaning they found that.

One woman who had worked as a cabin crew member told us that she thought her appearance was sexualised for the sake of the business, which was both dehumanising and humiliating, given that male cabin crew were simply expected to look smart; those of us who fly regularly will know exactly what she meant by that. Another woman who worked in retail was told near Christmas to unbutton her blouse a bit and wear shorter skirts to sell to male customers, which she felt devalued her skills as a saleswoman and her knowledge of the products.

It gets worse. Frequently, these issues go hand in hand with a work environment in which women are harassed and younger women in particular have to put up with daily comments about their bodies from managers and are exposed to unwanted attention from customers. We heard, for instance, of women being asked when they were finishing work; of women receiving unwanted attention online, amounting to harassment; of people trying to find out where women lived or, if they were abroad, what hotel they were staying in; and even of women being followed home from work by customers. All that is unacceptable in the 21st century. It degrades women.

The Government think that the law is fairly clear on this. In their answer to the petition, they were clear that the requirement to wear high heels, as experienced by Nicola Thorp, is illegal under the Equality Act 2010. We received some legal evidence that suggested the law is not quite so clear. The legal opinions we heard suggested that a conventional dress code, for want of a better term, might not constitute direct discrimination under the Equality Act, because men and women tend to dress differently. However, if that dress code impacted more on one sex than another, it was likely to be indirect discrimination. The problem is that indirect discrimination can be justified if it is reasonably necessary in pursuit of a legitimate end, but there is not a proper definition of "legitimate end".

More importantly, not only can tribunals decide cases differently in different parts of the country, but very few cases are getting to tribunal at all. We heard that there is very little case law or advice for employers. When I asked the managing director of Portico, during our evidence session, whether it had occurred to him that his company's dress code might be discriminatory, he said that it had not at all. That is one reason why we suggest that the Government need to provide much more information to employers about not only the

health and safety aspects of their dress code but what may constitute discrimination. That is particularly true for smaller employers that do not have in-house solicitors and HR departments.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case. The evidence in our hearings about what is happening on a day-to-day basis was pretty shocking, to be completely honest—particularly as a man. My question relates to the information provided for not only businesses but individuals. It is quite clear that we are not seeing enough cases coming forward. Where can information become available, so that there is greater resilience within the group of women affected by this?

Helen Jones: The hon. Gentleman is quite right, and I will come on to that issue later in my speech. It is very important that people have information about their rights, but information by itself is not enough.

We found that there were real issues about enforcement and access to justice. Women told us that when they raised these concerns, they were belittled. One said,

"I was told that I would be fired straight away if I chose to put flats on."

Another was told that she would have plenty of time to rest her feet when she was unemployed. Women do not take these matters further for several reasons. Many of them are in insecure employment; they may be on fixed-term or zero-hours contracts. They may not have worked for long enough to bring a claim against their employer.

Awards in this area are fairly low. We were given a ballpark figure of £250 to £1,000, which is less than the cost of going to a tribunal nowadays. That is simply not good enough. A right that cannot be enforced is not a right at all. We also found that these cases were not getting as far as a tribunal all the time. That is why we are calling on the Government to look at increasing the penalties on employers for breach of the law. Penalties should be set at a level that does not discourage people from bringing a claim but disincentivises employers from breaking the law. As one of our witnesses said, in the current climate, employers take a punt that no one will bring a claim.

We have a situation where not only is this happening in an insecure workforce, but because the Equality and Human Rights Commission's budget has been cut, it is no longer bringing as many test cases to test out the law. We are in the same position with the Equality Act as we were many years ago with the Equal Pay Act 1970. The Equality Act sets out general principles, but because English law proceeds by an accumulation of case law it needs to be fleshed out by people bringing cases. We also think that if the Government gave tribunals the power to issue injunctions to stop the use of discriminatory dress codes, these cases could be dealt with more quickly.

Funding and access to justice are key issues. We are very grateful that since our report was issued, the Equality and Human Rights Commission has told the Equality Advisory and Support Service to notify it of any cases involving dress codes, so that it can decide whether litigation and enforcement action are required. We are also grateful that it has started a campaign on social media to inform women of their rights. However, as the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) said, much more

needs to be done. We are calling on the Government to start a campaign targeted at areas where people are most vulnerable, such as the hospitality industry, to inform employees of their rights and employers of their obligations.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): To build on a point the hon. Lady has made, does she agree that it is one thing to inform people of their rights, but it is critical that employment tribunal issue fees are set at an affordable level, so that people can exercise their rights and seek a remedy in the courts?

Helen Jones: I absolutely agree. Since the fees were raised in 2013, these cases have fallen off a cliff; they are not being brought any more. We have to remember that many of these women work in non-unionised workplaces, so a union cannot bring a claim. The Equal Pay Act was extended by unions bringing test cases on behalf of their workforce. That is not happening any more.

Ultimately, women must be able to enforce their rights. If only those who are well paid and in secure jobs can do that, not those who are low paid and in insecure employment, we do not have equality. If older women or women with disabilities are deterred from applying for jobs because of the dress code, we do not have equality. If women are forced to bear pain all day at work or put up with a toxic working environment, we do not have equality. If young women are subject all the time to comments about their bodies at work, we do not have equality. What our Committee thought would be a nice, limited inquiry exposed a number of issues in the workplace that will need further study and action by the Government.

Ben Howlett: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way again; she is most generous. One issue that has come up time and again, not just in relation to this report but from the women and equalities perspective generally, is the fact that the concept of dual discrimination is not enshrined in the Equality Act currently. The hon. Lady makes a powerful point in relation to both age and gender. Does she agree that it would be appropriate for the Government to consider implementing the dual discrimination provisions to help women to bring their cases to trial?

Helen Jones: Yes, I could not agree more; the hon. Gentleman is right about that issue. We also say that if the existing law is not shown to be working, the Government need to take action to clarify the law.

As I said, we thought at the beginning that this would be a short inquiry, but it has exposed a number of issues in the workplace: widespread discrimination against women; stereotypical views of what women should look like, dress like and behave like; outdated attitudes towards women in the workplace; and the constant belittling of women when they try to challenge those attitudes. The conclusion that I have come to is that we have a long way to go to solve these problems but I hope that the Government will take them seriously, because women in the workplace deserve—everyone in the workplace deserves—better than that stereotyping, better than the pain and inappropriate clothing that they are forced to put up with, and better than the attitudes that women encounter every day.

I think, as a Member of Parliament, that we have undergone a long struggle for women to be accepted in this place, but our life is a bed of roses compared with that of women in low-paid and insecure employment and what they have to put up with every day to keep their jobs. I hope that the Minister sees that this is not a trivial issue but a very serious one that affects women every day at work. The Government must now take it seriously.

4.52 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I am pleased to speak in this debate in support of women across the UK who have been subject to various kinds of discrimination with regard to workplace dress codes. I call on the Government to tighten the rules so that that is no longer prevalent in the workplace.

The debate is happening because of a petition signed by more than 150,000 people in the United Kingdom. That shows the real and serious concern that many people have about the fact that, in 2017, women are still subject to unreasonable footwear requirements at work. In the same week as International Women's Day, when we are celebrating the success of women across the world, who during the past century have made huge strides in the attempt to secure economic, political and social parity, we must also pay great attention to the fact that there is still some way to go.

As recent studies have shown, women still lag behind men in pay. The median hourly rate of pay is £12.82 for female full-time employees, compared with £14.16 for males. However, as this debate highlights, parity in the workplace does not mean only economic parity. The petition rightly points out that, despite the introduction of equality laws, women continue to face discrimination in the workplace. That manifests itself in various ways, including through requirements to wear high heels in the workplace. I assure the House that in workplaces across the country, women are often instructed to wear a full face of make-up and even told which shade of red to wear on their lips.

In evidence provided to the Petitions Committee and the Women and Equalities Committee for their joint report, women admitted that they found the dress codes that require them to wear high heels “humiliating and degrading”. Some felt “sexualised” by their employer's insistence on high heels. That effect on the psychological wellbeing of female workers is deeply worrying.

The evidence is clear. There is no real practical function to the wearing of high heels, and I challenge anyone in the House to provide evidence that wearing high heels in the workplace should be mandatory and forced on women employees. Evidence from the College of Podiatry reveals that there is a strong body of clinical evidence against wearing high heels for prolonged periods. However, in some professions, standing in high heels for the duration of an eight-hour shift is the norm. Wearing heels in that way often causes foot pain, bunions, skin lesions, lower limb pathologies and other related discomfort. In fact, my own daughter suffered a metatarsal fracture, which is more commonly associated with sports injuries, when she was forced to wear high heels in a former retail job. As she had not been on the payroll long enough, she was denied any compensation or sick pay—

[Gill Furniss]

literally adding insult to injury. Needless to say, she did not return to that type of work, but not everyone has that choice.

In my view, all the evidence that we have heard disqualifies any practical argument for forcing women to wear high heels in the workplace. Dress codes in all workplaces should serve a practical purpose and be neutral, targeting men and women in the same way. That is compatible with what the law states. The Equality Act 2010 is clear in principle, in that it aims to harmonise discrimination law and strengthen the law to promote equality in the UK. Sections 39 and 41 prohibit direct discrimination. As the Government put it to the Petitions Committee and the Women and Equalities Committee:

“They...specifically state that employers must not discriminate as to the terms of employment, or indeed by subjecting an employee to any detriment at work.”

We are debating this topic today because the law is not working in practice and is particularly disadvantageous to women in the workforce, who often feel vulnerable in calling out these injustices. To be effective, the law must be understood by both employers and employees, and employers must take complaints of such discrimination seriously. If they do not, appropriate punishment should be set out clearly.

Today’s job market is fragile, with record numbers of people on zero-hours contracts. Often, those contracts are found in the retail and hospitality sectors, and there have been many cases of women in particular being sent home because they have not complied with a certain aspect of a dress code such as wearing high heels or putting on the “right” shade of lipstick.

I support the calls for the Government to take urgent action to improve the effectiveness of the Equality Act 2010, as well as to provide clearer guidelines on these issues so that the laws already in existence are properly functional and effective.

4.57 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I wanted to speak in the debate for three reasons. The first is that I personally have never quite fathomed the fashion for cripplingly high heels. I have only ever owned one pair of really high heels. Bought for a wedding, they were worn once and then consigned to the charity shop. I have always been a fan of the comfy shoe—nothing gladdens my heart more than a sensible shoe in a broad fitting.

The second reason is that I was a workplace trade union rep for Unite the union before I was elected to this place, and I have spent many happy and not so happy hours discussing dress codes with various HR advisers and managers. That is a truly thankless task, and I would advise against it if it can possibly be avoided.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I was one of the people with whom the hon. Lady would have been having such a discussion, although I suspect that it might not have been a thankless task if the discussion had been between us. Did she ever discuss, as part of any of those negotiations, a requirement to wear high heels?

Liz McInnes: I am happy to say that I did not, because I worked for the NHS and our dress code was very much along health and safety lines and about protecting people at work, rather than forcing them into garments that are unsuitable for the workplace.

The third reason why I wanted to speak in this debate is that I am a feminist and I find the idea of women being forced to wear certain items—any items, but particularly those that are uncomfortable and inhibit our ability to walk properly, stand for long periods of time or even run away—quite abhorrent. I find the idea that an employer might make the wearing of such items a prerequisite for a job even more abhorrent still.

I can remember when the NHS trust that I used to work for produced a 30-page document outlining what staff could and could not wear—from the contents page containing headings such as “acrylic nails”, “make-up”, “hair”, “jewellery”, “tattoos” and “piercings”, to the extremely prescriptive details on each subject that followed. I was interested to hear the flesh-coloured tights dilemma that my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) highlighted—I remember the long conversations we had about what exactly was meant by the requirement to wear flesh-coloured tights. Given the diversity of our workforce, what colour of flesh did management have in mind? After much discussion, management finally agreed to drop that requirement.

Piercings and tattoos were another source of much agitation. I worked in a laboratory and recall our laboratory manager, having interviewed for a lab assistant, appointing a young man who turned up for his first day with his face resplendent with various piercings that he had not worn to the interview. I remember the anguished cry of our laboratory manager—“We’ve taken on Metal Mickey!” He appeared to feel that he had been duped in some way. Yet that young man proved to be conscientious and good at his job, and given that his role involved minimal contact with the public, his visible piercings were not really too much of a problem.

Of course, a lot of dress code issues in the NHS are necessary because of health and safety at work and the need to wear personal protective equipment. I certainly do not think there was any emphasis at all on making women conform to some odd standard of stereotypical attractiveness, as the petition concentrates on. However, I mention those details to emphasise that dress codes do not have to be 30-page documents stipulating down to the tiniest detail what can and cannot be worn. I recall the deathless phrase in our code, “Underwear must not be visible”, and wondering whether that also applied to my boss’s string vest, which was always clearly visible through his white shirt, and exactly where people buy such things from.

A good dress code only has to be a few lines long, and my own council, Rochdale Borough Council, has an exemplary policy that is brief but covers all eventualities and health and safety requirements. It simply states:

“First impressions count and there is a general expectation that employees dress appropriate to the nature of their duties and responsibilities. The Council values and welcomes the ethnic diversity of its workforce and therefore expects all employees to recognise and respect this in terms of dress. Where there is a clear business, service or health and safety reason appropriate dress codes may be introduced following consultation to suit the service needs and meet public expectations. Uniforms must be worn where required and provided. Personal Protective Equipment must be worn where it is appropriate to do so or if directed by the manager or Health and Safety Advisor.”

Alex Chalk: I was interested to hear the hon. Lady read that. There was a part where she said that uniforms must be worn where provided. However, the issue is whether the uniforms required are appropriate; ultimately, the key arbiter of that must be a court, which will establish whether an employer has gone too far. Does she therefore agree that, to reiterate what I said earlier, the key is to ensure that people can access the courts to establish where the boundaries lie and to achieve justice and case law that will apply to future circumstances?

Liz McInnes: Yes, I agree that every worker should have access to the courts. Unfortunately, the tribunal fees that have been introduced have restricted such access. I think I am right in saying that no employee of Rochdale Borough Council has had to seek that access; I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's point, but the uniforms provided by Rochdale Borough Council tend to be practical and appropriate for the job.

A brief dress code such as that is really all that is needed. Any attempt to be prescriptive and go into further detail about particular items of clothing is a waste of everyone's time and, given the vagaries of fashion, likely to be quickly superseded by some new fad or trend.

I personally think that high heels hobble and restrict women and hamper our ability to move freely, and even to run away if necessary. However, I recognise that some women choose to wear heels of their own volition, and I will not criticise them for that—we should all be free to wear whatever we like. What I cannot tolerate is employers trying to force women into an ideal of what constitutes professionalism or power dressing by insisting that particular items, such as cripplingly high heels, must be worn.

I am reminded of Ginger Rogers' famous response when she was asked about dancing with Fred Astaire and said, "It's easy, I just do everything that Fred does," and then added, "just backwards and in high heels." That is all these strict dress code stipulations are—an attempt to hobble and restrict women, meaning that we have to perform as well as men, if not better, while being held back by quaint, stereotypical notions of what constitutes femininity and a professional appearance. So I say to women everywhere, "Let's have no more going backwards in high heels; let's go forwards, and in sensible shoes."

5.6 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I am pleased to follow such an interesting and thought-provoking contribution from the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). I also commend Nicola Thorp, who brought this issue to all of our attention and wrote the petition. The hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) spoke passionately and clarified some of the depressing realities of working life for many of the young women that she and her Committee spoke to. Like her, I commend the young women who came forward to give evidence in public. It can be daunting for someone to put their head above the parapet, and in this case doing so attracted comment that would have made it more so.

I followed the case that led to the petition and subsequent Committee inquiry with some interest. As I said, before I came to this place it was my job to write the dress code

policy for my organisation and to work with staff and trade unions to arrive at a sensible and agreeable policy. I can recall us having lots of discussion but, I have to say, little disagreement about how things might be expressed. We heard sensible words about people being attired appropriately for the task at hand, and that is a reasonable summary of the position that I would expect most organisations to reach.

We had precious little discussion about shoes and none whatever about some of the other, quite astonishing requirements being placed on women that we have heard about today, such as women being required to dye their hair blonde, to wear revealing outfits and to reapply their make-up constantly—as for flesh-coloured tights, I despair! I would be amused by the fact that I personally would fail on every single one of those counts, were not the overall topic and what it says about women in the workplace and wider society so depressingly serious.

I would have remembered had we had any discussion about high heels because, unlike the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton, I am quite partial to a pair of high heels, but not at work—they do not really do in the House of Commons where we have to walk so much. I therefore stand here in the Chamber in a pair of boringly sensible boots. They are smart enough and, thankfully, they add a number of extra inches to my height, but I am sure that they would fall foul of the kind of dress codes that we have heard about, because they are simply too sensible.

Interestingly, the only discussion that I can remember about footwear and dress codes was in relation to safety footwear. That was the only area in which we felt it was at all appropriate for us to be specific. For most staff, "smart" was clarity enough, but for those who were likely to be working in environments in which things could be dropped or cause injury, the unbreakable rule was that appropriate safety footwear must be worn. That seems eminently sensible to me and seems to be in line with the century in which we are having this discussion.

I am a member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, which I thought would have a view worth considering on this issue, and it did. It says that dress codes are lawful, provided that they are reasonable and have equivalent requirements for both sexes. It suggests key points that employers should consider when implementing or amending a dress code: they should always avoid any form of discrimination in a dress code policy and remember that imposing certain standards of dress for health and safety reasons is acceptable—I would go further and say that it is vital. They should also apply dress codes equally to men and women. The difficulty, of course, arises there, because men and women do not generally wear similar shoes or clothing, and most men do not wear make-up. However, it is surely possible in this day and age for us to agree, for instance, that both sexes need to look smart without going into areas where women are clearly treated less favourably than men. For instance, the requirement to wear make-up would surely amount to discrimination, as would a requirement for someone to wear revealing clothing or to dye their hair blonde. I can also foresee a strand of age discrimination that would quite likely follow some of those extremely unhelpful gender-related suggestions.

[Kirsten Oswald]

Crucially, the CIPD advised that employers should always make sure that they have a sound business reason for imposing personal appearance criteria on staff and that a clear written policy has been implemented and widely communicated. The CIPD concluded that it is important to avoid the pitfall of believing that clients would automatically take offence at an employee's personal appearance. I do not know about anyone else in the Chamber today, but the sight of a woman in flat shoes does not usually send me reaching for the smelling salts. I imagine that clients coming to meetings will be spectacularly unbothered by the heel height of anyone in attendance, and rather more focused on the business at hand—unless, of course, their meeting is being held in the 1970s.

Safety is clearly the key point; it is vital that everyone is kept safe at work and that all health and safety requirements are met. Nobody should be expected to work in an environment that damages their health—but that is what happens for someone who works in a company where high heels are required. We have heard only too clearly from the hon. Member for Warrington North about the real health impacts—to say nothing of the pain—that these dress codes can cause and, worryingly, about the fact that women were put off applying for jobs because of those criteria.

I have admitted to owning a number of high-heeled shoes—some of them very high—but that is my choice and there is no compulsion on me to wear them to work. If I did, according to research I would be in trouble, because women over 40—sadly that includes me—are particularly affected, because women's balance is apparently affected by age. Seriously, there are more potential issues of discrimination on the grounds of age and disability.

The Women and Equalities Committee's report was helpful in clarifying that the relationship between the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 and workplace dress codes is not as widely understood as it should be, and that the current approach is not working. We welcome the report and its calls for new legislation and new ways of tackling discrimination, and for stopping women being forced to comply with discriminatory dress codes.

I understand that the UK Government have said that the existing law is clear and that the dress code that prompted this petition is unlawful. However, discriminatory dress codes obviously remain widespread, so the existing law is clearly not yet fully effective in protecting employees from discrimination at work. It is wrong for someone to be expected to wear high heels, make-up or revealing outfits if such demands are not placed on both genders. Clearly, that would be undesirable, but such ingrained workplace sexism sadly continues to prevail.

It is clear from the report that many people do not feel able to challenge the dress codes that they are required to follow. I agree with the recommendations that the Government Equalities Office should work with ACAS and the Health and Safety Executive to make sure that detailed guidance can be published to help people to understand both equality and health and safety law and how they apply to workplace dress codes. There is simply insufficient evidence in the public domain about health and safety and the risks and implications,

for instance, of wearing high heels. I look forward to those bodies working on that as soon as possible, because this really does matter.

I am pleased that the SNP Scottish Government are taking action to ensure women's equality in the workplace, because that goes right to the heart of this issue. What we have heard today about women being subjected to ridiculous requirements and—far worse—harassment in the workplace is unacceptable. In 2017, equality for women in the workplace should be at the heart of every Government's agenda. Closing the gender pay gap, dealing with maternity discrimination and considering how all those issues can feed into economic growth are vital, but those things cannot be dealt with alone. Until we can deal with what we have discussed today, we will not make the progress that we should, because that is key to driving forward gender equality in the workplace. I press the Minister to tell us what she can do, what she will do and when we can expect some action.

5.16 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for the powerful way in which she introduced the debate on behalf not only of the Petitions Committee, but of the more than 150,000 people who signed the petition. I also pay tribute to the incredible lady—Nicola Thorp—who started it.

Nicola's actions on that day in December 2015, when she was given the choice—I use the word “choice” with the loosest possible meaning—either to return to work with a pair of high heels or to leave work and forfeit a day's pay, has the potential to change the experiences of women in the workplace. She acted not just for herself, but, as we can see from the subsequent inquiry by the Petitions Committee and the Women and Equalities Committee, for thousands of women up and down our country.

Given that 150,000 people signed the petition and the more than 700 responses to the inquiry's web forum, it is clear that Nicola's experience was not an isolated incident. The inquiry took evidence on the medical effects of the prolonged wearing of high heels, which the College of Podiatry describes as “disabling”. As we heard from a number of hon. Members this afternoon, that includes severe pain, knee, hip and spine problems and stress fractures. It places older women or perhaps those with disabilities—already marginalised groups—at a particular disadvantage and impacts on women's performance at work.

As reported by many of the respondents to the inquiry, women often find such dress codes humiliating, degrading and demeaning, designed not to guarantee a professional image of the employer but to sexualise women employees. Evidence in the Committee's report highlights just that, with one respondent saying:

“For me personally, it was a bit dehumanising and humiliating to be made specifically to wear items of uniform that sexualised my appearance or enhanced my sexuality—no aspect of the men's uniform was designed to enhance their male sexuality.”

Such dress codes are based on the objectification and sexualisation of female employees. They hinge on the requirement for someone else in the workplace to appraise the physical appearance of those staff members. Gender-based dress codes create working environments where

women are vulnerable to sexual harassment, not only from their employer, but from customers and clients. Furthermore, any such level of objectification, clearly based on a particular understanding of beauty and gender stereotypes, may have negative implications for women who do not conform to them. As the inquiry heard, there may be homophobic or racist connotations for women employees. In common with the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) but unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), I own a plethora of high-heeled shoes—perhaps more than some would consider necessary—but I choose when I want to wear them, and that is becoming increasingly rare these days, as my age increases.

These stereotypes do not just impact on women currently in employment; they are pernicious, feeding down to the standards that young girls and women believe are expected of them. According to Girlguiding's "Girls' Attitudes Survey", 36% of girls aged seven to 10 say that people make them think that the most important thing about them is how they look, while 47% of girls aged 11 to 21 say that how they look holds them back most of the time. Tellingly, 86% of seven to 10-year-old girls think that girls and boys have the same chance of being successful in their future jobs, but that falls to just 35% when asking 17 to 21-year-olds. Gender-based dress codes are a cause and a consequence of a nasty and corrosive sexism that conveys that women are little more than dolls to be dressed or objects to be presented. The codes feed portrayals of women that make girls believe that their most valuable asset is not what they say or do, or how hard they work or apply themselves, but how they look. I am rarely lost for words, as I am sure many of my hon. Friends here would agree, but having heard about the mandatory make-up requirements in some workplaces, I am at a loss. We cannot overestimate the implications for young girls' physical and mental health, self-worth and aspirations.

The inquiry made a number of recommendations. In particular, the Select Committee on Women and Equalities and the Petitions Committee focused on women's ability to challenge such dress codes and made recommendations on the role of tribunals. Unsurprisingly, the sectors recognised as having the most discriminatory dress codes are travel and tourism services and the retail and hospitality industry, which are known for low-paid and insecure working environments in which women are significantly over-represented. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North, many women are deterred from applying for certain jobs by such dress codes.

Those deep and corrosive structural barriers are at the core of women's economic inequality and allow some companies, as evidenced in the Committees' report, to treat women poorly in the knowledge that they do not have access to recourse. How does the Minister plan to tackle sectors that rely on insecure working practices, and how will she better support employees in those sectors to access recourse?

According to the TUC, since the introduction of employment tribunal fees of up to £1,200, the number of people taking a claim against their employer has dropped by 9,000 a month, which has direct implications for women. Between January and March 2014, just 1,222 sex discrimination claims were made to an employment tribunal, compared with 6,017 in the same quarter in 2013. That represents a huge fall of 80%. On

31 January 2017, the Government published their review of employment tribunal fees, admitting that the fall in claims has been significantly greater than was estimated when fees were first introduced.

As the inquiry shows, sometimes the only way that women can enforce their rights at work is through employment tribunals. How on earth can the Government claim to show any commitment to tackling sexist and discriminatory working practices when they have effectively priced women out of their own employment rights? The situation is compounded by the Equality and Human Rights Commission's failure to bring test cases in relation to working practices, which comes as no surprise given that the Government have cut its budget to shreds. How will the Government ensure that the EHRC has the necessary budget and resources that it needs to bring test cases to uphold anti-discrimination laws?

Nicola Thorp's actions and her subsequent petition are a lesson to us all about the importance of hearing directly about women's experiences. It may never even occur to many in this place that women in the workplace can and regularly do have a markedly different experience from men. Expectations placed on women in the workplace, whether they are written down in a dress code or hinted by a manager, or stare out of an advertisement board or a newspaper, shape the way that women are treated in the workplace. The consequences of those expectations, the humiliation and even, sometimes, the physical pain can and do change how women interact with their work and the world around them.

Ahead of International Women's Day on Wednesday, every Member of this House should do our utmost to hear directly from women and understand what they experience. When we do hear from women, it is not enough just to recognise their experiences of sexism and discrimination; we must act to tackle it.

5.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for securing this important debate and for setting out the issues so clearly, and in some cases shockingly, in her opening speech. I congratulate all the other Members who have taken part.

I am grateful to the Petitions Committee and the Women and Equalities Committee for their report on high heels and workplace dress codes. It is clearly concerning, and highlights both unacceptable behaviour and the persistent challenges faced by some women in the workplace. I am most grateful to Nicola Thorp and other brave whistleblowers like her who have shone a light on this important issue.

Let me be clear: the Government will not tolerate any form of discrimination on any grounds, including gender. As the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) said, it is International Women's Day this Wednesday, so this debate could not be more timely. The international theme this year is "Be Bold for Change", and our own national theme is supporting women in the workplace. When it comes to supporting women in the workplace, we mean to be bold, including by enforcing strong laws to tackle sex discrimination at work, including dress codes.

[*Caroline Dinenage*]

We should renew our efforts to be bold for change. After all, we have had anti-discrimination laws in this area for over 40 years, yet it is a safe bet that this sort of dress code has still existed under the radar, and that female employees have put up with discrimination because “that’s the way things are”. However, whether shod in heels or flats, we are collectively putting our foot down. Attitudes are changing, and this petition has brought that change clearly into the public domain.

However, this is not just about shoes; it is way bigger than that. It is about how people are treated in the workplace, and this debate is specifically about how women are treated in the workplace. We have a higher number of women in work than ever before, but it is essential that they should feel comfortable and confident in their employers’ due regard for their health and wellbeing. They should feel empowered to do their best and be rewarded for their hard work. They should feel confident of their rights and that they can redress a problem where it persists. Employers must meet their legal obligations towards their employees, and we will support them to do so.

We are carefully considering the Committees’ report and recommendations and will be issuing a response later this month. I do not want to pre-empt that response, but the evidence sessions conducted by the Committees were invaluable in setting out the extent of the problem. They highlighted some shocking workplace dress code requirements, such as the requirement to re-apply make-up throughout the day and to dress in a sexualised fashion, supposedly to attract clients and customers. I do not know who should feel most insulted by that: the person being required to re-apply their make-up or the consumers whose intelligence is being insulted by the suggestion that a fresh coat of lipstick will somehow induce them to purchase something.

The report also shows that the problem is compounded by the further issue of health and safety, which many hon. Members have mentioned. If an employer requires staff to wear particular shoes as part of a dress code, they should consider the implications. It is absolutely right that the Committees are shining a spotlight on discriminatory dress code practices. In 2017, such outdated and sexist employment practices should not be part of the workplace.

I am proud that in this country, women have a voice and a way to bring such issues to Parliament. We now have plenty of female parliamentarians—maybe not quite enough yet, but enough to bring this issue to Parliament. However, we must also ensure that women have a choice. Whether they choose to wear high heels or not—we have heard very good cases for and against; personally, at 5 foot 10 inches, I have never really needed a few extra inches—should be up to them, not up to some outdated, dodgy 1970s workplace diktat. I must reiterate that the Government utterly condemn such dress requirements where their effect is discriminatory. We strongly support the existing equality legislation that provides protection to women and indeed men who are treated less favourably because of gender in the workplace, but clearly the legislation must be more widely understood and better enforced.

The Equality Act 2010 clearly prohibits an employer from discriminating against an employee or job applicant because of their sex when deciding whom to offer

employment or in relation to the terms on which employment is offered. Dress policies for men and women do not have to be identical, but the standards imposed should be equivalent, meaning that where an employer or an agency supplying staff imposes a dress code, then unless similar or equivalent rules are laid down for both male and female employees, that code may be directly discriminatory. For example, a man may be asked to wear a shirt and tie while a woman is not, but she would be expected to wear equivalent smart work wear. A code that results in a degree of discomfort or expense for a female employee that a male colleague would not be expected to endure is likely to be discriminatory. In the case of a requirement for high heels, as the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) pointed out, a blanket rule for women might also be indirectly discriminatory on grounds of disability—for example, if a female employee has difficulty in walking because of a medical condition but is required to wear heels along with her colleagues.

Dress codes can be a legitimate part of an employer’s terms and conditions of service—we accept the importance that some firms place on presenting a smart, uniform corporate image, particularly where services are offered to the public—but such codes must apply fairly to men and women. I was thinking about whether there are any workplaces in which both men and women are required to wear high heels, but the only one that I could think of was the musical “Kinky Boots”, in which everyone seems to wear high heels at the end. Personally, I fail to see why a high heel should be a byword for smartness.

I hope that this case acts as a reminder to employers of their responsibilities and makes employees of both genders aware of their rights under the 2010 Act. However, to ensure that the message is driven home, particularly to employers, the Government and the Equality and Human Rights Commission are taking action. The Government are clear that the law to deal with such cases of discrimination is adequate, but we recognise that some employers lack awareness of the law or even choose to flout it. We are therefore developing guidance for employers, working closely with the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, the EHRC and the Health and Safety Executive, in response to the recommendations in the Committees’ report. I welcome the work that the EHRC has already done to raise awareness of discriminatory code practices on social media; I am also aware of, and welcome, the fact that it is looking more generally at how to sharpen and improve its enforcement work under the 2010 Act.

I commend Nicola Thorp and I encourage other whistleblowers to call out employers on these outdated and potentially unlawful practices. These kinds of headlines do not show anybody in a good light, and people should be calling out the employers concerned. Taking that action is never easy, but it is invaluable in raising the profile of the issue and in encouraging employers to review and, where necessary, revise their current dress code practices—as the employer in this case went on to do.

I would like to use this debate to challenge all employers with dress codes to review them and consider whether they remain relevant and lawful. I urge employers to consult the existing guidance available from EHRC and ACAS on the issue, and our forthcoming guidance, which will be prepared with the Thorp petition and the

Women and Equalities Committee's report in mind. Consulting with employees on any proposed dress code may ensure that the code is acceptable both to the organisation and to its staff. In particular, I expect the sectors highlighted in the report—hotels and tourism, travel and airlines, temporary agencies, corporate services, retail and hospitality—to review their dress codes, if they have not already done so. With that in mind, I have recently written to all the trade bodies that represent those sectors. I have drawn their attention to the report and asked them to impress on their members the importance of treating their employees, both male and female, fairly and decently when setting dress codes. I am already beginning to get responses from the trade bodies, and so far they have been very positive.

The hon. Member for Warrington North mentioned that women are sometimes afraid to take complaints against employers further. It is important to emphasise that the 2010 Act has victimisation protections that can give women the confidence to complain about dress codes that may be unlawful, safe in the knowledge that their employer cannot dismiss them for making a complaint. However, there is room for improvement, especially in employees' understanding of their rights, and the Government have a role to play in that. We will look at how we can improve awareness and understanding of the protections available and how better to enforce them.

To further our ability to spot and respond to this type of discriminatory practice, the Equality Advisory and Support Service has agreed to refer any reports of dress code issues to the EHRC to consider further action. That will ensure that the situation is investigated, that whistleblowers are supported and that we can assess whether further action is required on the part of the Government or other bodies.

The lack of test cases is nothing to do with EHRC budgets. The EHRC has not historically taken on cases of this sort; it has been concerned with taking on strategic cases, generally those that might extend or expand the law, and a basic dress code would not normally be part of that category. However, the EHRC is now looking at strategic cases, to see whether they can include more basic areas of public or parliamentary concern such as this.

We want the UK to lead the way in gender equality in the workplace to ensure that we are a true meritocracy that harnesses the talents of everyone. Making women wear sexualised clothing is about as far away as it is possible to get from our vision of gender parity in the workplace.

The EHRC budget is a bit of a red herring. The EHRC has and will continue to have sufficient funds to fulfil its functions. Its total budget allocation in 2016-17 is £20.435 million. To put that in perspective, it has four times as many staff as my entire Department, the entire Government Equalities Office. We are confident that it has sufficient money and resources to continue to fulfil its statutory functions.

We are committed to enhancing the role of women and removing barriers to equality, including outdated practices and attitudes, by tackling the gender pay gap, increasing the number of women on boards, increasing support for childcare costs and ensuring that employers are aware of their obligations to pregnant women.

A number of hon. Members raised tribunal fees. We are currently consulting on proposals to extend the support available under the help with fees scheme. Under these proposals, the gross monthly income threshold for a full fee remission would be increased to £1,250 a month—broadly the level of the national wage. If implemented, the proposals will help people on low incomes.

We have made great progress on tackling gender discrimination, but there is still much more to do, and it is the responsibility of all of us. We will continue to work hard to ensure that women are not excluded from or held back in the workplace because of exactly the type of outdated attitudes, practices and discriminatory dress codes that we have heard about today.

5.36 pm

Helen Jones: I thank all colleagues who have spoken in this debate. Among the parliamentarians here, I see women of different ages, shapes and heights. We have all managed to do our job without anyone telling us how to dress—funnily enough, it does not matter. We need to get that message across to employers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), who has had to leave the debate, spoke about the impact that wearing high heels can have. My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) rightly said that the best dress codes are limited in scope and do only what they have to do. My hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) pointed out how degrading many women find the requirements imposed on us. The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) brought to bear her own experience of working in personnel and set out what needs to be done. As many hon. Members have said, a clear message needs to go out today that employers need to review their practices in this area. I was pleased to hear that the Minister has written to trade bodies to get them to remind employers about their duties under the Equality Act 2010, because too much discrimination still goes on in the workplace.

Anyone who suggests that a woman can only do her job wearing 3 or 4 inch heels does not understand the job and has never spent the day in heels. Anyone who suggests that we choose an airline based on the shade of lipstick worn by the female cabin crew really needs to wake up and smell the coffee. It is outrageous that such things are still going on today. Equality in the workplace should be a given; it should not be something that people constantly have to fight for. It benefits employees, but in the long term it also benefits employers, because it gives them a much more diverse workforce with different skills and attitudes.

I am glad that the Minister has made it clear today that she shares our concern about discriminatory behaviour and that she knows that it is unacceptable. I look forward to the Government's response to the Committees' report. In the end, however, women have to be able to enforce their rights; we can get only so far with information and exhortation. At the end of the day, people need to go to a tribunal. It is a long time since I practised law, because I have been here in Parliament for nearly 20 years, but I do not see a difference between what the Minister calls a "strategic" case and a test case. I think they are exactly the same thing and I will be glad to see the Equality and Human Rights Commission taking on some further cases in this area.

[*Helen Jones*]

I also thank Nicola Thorp, who started this petition. Already, it has achieved a great deal and I hope that we will achieve more in the long term. She put her head above the parapet and endured a lot of abuse on social media for doing so. As I said before, these issues are not trivial; they contribute to a toxic atmosphere in the workplace that demeans women and does not give them equality. I hope that we shall move on from our report to ensure that such equality becomes not just an aspiration

but a reality in the workplace for all women, even those who are poorly paid and in insecure jobs.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 129823 relating to high heels and workplace dress codes.

5.41 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 6 March 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Departmental Contingency Liability: Postal Services Holding Company Ltd

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Government intend to put the Postal Services Holding Company Limited into voluntary liquidation on 30 March 2017. This company, previously known as Royal Mail Holdings plc, is wholly owned by Government.

The Government have decided that, following the disposal of all of the Royal Mail shares held by the company, there is no longer a need to retain the company. The voluntary liquidation will save the taxpayer money by removing the company's running costs of around £120,000 per annum.

Shares held by the company in Post Office Limited (POL) will be transferred to direct ownership by the Secretary of State for BEIS and this transfer will have no impact on POL's operations.

The directors of the company (all unremunerated, public or civil servants) are required to issue a Declaration of Solvency prior to the company's liquidation.

The expectation is that all the company's identified and existing liabilities will be met, apart from minimal expenses incurred during the liquidation process, after placing into to liquidation.

However, there is a small risk that some as yet unidentified liabilities could emerge. To give the directors comfort that such liabilities could be met, and to enable them to sign the Declaration of Insolvency, my Department intends to grant an indemnity to the Postal Services Holding Company Limited. The granting of an indemnity is effectively neutral to BEIS because if the company were not placed into liquidation and a liability emerged, the company would look to work with the Department, as sole shareholder, to address that liability.

The indemnity will be uncapped for a period of six years and will be issued prior to the liquidation.

When a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, it is required practice for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until fourteen parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

As a matter of record I have attached a departmental minute for both Houses explaining the procedure followed and containing a description of the liabilities undertaken.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-03-06/HCWS519>.

[HCWS519]

CABINET OFFICE

Anonymous Electoral Registration

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): I am pleased to publish the Government's plans setting out our aim of ensuring survivors of domestic abuse can participate in our democracy by making it easier for them to register to vote without their names and addresses appearing on the electoral register.

Our proposals are intended to make the anonymous electoral registration scheme more accessible to those escaping domestic abuse. They will broaden the evidentiary requirements for an application for anonymous registration to make them more accessible and relevant for survivors of abuse, while maintaining clarity and certainty around the registration process for electoral administrators. The policy will provide more ready access to anonymous registration for those whom it is intended to help.

The publication of the policy will welcome comment from domestic abuse organisations, professional bodies and those with technical electoral expertise.

This is one of a number of proposals to make sure our democracy works for everyone. The Government are also encouraging registration in under-registered areas, equalising constituencies, and giving all British citizens who have lived in the UK a lifelong right to vote in Parliamentary elections.

I am placing a copy of the policy statement in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS518]

HEALTH

Health Redress

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): On 13 July 2016 the Government announced their response to the January 2016 consultation on reform of the current ex-gratia payment schemes for individuals infected with HIV and/or hepatitis C following treatment with NHS-supplied blood or blood products before September 1991.

The Government recognise the suffering experienced by people as a result of this tragedy and the Prime Minister apologised on behalf of the Government in March 2015. Since 1988, successive Governments have set up five schemes to provide financial and other support to those affected. The Government committed further funding of up to an additional £125 million over the existing baseline budget. This additional money more than doubles the Department of Health's annual spend on the scheme over the spending review period to April 2021. This is significantly more than any previous Government have provided for those affected by this tragedy.

On account of this increased allocation, July's consultation response set out a package of support measures for those infected and affected by the infected blood tragedy. For the first time, almost 2,500 beneficiaries with chronic hepatitis C infection were eligible to receive

an annual payment of £3,500 per year. Those with advanced hepatitis C and HIV received an uplift in their annual payment to £15,500, and we introduced a new £10,000 payment to bereaved partners and spouses.

Since July, the Government have also worked on the detail of the measures proposed for 2017-18 for scheme beneficiaries infected in England such as the new special appeals mechanism for those with chronic hepatitis C infection and reformed discretionary support scheme. The special appeals mechanism, which is now called special category mechanism (SCM) will be a significant new element of the infected blood reforms. Therefore, today the Government announce the launch of a new consultation on the details of the new SCM and our proposals for ensuring the scheme remains within its budget as a result of the new SCM. We invite beneficiaries and other interested parties to comment on our proposals.

The consultation published today and attached will run until 17 April 2017. This is a six-week consultation to ensure that all those who wish to respond have time to do so. There are four elements of reform on which the Government would welcome views.

The addition of a new condition to qualify for the higher financial support given to those infected with hepatitis C who have developed advanced liver disease.

The new special category mechanism (with appeal) (SCM) to identify hepatitis C stage one beneficiaries whose infection has a substantial and long term adverse impact on their ability to carry out normal daily activities, offering those who are successful the higher annual payment.

Proposals to keep the scheme within budget in light of the increased annual payment for successful SCM applicants while preserving discretionary fund.

The type of support the reformed discretionary scheme would offer that is fair to all groups of beneficiaries.

The Government understand that there has been uncertainty about how the SCM and reformed discretionary support will be implemented during 2017. The outcome of the consultation will be crucial to informing our final decisions about these elements. Informed by the consultation responses, the Government will implement the decisions as soon as possible in 2017-18. The Government do not anticipate that there will be any reduction in current spending as a result of the consultation proposals. No one who currently receives an annual payment will be worse off than they are now as a result of the proposed changes to the annual payments.

This consultation does not affect any of the reform elements introduced in the financial year of 2016-17.

Finally, the Government have heard beneficiaries' feedback regarding our plans for a new scheme administrator. As a result, we announce today that the NHS Business Services Authority will become the new single scheme administrator during 2017. While this transition takes place, annual and discretionary payments and services will continue to be made by the current schemes to ensure a smooth transition to the new scheme administrator with minimum impact on the important financial and non-financial ex-gratia services infected blood beneficiaries will receive this Parliament.

Consultation Document can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-03-06/HCWS520/>.

Petitions

Monday 6 March 2017

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Adoption

The petition of Rebecca Gaffney,

Declares that the petitioner is the mother of a four year old girl who has been placed for non-consensual adoption by Essex Children's Services. The arguments used to justify this by the Local Authority have varied over time, including relying on hearsay. Further, although she passed all drugs tests from her General Practitioner, a court-appointed expert made findings against her. She was given permission to appeal, and the court-appointed expert accepted he was wrong. However, her child was not returned to her care as she was considered to be settled with adopters.

The petitioner therefore requests that the House of Commons Education and Justice Committees investigate the use of adoption targets by Local Authorities and whether they impact on the independence of evidence provided to the courts; further requests that cases like hers, where children are adopted even though the case against the parent is disproven, are considered when reviewing how procedures operate in care proceedings, and how experts are not prosecuted for giving false information, and how people in her position might obtain a re-hearing of the case.

And the petitioner remains, etc.—[Presented by Sir Eric Pickles.]

[P002023]

OBSERVATIONS

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Royal Sutton Coldfield Green Belt

The Humble Petition of citizens of the Royal Town of Sutton Coldfield,

Sheweth,

That the proposal to build 6000 homes on the Green Belt that surrounds the Royal Town of Sutton Coldfield should not proceed while accepting that significant new housing should be built in more appropriate places.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House considers this proposal and lays it aside.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.—[Presented by Mr Andrew Mitchell, Official Report, 12 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 735.]

[P001707]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): Green Belts are created by local authorities, who are expected to protect them in line with policy set out in the National Planning Policy Framework. The Framework states that a Green Belt boundary can be altered only in exceptional circumstances. In the Housing White Paper, Fixing our broken housing market, the Government reaffirmed its commitment to Green Belt protections.

Local authorities, working with their communities, are responsible for determining the best location for the new homes needed in the area. The Framework recognises that, in exceptional circumstances, a local authority may find it necessary to review the extent of its Green Belt using the Local Plan process of public consultation followed by examination in public of the draft Plan, as happened in the preparation of the Birmingham Development Plan.

All Local Plans are submitted to the Secretary of State for examination. Examinations are carried out on the Secretary of State's behalf by an independent inspector who tests whether a plan is sound, which includes testing whether it is consistent with national policy.

Following local requests for intervention by the Secretary of State in Birmingham's Plan process, the Secretary of State issued a holding direction preventing Birmingham Council from adopting its Plan.

After careful consideration, the Secretary of State found no grounds for intervening in the Birmingham Development Plan, noting that Birmingham Council had taken appropriate steps to maximise densities and use of brownfield land, and that the scale of housing need means that not all Birmingham's housing need could be met within the city. Accordingly, the holding direction was lifted and the Planning Inspector's report was upheld. It can be viewed at:

https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/directory_record/1380/inspector_s_report.

This means that, after some years of discussion and revision of the draft Plan, including the statutory consultation with local people, the local authority is now able to proceed to adopt its Plan.

As and when planning applications are made for the land in question, the Petitioners will have further opportunities to comment to the local authority.

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**not later than
Monday 13 March 2017**

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