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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 23 March 2017

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, in respectful memory of those who lost their lives in yesterday's attack, and of all the casualties of that attack, we shall now observe a minute's silence.

The House observed a one-minute silence.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEPARTMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Medical Research and Development (Israel)

1. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to strengthen the trade relationship in medical research and development with Israel. [909448]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): As we begin our questions today, it is appropriate that we recommit ourselves to the values that this Parliament represents. Those who carry out such wicked and depraved actions as we saw yesterday can never triumph in our country. We must ensure that it is not violence, hatred or division, but decency, goodness and tolerance that prevail in our country.

The United Kingdom and Israel have a strong and important trading relationship, with nearly £5 billion in bilateral trade last year. We will continue to liaise closely on strengthening our trading links, including in important sectors such as medical research and development. The Life Sciences Organisation within the Department for International Trade currently supports companies wishing to export to Israel from the earliest stages of research and development through to manufactured medicines and medical devices.

Bob Blackman: I join you, Mr Speaker, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in expressing sincere condolences to the victims of the terrible atrocity yesterday, and particularly to the family of PC Keith Palmer, who died so that we can carry out our democratic duties.

I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Companies in the Israeli economy are responsible for more than 100 million prescription drugs consumed in this country every year, and one has recently launched the ReWalk device, whereby people are encouraged to develop. Will he set out what further plans he has to ensure that we benefit from Israel's pharmaceutical industry?

Dr Fox: UK industry will have a strong and important trading relationship with Israel, and the Department for International Trade supports and will continue to support life science companies from Israel that invest in the UK, and those seeking to export from the UK. The companies range from large multinationals to small and medium-sized companies such as the one my hon. Friend mentioned. We support all stages, whether that is by facilitating investment in research and development or setting up commercial operations, such as manufacturing, to export from the UK.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I, too, express my condolences to the families of all those who died, and I wish the very best for those who were injured.

One notable thing about Israel's trade relationship with the EU is that Israel is part of Horizon 2020. Has the Secretary of State considered whether, after Brexit, we should stay in Horizon 2020 and the European Medicines Agency?

Dr Fox: The latter decision will be part of our negotiations. We have made it clear that our intention is to roll over in full the trading agreements that the EU currently has with third countries. That will include Israel, on the basis of the current negotiations.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): In his trade discussions with the Israeli Government, will the Secretary of State convey the House's sympathy for and solidarity with Israel, which has so often suffered the same kind of terrorist attack as we suffered in this House yesterday?

Dr Fox: What we have in common with all terrorist attacks is the fact that such acts of savagery against the innocent can never be justified or excused by creed or by politics.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): May I echo the opening words of the Secretary of State and indeed the condolences that have been expressed for the police officer and the families of others affected by this tragedy?

The world-leading Institute of Cancer Research in the London borough of Sutton already does a lot of work with Israel. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether the post-grads who work at the institute, a third of whom come from the European Union, will be able to carry on working in those projects for years to come?

Dr Fox: The Government have already made it clear that the United Kingdom wishes to see an early resolution on the status of EU citizens. Those who collaborate with our research institutes do so on the basis of the quality of the research, and I am sure that that will continue.

Trade Facilitation Agreement

3. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the WTO trade facilitation agreement. [909450]

4. **Suella Fernandes** (Fareham) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the WTO trade facilitation agreement. [909451]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The World Trade Organisation agreement on trade facilitation entered into force on 22 February 2017 once two thirds of WTO members had accepted the new agreement. This is a very significant event. Once fully implemented, the agreement could add more than £70 billion to the global economy, and of that we expect a benefit to the UK of up to £1 billion.

Mr Speaker: I should say for the benefit of the House, because there was a quizzical air in the Chamber, that Question 2 was withdrawn. That is a situation which is not dissented. I can see that the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) is in his place, but the question was withdrawn.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for the work he is doing to try to secure a bespoke trade deal, and to his Ministers for the work they are doing as well. We do not want to fall back on to WTO rules, but, if we did, what would happen to airlines, digital data flows and trade and services?

Dr Fox: There is a difference between some of the agreements mentioned, which are bilateral agreements, and WTO tariffs that largely apply to goods. We hope to get a comprehensive agreement with our European partners across all the sectors that my hon. Friend mentions so that we will see no interruption to the business as we have it today.

Suella Fernandes: The WTO trade facilitation agreement's coming into force last month brought about great reforms such as reducing fees on imports and exports and quickening clearance procedures. What impact will the reforms have on UK businesses that are importing and exporting?

Dr Fox: UK exporters in particular will benefit from the customs reforms being introduced, and implementing the agreement will reduce delays at the borders of participating members and improve the trading environment for businesses engaging in international trade, making it easier and cheaper for UK businesses to export their goods across the globe.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I associate the Democratic Unionist party with the sentiments that have been expressed for the innocents who were murdered yesterday? Our thoughts and prayers are very much with those who were injured.

With the initial period of this agreement now under way, will the Minister determine how we can enhance and further build capacity in this area? Does he believe that lessons learned here can and will affect our approach to Brexit, trade and negotiations?

Dr Fox: As most European Union countries are already higher than the bar set by TFA, that will not have a huge effect on intra-European trade, but it will have a beneficial impact on European exporters, especially if they are exporting to markets such as sub-Saharan Africa, where the greatest benefit of the trade agreement is likely to be felt.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State give some reassurance to Welsh lamb and sheep farmers, who have faced 40% tariffs under WTO, and ensure that if we do have a trade agreement with New Zealand we will not be flooded with New Zealand lamb?

Dr Fox: When we get to the point at which we begin to have those discussions, we will want to take into account a balance between UK producer interests and UK consumer interests, and we will also wish to ensure that we are making a contribution to a global liberal trading environment that benefits everybody.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): This agreement is potentially of greatest advantage to the least developed countries, in which we have put very considerable investment. Will the Secretary of State continue to drive forward that agenda?

Dr Fox: Yes, and we have actually invested a large amount of money in supporting the agreement itself and in ensuring that it can be introduced in as beneficial a way in as many countries and as quickly as possible, because, as my right hon. Friend correctly says, this agreement will have the greatest benefit to some of the poorest countries in the world, which is why the United Kingdom, under Governments of both parties, has been so supportive of it.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): For well over a century the UK has not had security of food supply, but has instead always relied on imports. What will WTO tariffs of up to 40% do for the price of food for hard-working families already squeezed by the Tory Government's policies?

Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman perhaps unintentionally raises this important point: where we have genuinely free trade it benefits consumers, and where we can have an open global trading environment, it is likely to make the incomes of those on low incomes in particular go further. We should welcome an open trading environment, which I hope the Scottish National party does.

Overseas Trade

5. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help businesses build trading opportunities abroad. [909452]

9. **David Rutley** (Macclesfield) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help businesses build trading opportunities abroad. [909456]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): The Department for International Trade provides market access, support and advice to UK businesses both in the UK and in 109 markets overseas. Through the GREAT campaign we build the global appetite for British goods and services, and give UK companies access to millions of pounds' worth of potential business through the digital services offered on the great.gov.uk website.

Sir David Amess: My hon. Friend the Minister leads the buy British goods campaign. Does he agree that taking companies that make British goods on trade delegations is an excellent way of ensuring that companies make the most of our opportunities as we leave the European Union?

Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Trade delegations give an opportunity for small businesses to be put in front of buyers, and the Department for International Trade runs about 1,000 of them every year; I have been on a number, as have my colleagues, and they are extraordinarily successful in developing opportunities.

David Rutley: What steps is my hon. Friend the Minister taking to help first-time entrepreneurs become first-time successful exporters?

Mark Garnier: The great.gov.uk website is a tremendous opportunity, whereby entrepreneurs, many of whom are very tech savvy, can take advantage of the opportunities that we provide through our subsidised access to global e-marketplaces. They can also access the advice we provide through the website for exactly that type of business—they are supported as well.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): May I ask the Minister specifically what advice there is, and what the Government are doing, to help small businesses in that respect?

Mark Garnier: The Department for International Trade has available a network of international trade advisers throughout the English regions who can be contacted through local chambers of commerce and are specifically there to hand-hold individual companies that need help.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): Is the Minister looking at the trade differences between the English regions? One of the reasons that lots of people in the English regions outside London voted to leave was that they did not feel they were getting the benefits of the European Union. What is he going to do to help those areas improve their trading links?

Mark Garnier: We certainly look at foreign direct investment into the regions through trading links. That is why we see inward investment in areas such as Sunderland, which has benefited from Nissan. The right hon. Lady's point about trade is absolutely right. The UK needs to trade more with the rest of the world—just 11% of businesses that could conduct such trade are actually doing so. One of the prime concerns and objectives of the Department for International Trade is promoting trade to the whole of the UK to ensure that we up our offer to the rest of the world.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps is the Department taking to enhance trade between India and the UK?

Mark Garnier: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has certainly held meetings in India, and we are having ongoing talks to try to facilitate opportunities there. I will visit India in the next couple of weeks with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer to explore more opportunities with financial services.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): May I associate myself and my colleagues with the Secretary of State's remarks about yesterday's terror attacks?

The Federation of Small Businesses reports its members' concerns that there should not be a cliff edge when we leave the European Union. Smaller businesses want to continue with tariff-free access and to minimise non-tariff barriers. What is the Minister's Department doing to support small businesses and allay their concerns?

Mark Garnier: The Department for International Trade absolutely shares those desires for a disruption-free exit from the European Union. We are certainly representing those interests to the Department for Exiting the European Union, which is tasked specifically with the objectives described by the hon. Gentleman.

11. [909458] **Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con):** The United States is the UK's single biggest export market. What early discussions has the Minister had with his new US counterparts about trying to secure a timely new trade deal?

Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to identify the United States as our single biggest trading partner, with 23% of the UK's exports going to the United States. We are waiting for confirmation of when we can start having conversations.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): May I associate myself and my party with the Secretary of State's opening remarks? We will have an opportunity to pay our respects later, but we are grateful that we are here because of the bravery of others.

The rise in Scottish exports has been one of the major success stories in the Scottish economy over the past decade. What lessons does the Minister believe the rest of the UK can learn from this, given that we have seen exports double in the past 10 years?

Mark Garnier: Like everybody else, I am delighted that exports from Scotland have done particularly well, but I stress that trying to promote exports is part of an ongoing process through the whole UK, not just one region. I celebrate the fact that Scotland has a number of tremendous exports, particularly Scottish whisky. Nearly £4 billion-worth of whisky is exported from Scotland, and the rest of the world sees a great deal of value in the brand.

WTO Rules

6. **Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab):** What discussions he has had with businesses, trade bodies and industry representatives on the potential effects of World Trade Organisation rules in the event that the Government do not secure free trade agreements with other countries after the UK leaves the EU. [909453]

10. **Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab):** What discussions he has had with businesses, trade bodies and industry representatives on the potential effects of WTO rules in the event that the Government do not secure free trade agreements with other countries after the UK leaves the EU. [909457]

14. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What discussions he has had with businesses, trade bodies and industry representatives on the potential effects of WTO rules in the event that the Government do not secure free trade agreements with other countries after the UK leaves the EU. [909462]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): International Trade Ministers and officials regularly meet British businesses to discuss trade policy matters. These discussions have included our position in the WTO, work under way to avoid the loss of trade preferences that UK firms currently access via EU trade arrangements, and future trade negotiation priorities. The Department for Exiting the EU is also engaged fully with British businesses.

Jeff Smith: As an EU member state, we are party to free trade agreements with countries such as Mexico, South Korea and South Africa. Is it the responsibility of his Department or the Department for Exiting the European Union to negotiate the grandfathering or replacement of those agreements?

Mark Garnier: I can absolutely confirm that DIT leads in every sense on the trade negotiations with the rest of the world. The Department for Exiting the European Union is restricted to the European Union.

Paula Sherriff: How does the Department intend to help businesses trading with non-EU countries overcome trade barriers such as tariffs and rules of origin requirements if the Government are unable to secure continuation of preferential trading terms?

Mark Garnier: When we leave the European Union, it is the intention of the Department for International Trade to carry over the existing trade deals that we enjoy through our membership of the European Union. Countries such as Mexico, for example, have trade deals with the EU, and it is our intention to carry over such trade deals in the first instance in order to avoid any cliff edge.

Justin Madders: The Minister will be aware of statements made by the head of the PSA Group, following the takeover of Vauxhall-General Motors group, that when new models are awarded plants across Europe will be judged on their competitiveness. A 10% tariff on cars would have a huge impact on the competitiveness of the UK car industry, so what contingency plans do the Government have to ensure that the UK car industry remains competitive?

Mark Garnier: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this point; he speaks on behalf of his constituents in an area that manufactures these vehicles. It is the intention that the UK can achieve tariff-free, customs-free access to the single market. That benefits not only the UK car manufacturers that produce 1.9 million cars, but the European manufacturers that export to the UK.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Many countries breach WTO rules by using a whole series of non-tariff barriers such as local content requirements. What discussions have the Government had to get the

WTO to enforce those rules, and what can we do to ensure that those countries are persuaded against this practice?

Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend is right. Non-tariff barriers are incredibly disruptive to free trade, and we take that very seriously. We will be looking at our own system of trade remedies, but at the moment everything has been done through the European Union. We need to start engaging in that. To a certain extent, we have had conversations with other countries through the joint economic and trade committees, where we can deal with that.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The Government will know that WTO rules are not something that we fall back on, but the ultimate foundation of all international trade. Will the Minister bear in mind the advice of Economists for Free Trade, which has said that a UK free trade policy could add 4% to GDP in the long term and reduce consumer prices by 8%?

Mark Garnier: Free trade is absolutely the key to giving prosperity to the world, including the UK—it is a huge benefit to developing nations, as well as developed nations. For consumers, there is the opportunity to have market choice, and therefore price choice, which can be incredibly helpful to the economy.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Tech City UK published its excellent “Tech Nation” report yesterday, showing that investment in digital companies in the UK is 50% higher than in any other European country. I know that my hon. Friend and his fellow Ministers are supporting the tech industry strongly, but has he made an analysis of how WTO rules will affect it?

Mark Garnier: The Department for International Trade is carrying out an analysis of how WTO rules will affect every sector of our economy. This is an ongoing process, but my right hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the technology sector as one in which this country is leading, and that is a fantastic opportunity.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you and I have been in this House for 20 years, and after yesterday’s attack, I have never felt more proud or more grateful to be speaking in this Chamber.

What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the need to deploy WTO trade remedies? We know that the Government opposed anti-dumping measures in Europe that would have protected British industries. Earlier, he spoke of a balance of interests between UK producers and UK consumers. If there is to be a balance, how many specialist staff has he recruited to deploy successful anti-dumping measures and protect vital UK jobs in the steel and ceramics industries from dumping by China?

Mark Garnier: We will bring forward our proposals on this to the House in due course, but at the moment we are looking to adopt a rules-based process to deal with it.

Topical Questions

T1. [909440] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Department for International Trade has three tasks: promoting UK exports to support a growing economy that serves the whole country; maximising opportunities for wealth creation, including through overseas direct investment, to support the current account; and negotiating the best international trading framework for the UK outside the EU.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to acknowledge Sir Martin Donnelly, who leaves our Department after 36 years in the civil service. He is a great and distinguished civil servant who will be very much missed by my Department and more widely.

Gavin Newlands: Last weekend, we learned that the Secretary of State's Department is secretly working on a 10-year transitional arrangement with the EU, based on the WTO general agreement on tariffs and trade. Will he confirm that the Scottish Government and all other devolved Administrations are being consulted so that the interests of all the nations of the UK are represented, should a trade deal not be reached in time?

Dr Fox: The Department is not working on a secret agreement with anybody, including the European Union. I think that the hon. Gentleman is referring to press reports about the possible use of WTO rules to ensure a smooth transition at the point when the United Kingdom leaves the European Union.

T2. [909441] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): There has been considerable investment in the offshore wind sector off the East Anglian coast in recent years. With article 50 being triggered next Wednesday, will the Minister set out the Government's plans to strengthen the UK's position as a world leader in the sector, and to attract global investment in innovation and research, so that local businesses are well placed to win contracts at home and overseas?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): The Department for International Trade works with, and will continue to work with, key UK suppliers, potential and existing inward investors, foreign Governments and offshore wind developers. The UK is building a competitive and innovative supply chain that creates and sustains jobs, exports and economic benefits for the UK as we leave the European Union.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Now that the Secretary of State has revealed to *The Sun* his plans for a trade Bill in the Queen's Speech, will he do Parliament the courtesy of publishing a trade White Paper that sets out clearly what markets he wishes to liberalise and what measures he will take in future trade agreements to protect and enhance International Labour Organisation principles, sustainable development, human rights, environmental protection, intellectual property rights,

food standards, future options on state-owned enterprises and the ability to nationalise particular sectors? If he develops an informed, consultative international trade policy, the Government may be able to restore confidence that they are holding trade dialogues that are backed by a clear and strategic plan.

Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Should the Government intend to introduce legislation on this issue in the Queen's Speech, we would want a consultative process so that stakeholders could make their views known. It is important that we do that in a very collegiate way, because that is, as he said, the way to maintain and maximise confidence.

T4. [909443] **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): The aerospace sector is of great importance in Derbyshire. What steps are the Government taking to promote the UK's excellence in this sector around the world?

Mark Garnier: Our aim is absolutely to keep the UK as a leading aerospace—and, indeed, space—nation. We will continue to work with the industry through the aerospace growth partnership and to promote foreign investment, boost exports and grow high-value jobs here in the UK.

T3. [909442] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): The UK video game sector is one of our great success stories. I was with Ninja Theory in Cambridge on Friday. The trade body UKIE has consulted its members, who have told it that maintaining data flows in Europe is essential. Can the Minister tell us what progress has been made on securing a data adequacy agreement with the European Union?

Mark Garnier: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to celebrate the activities of this creative industry sector. However, since we have not started the article 50 process, we have not entered into any specific talks.

T5. [909444] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with Commonwealth countries about trade and investment opportunities?

Dr Fox: Just over a week ago, we held our first conference with Commonwealth Trade Ministers. That gave us an opportunity to look at how we might maximise intra-Commonwealth trade and at the differences between our trading systems. That will help us to move towards greater consistency in the rules that we apply so that all in the Commonwealth can get even greater benefit from a system that is growing faster than the global economy and should be much more beneficial.

T7. [909446] **Heidi Alexander** (Lewisham East) (Lab): When will the Government notify other contracting parties to the European economic area agreement of their intention to withdraw from the EEA?

Dr Fox: As we withdraw from the European Union, we will be having continued discussions with our partners about how we intend the process to be notified.

T6. [909445] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What early consideration are Ministers giving to product standards?

Mark Garnier: The subject of product standards is incredibly important. My hon. Friend will be aware that the great repeal Bill will bring across a great deal of what relates to the European Union, and that Bill will contain detail about product standards.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): What influence can my right hon. Friend bring to the showcasing of great British beer in embassies around the world?

Dr Fox: We give great priority to all great British exports, and let me give my hon. Friend a personal commitment that I will take an unusually strong personal interest in the request that he makes on the regular trips that I intend to take in the coming months.

T8. [909447] **Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP):** My constituent Heather Burns works in the digital economy. She has only ever known a borderless, connected world of work. Can the Secretary of State reassure her that he understands the difficulties that Brexit is likely to cause for this very globally focused industry? What action is he going to take to prevent problems from occurring?

Dr Fox: One problem that we have faced in recent times is that although the European Commission has been relatively forward-leaning on digital issues, European Union members have prevented the Commission from taking forward some of the measures of liberalisation that would, in fact, help this country and others. As we leave the European Union, we will want to see what advantages there are for the United Kingdom in liberalising our economy, especially so that the digital economy and e-commerce can flourish.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Exiting the EU: Disability Rights

1. **Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** What assessment she has made of the potential effect on disability rights of the UK exiting the EU. [909425]

14. **Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP):** What assessment she has made of the potential effect on disability rights of the UK exiting the EU. [909439]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): I would, of course, like to add my condolences to those already expressed by colleagues to the families of the victims of yesterday's attack, and especially to the family of Keith Palmer.

I can assure the House that the Equality Act 2010 and the public sector equality duty, which incorporates a number of EU directives on equalities, will continue to apply once the UK has left the EU. Additionally, we continue to be signatories to the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, which is binding in international law.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for her answer, but she will be aware that a lot of her Conservative colleagues are desperate to do away with many of the regulations. As we go forward post Brexit, will she guarantee that there will be no rush to deregulate and there will not be a reduction in the statutory protections available to disabled people?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman mentions my colleagues, but I remind him that the Conservative party has a proud history of protecting disability rights. It was under a Conservative Government that we passed the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which made it unlawful to discriminate against people in respect of their disabilities. The UK is a world leader in support for disabled people, and we are proud of the work that we do to support people with disabilities and health conditions, both in this country and abroad.

Gavin Newlands: There is already a lot of fear and anxiety as this Tory Government have substantially reduced disability support with the powers they already have. How then can we trust this Government's word? Will the Minister set out exactly which of these rights will be safeguarded following Brexit?

Caroline Nokes: Our reforms to welfare are about making sure that we give more to those who need it most while encouraging those who can do so to get into work. That is why people with the most severe disabilities have had their payments increased and protected from the benefit cap and the benefits freeze.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Over 160 Members have signed a prayer against the new personal independence payment regulations. The period for praying against those regulations comes to an end on 3 April. A debate has been arranged in the other place next week, but to date the Government have refused to arrange a debate and vote on the Floor of this House. There is a huge democratic deficit, as the regulations will come into force under the negative procedure. Why are the Government refusing to hold a debate on the new PIP regulations in this House?

Caroline Nokes: As the hon. Lady will know, the usual channels decide when debates will be held in this place. It is not for me to give such a date today.

Universal Credit

2. **Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab):** Whether she has had discussions with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the potential effect on levels of income of limiting entitlement for the child element in universal credit to two children; and if she will make a statement. [909426]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): The Welfare Reform and Work Act was scrutinised by both Houses and gained Royal Assent in March 2016. An impact assessment of the policy was published during the passage of the legislation. The policy strikes the right balance between protecting vulnerable people and encouraging families who receive benefits to make the same financial decisions as those who support themselves solely through work.

Fiona Mactaggart: The respected Women's Budget Group calculates that these cuts will disproportionately affect Asian families, costing them £16,000 by the next general election compared with a cost of £13,000 for larger white families. Should not the Government have carried out a comprehensive equality assessment on this and other Budget measures, and taken action to end this disproportionate effect?

Caroline Nokes: As the right hon. Lady will have heard me say, the policy was available for scrutiny during the passage of the Bill. Since 2010, we have worked hard to make sure that families who are reliant on benefits make the same decisions as families in work. Our reforms are about encouraging more people into work.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): For the very reason that my hon. Friend has just given—those on welfare benefits should have to make the same choice as those in work—will she reassure me that there will be no U-turn on this policy?

Caroline Nokes: As I have said, the reforms are aimed at helping working parents and they are removing barriers to work for ordinary men and women across the country. Ordinary working families rely on the Government to provide economic stability and we are starting from a position of strength. I assure my hon. Friend that we have looked at the regulations carefully, and we have taken this decision to restore fairness in the benefits systems.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): May I, too, associate myself with the comments made by right hon. and hon. Members from across the House?

The Prime Minister wants to transform the way in which we think about domestic violence, and I am sure that the Minister supports her in those efforts, but does the Minister accept that that is completely undermined by introducing the rape clause without parliamentary scrutiny? Will she encourage her colleagues to scrap this pernicious tax?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady will recall that there was a debate on this subject in Westminster Hall in October. I am aware that there have been repeated requests for further scrutiny and debate on this subject, and the usual channels have considered them.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I associate myself with the Minister's comments about PC Keith Palmer. We will always owe a debt of gratitude to him and our hearts bleed for his family.

From 6 April, new mothers will not be able to claim tax credit or universal credit for their third child. What communications has the Minister had with women who are pregnant now to tell them that they face an unexpected drop in income because of this Government's choices?

Caroline Nokes: Of course, the hon. Lady will know that no existing family will be a cost loser as a result of this policy. We consulted widely on the exceptions and how to implement them, and we have worked hard with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to make sure that information is available to all staff who have to communicate the policy.

Women's Voting Rights

4. **Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to celebrate the centenary of the right to vote for women. [909428]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): First, I would like to set out my own condolences to PC Keith Palmer's family and all those who were affected by the terrible incident yesterday. I would also like to say a big thank you to the emergency services and the House of Commons staff, who I felt were outstanding yesterday. The kind of people who perpetrate these sorts of attacks need to understand that they will never disrupt our democracy, because democracy is part of our country's DNA. That is why oral questions are happening perfectly as normal today.

This is a fantastic time to be able to celebrate the centenary of women's suffrage. We now have our second female Prime Minister, who I know is committed to encouraging women in politics, and the proportion of women MPs has finally reached 30%. However, there is much, much more to do. In the Budget, we announced a £5 million fund to support projects to educate young people about the important milestone that is coming up and to inspire women to get more involved in politics at all levels.

Sir David Amess: As we mark 100 years since women were given the right to vote, will my right hon. Friend join me in celebrating the election of two female Prime Ministers, the first of whom made our country and the world better places in which to live, and the second of whom will make our leaving the European Union a great success?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am extremely proud that it is our party—the Conservative party—that has delivered not only the first two female leaders of the major political parties represented in Westminster but, critically, the first two female Prime Ministers of our country. One of them shaped the Britain we live in today; one of them will shape the Britain we live in tomorrow. It is long overdue that we celebrate the centenary that is coming up.

Thangam Debonnaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Women won the right to vote—they fought for it, as they have had to fight for so many rights. I want to make that clear. What is the Minister doing, as we approach the year in which we celebrate that struggle, to ensure that all women in the country today are registered to vote, as many are finding individual registration difficult?

Justine Greening: The Government are committed to ensuring that everybody who is entitled to vote in our country, women included, is registered to vote. I very much hope over the coming months that we can all be role models and inspirations for a new generation of young girls growing up in our country, and encourage them to play their role in our democracy not just in this Parliament, but in councils and other community groups around the country.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): This House benefits hugely from the much broader representation that women and all those from different backgrounds bring to it. As chair of the all-party group for women in Parliament,

may I ask the Minister to commit the Government to highlighting women's suffrage, which was hard fought for and should be highly valued and used?

Justine Greening: I absolutely give my hon. Friend that commitment. We announced £5 million in the Budget to help community groups around the country to celebrate and highlight this important centenary. When I arrived here as a Conservative female MP just over 10 years ago, there were fewer than 20 others. We now have a huge number, but we need to do more. We all need to work together to say that politics is a place that should have more women in it. It is important that we see that happen.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): While it is welcome that next year we will celebrate 100 years of votes for women, those women were also campaigning for economic equality. How then, 99 years on, can the Government justify the fact that 86% of Treasury gains come from women?

Justine Greening: One of the Government's important achievements is getting more people, particularly women, into work. Indeed, there have never been more women in work. However, women's economic empowerment is vital—it is one of our biggest economic growth levers, not just in the UK, but around the world. I was on a United Nations high level panel that recently completed a second report to hand over to the Secretary General in New York. That will provide a platform for delivering global goal 5 of the sustainable development goals.

Child Tax Credit (Rape Victims)

7. **Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab):** What steps the Government are taking to prepare for the implementation of the requirement for victims of rape to prove that abuse in order to receive child tax credit for their third child. [909431]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): The Government consulted on the exception in October 2016 and responded in January 2017, outlining the finalised policy. Since then, we have been developing guidance and working with stakeholders to plan for the delivery of this exception in the most sensitive and compassionate way possible.

Lilian Greenwood: The rape clause exception in the two-child limit on tax credits is not just unworkable, but inhumane. It betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of sexual violence and domestic abuse. Will the Minister act urgently and seek to persuade her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to reconsider the proposal in order to protect women's rights?

Caroline Nokes: We know that this issue is difficult and sensitive. The exception will use a third-party model, whereby women can request the exception through engaging with a third party, who will be a recognised healthcare professional. We are setting up procedures that are mindful of the sensitivities involved. Neither DWP nor HMRC staff will question the claimant about the incident, other than to take the claim.

Food Security (East Africa)

8. **Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for International Development on the Government's support for women and girls affected by food insecurity in east Africa. [909433]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): The scale of the humanitarian crisis we are facing in 2017 is unprecedented. Once again, the impact falls disproportionately on women and children. I am proud that the UK is leading the way, stepping up DFID's life-saving emergency assistance for those affected by food insecurity in east Africa, with women and girls at the heart of that response.

Patrick Grady: The Minister is right that women and girls are disproportionately affected by the food insecurity crisis in east Africa, and I recognise her experience in dealing with such matters. What further discussions has she had with the Secretary of State for International Development about not just immediate, short-term aid, but long-term rebuilding, especially access to education for women and girls, which is the best route out of poverty?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He will know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development announced £100 million to support South Sudan in particular. More broadly, we need to look long-term, and I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is leading a big push to ensure that girls and women, wherever they are in our world, have education. It is vital if women are to take their proper place in our society.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Millions of impoverished women and girls in developing countries spend much of their life fetching and carrying very heavy loads of water to and from their homes. Their lives would be vastly improved if DFID encouraged proper sanitation and water facilities.

Justine Greening: I agree with my hon. Friend and, indeed, substantial investment has gone into improving water and sanitation. It is a basic issue, but it makes a tremendous difference to being able to lift up women and girls.

STEM Careers

9. **Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to encourage girls to take up STEM careers. [909434]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): We simply cannot afford to miss out on the talents of half the population. Increasing the number of women in STEM industries is vital for economic growth and to eliminate the gender pay gap. That is why we are improving the quality of STEM teaching, funding programmes such as the Stimulating Physics Network and the further maths support programme, and raising awareness of career opportunities through STEM ambassadors.

Andrew Stephenson: I recently met Katie Goodwill, an apprentice from Rolls-Royce in Barnoldswick, who in November won the gold medal in CNC turning at a 2016 world skills show. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Katie as a role model for other women and girls, inspiring them to take up STEM careers?

Caroline Dinéage: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating his constituent, Katie Goodwill, on her fantastic achievement. Role models are so important—that is why more than 40% of our STEM ambassadors are women. They are helping to inspire the next generation, just as I am sure his constituent Katie will.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): It is important to encourage women and girls into non-traditional careers, but will the hon. Lady ask the Ministers responsible for expanding apprenticeships why there are no targets for increasing the number of girls on apprenticeships in traditionally male areas? There has been a lost opportunity to challenge that.

Caroline Dinéage: I certainly will have conversations with my colleague in the Department for Education, but the right hon. Lady must remember that there are no such things as girls' jobs and boys' jobs, and we have to get that message across from the earliest stages of kids' engagement with the education system. That is why we have chosen to focus on increasing the take-up of STEM subjects, which lead to the more technical apprenticeships and jobs.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): The engineering education scheme is a brilliant scheme for encouraging primary schoolchildren of both sexes to get interested in engineering. What can the Government do to support that scheme and promote it in schools across the country, including in my constituency?

Caroline Dinéage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to that scheme and others that make such a difference up and down the country. She should also be aware that we are investing an additional half a billion pounds in developing technical skills for 16 to 19-year-olds via the new T-level certificate. We are encouraging girls to take advantage of that scheme to gain valuable industry skills and experience.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): All the evidence suggests that one of the best ways of getting girls and young women to go into STEM careers is to change STEM to STEAM—that is to ensure that every young person in this country, and particularly girls, has a really strong arts education in their school. What will the Government do to ensure that schools do not cut music teaching and drama education, and ensure that every youngster gets a good arts education?

Caroline Dinéage: The Government have taken unprecedented steps to ensure that we continue to invest in those subjects, and that they continue to have massive focus in our schools. We are also publishing online guidance—"Your daughter's future"—that helps parents to support their daughters in careers choices, so that they ensure that they include all those important subjects when making decisions about their future.

Domestic Violence Refuges

10. **Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab):** What recent assessment the Government have made of the adequacy of the availability of domestic violence refuges for women. [909435]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Refuges provide vital support for victims of domestic abuse. We are investing £40 million over this Parliament in services to support victims of domestic abuse, including refuges. We expect local areas to assess their need, and to provide services and support to meet that need.

Helen Hayes: Domestic violence refuges are unique within the supported housing sector because many who need them have to flee a long distance to be safe. By relying solely on local authorities to commission refuge services, the Government are failing to maintain a strategic approach. We are now seeing patchy provision with, for example, the recent closure of the last remaining refuge in Cumbria. Is the Minister monitoring the number of specialist refuge services and specialist providers that have closed since 2010? If not, how can he be assured—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am extremely grateful but we have got the thrust of it. We really do need to be briefer. That was far too long.

Mr Jones: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

We recognise the importance of refuges. That is why we are exempting refuges from the 1% social rent cap policy, and exempting them from the local housing allowance rate until 2019-20. We are working closely with organisations that provide refuges to ensure that we get the new system for supported housing right, so that we can continue to provide those refuges, which are so badly needed.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): I warmly welcome what the Government are doing in this crucial area, but what work is being done with local authorities and social housing providers on the next stage, which is ensuring that there are enough homes for women and their families to return to that provide a safer environment?

Mr Jones: I reassure my right hon. Friend that we are working closely with housing associations on that important issue, and particularly on getting the funding stream right for supported housing. We are also working on bringing badly needed new supply on stream.

Women in Work

11. **Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con):** What assessment she has made of recent trends in the number of women in work. [909436]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinéage): I am delighted that there are now more women in work than ever before, and that the female employment rate is nearly 70%, which is the highest on record. The female employment rate has increased by more since 2010 than it increased during the three previous Parliaments combined.

Chris Davies: Recent figures show that record-breaking numbers of women are in work under this Government. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is only by creating a stronger, fairer economy that works for everyone that we will continue to see records being broken?

Caroline Dinéage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to that. We want to ensure that all women can fulfil their potential. That is why the Government have extended the right to flexible working and introduced shared parental leave. From September, we will double the 30 hours childcare offer.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): According to Maternity Action, 54,000 women are forced out of work each year due to maternity discrimination. What steps are the Government taking to address that unacceptable gender inequality?

Caroline Dinéage: Maternity discrimination and pregnancy discrimination in any form is utterly illegal and must be tackled. Women must feel that they can bring cases forward, which is why we are committed to ensuring people from all backgrounds can access justice. The introduction of the early conciliation service through ACAS has meant that people have to avoid the stress of going through an employment tribunal hearing.

Personal Independence Payments

12. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect on disabled people of recent changes to the level of personal independence payments. [909437]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): Recent changes to the PIP regulations clarify the original criteria used to decide how much benefit claimants receive. This is not a policy change, nor is it intended to make new savings. It will not result in any claimants seeing a reduction in the amount of PIP previously awarded by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Kerry McCarthy: The Minister, in response to the Labour Front Bench, batted away suggestions that we need a full debate and vote on the Floor of the House on this issue, but given that the Government's own equality impact assessment says that 164,000 people with debilitating mental health conditions will be affected, does she not think it is her job to go to the DWP and tell them we want a proper vote?

Caroline Nokes: Supporting people with mental illness is a priority, which is why we are spending more on mental health than ever before, and an estimated £11.4 billion this year. PIP does ensure parity between mental and physical conditions, and it achieves this by looking at the impact of conditions on an individual, not which conditions they have. As I have previously said, it is of course up to the usual channels to decide whether there will be further debate on the subject.

Topical Questions

T1. [909417] **Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): We celebrated International Women's Day this year with a budget for potential and a budget for equality, including £20 million of funding to combat violence against women and girls, £5 million for internships and £5 million to mark the centenary of women getting the vote for the very first time. Next month, the gender pay gap reporting regulations will come into force. I want to thank Members from all parts of the House for their constructive support as we take forward amendments to the Children and Social Work Bill, enabling statutory, age-appropriate relationship education in primary schools and relationship and sex education in secondary schools.

Jo Stevens: The European Social Investment Fund has supported a Cardiff-based charity, Chwarae Teg, to deliver a range of successful programmes to help women in Wales achieve pay equality and progress in Welsh workplaces. One example is the £8.6 million for the Agile Nation 2 project. Can the Minister provide a guarantee that post-Brexit the Government will provide equivalent replacement funding for Chwarae Teg?

Justine Greening: The Government are proud that we now have the lowest gender pay gap on record. We are absolutely committed to making sure that that continues post-Brexit.

T6. [909424] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): The good news is that smoking rates among both men and women are falling, as is the incidence of lung cancer in men. The bad news is that the incidence of lung cancer in women is rising. What will the Government do to tackle that?

Justine Greening: I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health looks into these incredibly serious issues very carefully. I will raise my hon. Friend's concerns with him.

T2. [909418] **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough) (Lab): The Minister said that the Budget was good for women, but actually mothers and couples will be losing 11%, or £2,400, of their individual income. In contrast, their husbands or partners will lose 5%, or £1,700, of their income. What does that tell us about her effectiveness as a Minister for Women?

Justine Greening: The bottom line is that the best route for all of us as women is to be able to have the chance to have a working life and a career. That is why we have more women in employment than ever before, something the House should welcome.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers) had a question on the Order Paper. She is here and it could be topical. She should be heard.

T5. [909423] **Mrs Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Secretary of State make every effort to ensure that women are involved in the huge programme of rail infrastructure upgrades we are currently undertaking as a Government?

Justine Greening: Absolutely. The Department for Transport set out an ambition for women to represent at least 20% of new entrants to engineering and technical apprenticeships in the transport sector by 2020. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills visited the Crossrail Academy recently. The academy is exceeding the target: 27% of its apprentices are female.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Some 54,000 women are forced out of work due to maternity discrimination. Will the Government look at reducing the extortionate fees for employment tribunals, and will the Minister specifically look at extending the time for application from three months to six months?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): We are consulting on proposals to extend the support that is available under the help with fees schemes. We propose that the gross monthly income threshold for a full fee remission should increase to £1,250, which is broadly the level of the national minimum wage.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that only 36% of headteachers are women? In my constituency, the Affinity Teaching Alliance, led by local headteacher Sarah Watson, is working on an innovative programme to change that. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Sarah Watson on enabling many more women to take up senior teaching

posts, and does she agree that that is the best way to get the most out of our workforce?

Justine Greening: I would indeed like to congratulate Sarah Watson. Improving flexible working in the teaching profession is one of the best things we could do to ensure that women can get to the top, and later this year the Department will host a summit with teachers to discuss how we can make more progress in that regard.

T4. [909422] **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Eighty-six per cent of cuts and adjustments to tax and benefits have been inflicted on women. Will the Minister agree to meet me, along with women from my constituency who are affected by the changes in the state pension age, and will she tell us why the Government are persistently refusing to listen to the WASPI campaigners, who have fought so long and so hard for a fair deal?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): As the hon. Gentleman knows, there is a long-standing commitment to equalise the state pension ages of men and women, and we continue to look very closely at the state pension age in general. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, like me, welcomes the increase in longevity. The Government have made big concessions with regard to cost—we have already committed more than £1.1 billion—and there will be no further concessions.

Speaker's Statement

10.31 am

Mr Speaker: After yesterday's shocking events, I know that the whole House will want me to express our heartfelt condolences to the families and friends of the victims of this outrage. A police officer, PC Keith Palmer, was killed defending us, defending Parliament and defending parliamentary democracy. Arrangements have been made for books of condolence to be placed in the Library and Westminster Hall. Our hearts go out to all those directly and indirectly touched by yesterday's events.

I should like to thank all colleagues, staff of the House and Members' staff for their forbearance in very stressful circumstances yesterday. Naturally, the parliamentary security authorities have already taken measures to ensure that Parliament is safe in the light of the attack. In due time, the Commission, which I chair, will consider, together with our Lords counterparts, what sort of review of lessons learned would be appropriate. However, let the security personnel who protect us—police, security officers and Doorkeepers—be in no doubt whatsoever of our profound appreciation of the way in which they discharged their duties yesterday, matched by other staff of the House. That means that this morning the House has been able to resume its business undeterred.

London Attack

10.33 am

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Yesterday, an act of terrorism tried to silence our democracy, but today we meet as normal, as generations have done before us and as future generations will continue to do, to deliver a simple message: we are not afraid, and our resolve will never waver in the face of terrorism. We meet here, in the oldest of all Parliaments, because we know that democracy, and the values that it entails, will always prevail. Those values—free speech, liberty, human rights and the rule of law—are embodied here in this place, but they are shared by free people around the world.

A terrorist came to the place where people of all nationalities and cultures gather to celebrate what it means to be free, and he took out his rage indiscriminately against innocent men, women and children. This was an attack on free people everywhere, and on behalf of the British people, I would like to thank our friends and allies around the world who have made it clear that they stand with us at this time. What happened on the streets of Westminster yesterday afternoon sickened us all.

While there is an ongoing police investigation, the House will understand that there are limits to what I can say, but, having been updated by police and security officials, let me set out what, at this stage, I can tell the House. At approximately 2.40 pm yesterday, a single attacker drove his vehicle at speed into innocent pedestrians who were crossing Westminster bridge, killing two people and injuring around 40 more. In addition to 12 Britons admitted to hospital, we know that the victims include three French children, two Romanians, four South Koreans, one German, one Pole, one Irish, one Chinese, one Italian, one American and two Greeks, and we are in close contact with the Governments of the countries of all those affected. The injured also included three police officers who were returning from an event to recognise their bravery; two of those three remain in a serious condition.

The attacker then left the vehicle and approached a police officer at Carriage Gates, attacking that officer with a large knife, before he was shot dead by an armed police officer. Tragically, as the House will know, 48-year-old PC Keith Palmer was killed.

PC Palmer had devoted his life to the service of his country. He had been a member of the parliamentary and diplomatic protection command for 15 years, and a soldier in the Royal Artillery before that. He was a husband and a father, killed doing a job he loved. He was every inch a hero, and his actions will never be forgotten. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I know that the whole House will join me in sending our deepest condolences to his family, and to the families and friends of all those who have been killed or injured in yesterday's awful attacks. I know also that the House will wish to thank all those who acted with such speed and professionalism yesterday to secure this place and ensure that we are able to meet, as we are doing today.

At 7.30 pm last night, I chaired a meeting of the Government's emergency committee, Cobra, and will have further briefings and meetings with security officials today. The threat level to the UK has been set at "severe"—meaning an attack is highly likely—for some

time. This is the second highest threat level. The highest level—“critical”—means that there is specific intelligence that an attack is imminent. As there is no such intelligence, the independent joint terrorism analysis centre has decided that the threat level will not change in the light of yesterday’s attack.

The whole country will want to know who was responsible for this atrocity and the measures that we are taking to strengthen our security, including here in Westminster. A full counter-terrorism investigation is already under way. Hundreds of our police and security officers have been working through the night to establish everything possible about this attack, including its preparation and motivation, and whether there were any associates involved in its planning. And while there remain limits on what I can say at this stage, I can confirm that overnight the police have searched six addresses and made eight arrests in Birmingham and London.

It is still believed that this attacker acted alone, and the police have no reason to believe that there are imminent further attacks on the public. His identity is known to the police and MI5, and when operational considerations allow, he will be publicly identified. What I can confirm is that the man was British-born and that—some years ago—he was once investigated by MI5 in relation to concerns about violent extremism. He was a peripheral figure. The case is historic: he was not part of the current intelligence picture. There was no prior intelligence of his intent or of the plot. Intensive investigations continue, and as Acting Deputy Commissioner Rowley confirmed last night, our working assumption is that the attacker was inspired by Islamist ideology.

We know the threat from Islamist terrorism is very real, but while the public should remain utterly vigilant, they should not, and will not, be cowed by this threat. As Acting Deputy Commissioner Rowley has made clear, we are stepping up policing to protect communities across the country and to reassure the public. As a precautionary measure, this will mean increasing the number of patrols in cities across the country, with more police and more armed police on the streets.

Since June 2013, our police, security and intelligence agencies have successfully disrupted 13 separate terrorist plots in Britain. Following the 2015 strategic defence and security review, we protected the police budgets for counter-terrorism and committed to increase cross-Government spending on counter-terrorism by 30% in real terms over the course of this Parliament. Over the next five years, we will invest an extra £2.5 billion in building our global security and intelligence network, employing over 1,900 additional staff at MI5, MI6 and GCHQ, and more than doubling our global network of counter-terrorism experts working with priority countries across Europe, the middle east, Africa and Asia.

In terms of security here in Westminster, we should be clear first of all that an attacker attempted to break into Parliament and was shot dead within 20 yards of the gates. If his intention was to gain access to this building, we should be clear that he did not succeed. The police heroically did their job. But, as is routine, the police, together with the House authorities, are reviewing the security of the parliamentary estate, co-ordinated with the Cabinet Office, which has responsibility for the security measures in place around the Government

secure zone. All of us in this House have a responsibility for the security and safety of our staff, and advice is available for Members who need it.

Yesterday, we saw the worst of humanity, but we will remember the best. We will remember the extraordinary efforts to save the life of PC Keith Palmer, including those of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood). [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] And we will remember the exceptional bravery of our police, security and emergency services who once again ran towards the danger even as they encouraged others to move the other way. On behalf of the whole country, I want to pay tribute to them for the work they have been doing to reassure the public, treat the injured and bring security back to the streets of our capital city. That they have lost one of their own in yesterday’s attack only makes their calmness and professionalism all the more remarkable.

A lot has been said since terror struck London yesterday. Much more will be said in the coming days. But the greatest response lies not in the words of politicians but in the everyday actions of ordinary people. For beyond these walls today, in scenes repeated in towns and cities across the country, millions of people are going about their days and getting on with their lives. The streets are as busy as ever, the offices full, the coffee shops and cafés bustling. As I speak, millions will be boarding trains and aeroplanes to travel to London and to see for themselves the greatest city on Earth. It is in these actions—millions of acts of normality—that we find the best response to terrorism: a response that denies our enemies their victory, that refuses to let them win, that shows we will never give in; a response driven by that same spirit that drove a husband and father to put himself between us and our attacker, and to pay the ultimate price; a response that says to the men and women who propagate this hate and evil, “You will not defeat us.” Mr Speaker, let this be the message from this House and this nation today: our values will prevail. I commend this statement to the House.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Order. Colleagues, I am advised that we have been joined today by French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault—Sir, we appreciate your presence and your fitting display of solidarity with us—who is accompanied by a number of his colleagues and also by the deputy Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan).

10.45 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join you, Mr Speaker, in welcoming our colleagues from France here today, and I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s remarks. What happened yesterday within metres of where we sit now was an appalling atrocity. The police are still piecing together what took place and what lay behind it. It behoves us all not to rush to judgment, but to wait for the police to establish the facts, to stay united in our communities and not to allow fear or the voices of hatred to divide or cower us. Today, we are united by our humanity, by our democratic values and by that human impulse for solidarity to stand together in times of darkness and adversity.

[Jeremy Corbyn]

I express my condolences to the family and friends of police officer Keith Palmer who gave his life yesterday in defence of the public and our democracy. We thank the police and security personnel who keep us safe every day on this estate, and we especially pay tribute to the bravery of those who took action to stop the perpetrator of yesterday's assault. The police and security staff lost a colleague yesterday and continued to fulfil their duties, despite their shock and their grief for their fallen colleague, which many of them expressed to me when I was talking to them late last night. We see the police and security staff every day. They are our colleagues. They are fellow workers. They are friends. They are neighbours. As the Prime Minister said, when dangerous and violent incidents take place, we all instinctively run away from them for our own safety; the police and emergency services run towards them. We are grateful for their public service yesterday, today and every day that they pull on their uniforms to protect us all.

I want to express our admiration for the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), whose efforts yesterday deserve special commendation. He used his skill to try to save a life.

Innocent people were killed yesterday walking across Westminster bridge, as many millions of Londoners and tourists and all of us in this Chamber have done before them. As the Prime Minister said, the injured include people of 10 nationalities. We send our deepest condolences to their loved ones and to the loved ones of those still in a critical condition, including the French schoolchildren so welcome in our capital who were visiting from Concarneau in Brittany. We send our sympathies to them and to the people of their town and their community.

We thank all the dedicated national health service staff working to save lives, including all those from St Thomas' hospital who rushed straight over to the scene of the incident to try to support and save lives. Many people will have been totally traumatised by yesterday's awful events—not just all of us here, but those who were watching on television, worried for the safety of their friends and loved ones—so I ask in this House and in the country, please, that we look after each other, help one another and think of one another. It is by demonstrating our values—solidarity, community, humanity and love—that we will defeat the poison and division of hatred.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

The Prime Minister: I join the right hon. Gentleman and you, Mr Speaker, in expressing our gratitude for the support and solidarity that the French Government have shown us at this difficult time. Like many other countries on the continent, France has obviously felt the horror and trauma of terrible terrorist attacks, and we are grateful to the French Government for the support that they have shown us.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in his description of the police officers. Every day they put on that uniform, they do not know what they will confront in the course of their duties. It is a fact often forgotten when people see the police officer walking on the streets

that, actually, they put their life on the line for our safety and security. They show enormous bravery, and we are grateful to them all.

We are also grateful, as the right hon. Gentleman said, to all those from the emergency services, to those from the hospitals and to others who rushed forward to give aid and support to those who had been injured at a time when they knew not what else might be happening in the vicinity and whether they themselves might be in danger.

Finally, as the right hon. Gentleman said, at this time it is so important that we show that it is our values that will prevail, that the terrorists will not win and that we will go about our lives showing that unity of purpose and the values that we share as one nation as we go forward, ensuring that the terrorists will be defeated.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I join my right hon. Friend in everything she says in respect of the deaths and injuries that have taken place, and I join her in sending our condolences to the families and the injured.

My right hon. Friend has set exactly the right tone. Those of us who are privy to the information and background of these matters know very well that it has been little short of a miracle that, over the course of the last few years, we have escaped so lightly from the evil that is, I am afraid, present in our society and that manifests itself in these senseless and hideous acts of violence and evil. We have been very fortunate in that our security services have been immensely diligent and helpful in preventing such attacks, but she may agree with me that the House will simply have to be resolute in accepting that such attacks cannot always be prevented and that, as a society, we have to accept that we are going to have to fight this evil with rational democratic principles in order to get rid of it and that, in reality, there are no shortcuts that will ever enable us to do that.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. In a sense, he refers to the fact that a number of plots have been disrupted in recent years, and it is easy to forget that when the threat level is at severe it means that an attack is highly likely. We live in a free and open country, we live in a democracy, and as he says it is not possible to ensure that we can prevent the possibility of any attack, but we can work as hard as our security services and police do precisely to try to prevent attacks. They have worked hard and have been doing a good job, and they continue to do a good job, in keeping us safe and will do so into the future.

If we are to defeat this evil, my right hon. and learned Friend is right that we will defeat it through our democracy and our values. We must defeat, of course, the terrible ideology that leads people to conduct these horrific attacks.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I begin by associating myself and my hon. and right hon. Friends with everything that has been said by the Prime Minister, by the leader of the Labour party and by you, Mr Speaker. Today of all days, we are reminded that, notwithstanding our differences on political and constitutional issues, we are as one in our dedication to democracy, the rule of law and harmony between peoples of all faiths and none.

I personally wish the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary well as they work very hard on our behalf with the security and intelligence services to deal with the aftermath of the appalling indiscriminate terrorist act yesterday. Our hearts go out to the family, friends and colleagues of PC Keith Palmer and of all other casualties. We are all hugely grateful to all the police, security and intelligence staff and first responders who ran towards danger without concern for their own safety, and I include in that our colleague, the hon. and gallant Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood).

Today is not a day for detailed questions, so will the Prime Minister accept on behalf of the Scottish National party, and no doubt every Member of this House, our huge debt of gratitude to all police and security agency staff who are working so hard to keep everyone in the country safe? Does she agree with me that no terrorist outrage—no terrorist outrage—is representative of any faith, or of any faith community, and that we recommit ourselves to strengthening the bonds of tolerance and understanding?

Finally, is it not best to follow the advice of Brendan Cox, the husband of our murdered MP colleague, Jo Cox? He said:

“In the days to come I hope we will remember the love & bravery of the victims not just the hatred & cowardice of the attackers.”

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his words. He is absolutely correct that now is a time for us to come together to promote the values of tolerance and understanding to which he referred, and to recognise that what motivates the terrorists is a warped ideology and a desire to destroy the values that we share and that underpin our democracy—those values of the rule of law, human rights, tolerance and understanding, and democracy itself. We should be absolutely at one in ensuring that those values prevail. Finally, as he says, we should remember the bravery of the victims and the bravery of those who keep us safe, day in, day out.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend’s powerful statement and add my prayers to hers for those who have died and those who are suffering, and particularly for Keith Palmer, our wonderful and brave police officer. We have faced such threats before from those of twisted and violent ideologies, as the broken stones of the arch through which we enter on a daily basis bear testament to. Time and again, they have failed; they will always fail because we are a beacon of freedom in this place, and that is why they target us. But as they fail, may I urge my right hon. Friend to ensure that as we extoll our righteous defiance in the face of such evil, we lace it with compassion, tolerance and hope?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely share the thoughts that my right hon. Friend has set out. He is right: this place is a beacon of freedom, and we should never forget that. We should be absolutely resolute in our determination to defeat this evil, but we should also be optimistic and hopeful for our democracy and our society in the future.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement and for early sight of it. I also thank her for her words from the steps of 10 Downing Street last night, which were both

unifying and defiant, and in which she really did speak for us all. We always know that the police keep us safe, but yesterday, in the most shocking of ways, we saw how true that really is. In my prayers are Keith Palmer, his family and all the victims of yesterday’s outrage, and they will continue to be there. I am, and we are, beyond thankful to the police, the NHS, the emergency services and the staff of this House for keeping us safe and being so utterly dedicated to their roles. Those who attack us hate our freedom, our peaceful democracy, our love of country, our tolerance, our openness and our unity. As we work to unravel how this unspeakable attack happened, will the Prime Minister agree with me that we must not, either in our laws or by our actions, curtail these values? Indeed, we should have more of them.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He is of course right that, as others have said, we should ensure that our values of democracy, tolerance and freedom prevail. It is exactly those values that the terrorists are trying to attack. It is our very way of life that they wish to destroy, and that is why it is so important that, out there, those millions of citizens are going about their lives, as they would do normally, showing, in the very smallest of ways, but each and every one of them, a defiance of the terrorists.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Although yesterday’s dreadful events took place within the boundaries of my constituency, I know that the Palace of Westminster is close to the hearts of not just the 650 of us but of many millions of our fellow countrymen and, indeed, people who live abroad. I thank the Prime Minister for speaking so very eloquently for the nation, both on the steps of Downing Street yesterday evening and in the House today. She reminds us all that the greatest tribute that we, collectively, can pay to those so tragically murdered is to ensure that we go about our business as normally as possible and maintain the values and liberties that our forefathers fought so hard to win on our behalf.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. It is so important that we continue to show not just that we value those freedoms and liberties, but that we espouse and, in every action, embody them, because it is those that the terrorists wish to attack. Those freedoms and liberties were hard fought, and there are parts of this Palace where in the past there have been many arguments about them. We must ensure that they remain, and that we show, in our actions, in our deeds and in our words, that they remain at the heart of our democracy.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for her words here today, and also her words on the steps of Downing Street yesterday. At this very difficult and important time she spoke for us all, so I thank her for that.

We are so proud of the bravery of PC Keith Palmer, so sad for his grieving family, but so grateful for what he did to keep us safe. I wish to add my tribute to all the police and the parliamentary staff here in Westminster who acted with such calmness and professionalism yesterday. I wish to pay tribute, too, to the emergency trauma team at King’s College hospital who are caring

[Ms Harriet Harman]

for the injured. This was an horrific crime and it has cost lives and caused injury, but as an act of terror it has failed. It has failed because we are here and we will go about our business. It has failed because, despite the trauma that our staff witnessed outside their windows, they are here and getting on with their work. It has failed because, as the Prime Minister so rightly said, we are not going to allow this to be used as a pretext for division, hatred and Islamophobia. This democracy is strong, and this Parliament is robust. This was an horrific crime, but, as an act of terror, it has failed.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Lady speaks very well and I utterly agree with her words.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Some of us were present 38 years ago and nearby when Airey Neave was martyred. The lesson that we learned then was not to damn a community because of the actions of a single person. The message from the imam at the Worthing House of Prayer and Peace was:

“We will always be with those who work for peace.”

May I suggest that we try to disappoint those who calculate that publicity and public reaction will work in their favour by making sure that we work together?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The Metropolitan police are bringing together a number of faith leaders for a meeting today to show the importance of that coming together. They are of course working with communities up and down the country, especially with those that are concerned about the possible reaction that might take place, to reassure them that the job of the police is to keep us all safe.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): May I join others in commending the Prime Minister for her statement last night and her statement today? In her tone and in substance, she has spoken for the whole country and I commend her for it. May I also echo those who have said that, in the coming days and weeks, we must not allow anyone to try to divide our country on the basis of faith or nationality after these attacks? The reality is that, across London and across the country, we are united against these attacks; that is who we are.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the country is united. People of all faiths and none are going about their business in defiance of the terrorists. Their very clear message is that they will not be cowed, and that is a message that this House gives very clearly today: this country will not be cowed by these terrorists.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I too send my sympathies to all those bereaved or injured in yesterday's horrific attack. As we reflect on what happened, we must ask if it is time to consider whether the police who guard sensitive sites known to be of interest to terrorists, such as Parliament or airports, should routinely carry personal protection weapons, even when those officers are not part of the units formally tasked with armed response?

The Prime Minister: Over the nearly 20 years that I have been in this House, the level of security on the parliamentary estate has been enhanced significantly, and the number of armed officers on the parliamentary estate has been enhanced significantly. As to whether individual officers undertaking particular duties are routinely armed, that is an operational matter for the police themselves. They are best able to judge the circumstances in which it is best for individuals to have such arms. Of course, we have seen a significant increase in the number of armed response vehicles and the number of counter-terrorism specialist firearms officers. It is a sad reflection of the threat that we face that it has been necessary to do that, but we have been doing so. But, as I said, my right hon. Friend's specific question is really an operational matter for the police.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I too commend the Prime Minister for her words last evening and today, when she spoke for all of us and for the entire country? PC Keith Palmer and his colleagues are the reason we are here today and on any other day. He embodied the rule of law, which we stand for, and stood in harm's way for all of us. We remember and pray for his family, all the victims who suffered yesterday and the bereaved. We must remember, too, and always will, the bravery of the emergency services, the police, the security forces and our own parliamentary staff and, indeed, the goodness and decency of ordinary members of the public who rushed without regard for their own safety to help people—that includes our hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood).

We must uphold the values of this place—our democratic values. We have learned in Northern Ireland that the way to overcome terrorism is by working together politically, and in every other way, to ensure that our democratic values, the rule of law and human rights are all upheld in every way that they can be. We must rededicate ourselves to that in the future.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman—we are able to be here today because of the bravery of our police officers. He rightly referred to the emergency services and others—members of the public, as he said—and to the staff of this House and of this Parliament who calmly went about their jobs to ensure that everybody was safe yesterday. As he said—he referred to the experience in Northern Ireland—the way to defeat terrorism is by working together and upholding our democratic values.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): As a Back Bencher, it seems to me that both the Prime Minister and the leaders of the opposition parties have set exactly the right tone today and prove that it is values that unite this kingdom. When this Chamber was completely destroyed in the war, Mr Churchill and Mr Attlee decided that not a single day would pass without our carrying on our work. The Prime Minister and her opposite number have shown today that the best way to defeat terrorism is to prove that we will not be moved from our values and our place.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He refers to a specific example in the past when, once again, Parliament upheld our democracy and showed our values in the face of evil, and we continue to do that today.

Alan Johnson (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The Prime Minister is dealing with this outrage in a calm and assured way. Does she agree that an effective counter-terrorism strategy designed to prepare, protect and pursue would be inadequate without the strand of prevent? In that vein, will she assure the House that across all 43 constabularies there will be neighbourhood policing teams visible to, and contactable by, the public, which is a crucial strand in feeding information on terrorism to the counter-terrorism organisations?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right. As he knows from his experience, our counter-terrorism strategy does indeed embody those four pillars, including the pillar of prevent. The action that is taken to prevent terrorism, violent extremism and extremism will come in many forms, but it is important that individuals within communities feel that they are able to give information when they are concerned about somebody within their community, or perhaps within their family, and what is happening to them. It is important that there are those opportunities for them. There will be a variety of means—some through policing and some through other opportunities—where people can go and give such information, not just only for the protection of us all but often to the benefit of the individual concerned.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): May I commend the Prime Minister for her very fitting statement? When police officers die, they leave behind husbands, wives, sons and daughters. The Police Dependants' Trust was set up to support the dependants of police officers killed or injured on duty, following the brutal murder of three police officers in Shepherd's Bush in 1966. Will the Prime Minister join me in encouraging people to donate to the Police Dependants' Trust via pdtrust.org/donate?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to encourage people to do exactly as my hon. Friend suggests. It is a valuable organisation, providing help and support to the families who are left behind. As we have all said, they have to live forever with what, for us, has been an act of bravery from their family member, but which, for them, is a tragedy and a trauma.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Prime Minister's words, as she speaks for all of us with the backing of all parties today. She was right to say that this was an attempted attack on Parliament and democracy that failed because of the bravery of PC Keith Palmer, who gave his life doing a job with others to keep people safe. It was also a violent, cowardly attempted attack on our freedom, by mowing down people who were just walking along a bridge. As our hearts go out to them, does the Prime Minister agree that that attack on freedom also fails, not just because of communities' resilience and determination but because of the perhaps unique partnership in this country between the police and communities of all faiths and across all parts of the country, and that that partnership working will be crucial to our making sure that the terrorists never win?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady is right; it was a cowardly attack. Parliament has particularly focused on the attempt to attack Parliament, but the mowing down of innocent men, women and children who were just going about their business in a variety of ways—many had come here as tourists to enjoy the great delights of this wonderful city—was an absolutely cowardly and appalling act. We have a unique bond between our police and their communities, and it is important that the partnership and bond continue.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I commend the Prime Minister's statement? I also commend the Prime Minister for her reassuring dignity and resolve. She has shown why she is proving to be a superb Prime Minister, and why we are proud to have her as our Prime Minister. Of course, our hearts go out to the victims, and we honour the police, who risk their lives every day and, unfortunately, too often give up their lives to keep us safe. Will the Prime Minister assure us that she will ensure that police forces up and down the country, and the security services, will always have the resources they need to carry out their job of keeping us all safe?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. As I indicated in my statement, we have taken steps to enhance the resources available for our security and intelligence agencies, and for our police forces, particularly those working in counter-terrorism. As I indicated in my answer to an earlier question, we have looked, in recent times, to increase the number of armed response vehicles available not just here in London but in other parts of the country. Of course, we constantly look at making sure that our response is appropriate, but we are very conscious of the job that our police do, day in and day out, and we give them the support that they need.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I speak for my party, Plaid Cymru. I commend the Prime Minister for her words today. All of us being here today is not a show of defiance. It is a show of respect for the dead and the injured, respect for democracy and respect for our duty to our constituents. One man cannot shut down a city and lock down democracy. Does the Prime Minister agree that we must not react to such a warped ideology with unworthy responses?

The Prime Minister: What is absolutely appropriate is the response that this House has shown today: it has shown gratitude for the bravery of our police and our emergency services; it has shown respect and concern for those who have been the victims of the terrible attacks that took place; but, also, it has shown normality, and that is what is important as we defy the terrorists, and as we work to defeat them.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement. I have been an MP for 25 years, and I have seen the police play many roles around the Palace of Westminster, one of which is to give advice to members of the public about where to go. None of us will have passed Carriage Gates without seeing members of the public having their photographs taken with the police—that too is one of the things the police do. One of the other things they do is protect our democracy, as we saw yesterday—with brutal consequences.

[Mr Nigel Evans]

I am very proud of the police and everything they do in defending our democracy. Keith Palmer was one of us; every one of the police who protect us is one of us. The tribute to Keith and the police is that we are here today and that our proceedings are going on. We have the arch that was spoken about before, which is a lasting memorial to those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our democracy. I hope that, at an appropriate time, following discussion with the family, we may be able to look at a lasting memorial to Keith, in order that each and every one of us will know that there are people putting their lives on the line for our democracy today.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, and I am sure the House authorities will wish to consider the point that he has made. If I may just reflect on his earlier remarks, it is a particular characteristic of policing in the United Kingdom that our police are able to have that link and that bond with members of the public, at the same time as they are doing the very difficult job of keeping us safe. We see it so often when major events take place—royal weddings, the Olympics and so forth—but my hon. Friend is absolutely right that we see it day in and day out here on the parliamentary estate.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): As we mourn those who were so cruelly cut down yesterday, give our grateful thanks to the police and to the emergency and security services for their exemplary courage and devotion to duty, and show as a country, by our determination to carry on, that we will not be cowed, as the Prime Minister put it so eloquently, does she agree that we will need to show the same determination to stand up against anyone who seeks to sow division or to stir up hatred in the wake of these cowardly attacks?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. We must be very clear that the voices of evil and hate will not divide us; that should also be a clear message from this House today.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): While our hearts go to all those people who were wounded and murdered yesterday, and to all the people who sought to help them, I would like, with your indulgence, Mr Speaker, to turn for just a moment to PC Keith Palmer, whom I first met 25 years ago when he was Gunner Keith Palmer at headquarters battery, 100 Regiment Royal Artillery. He was a strong, professional public servant, and it was a delight to meet him here again only a few months after being elected. In recognition of the work that he did and that the other police officers and public servants in the House do, would my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister consider posthumously recognising his gallantry and sacrifice formally?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for not just the compassion but the passion with which he has spoken about an individual he knew, and he bears witness to the tremendous public service that Keith Palmer had given this country in so many ways, having served in our armed forces and then come to this place and made the ultimate sacrifice here, at the heart of our

democracy. I can assure my hon. Friend that the issue he has raised will, of course, be considered in due course.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Yesterday, we saw absolutely the best of security, policing and the emergency services. We also saw the camaraderie that got people through the lockdown, when we had staff stuck in offices all over the estate. I make a small plea that people will take the bravery and determination of yesterday, but that they will also remember to talk among themselves and support their staff; and that instead of burying any feelings of fear from yesterday, they will let that out, so that there is absolutely no scar remnant within this place as we go forward.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. It is all too easy for us to come to this Chamber to show our gratitude, rightly, for the bravery shown by those who protect us, but to forget that for all the staff who were caught up in this, it could have lasting impacts. I understand that there are moves afoot to ensure that, as I said in my statement, Members can access help and support for themselves and their staff, should they wish to do that. But, actually, just allowing people to talk about what happened is often the best remedy.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement this morning and for her message last night in Downing Street. As a former Metropolitan police officer, may I pass on my condolences personally to Constable Palmer's family, and to the pedestrians and everybody who was involved yesterday?

As someone who served on the counter-terrorist command here in London in the 1980s, when the IRA, the Irish National Liberation Army and middle eastern groups were bombing London apart, I know only too well the challenge that is faced by the police. I know that the Prime Minister has already been asked about resourcing, but may I reinforce that point by asking her to ensure that in the area of counter-terrorism the Met police and all police forces, as well as the security forces in general, want for nothing?

The Prime Minister: I reassure my hon. Friend that through the refresh of the strategic defence and security review we did a major exercise in which we looked at the resources that should be available for all aspects of counter-terrorism. That is, of course, about the security and intelligence agencies and the police, but other parts of Government have a role to play in counter-terrorism as well. Extra resources are going in, as I indicated in my statement. Of course, we want to ensure that all who are involved in acting against terrorism have the support that they need to do the job that we want them to do.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's words and those of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition? Does the Prime Minister accept that this is not about our personal security, as Members of Parliament, or about the security of this building? PC Keith Palmer died defending the values of, as the Prime Minister put it, "free people everywhere". Is not the proper response over the coming days, as more facts emerge, to stand firm for those self-same values of free people everywhere?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. As he says, it is not about individuals in this House or this building; it is about what we stand for, and we should stand absolutely firm for those values.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): May I start by commending the Prime Minister for a very powerful speech, and particularly for the tone in which it was delivered? Yesterday, we saw an attack on this centre of democracy and on the citizens of 10 countries. The message that we need to take away from here is that not only is this evil ideology an attack on western countries and on the values that we hold so dear, but it seeks to destroy the way of life of people across the globe. I hope that the message will go out to all decent and civilised countries that we must all redouble our resolve to deal with this evil.

The Prime Minister: I have been struck by the number of messages I have received from a number of foreign leaders to whom I have spoken in which they have been absolutely clear that we stand together in defiance, as he says, but also in ensuring that we will defeat this evil.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): We recognise the immense bravery of all concerned yesterday, but should we not also recognise that, unfortunately, terror attacks are likely to continue for years to come and, needless to say, this country is not unique in Europe, let alone elsewhere, in having such onslaughts against us. Arising from what the Prime Minister said, may I just tell her that, during all the years of sustained IRA bombing, I as a Member of Parliament did not receive any letters at all or have anyone come to my surgery telling me that we should change our policy in combating terrorism? I have to say that illustrates once again that our people are simply not appeasers.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right. I believe the British public stand with this Parliament in wanting to see us in defiance of terrorists, defeating the terrorists and showing that the values of democracy and the rule of law—the values of free people everywhere—underpin our way of life. I think people recognise that, and they want to see this House endorse it.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I support all that the Prime Minister has said and done, and my thoughts are with all those who have been affected by this evil act. The assistant police commissioner, Mr Rowley, said in 2016 that two people a day are being turned away from extremism, that it is often members of an individual's own community who are alerting the authorities and that it is communities who defeat terrorism. May I ask the Prime Minister what further steps we are taking to engage with all our communities so that we can work together to defeat the non-violent extremism that often leads to violent extremism?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that it is important we defeat such extremism and deal with it at that earlier stage. A lot of work is being done within communities and working with communities. Obviously, there is the work that the police do to encourage people within communities to come forward with information

when it is possible to do so and they have such concerns. That is important: people need to have the confidence of feeling that they can do that. It is important to create the environment within communities where people who recognise there are those who are trying to destroy our way of life actually feel able to take action about it. My hon. Friend is right: bringing communities together is an important part of what the Government are doing on a number of fronts.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I had intended to call another Birmingham Member, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), who, sadly, has left the Chamber. In the absence of that hon. Member, let us hear the voice of Jack Dromey.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): May I thank the Prime Minister for her leadership at a bleak moment for our country? As the brave guardian of Parliament, Keith Palmer fought for his life yesterday; the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) fought to save his life. May I say of the hon. Gentleman that he is one of Parliament's finest?

In backing our police to defeat terrorism, does the Prime Minister believe we should heed their wise words that to demonise and divide is to play right into the hands of the evil that is terrorism?

The Prime Minister: We should not be making any attempt to demonise individual communities. We should recognise that it is individuals who are terrorists, that they are adhering to a warped ideology—a warped ideology of evil—and that that is true whatever the origin of the terrorism, because there are different ideologies. This House has been struck before, as we know, and has felt terrorism of a different sort hitting a Member of this House. We must ensure that we do not demonise communities, but work with them to identify and to isolate those who wish to do us harm.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): In the wake of yesterday's evil, tragic, but unfortunately not wholly unexpected attack on this place, there will be a review, as the Prime Minister has said, of the response of our excellent police and security services. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in an open and free democracy such as ours there will always be a balance between our security, and public access to and the transparency of our democracy, and that if that balance is not maintained, unfortunately, the terrorists will have won?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is a balance. We live in an open and free democracy. We want members of the public to have access to their representatives and to this place, and for Members of this place to have easy access to it. That is part of how we operate. It is important, as we look ahead and ask whether anything more needs to be done, to recognise that we should not in any way destroy the values that underpin our democracy, because if we do that, as he says, the terrorists will have won.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): For the first time in this House, I want to agree with everything that has been said by every Member who has spoken so far. May

[*Fiona Mactaggart*]

I add thanks to two more groups of people who have not yet been mentioned: the staff at Westminster Abbey who received people who left this House; and the firearms officer who acted in a way that he had been trained to, but probably never expected to? We owe him our thanks.

The Prime Minister knows better than any of us that this sort of attack—it looks like a lone-wolf kind of attack—is the hardest for our security services to prevent. Its prevention, as her remarks have made clear, is best achieved by our celebrating our values—the values that meant that among the victims, there were people of 11 different nationalities—our openness and our democracy. What can she do to help to ensure that everybody in Britain—every child and everyone of every religion—is given the opportunity to learn about those values and celebrate them, because I think that is the best way to keep us safe in future?

The Prime Minister: I join the right hon. Lady in commending the staff of Westminster Abbey, who played a role in supporting people from Parliament yesterday, and the firearms officer, who had to make a split-second decision about what to do. It is not an easy job; it is difficult. Officers are trained to do it, but when the point comes, it is a difficult decision to take. We are grateful that he did that, with the consequences that we know about.

It is important that we celebrate our values. An important element in countering the extremists is to ensure that the values that we share are championed and resolutely put forward. The right hon. Lady asked what I would do, but it is for everybody in this House, as we go about our business as Members of Parliament, to encourage that celebration of the values that we share.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for the resolute, brave and courageous way she has stood up for our country and say how proud we are of her? Does she agree that one terrorist will not destroy our country, 10 terrorists will not destroy our country and 10,000 terrorists will not destroy our country—in fact, no amount of terrorists will ever destroy our way of life, because they are just trying to destroy what we in this place represent: freedom and democracy?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Terrorism will not destroy our way of life; it will not win. We uphold those values of freedom and democracy; they underpin our way of life. They are what the terrorists are trying to attack and they are what the terrorists dislike, but we must ensure that we uphold those values. As he says, no number of terrorists will defeat this place or defeat those values.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): PC Keith Palmer did not return home from work yesterday to his family so that the rest of us in this House could. We should never forget that sacrifice, and every single day we should pass our thanks to the staff and security of this House and the emergency services. Will the Prime Minister join me in cherishing what happened here yesterday when staff who were terrified and frightened came together and all supported each other? That, in itself, is a way to say to terrorism that it will never win.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. As he says, the way that people came together, showed that camaraderie and supported each other at a difficult and uncertain time for individuals in the parliamentary estate was a very important message to the terrorists.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is reported that what happened yesterday was an act of Islamic terror. Does the Prime Minister agree that what happened was not Islamic, just as the murder of Airey Neave was not Christian, and that both were perversions of religion?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree. It is wrong to describe what happened as Islamic terrorism; it is Islamist terrorism—a perversion of a great faith.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I pay tribute to the Prime Minister and wish her and her Cabinet well in their deliberations as we move forward. I echo everything that has been said about those who were killed, their families and the other victims. Will the Prime Minister ensure that every effort is made to support the victims and families, and the police officer whose role was to stop the terrorist in the end?

The Prime Minister: I assure the hon. Gentleman that that support will be available. Of course, the Metropolitan police already have in place the necessary support arrangements for those who have been injured and the bereaved families. I have also asked the Government to look at what further support can be made available for victims in a wider sense, because there will be people who were not physically injured in the attack yesterday, but witnessed it or were caught up in it, for whom there may be other scars. It is important to provide that support.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Parliament is a different place this morning. On my way in from the tube, I realised that millions of people live with the after-effects of terrorism. At almost this time yesterday, in my summing up of a Westminster Hall debate, I said of the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood):

“I understand that his experience of terrorism is something that is not known to the rest of us”.—*Official Report*, 22 March 2017; Vol. 623, c. 360WH.]

I could certainly repeat that assertion this morning about his experience yesterday afternoon. Does the Prime Minister agree that we should use the honours system to recognise those who made a contribution yesterday, including my hon. Friend?

The Prime Minister: As I indicated earlier, proper consideration will be given to the issue that my hon. Friend raises. I spoke to my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) yesterday evening, and we should all recognise not only that he showed huge professionalism in putting his past training to use in the hope of saving PC Keith Palmer's life, but that he did so in the middle of a terrorist attack, and he is someone who knows the trauma and tragedy of losing somebody in a terrorist attack.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I very much associate myself with the Prime Minister's statement and everyone's comments, and I pay tribute to all those involved. We are thinking of the victims and their families. I am the sister of a police officer in uniform, and when police officers go out of the front door in the morning, none of us really knows what they will face. Yesterday hit all of us and was particularly hard for those of us who have family in uniform. I am pleased to hear that the Prime Minister will give all the support she can to the victims, their families and all those who were affected.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady speaks well on this. When I was Home Secretary, two events always brought home to me the commitment, bravery and dedication of police officers. One was the National Police Memorial Day service, when the police recognise those who have fallen, and the other was the police bravery awards, where groups of police officers are recognised for brave acts that they have undertaken. What always struck me—and, I am sure, other hon. Members who have been at that ceremony—was the matter-of-fact way in which our police officers, whatever they had done, whomever they had dealt with and whatever injuries they had suffered, would say that they were just doing their job. We owe them a great deal.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for the tone with which she has reacted. She has genuinely spoken for the nation in this moment. Yesterday, many of us from the House were gathered in Westminster Abbey, in lockdown. In a stunning moment, people from left and right, of the Muslim, Hindu, and Christian faiths and of none, gathered in Westminster Abbey, in sanctuary, surrounded by luminaries of our political past, of left and right. I support others who reminded us today that what happened was not an act of faith, but the distortion of faith and that, in the strength of all our faiths coming together in this country, we will defend the values we cherish.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That shows the importance of all our faiths working together, recognising the values we share. As he says, this act of terror was not an act of faith. A perversion—a warped ideology—leads to such acts of terrorism, and it will not prevail.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): My prayers are with all those who were injured, with all those who lost their lives and their families, and particularly with PC Keith Palmer, who made the ultimate sacrifice. This attacker and people like him are not of my religion, nor are they of our community. We should condemn all who pretend to be of a religion when they are not, because if they were of a religion, they would not be carrying out acts like this one. We have to stay united, and show them that they cannot win on these grounds and that we are here to stay.

The Prime Minister: I commend the hon. Gentleman for the comments he has just made and for the stance he has consistently taken on terrorism. He has been very clear that, as he says, this is not of his religion. A perversion and a warped, evil mentality leads to these acts of terror.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I join hon. Members in saluting my fellow Dorset county Member, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), for his quiet bravery yesterday. It is a hallmark of his character that he stands below the Bar of the House today.

Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree with these words, which were written by a worker on the London underground yesterday afternoon? They were penned on a public notice board shortly after the events. My judgment is that he or she spoke for the whole country, irrespective of faith or creed, when they wrote: "All terrorists are politely reminded that this is London, and whatever you do to us, we will drink tea and jolly well carry on."

The Prime Minister: I think that is a wonderful tribute. In a very simple way, it encapsulates everything hon. Members in the House have said today.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Like many Members, in the 16 years I have been a Member, I have walked every day through Carriage Gates and said a small prayer for the safety of those who stand there to protect us. From now on, I will add a prayer for the soul of PC Keith Palmer.

Among the bravery and professionalism we saw yesterday—I say this as a former teacher who took children on many school trips—were the actions of the teachers, both those injured in the attack and those who were in the House during the lockdown, who kept the children educated, entertained and calm, on a day and on a school trip when they saw, witnessed and heard of things that they should never have to see.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It must have been particularly difficult for those children who were here and caught up in this. We should commend the work of their teachers in offering that reassurance and calm. We must particularly recognise the role of the French teachers of the French group. The last thing people expect when they bring a group of young people to visit another country is something terrible like that happening. They will have acted to support the other members of that group who went through that trauma, and will continue to do so.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): As we were evacuated from the House yesterday, I too met several stoical school groups, who had been involved with visits organised by the parliamentary education service. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such visits, as promoted by you, Mr Speaker, are vital and help to provide an antidote to hatred and intolerance?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree. Those visits are also important in helping to promote the values we share. The right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) asked earlier how we can ensure that we are promoting those values. The work that Parliament does by bringing in schoolchildren and showing them the work of Parliament and the values of our democracy is an important part of that.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): My thoughts are with PC Palmer's family and the families of all the victims of yesterday's terrorist attacks. We are so grateful to the emergency services, and everyone who protected us and the wider public.

[*Rushanara Ali*]

The Prime Minister speaks for the whole country in her message of unity, but does she agree that the painstaking work begins now, in the days ahead, for all hon. Members in our constituencies in providing reassurance and maintaining that unity? It is in the days after such events that we must be vigilant against those who try to exploit attacks and cause backlashes and intolerance against different communities. Does she also agree that the role of the media is critical in ensuring that we maintain our resilience, and that sense of defiance and solidarity?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right. There is an immediate focus on the event that has taken place, but, as she says, it is in the days afterwards that some may try to sow division and hatred in our communities. We all have a role to play in ensuring that does not happen.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement and offer my condolences to all affected. I am from an armed forces family, so I know that at these times it is all the more important to show our resolve. I also hope that we will continue to support all those affected, because although trauma may not have an impact straight away, it can have long-term impacts and effects. We must reach out in compassion, for that is what sets us apart from terrorists.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. Sadly, over time with a number of incidents we have come to learn more about the importance of providing that support. It is not just about an immediate reaction. For some, the impact of an attack can kick in quite a while later, which is why we are looking at the support available for victims.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend's statement. I hope she agrees with me that Great Britain's police force is the greatest in the world. For those of us who have served as police officers, I pay tribute to PC Keith Palmer who stood serving and protecting this House unarmed when duty called. He went towards the face of evil and made the ultimate sacrifice. Lone wolf terrorist attacks are notoriously difficult to defend. What, if anything, can be done to make sure this kind of event does not happen again?

The Prime Minister: In terms of protective security, work will be done with the parliamentary estate to see if anything more needs to be done. The best way to defeat the terrorists is through intelligence—finding out information about the potential for attacks in advance and then preventing them. As I said in my statement, since June 2013, 13 terrorist plots have been disrupted in this country. That is due to the hard work of our police, security and intelligence agencies. They work day in, day out to keep us safe and they will continue to do so.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I think everyone who works on the parliamentary estate has at some point considered what they would do if a day like yesterday ever happened, but for those of us

who work alongside our families on site it is of particular concern. Will the Prime Minister join me in saying a specific word of praise for the staff at the House of Commons nursery for their actions yesterday? Many of us can attest to the fact that looking after just one toddler in a confined space for a number of hours is not easy, but yesterday they looked after all the children in very difficult circumstances, all the time keeping in touch with some very worried parents. I was in the nursery during the lockdown. Their courage, care and steadfastness was exemplary and much appreciated.

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join the hon. Gentleman in commending the work of the nursery staff. It must have been particularly difficult with very young children in what was an uncertain and difficult circumstance. I am sure they did an excellent job and I am happy to join him in commending their work.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I join all the tributes that have been paid. I think those of us who were locked down in the Chamber will also want to pay particular tribute to Mr Deputy Speaker, the Chairman of Ways and Means, and to the Leader of the House for keeping calm and carrying on, and keeping us informed about what was going on. I also pay tribute to the *Hansard* reporters who kept democracy going and reported, three hours after the business had finished, the live recording of the proceedings up to the Adjournment of the House. That is a tribute to the continuity of our democracy.

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. I join the hon. Gentleman in commending the actions of both the Chairman of Ways and Means and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House yesterday. Very calmly, they were able to reassure Members of this House at a time when nobody knew everything about what was happening and only very limited information was available.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Yesterday showed us the worst of humanity, but it also showed us—much, much more—the best of humanity in the actions of the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), PC Palmer, and the firearms officer who shot down the person who wanted to terrorise all of us, our country and our democracy.

I have been touched by the number of people from my constituency—of Christian faith, of Jewish faith, of Muslim faith, and of no faith—who have contacted me in the last two days. I pay particular tribute to the chairman of the mosque in Leeds, who contacted me to say that his thoughts and prayers, and those of all members of the Muslim community in Leeds, were with all of us at this difficult time. There will be prayers in mosques, synagogues and churches across our country in the days ahead.

The Prime Minister: I join the hon. Lady in that. I think that all faith communities in the country will be coming together and, as she has said, will be remembering those who have suffered as a result of the attacks. In their coming together they will be showing again that they represent the values about which we have talked, and which are so important to our way of life.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Prime Minister has been exemplary in this instance, as, indeed, she was in relation to Hillsborough, in my view. I congratulate her on that.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) was absolutely right when he said that Keith was one of us. One of the things that we saw yesterday was that the parliamentary family is a very big family: it includes cooks, cleaners, Clerks, Doorkeepers, and all sorts of people who make our democracy function and who are, in many ways, far more important than we are.

When a Member of Parliament dies in action or is killed in a terrorist incident, as Ian Gow and Airey Neave were, a shield is put up in the Chamber, and I hope that—sadly—there will soon be one for Jo Cox. Surely, whatever other tributes and medals there may be in the future, it is time for Keith to have a shield here, because he was our shield and defender yesterday.

The Prime Minister: The bravery shown by PC Keith Palmer and his act of sacrifice should be recognised in an appropriate way, but as the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, what that should be is a matter for the House authorities.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): Yesterday, on Westminster Bridge and in New Palace Yard, many members of the public and Members of the House attempted to give life-saving aid to those who had been injured. Since then many of us will have asked ourselves whether we would have had the same skills had we been in close proximity to deliver that aid. Will the Prime Minister join me in encouraging those who now seek to acquire such skills to do so, and perhaps to contact their local branch of St John Ambulance with a view to taking lessons?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has made an important and very good point, and I join him in that encouragement. The vast majority of Members of the House would probably not have had the skills that would have enabled them to act in that way, and it is a very good message that perhaps more of us should go out and acquire those skills.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): A key aim of any terrorist is to exploit the completely natural and inevitable sense of public interest, grief and sympathy in order to sow disunity, disruption and fear beyond the physical act of terror itself. May I ask the Prime Minister to build on her commendable words about the resolution of the British people? Does she think that we should also take time to reflect, both in the Chamber and outside—and that includes the media—on how we can balance the public interest and people's feelings of grief with seeking not to give the oxygen of publicity to whatever cause a terrorist seeks to promote?

The Prime Minister: The question of the oxygen of publicity is obviously important, and I think we should all reflect on the point that the hon. Gentleman has made. He referred to the actions of the media. We have talked about a number of people who were caught up in what happened yesterday, but we should not forget that many journalists were caught up too, either on the periphery of the parliamentary estate or within the

estate, and continued to do their best to do their job in reporting faithfully what was happening. However, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that how these matters are addressed and reported is an important consideration. We want to ensure that it is not possible for people to use such actions either to encourage others or to try to sow division.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I would like to add my words of condolence and gratitude to those already so eloquently expressed. Yesterday, two of my constituents were caught up in the attacks, one of whom was eight months' pregnant, and they have asked me to pass on their gratitude and thanks to the House staff and the police for the consideration with which they were treated during the five-hour lockdown.

Does the Prime Minister agree that, just as we continue to go about our daily work, so those whom we represent must continue to see this House as their House, and must be encouraged to come here to see, and participate in, the democracy which puts our values into action?

The Prime Minister: That is an important point: it is part of our democracy that members of the public—the constituents we represent—are able to come to this place and to learn about this place, and are also able to access their elected representatives at this place. We should ensure that that will always continue.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) mentioned the House of Commons staff, who showed exemplary behaviour in the face of adversity yesterday. I want to pay particular tribute to the nursery manager, Anjali, who was very reassuring and calm in dealing with the nervous parents who had very small babies on site. This was every parent's worst nightmare, and Anjali and her colleagues stayed calm under a terrorist attack.

May I add that people who commit acts of terrorism in the name of Islam do not speak for the Muslims in this country, do not speak for the Muslims in this city, and certainly do not speak for me.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her words, and, again, for the warm way in which she has spoken of the action of members of the House of Commons staff who were looking after the small children in the nursery. She is absolutely right: the terrorists do not speak in the name of a faith; they have a warped ideology.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The murderer who used both his car and a knife as indiscriminate weapons of murder yesterday cared not what the faith was of the people he killed, or about their nationality. Does it not say everything about why our values will prevail and the values of murder will not that, after the police had shot him, they attempted to save his life?

The Prime Minister: It absolutely does show the values that underpin our way of life that the police's first thought then was to try to save that individual's life, and that is what the police do; it is what they have done in previous incidents as well. As the hon. Gentleman says, that shows the values that are at the heart of our society.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Prime Minister on her strength of character and leadership at this time: cometh the hour, cometh the woman. We thank you, Prime Minister—God will bless you, and all that you do.

We are all aware of the policy review that will take place. It will make recommendations for enhancements, and may I ask for an assurance that they will be conveyed to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly, and, further, that there will be co-operation on this with the Republic of Ireland, which is very important for us in Northern Ireland, so that security is enhanced and strengthened?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Obviously, it is important that any lessons learned here on this parliamentary estate are shared with the other representative Parliaments and Assemblies across the United Kingdom.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): This morning I spoke with the imam of Swansea University mosque, Sheikh Mohsen, who wanted to share his deepest sorrow, shock and condolences with the family of Keith Palmer and all the bereaved families, and to say that Islam is of course the Arabic word for peace and that these acts were not carried out in the name of Islam. Extremists, whether Islamic fundamentalists or right-wing terrorists, are trying to divide our communities and we should stand united, shoulder to shoulder, against all terror. Will the Prime Minister send a message to Muslims in Swansea and throughout Britain that we will stand shoulder to shoulder to defend our shared values—our freedoms, our democracies, our human rights—in a land and a community that we all share?

The Prime Minister: This act of terror was not done in the name of a religion; it was done, as I said earlier, as a result of a warped ideology. All acts of terror are evil acts underpinned by warped ideologies of different sorts, but whatever the ideology, it is an attempt to divide us and to destroy our way of life that drives the evil acts of the terrorists. We stand together with the Muslim community and with other communities around this country and say that what unites us is greater than what divides us. We must be very clear that we share the values of democracy, of the rule of law and of freedom. These are what make the society in which we all live.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and all colleagues for what they have said and for the way in which they have said it.

Business of the House

12 noon

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): With permission, Mr Speaker, before I announce the business, I should like to update colleagues on one or two practical matters following the terrorist attack yesterday. As is apparent to us all, the security checks and the rules on access to the Palace remain, for the time being, more restrictive than those to which we have become accustomed. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will not only accept the need for patience and compliance but ensure that their staff understand the need for these arrangements at present.

Allusion was made in earlier exchanges to the possible health needs of staff and others who may have witnessed what took place yesterday, and I want to take this opportunity to remind all colleagues of the parliamentary health and wellbeing service based at 7 Millbank, which is available to provide that kind of support to staff as well as to Members. The books of condolence for PC Palmer are now open in the Library, the Royal Gallery and Westminster Hall. Finally, on this point, the Chapel in the Undercroft will be open all day for any Member or staff member who wishes to say prayers or to reflect, and your chaplain, Mr Speaker, will be conducting short services there at 12.30 pm, 3 pm and 6 pm, which anybody is welcome to attend.

The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 27 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Bus Services Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 28 MARCH—Consideration of Lords amendment to the Neighbourhood Planning Bill followed by debate on a motion on the conflict in Yemen. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 29 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Pension Schemes Bill [*Lords*] followed by opposed private business that has been named by the Chairman of Ways and Means for consideration.

THURSDAY 30 MARCH—Debate on a motion on animal welfare followed by a general debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 31 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 17 April will include:

MONDAY 17 APRIL—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 18 APRIL—Second Reading of the Finance (No. 2) Bill.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business and for mentioning where staff who work in the House can get extra support if they need it. I should also like to thank him and his deputy for the leadership they showed yesterday. This is a sad day, because we have lost a superhero who has kept us safe every day. His family are suffering, and they are trying to make sense of his death. Their lives will be utterly changed, but we will always remember Keith Palmer.

I also want to thank colleagues, who were extremely patient yesterday, as well as the year 12 politics students from Dr Challoner's High School, who were up in the Gallery, and the pupils from a primary school in Birmingham. I especially want to thank the police, the security service and the emergency services for all they did to protect us and keep us informed in their usual professional manner and for the dedication that they show as public servants, day after day, allowing us to go about our lives safely. I also thank the Serjeant at Arms and the magnificent team of Doorkeepers. We all know how good they are every day, but on behalf of us all, I want to offer them an extra-special thank you for their calm professionalism and kindness in dealing with the situation yesterday. It is a real tribute to the House service. The Clerk of the House and his team also ensured that decisions could be made promptly and sensibly.

The Prime Minister said that this is business as usual, so I will proceed with business as usual and ask the Leader of the House a question. The convention is that there is a debate when a statutory instrument is prayed against, so may I express my concern that that convention has not been followed in the case of early-day motion 985 on personal independence payment regulations and early-day motion 948 on tuition fees and awards?

[That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Social Security (Personal Independence Payment) (Amendment) Regulations 2017 (S.I., 2017, No. 194), dated 22 February 2017, a copy of which was laid before this House on 23 February, be annulled.]

Under those regulations, those in psychological distress are denied access to additional support. Epilepsy Action is deeply concerned about the regulations and how they affect people with epilepsy or other long-term conditions. For students, the inflation-linked rise represents a 2.8% increase, and if that continues, fees could rise above £10,000 in the next few years. The House rose early on Tuesday, and the last Opposition day was a month ago. The Government seem to be thwarting the Opposition, preventing effective opposition by controlling the business in that way, so may we have time for a debate on those two important statutory instruments?

Article 50 is triggered next week, and there will be a vast amount of legislation to enact, so will the Leader of the House ensure that White Papers, draft legislation and an impact assessment are made available before the Bills are published? Will he ensure that the Government use secondary legislation not to stifle debate, but to allow Parliament to scrutinise that secondary legislation?

May we have a debate about leaving the BBC alone? Back Benchers may have time on their hands, but they said in a letter sent round by many hon. Members that the BBC is focusing on regretful voters, which is absurd. I have had emails from people who voted to leave and have regretted it, but the letter contains not a single piece of evidence—it was all opinion. After all, the Opposition have had to put up with the fact that the new editor of the “Today” programme used to openly support the Tory candidates for Mayor of London and the fact that the current editor of the *Evening Standard* is a former Tory Chancellor. More importantly, there should be no intimidation of or pre-emptive strike on a public broadcaster.

Another manifesto promise has been broken. While the consultation on the new funding formula closed yesterday, the Government promised in their 2015 manifesto a real-terms increase in the schools budget during this Parliament and that

“As the number of pupils increases, so will the amount of money in our schools.”

However, nearly half of schools would face a funding cut. In Walsall South, schools face a reduction of £490 per pupil. May we have a debate on the impact of the new funding formula to set out the losers and the losers, because every school will be a loser? Schools will bear the brunt of unfunded rises in pay, pension and national insurance contributions that could amount to between 6% and 11% of their budgets by 2019-20.

This is the last business questions for the Leader of the House and me before the Easter recess, so I again want to thank the Clerk of the House, his staff, the Library, the Doorkeepers, and you, your Deputies and your office, Mr Speaker—everyone who has made my work as shadow Leader of the House easier. I wish everyone a happy Easter. Finally, I want to say, from every corner of this United Kingdom and every corner of the world, blessed are the peacemakers.

Mr Lidington: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words and associate myself unreservedly both with her final remarks and with the tributes that she rightly paid not only to the police, but to the staff of the House for what they did yesterday in their various roles.

I have to say to the hon. Lady that I intend to be here for a business statement next Thursday. I would be very sorry to lose her across the Dispatch Box, but perhaps this is another Opposition Front-Bench change that has been heralded in advance.

The hon. Lady asked about a number of pieces of forthcoming business, and I can tell her that the Government will make provision for debates on the two statutory instruments about which she expressed concern. I cannot give her a firm date yet—work is happening and discussions are continuing through the usual channels about the precise date—but time will be found.

On the items of European legislation that will be needed, there will of course be ample opportunity to debate their content and impact. Although it is no secret that I expect the repeal Bill to include some secondary legislative powers, the scope and definition of those powers will of course themselves be subject to the full parliamentary process. The definitions and scope will have to be agreed by both Houses of Parliament through the normal process of enacting a Bill into law.

On education, it is a fact that more is being spent on schools than ever before, but the national funding formula, to which the hon. Lady expressed particular objection, has been the subject of a consultation that closed only a couple of days ago. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education will now consider the responses of local authorities, schools and others to that consultation, and she will come forward with the Government's proposals in due course. For a long time, it was common ground between political parties that the existing funding formula is grotesquely unfair in that it provides, in some cases, for a child attending school in one authority to receive almost twice as much funding as an equivalent child in a comparable school in a different local authority, despite

[Mr Lidington]

the basic cost of providing education being the same. That is why the Government committed themselves to introducing a national funding formula.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about the BBC. I note that she did not allude to the presence of a former Labour Cabinet Minister in a senior role at the BBC, although I suspect he has probably been airbrushed out by the current Labour party leadership. For as long as I have been in this place, robust, strongly held and strongly expressed views about the BBC, for and against, have been voiced by Members on both sides of the House. My feeling is that, if hon. Members have a sin in that respect, it is that we spend too much time watching or listening to political and current affairs programmes. When I think of the BBC, I think of the Proms and Radio 3, which enable me to approach the subject with a degree of serenity.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): We are urged to follow business as usual, which is difficult given what happened yesterday, not because any of us is affected by terrorism but simply because we are so horrified and saddened by those events and the terrible deaths and injuries. We wish everyone well, and our thoughts are with those who have suffered as a result of these terrible murders.

I will try to engage in business as usual by asking this of the Leader of the House. Many of us were surprised to learn that the apprenticeship levy, which is a good idea that has been rightly passed on to local, upper-tier and unitary authorities, has wrongly in turn been passed on to schools. Schools in my constituency of Broxtowe find that they are paying £300 or £400 but are receiving no benefit from the levy. They are having to pay the burden, which is wrong. When will the Leader of the House arrange for us to have a debate on that outrage?

Mr Lidington: Although we rightly return to business as normal to demonstrate that our democracy and our free society will not be disrupted by terrorism, it is important that we always remember that the families of those who lost their lives and the families of those who were severely injured will have to live with the events of yesterday for the rest of their days on this earth. We should have that in mind, too.

On the apprenticeship levy, the situation my right hon. Friend describes in Nottinghamshire is not, as I understand it, the case for every local education authority in the country. My understanding is that some local education authorities have decided to deal with the levy themselves, rather than pass it on to schools, but I will draw her concern to the attention of the Secretary of State for Education.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. I join him and the Labour shadow Leader of the House in all their tributes to the members of staff who worked so exceptionally yesterday. I commend him for the leadership he showed in the Chamber yesterday, for which I thank him. It is appropriate and right that we continue our business as normal. We will not be deterred from our important work on behalf of all the people we represent.

This institution lost one of its own yesterday, and I express my heartfelt condolences to the family of Keith Palmer and to the families of all the others who lost their life. As a Scottish Member of Parliament, one of the things I have noted is the inspiring resilience and determination of this great city and its people. We are all Londoners today. As a tribute, perhaps we could consider a debate on the value of our emergency services to this nation, on the risks they take on our behalf, and on their immense contribution to keeping our nation safe. That would be a fitting tribute from us, as Members of Parliament, to the memory of Keith Palmer.

Because of the events here, the Scottish Parliament suspended its business yesterday and no vote was taken on seeking a section 30 order so that a legal referendum can be held to determine the future political arrangements of Scotland. That vote will now happen next Tuesday, and it is anticipated that it will be passed. The will of the Scottish Parliament will be expressed, and surely it is incumbent on this House to respond positively to the democratic voice of the Scottish Parliament. There can be no good reason for the voice of Scotland's Parliament to be ignored, so will the Leader of the House tell us how this Government intend to respond, and how they intend to respond positively, to what is agreed in our national Parliament?

It is also beyond pernicious that this Government will seek to put through the rape clause via a negative statutory instrument without any debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) attempted to secure a debate on that issue. Will the Leader of the House please reconsider? Something so important should rightly be debated on the Floor of the House.

Article 50 will be triggered next Wednesday, but I cannot see anything in the business statement to say that there will be a statement or some sort of debate in the House of Commons, so will the Leader of the House confirm that there will be at least a statement next Wednesday to mark this immensely depressing event?

Finally, as we all go home to our friends and families this afternoon, it is right to remember that one of our number who worked in this House will not have the same opportunity and advantage as we have today.

Mr Lidington: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks, and I associate myself with his condolences to the victims of yesterday's attack and his salute to the emergency services and others.

On the hon. Gentleman's political questions, I have said that the Government will find time for the statutory instrument to be debated. Of course the fact that that particular statutory instrument is subject to the negative resolution procedure was authorised by the Act of Parliament from which it is delegated, so the power was debated and approved by this House during the Act's passage.

On the substance of the policy on the third child of a woman who has been subjected to the ordeal of rape, the Government recognise that that is a very difficult and sensitive issue, which is why we have adopted a third-party model to allow us to make sure that neither Department for Work and Pensions nor Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs staff will question the mother

about the incident. Instead, staff will simply take the claim and receive the supporting evidence from a third-party professional, which seems to us to be the right balance between making sure that mothers get the support they need without the need for unnecessary, intrusive processes while providing the right assurance that additional support goes to those for whom it is intended.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about article 50, I must say that we have not been short of opportunities up till now, but I am sure that before long there will be an opportunity for the House to debate that decision or for questions to be posed.

On the debate in the Scottish Parliament, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been very clear that we believe that now is not the time for a second referendum—particularly given that the 2014 referendum was supposed to be a once-in-a-generation opportunity—and that the United Kingdom Government and all three devolved Governments ought now to work very closely together to ensure that we get the best possible deal for all the people of every part of the United Kingdom in the forthcoming European negotiations.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I commend the Leader of the House for his calm and reassuring presence in the Chamber yesterday and, through you, Mr Speaker, I commend Mr Deputy Speaker; both performed magnificently in the Chamber yesterday.

May we have a timescale for a statement or debate on the fairer funding formula for schools? Preferably, the Government will scrap their current proposals, which are frankly unjustifiable. The formula will take money from schools in Bradford district, which is one of the worst-performing local authorities in the country with regard to education, and transfer it to some of the highest-performing local education authorities in the country, which is absolute madness. Every school in my constituency will lose money. How quickly will the Government realise that their proposals are unjustifiable and unacceptable?

Mr Lidington: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education will come forward with a response as soon as possible, but as the consultation on the draft national funding formula proposals concluded only this week, it is reasonable that she should have a while to consider the detailed representations that have been put forward by a number of different parties. Nevertheless, she will come forward with a response, and I promise my hon. Friend that there will be an opportunity for the Government to debate any proposals that are then submitted.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): May I begin with an apology to Members of the House for my absence over recent weeks? I too add my thanks to Members, staff and security personnel for their activities yesterday. There is, though, one group of people we have forgotten about a little. Hundreds of members of the public were in this building yesterday for dozens of different meetings and dozens of other reasons. Over many hours, they showed great compliance, patience, forbearance and fortitude while the security situation was being resolved outside the confines of this building. We put on record our thanks to them.

I thank the Leader of the House for the notice that next Tuesday's debate on the crisis in Yemen will be protected for 90 minutes, meaning that we will have a decent length of time to discuss the dreadful ongoing situation there. I also thank him for notice that we have two debates next Thursday: one on animal welfare and, of course, the pre-recess Adjournment debate. If at all possible, will he give early notice of any time allocated to the Backbench Business Committee in the weeks beginning 18 April and 24 April?

I am sure the Leader of the House is aware of this, but there is an anomaly in the Standing Orders. When we return on 18 April, the House will meet at 2.30 pm, but, under Standing Order 10(2)(b), Westminster Hall will commence at 9.30 am, which is an inconvenience not only to Members but to the staff of this House. A Backbench Business Committee debate is scheduled for that morning, to be led by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who will have to leave her constituency on Monday, a bank holiday, to get here in time.

Mr Speaker: It is good to know that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee is in fine fettle once more. I think I speak for Members across the House in saying that it is a pleasure both to see him here today and to hear his inimitable voice.

Mr Lidington: It is indeed good to see the hon. Gentleman back in his normal place for these exchanges on Thursdays. I will do my best to make sure that he and his Committee have early notice of any allocated time in the weeks beginning 18 April and 24 April. I take his point about the anomaly in the Standing Orders. I have already spoken to my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip to see whether we can look for a way to make life easier for the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows).

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am sorry that I was such a poor substitute for the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee.

I was unsuccessful in the shuffle at Women and Equalities questions, so may I ask the Leader of the House for an early statement on the position of the promised consultation document on caste discrimination? It will allow the Hindu community in particular the opportunity to put its perspective on why this unwanted, unnecessary and ill-judged legislation can be removed from the statute book.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend raises a matter that I know is very important to his constituents, and he does so eloquently. I will suggest to the Minister concerned that she write to him about the Government's current position. As he will be aware, this particular decision involves not only a policy commitment but the allocation of legislative time, which is currently under pressure from many Departments.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): I welcome the Leader of the House's assurances about support for staff after yesterday's tragic events, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for what you said about the Commission, under your chairmanship, looking at the lessons learned and particularly the issue of support for staff.

[*Dame Rosie Winterton*]

May we have a debate on the work of the Taylor review before it completes, so that we can feed in our views on insecurity at work, particularly the huge growth in zero-hours contracts, the increase in the use of agency staff, and bogus self-employment?

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Lady makes a perfectly reasonable point, although of course there is nothing to prevent individual right hon. and hon. Members from making representations to Matthew Taylor. The best advice I can give her is to seek a Backbench Business debate.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): It certainly is good to see the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) back in his place. I am glad that it was a back problem, rather than a heart problem.

Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House find time for a debate on developments along the Thames estuary? Last week, the North Thames Fisheries Local Action Group was awarded £800,000, which will be spent on further enhancing the culture and heritage of the Thames estuary.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend asks his question in a great historical tradition, because Magna Carta itself mentions the importance of maintaining fish weirs in the River Thames. He has drawn attention to one of the great successes of recent decades: the renewal of marine and river life in the estuaries of the Thames and other rivers that serve our country's great industrial cities. I hope the money that was announced recently will enable that development to be taken further forward.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): May we have an early debate on rules of origin documentation, particularly the fivefold or sevenfold increase that will be required when this country leaves the customs union?

Mr Lidington: I agree that that is an important subject, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be ingenious enough to raise it in the course of numerous debates we will be having on European issues in forthcoming months.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): This is not the day to labour the point—I do not expect the Leader of the House to reply to this in any detail—but when we finally have the long-delayed debate on whether the House should leave this building in the full decant that is proposed, we should, in the light of what has happened in the past 24 hours, give great consideration to both the symbolism of this place and the security considerations of dispersing MPs and peers around Parliament Square.

Mr Lidington: The security of not just Members, but of staff—let us never forget that there are something like 14,000 passholders to the parliamentary estate—is at the forefront of the consideration by the parliamentary officials who have been leading on this matter. I can assure my hon. Friend that, whatever is finally approved by this House and the House of Lords, as these works are carried through, on whatever timescale and in whatever fashion, security will continue to be at the forefront of everybody's mind.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): It was very striking this morning coming into this place to see so many police officers on duty, not only protecting us but mourning their colleague, the hero PC Keith Palmer. His death in active service, protecting us here, is a reminder that there are families of murdered police officers and of lost loved ones from our armed forces who have still not received proper compensation. Can we look at that issue again, and ensure that the families of every single person who dies in active service in our police force or in our armed forces are properly compensated for the rest of their lives?

Mr Lidington: It would indeed be good to find a way in which one could spare people the need to go through long and complex litigation to get the compensation that they deserve. That may be something that the hon. Gentleman can raise either in Westminster Hall or through the medium of the Backbench Business Committee.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): As Chairman of the Administration Committee, may I support all the thanks that have been made to the staff, as they were fantastic yesterday. We will mop up and follow up afterwards.

Coming back to business as usual, may I anticipate that we will have a motion on the restoration and renewal of the Palace? When it arrives, may I ask that it is a full-day debate, and that it is held on a day when we anticipate the House to be as full as it ever is—in other words Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday, but not Thursday or, obviously, Friday?

Mr Lidington: We will be making provision and announcing a date for a debate as soon as we possibly can. Clearly, the point that my hon. Friend has made is one consideration that we will take into account.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I have represented this House for seven years on the NATO parliamentary assembly. During the lockdown yesterday, there were messages coming into me from all over the NATO parliamentary family, offering solidarity and support, including from the headquarters in Brussels where people had just commemorated the attack on Brussels a year to the day. I wanted to pass that on to the Leader of the House and Members present.

Can we have a debate on the issues of tolerance and understanding, which were so stressed during the statement from the Prime Minister, within the Church in Wales? We have many opportunities to question the Church Commissioners via their representative here in the House, but we have no such opportunity in relation to the Church in Wales. May we have a debate on how we can make that possible?

Mr Lidington: Like the hon. Lady, I have been very struck by the spontaneous and very strong expressions of solidarity that many hon. Members and the Government have received from democracies and elected representatives around the world. On her point about the Church in Wales, although I understand her wish for a debate, I cannot offer one in Government time precisely because the Church in Wales is disestablished. She may be successful in securing a Westminster Hall opportunity.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The negative procedure for statutory instruments should be used for uncontroversial matters. I am very grateful that the Government have accepted that when they are prayed against they will be debated.

Returning to normal, we are obviously going to have a lot of Bills in relation to the EU in the next Parliament, and we will also want to continue with normal business. Has the Leader of the House given any thought either to extending the sitting hours, or sitting on the Fridays that we do not sit for private Members' Bills, and could we have a statement next week?

Mr Lidington: I cannot promise my hon. Friend a statement next week. How we allocate time, given the exceptional pressure that there will be on legislative time because of the legislation that is needed to exit the European Union, is something that I and other business managers are taking very seriously indeed. We are spending a lot of our time reflecting on how best that might be achieved.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I start by expressing my condolences to the family and friends of PC Keith Palmer? Today, more than ever, I would like us to think about the innate goodness and solidarity of people in this country.

In that vein, can we have a debate on the honours system? Jean Bishop, who is 94 and lives in Hull, dresses up in a bee costume and has been able to raise £117,000 for Age UK. Before her 95th birthday, she wants to get to £200,000 for that charity. She has been put forward for honours before, but has never received one. A 13-year-old girl in Hull has now started a petition. Some 3,500 people have said that they think that Jean deserves an honour. Can we have a debate about honouring people such as Jean?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady has put her case eloquently. Many of us here will know of comparable examples of local heroes and heroines who have voluntarily given of their time, effort and money often over many, many years in the service of their fellow citizens. The best advice I can give is for her to present a strongly argued, persuasive case with as many other supporters as she can from Hull to the secretariat at the Cabinet Office, which is in charge of making initial recommendations on honours.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May I associate myself and my constituents with the words of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the House, and all other right hon. and hon. Members about yesterday's events?

May I ask for a debate on the situation in Burundi? More than 1,000 refugees a day are fleeing into Tanzania. Although there has rightly been a concentration on other countries suffering from food insecurity and famine in central and eastern Africa, Burundi is being ignored at the moment. We therefore need a debate urgently.

Mr Lidington: I can assure my hon. Friend that the Government are not ignoring the situation in Burundi. Considerable amounts of humanitarian assistance are being directed there through the Department for International Development. Clearly, we have to work through both international agencies and the existing

authorities in Burundi, and that is not always straightforward. I will highlight the points that he makes to the Minister for the Middle East and Africa.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Yesterday morning, the British Government announced their intention to build a second Titan prison in Wales; this time at Port Talbot. Cardiff University estimates that that will lead to 2,400 surplus prison places across the Welsh estate. May we have a debate to help ensure that the prisons policy as it applies to Wales reflects Welsh requirements?

Mr Lidington: That is a matter that the hon. Gentleman will want to take up directly with Justice Ministers. The purpose of the prison-building programme is that we should have a new generation of modern prisons that really are fit for purpose, in order to deliver a regime that is both secure and—precisely because it is secure—that provides greater opportunities for work and education, which are so vital if we are to make a success of rehabilitative policies. At the same time, the programme would free up older prisons, usually in city centres, which, frankly, should be phased out now, and which could mean a significant capital return for Government that we can then invest in modern facilities.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I, too, put it on record that my thoughts are with the family and friends of PC Palmer and all those who suffered as a result of yesterday's events.

New Waltham Parish Council in my constituency has written to the Transport Secretary about what it regards as a complete waste of money—a proposal by North East Lincolnshire Council to install traffic signals at Toll Bar roundabout in the parish. That proposal has angered and perplexed many people in the area. It is being carried out with Government money, so could we have a debate on how local authorities spend the many billions of pounds that the Government hand to them?

Mr Lidington: One of the important roles of both lower-tier authorities, such as parish councils, and Members of Parliament is holding local authorities to account for their stewardship of the scarce and finite resource of taxpayers' money. I am in no position to comment in detail about traffic lights at roundabouts in my hon. Friend's constituency, but he is clearly not going to let this issue go.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The cuts to the personal independence payment explicitly exclude people applying for mobility support if the problem arises from psychological distress, despite the Prime Minister's commitment to treat mental health problems on a par with physical health. I am grateful for the Leader of the House's commitment that we are finally going to have a debate, but can I press him for a date? Those cuts have already taken effect, but it sounds as though the debate will now have to be after the Easter recess. Can he at least give us a firm date for when it is finally going to happen?

Mr Lidington: I want to reassure the right hon. Gentleman on the design of the personal independence payment. It is at the very core of the personal independence payment system that non-physical conditions should be

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given the same recognition as physical conditions. We already see the outworking of that in the fact that a significantly higher proportion of people who have mental health issues receive the top rates of PIP than was the case with disability living allowance.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): May I also associate myself with all the tributes that have been paid today? We have seen the House at its very best and, ultimately, our democracy will not be silenced.

The Corby urgent care centre is a vital NHS service, and I am pleased that the local clinical commissioning group has confirmed that its doors will absolutely not close on 31 March. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging the clinical commissioning group to resolve some of the contractual issues with Lakeside+ to give my constituents greater reassurance and to make sure that we continue to have the quality of service that people have come to expect—and, of course, can we have a debate next week?

Mr Lidington: I think that my hon. Friend will have to take his chance with Adjournment debates on that particular subject. It is clearly important that, while decisions about the configuration of health services are taken possibly in light of local circumstance, commissioning groups manage their relationships with their contractors effectively so that local people can be assured of receiving the decent service to which they are entitled.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I associate myself with all the remarks and condolences that have been expressed so eloquently this morning. I refer particularly to my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) who mentioned going home; I am going home tonight, and I am very grateful to be doing so. Unfortunately, I will miss a rally at the bottom cross in Wishaw; it has been organised quickly to support the refugees that we will soon be welcoming and against a proposed Scottish Defence League march in Wishaw against refugees.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee convener, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), and the Leader of the House for their consideration of the changes to timings of Westminster Hall debates on Tuesday 18 April. My debate is on the child maintenance service; I have received support from Members across the House, and it really is important. I do not mind travelling on bank holiday Monday to get here—I know how important it is—but I understand the difficulties that many Members will have in getting to a debate at half-past 9 on that day. I appreciate all the efforts that the Leader of the House has said he will look to make.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and we will do our best to accommodate the problems that she has identified.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Item No. 3 on today's Order Paper, titled "Business of the House (29 March)", makes reference to a motion being tabled "in the name of the Prime Minister relating to exiting the European Union and the Environment".

That was not mentioned in the business statement, so could the Leader of the House clarify the matter? In the light of yesterday's events, may we please have a debate on community cohesion and the Prevent strategy?

Mr Lidington: The answer to my hon. Friend is that yesterday's business was interrupted for the reasons we all know about. That business on the Pension Schemes Bill has had to be rescheduled, and conversations through the usual channels agreed that that slot on 29 March was the best way to accommodate that.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I was surprised to receive a letter from the Minister of State for Transport this week. My surprise was because it referred to improvement works on the M25 motorway, which is some distance from my constituency. I was even more surprised, because I had just written to the Secretary of State about a number of serious accidents at Switch Island, which is in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House please remind the Secretary of State of the need to respond to my letter? Serious accidents are happening far too often. My constituents care about Switch Island, not the M25, and all that has happened is a repeat of the idea that investment happens in the south-east of England at the expense of the north-west.

Mr Lidington: I know from personal experience that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport takes very seriously his responsibility to ensure that hon. Members receive accurate and comprehensive replies to points that they make about their constituencies. I will draw to the attention of the Secretary of State's office the need for that reply to be sent.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): May I take this opportunity to thank you, Mr Speaker, and your staff—I notice Mr Deputy Speaker there—for the way you all conducted yourselves yesterday? Indeed, I also thank the Leader of the House and the Serjeant at Arms? As chairman of the all-party beer group, I invite everyone and their staff to share a great British pint and then to carry on at a later date and place to be confirmed. May we have a debate on the contribution of the brewing industry to the United Kingdom and its culture?

Mr Lidington: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. One of the remarkable things we have seen in the brewing industry in the past couple of decades has been the surge in the growth of small-scale breweries. It is a real tribute to the sector's enterprise that we have seen microbreweries and craft breweries taking off and continuing to win new discerning drinkers as their customers.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I put on record my thanks to the staff and to all those outside this House—members of the public—who have sent their kind thoughts and wishes in the past 24 hours. It has been very touching, and I thank them very much.

I also add my voice to the chorus of Members who are calling for more time to debate the Government's new funding formula—or, as Labour Members call it, education funding cuts. Headteachers across Norwich and Norfolk have taken the unprecedented step of sending letters to children's parents about the impending budget crisis at a time when precious financial resources

are being spent on more free schools and grammar schools rather than those schools that we already have. Some 25 out of 31 schools in my constituency will receive funding cuts, and I would like more time to debate that.

Mr Lidington: As I have said, the Secretary of State will be considering the recently concluded consultation on the new funding formula. She will announce her proposals in due course, and that would be the appropriate time for her to be questioned, or for any debate to take place.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I was honoured to open two new business premises in my constituency earlier this month—for 4D Data Centres and Inspiration Healthcare. I was also pleased to visit two new facilities at Crawley hospital: a clinical assessment unit and a 26-bed ward. May we have a debate on the importance of further engendering economic growth, as this Government are doing, so that we can afford better public services?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes an important point: we cannot distribute wealth unless business has created it in the first place. It is the job of government, and this Government's commitment, to foster the economic climate in which businessmen in every part of the United Kingdom—[*Interruption*—]and indeed businesswomen, can help to generate economic growth and drive the numbers in employment up even higher than the record levels that they have now reached.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am pleased to have the opportunity to share in the sentiments that have been expressed today and the condolences that we have sent from the House. I also thank all the staff for their work yesterday.

I have been quite concerned about recent comments from people on social media who have boasted about signing a UK parliamentary petition 2,000 times. Given that these petitions often influence what MPs debate, will the Leader of the House reassure the House by setting out what measures are in place to ensure the validity of signatories to any parliamentary petitions so that we can all be confident about the integrity of petitions, and that they are signed only once by those who are entitled to do so?

Mr Lidington: There is a system in place to try to check for the risk of bogus signatories to petitions. Given the pace at which information technology moves, those systems clearly need to be updated from time to time. The Petitions Committee and the House authorities are keen to act on the basis of any evidence of malpractice such as that described by the hon. Lady.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Following the horrific events of yesterday, the Prime Minister said in this House today that she wanted all MPs to learn life-saving first aid skills. With that in mind, can we revisit the debate on compulsory first aid education in schools, which was the subject of a private Member's Bill that was sadly talked out by Government Members?

Mr Lidington: I think that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister encouraged people to acquire those skills. Whether the best way to do that is by making

such education a compulsory part of the school curriculum is a slightly different question. It is a perfectly reasonable element of the debate, but allocating time to such skills lessons would inevitably mean prolonging the school day or taking time away from other activities. The Government's general approach is that we want to give local schools and headteachers discretion about such things.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): May I associate myself and my constituents with everything that has been said this morning about yesterday's horrific attack, which goes to show that evil will never prevail? I recently met a constituent called Ellen Höfer-Franz. She is a German national who, despite having lived in Scotland for nine years, is very concerned about applying for permanent residency to guarantee her status following Brexit due to changes made in 2011 to the rules on comprehensive sickness insurance. May we have a debate about this specific issue to clarify the situation for EU nationals such as Ellen who are concerned about their future?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman could raise this matter on behalf of his constituent in any of the frequent opportunities that we have to debate European matters. I hope that he understands that the Government's objective is to seek, at a very early stage in the forthcoming negotiations, an agreement with the 27 other members of the European Union that each other's nationals should continue to have rights of residence and other connected rights, if they have been lawfully established here.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House and the Environment Secretary please consider the need for an urgent debate on the Zoo Licensing Act 1981, the alarming inadequacy of which has been exposed at South Lakes Safari Zoo in my constituency, which the Leader of the House might have seen in the news of late? There is a catalogue of reasons why the Act and licensing regulations need to be modernised and professionalised. The matter has not been debated in the House for many years; in fact, the last debate was four years ago in the other place.

Mr Lidington: I did, indeed, read the newspaper reports about what seems to have been a pretty appalling case of mismanagement and the ill treatment of a large number of animals at that zoo. There will be questions to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on Thursday 20 April, but the hon. Gentleman will probably want to seek an Adjournment debate in the Chamber or a debate in Westminster Hall.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Leader of the House keeps suggesting that people apply for debates in Westminster Hall, but what is the point when Ministers' responses are so woefully short? There seems to be a particular problem with the 11 am slot on a Wednesday. Library research shows that the average ministerial response to such debates since January has lasted 10 minutes and that the debates are finishing early. I understand that Ministers need to rush up here to fill the Back Benches for Prime Minister's questions, but surely those debates, which are important to our constituents, should have the courtesy of a decent response from Ministers.

Mr Lidington: A courteous and decent response can also be pithy and succinct. In the days when I had to reply to numerous Westminster Hall debates, we always seemed to need additional time to accommodate the many speeches, but I often found that my remaining time at the end of a debate was squeezed hard, including by spokesmen for the hon. Gentleman's party.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): May I associate myself with all the tributes that have been paid in the House regarding yesterday's tragic events?

It should send a strong message to the Secretary of State for Education when Opposition Members like me are entirely united with the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on the funding formula for education? Many schools face severe deficits and need to be able to plan ahead urgently. I hear what the Leader of the House says about the consultation only ending yesterday, but I urge him to say to the Secretary of State that we need an early statement so that schools can plan ahead.

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is aware of the need for headteachers and governing bodies to be able to plan, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says, but I will certainly ensure that she is aware of the opinions that have been expressed today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Prime Minister stated in her speech last night that the UK sets an example for advancing freedoms, including the freedom of religion or belief. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office also made a commitment at the October conference to pursue the freedom of religion or belief at the Human Rights Council. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the relevant Minister to make a statement to confirm that FCO and Department for International Development desk officers, as well as UK embassies, fully recognise the importance of religious freedom and promote it in their daily work?

Mr Lidington: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seize his opportunities at questions to those two Departments. From my fairly recent experience of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, I can assure him that human rights, including religious freedom, are taken very seriously throughout our network of posts abroad and in London. It is also sometimes the case that persecuted religious minorities themselves prefer for their plight to be addressed in the context of the expression of broader concerns about human rights, precisely because they do not want to be further singled out for additional persecution. There is an element of judgment in how we go about this task, but the centrality of that to the mission of the FCO and DFID is something about which I hope I can give him some firm assurance.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Last week, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence issued guidelines that introduce a financial cap on access to medicines. Major research charities such as Alzheimer's Research UK and Cancer Research UK warn that lives will be lost because of this new rationing system. Should there not have been a statement about such an important change in policy? In the absence of such a statement, may we have a debate?

Mr Lidington: It is important that decisions about individual medicines are taken by a body such as NICE, where clinical judgment is to the fore, rather than being subject to political pressure or the question of who has the most effective group of supporters to lobby on their behalf. I will ask the relevant Minister at the Department of Health to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): May I associate myself with the expressions of sympathy today and with the appreciation that has been expressed for those who keep us safe, including the brave police officers?

May we have an urgent debate on the plight of the Chennai Six, who include my constituent Billy Irving, given the Foreign Office's shocking lack of disclosure and communication with families and MPs about the horrific assault on one of the men, who suffered forced incarceration in an Indian mental hospital and the forced administration of drugs, and given that the Minister concerned is apparently currently unable to personally meet terrified family members to reassure them?

Mr Lidington: I do know that the question of the Chennai Six has been raised with the Indian authorities at the highest political level, as well as repeatedly at official levels. I will ask the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), as the Minister responsible for policy towards India, to write to the hon. Lady.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent Steven McColl from Darvel worked for Royal Mail for 28 years and absolutely loved his job. Fifteen years ago, he overcame adversity when he lost his young daughter, who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, aged just two and a half. He went through that traumatic time, and his Royal Mail manager then wanted to sack him, which is unbelievable. He has since recovered, and he won postman of the year a few years later. However, 15 years after losing his daughter, he was off work ill, due to muscle injuries. Royal Mail forced an ill-health retirement settlement on him after he was off for just four months—it did not even wait a full six months—and his appeal is still ongoing. Royal Mail has refused to engage positively with my office, but the Government still have a Minister with responsibilities for Royal Mail, so will the Leader of the House outline what role that Minister can play and what assistance can be given to stick up for this fantastic and popular employee?

Mr Lidington: I am sure the hon. Gentleman would not expect me to comment on the individual case, particularly because, as he has just said, it is subject to an appeal, presumably through an employment tribunal. I will draw his concern to the attention of the Minister responsible for Royal Mail, but it would not be at all usual for Ministers to intervene in individual employment cases. Royal Mail exists as a corporate entity, and it has to take management decisions about its personnel, among other things, without being second-guessed by Ministers.

Points of Order

1.2 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Leader of the House repeated a claim that other Ministers have made: that more people with mental health problems are supported by personal independence payments than by disability living allowance. Mind, the mental health charity, has made it clear that 55% of people with mental health awards on DLA, when reassessed for PIP, have no or a reduced award. How can I get the record corrected and push the Leader of the House for a date for a debate on the new regulations?

Mr Speaker: The pursuit of a debate has been single-minded and persistent on the part of the hon. Lady, and it shows some sign of bearing fruit. She has made her own point in her own way, and when she asks how she can find a way of putting her concern on the record, she knows perfectly well, as the cheeky grin etched on her face testifies, that she has, in fact, by an abuse of the point of order procedure, found her own salvation.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well. The day would not be complete without a point of order from the hon. Gentleman.

Bob Blackman: I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker, as to how I can put on record the fact that my Homelessness Reduction Bill passed its Third Reading in the House of Lords, and how I can pay tribute to Lord Best, who piloted it through.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman, also, has found his own salvation, and it is a delight to observe that that success has brought further happiness into his life, quite apart from the potential benefits that the Bill will confer upon those whom he has in mind.

Declarations of Interest

1.4 pm

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you will be aware, the Committee on Standards has today published a report, following an inquiry into my declarations of interests during Select Committee inquiries last year, and it has found that there were breaches of the code. The report states that the Standards Committee found that these breaches were very minor. I am grateful that the Committee also concludes that I was seeking to act within the rules and, additionally, that there was no intention on my part to conceal my interests. However, I would like to take this—the earliest—opportunity to offer a full apology to the House.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said.

Backbench Business

Equitable Life Policyholders: Compensation

1.5 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the Government's acceptance in full of the Parliamentary Ombudsman's findings in relation to its maladministration with regard to Equitable Life; notes that the Parliamentary Ombudsman recommended that policyholders should be put back in the position they would have been had maladministration not occurred; further notes that the overwhelming majority of victims have only received partial compensation compared to the confirmed losses directly attributed to regulatory failures; regrets that the Government made no further funding available in the Spring Budget 2017; and calls on the Government to make a commitment to provide full compensation to victims of the scandal as the economy continues to recover.

I draw the House's attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am the co-Chair of the all-party parliamentary group for justice for Equitable Life policyholders.

This saga has been going on for more than 25 years. There have been debates in this House on many occasions. I am delighted the Government took action as early as 2010 to provide compensation for the victims of this scandal. This is a unique scandal, and there are three sets of individuals involved. For the benefit of all Members, I will in due course briefly go through the issues faced by those three sets of people.

It is clear that this is a unique case. When I stood for election in 2010, individual candidates made relatively few promises and pledges, but one of the pledges I made was to seek full compensation for Equitable Life policyholders, and I can assure those affected that I and my colleagues will continue this fight until every policyholder has received the full compensation they are due.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Given the failure of the regulator to identify, let alone expose, the problem, what information was in the public domain that a savvy investor could have taken into account and that might have alarmed him?

Bob Blackman: That intervention goes to the heart of the matter. The reality is that people who were investing their life savings in pension schemes, from the time when it was possible to take out personal pensions, were persuaded by unscrupulous Equitable Life salespeople to transfer those life savings—their hard-earned money—into a Ponzi-like scheme. They were promised bonuses that were unachievable, and the regulator knew they were unachievable. All was well while enough money was coming in, but eventually, as we know, the money coming in was insufficient to pay the bonuses expected, and disaster loomed. The key point, as my right hon. Friend points out, is that there was no information in the public domain, and individuals could not have known that they would be affected, but they were none the less. The regulator, who should have been overseeing this, knew what was going on, and the Treasury knew what was going on, but no one took any action. This was hidden because the cost of collapse to the public purse was so immense that this could not be allowed to continue.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this issue to the House yet again because policyholders with Equitable Life have been very badly treated. The finances of this country are now much improved, and it is time that we looked yet again at the situation of these policyholders, because their policies were oversold and actuaries hyped up their value well beyond anything that could be delivered, even at the time. Many people have never been held to account, but the policyholders have had millions of pounds taken from them through their insurance policies and pensions.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that lengthy intervention. The reality is that, as he suggests, there are more than 1 million victims. The former Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), accepted at the Dispatch Box that the total sum to be paid in compensation should be £4.1 billion, but 895,000 people have received only 22% of their losses. The payments process has been less than transparent, and policyholders have no way to check the calculations that have been made. That creates a difficulty for all who support the policyholders; at this point, I want to pay tribute to the Equitable Members Action Group, which has done such diligent work on their behalf.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): Given the failure of regulation and the Treasury's knowledge of it, as the hon. Gentleman outlines, this is a matter of obligation for the Government, is it not? No individual can discard their obligations because they do not have enough cash, and the Government do have enough cash at the moment.

Bob Blackman: I believe that this is a debt of honour. I do not expect my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury to announce that he will open the Treasury chequebook and pay the full compensation today. I have sympathy with the suggestion that, because of the most recent decisions on national insurance, the Budget has not yet been brought into balance. As the motion states, however, I believe that in the long run, as the economy recovers, this debt of honour should be satisfied, and I think that there is a way to do so within the remit of the legislation and the capability of the Treasury.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good case. I, too, have been contacted by many constituents about this issue. I understand the Government's position, but the public finances are looking better than they were when this all hit and we have cut the deficit by two thirds. On behalf of my constituents, I urge the Government to continue to look at the matter to see whether they can help these very deserving people, and I am sure that he will support me.

Bob Blackman: As I have said, this is a debt of honour and the economy is recovering. In the long term, we should compensate in full all those who suffered, through no fault of their own. We are encouraging people from across the country to invest in savings for their retirement, so they need to know that the regulator and the Government will safeguard and look after their savings and make sure that they are not short-changed as the vulnerable people we are discussing have been.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I draw to the attention of the House my interest as a policyholder—mercifully, a very small one—in Equitable Life. I lost a few hundred pounds, but others lost very much larger sums. I endorse everything that the hon. Gentleman says. He has mentioned the lack of information accessible to the public. Does he agree that one of the most shocking things was the fact that, right up to the end, advertising continued to encourage people to put their savings into Equitable Life? I remember distinctly seeing large advertisements on the tube in 2000, weeks before the company went down.

Bob Blackman: Quite clearly, there was irresponsibility. I would absolve the current leadership of Equitable Life from that, because it has been co-operative in every way. It has identified the policyholders and assisted the Government and EMAG to ensure that everyone could be compensated. That does not apply to the previous management, however.

Let us turn to the current position. I applaud the Government for honouring the pledge to provide compensation to Equitable Life policyholders immediately after the 2010 general election. At that point, £1.5 billion was set aside to provide compensation. That was too little, and there is still a debt of honour, as I have said.

There are effectively four sets of people involved. The with-profits annuitants, of whom there are 39,858, have been paid out £336 million. The pre-'92 trapped with-profits annuitants were left out of the scheme quite deliberately, because the Government took the view that anyone who took out a policy before 1 September 1992 was outside the compensation limit. That, to me, was wrong, because those people could not have known that this scandal was going on. But I am delighted that the then Chancellor provided an ex-gratia payment of £5,000 to 9,000 people and that he extended it to £10,000 for those on pension credit.

We also have the non-with-profits annuitants, of whom there are 1,000,605. They have received, thus far, £749 million, but that represents only 22.4% of their losses. That is an arbitrary number. If the Government have accepted that they are responsible for the pensions of those individuals, it cannot be right that they receive an arbitrary percentage merely because that is the balance left of the money that was set aside. All I ask is for my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to say that the Government will keep that under review and that, as the economy recovers, the compensation should be paid out.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Policyholders in my constituency who did the right thing have been left in dire straits through no fault of their own. Given that even modest additional sums can make a difference, does my hon. Friend agree that it must be possible, at the very least, to do better than 22% and to link that to the improving public finances?

Bob Blackman: I agree with my hon. Friend that we can, and should, do better. The current position is unfair on those individuals, many of whom are approaching retirement and seeking to draw on their pension pots but do not know what security they will have in their old age. For them to get just 22.4% is absolutely unacceptable, and the battle will continue until such time as they receive the compensation that they are due.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all the work that he has done, over many years. He deserves huge credit for that. Does he agree that when we are quite rightly seeking to show that the United Kingdom is the world financial centre, we need to show that we have the best possible regulation and that we are prepared to stand behind people who have been let down by regulation in such cases?

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend, and I trust that he will make a further contribution to the debate later. The position is as he has set out. We should ensure that the City of London remains the financial centre of the world, and we must show that we can be trusted to look after people's investments.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I, like other Members, have a number of constituents who are affected by this. He talks about people reaching their old age. In addition to the fact that the compensation is too little, is there not an increasing risk that it will come too late? The longer justice is delayed, the greater the chance that it will be denied.

Bob Blackman: Indeed. Unfortunately, as we know, many of the individuals affected by the scandal are deep into old age. They may be very vulnerable, and, regrettably, there are fewer and fewer of them every day. For every day that goes by without them receiving proper compensation, the scandal is maintained.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): My hon. Friend just made an important point about the significance of London's international reputation. That depends, in part, on the strength of our regulatory environment. Does it not follow, as a matter of both good policy and common decency, that when there is a massive regulatory failure, the Government should be seen to stand behind those who lose out as a consequence?

Bob Blackman: I absolutely agree with that comment. I want to say something about the commitments we have made, which are very important. As I have said, the former Chancellor accepted the reality of the situation at the Dispatch Box. He said:

"I accept the findings of the parliamentary ombudsman in full."—*[Official Report, 20 October 2010; Vol. 516, c. 960.]*

Let us be clear about the parliamentary ombudsman's findings at the time. There had been 10 years—a decade—of regulatory failure, which was responsible for the losses suffered by pensioners when Equitable Life collapsed. In her report, which was 2,872 pages long by the way, she recommended that the Government

"should restore complainants to the position they would have been in, had maladministration not occurred".

I believe that we should ensure we honour the commitments we have made and honour the situation in law.

I note that my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary is a former member of the all-party group and a strong supporter of justice for the Equitable Life policyholders. I know him to be an honourable man, and I know he will want to do the best he can for the people who have suffered such losses.

[Bob Blackman]

The ask today is very simple. The pre-1992 trapped annuitants, who are the most vulnerable group—I am afraid that, every day, fewer and fewer are with us any longer—should be compensated in full, even though that is outside the scope of the legislation. Full compensation for those individuals would cost the Government less than £100 million. For the people who have received compensation for 22.4% of their losses, a plan should be set out to enable them to receive full compensation. I am not expecting that to happen straightaway—it may take time—but those people should receive compensation as the economy recovers. We could have a plan so that, in line with the recovery of the economy, much more money is paid out. That would be fair, reasonable and—dare I say?—equitable.

In conclusion, I look forward to my hon. Friend giving us some commitments and clear guidance on what the Treasury will do to assist people who invested and did the right thing. This House owes a debt of honour to those individuals, and those of us who support these honourable people will not rest until such time as they receive every penny piece of the compensation to which they are entitled.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I tell Members that if they take about 10 minutes, everyone will have an equal time, including for the second debate?

1.22 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), with whom I have worked for the past few years as—I should declare this—the co-chair of the all-party group on justice for Equitable Life policyholders.

I am very sad that after so many years of debating this issue in this House, we are back once again talking about the continuing losses suffered by hundreds of thousands of Equitable Life policyholders. As we have heard, they invested in the world's oldest life assurance company in the belief that they would be able to have a comfortable old age, but instead, after a lifetime of saving, they find themselves sometimes destitute, and often much poorer through no fault of their own.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the issue is not just one of restitution for our constituents who have lost out, but one of confidence in the whole savings culture for future generations, which is very important, and that the two issues are linked?

Fabian Hamilton: Indeed, I do agree, and I will go on to say something about that, but there is also a third dimension, which is that we have a moral duty to ensure that the Equitable Life policyholders are compensated.

How have we arrived at this situation at this point in time, 17 years after Equitable closed its doors to new investors, and seven years after the previous Government promised to ensure that the losses incurred by Equitable policyholders would be compensated? My first involvement in the Equitable saga was to speak in an Adjournment

debate that I secured in Westminster Hall on 24 June 2009. In that debate, I spoke about the serious issues facing all our constituents since the crash of Equitable Life, following its inability to meet its obligations and the promises it had made to investors over the decades. Equitable Life started selling pensions as early as 1913, but it was not until 1957 that the society started selling its now infamous guaranteed annuity rate pensions, which promised a clear and unambiguous return on the capital invested. That carried on until 1988, when the society realised that its rates were so good and so far ahead of the rest of the market that they were, in reality, totally unsustainable. In December 2000, Equitable Life was forced to close to new business.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): In that year, there was the, to me, rather surprising Appeal Court judgment regarding those who had contracts saying that if they put in more money, they would get greater rates of return. The judgment totally missed the fact that all the policyholders were members of the society. The senior judges did not fully understand the consequence of what they were doing, and it was unfair to too many.

Fabian Hamilton: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Unfortunately, the time available limits what I can say about the judgment, and I want to talk about what we need to do now.

By the time Equitable was forced to close, it had more than 1.5 million members, and was one of the biggest societies in the world.

Kate Green: Does my hon. Friend agree that many of the members were in modest employment with modest earnings, often in the public or voluntary sector?

Fabian Hamilton: I certainly do agree, and I will go on to make that point. It is the very reason I took up this cause in the first place. Like many of my colleagues, I had believed that only the wealthy invested in Equitable—people with hundreds of thousands of pounds to put into their pensions seeking to make a huge return—but I discovered that, in fact, the average pension pot was just £45,000. Ordinary people, saving £20 or £30 a month over a working life, were investing in Equitable.

Alex Chalk: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is an important business case, as it were, for the Government to do more? If people cannot support themselves without the income that they expected, the burden of doing so will fall on the state, which means there is all the more reason to do more now.

Fabian Hamilton: Absolutely. That is a very good point. People were encouraged to save for themselves exactly because neither the state nor the individual wanted people to have to depend on the state always coming up with the money necessary to enable them to have a full and enriching retirement. It was about self-reliance, which has been at the core of the arguments today and over many years in debates in this House. The people who were helping to provide for themselves and who were encouraged to invest in Equitable are the very people who have been let down. They are not the wealthy, but the ordinary people who were putting aside a little bit more for their retirement so they could have a comfortable retirement, and that money has now gone.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentions that over 1 million people subscribed to the Equitable Life pension funds. Over 900 of them are in my constituency, many of whom, as he says, are people who are just about managing. They have done the right thing, but they are now, at the very best, just about managing. This is about maladministration under previous Governments, so is it not incumbent on this Government at least to open the door a little more to an improved offer that will possibly improve over time to give such savers a fair deal?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, because one of the great things we do in this House is to work on moral issues such as Equitable together, across party lines. I am proud to work with the hon. Member for Harrow East—I hope he will allow me to call him an hon. Friend—because he has done an awful lot, and I pay tribute to him for the work he has done. I have done my best to work collectively and collaboratively as the co-chair of the all-party group, because we need to do this together. This is a moral issue, as I shall come on to elaborate.

In July 2008, the parliamentary ombudsman published her first report on Equitable Life, “Equitable Life: a decade of regulatory failure”. On 11 December that year, the Public Administration Committee produced a report entitled “Justice delayed”, which said:

“Over the last eight years many of those members and their families have suffered great anxiety as policy values were cut and pension payments reduced... Many are no longer alive, and will be unable to benefit personally from any compensation. We share both a deep sense of frustration and continuing outrage that the situation has remained unresolved for so long.”

Well, there has certainly been no shortage of reports, just a shortage of justice for those who, through no fault of their own, suffered huge losses in the life savings they had accrued over years of hard work.

At the core of the problem is the fact that Equitable Life simply could not meet the obligations it had made for itself, because it had made no provision for guarantees against low interest rates on policies issued before 1988. It therefore declared bonuses out of all proportion to its profits and assets.

Following the ruling of the House of Lords in July 2000, the society effectively stopped taking new business in December of that year, which spelled the end for Equitable. More than 1 million policyholders found that they faced severe cuts in their bonuses and annuities, which caused a huge loss of income on which many small investors were depending. After all, as I have said, the average investment among the 500,000 individual policyholders was just £45,000, which even at its height, according to the Equitable Members Action Group, would have yielded no more than £300 per month.

In its December 2008 report, one of the many recommendations of the Public Administration Committee stated:

“We strongly support the Ombudsman’s recommendation for the creation of a compensation scheme to pay for the loss that has been suffered by Equitable Life’s members as a result of maladministration. Where regulators have been shown to fail so thoroughly, compensation should be a duty, not a matter of choice.”

Reacting to the Government’s lack of response to the ombudsman’s report, the then Conservative Opposition expressed their determination to introduce an Equitable

Life (Payments) Bill early in the next Parliament, should they form a Government after the general election of 2010. The legislation planned in the coalition agreement did, indeed, include such a Bill and it was introduced in June 2010, shortly after the new Government took office.

On 10 November 2010, I tabled an amendment to the Bill in Committee, supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, that would have included the pre-1992 with-profits annuitants—WPAs—who had been specifically excluded from the proposed compensation scheme contained in the Bill. The Bill offered 100% compensation to all with-profits annuitants who had taken out their annuities after 1 September 1992 and, as we have heard, 22% compensation to every other policyholder. Many Members from all parts of the House felt that that was inherently unfair, as the date of 1 September 1992 was somewhat arbitrary. That relatively small group of with-profits annuitants were the eldest and by far the most vulnerable policyholders. Many of them would not even live to enjoy the compensation, were it to be paid. Indeed, that has been borne out in reality.

My amendment to the Bill simply read:

“Payments authorised by the Treasury under this section to with-profits annuitants shall be made without regard to the date on which such policies were taken out.”

The Public Bill Office helped me to draft that amendment. The debate on the amendment took just over two hours, but the Division was lost by 76 votes in favour to 301 against. The debate did, however, strongly set out the case for including the pre-1992 with-profits annuitants.

The Bill received Royal Assent in early 2011 and the compensation scheme was set in motion. At first it was slow, but it began to pick up over the subsequent years. By the end of January 2015, more than £1 billion had been paid out to 896,367 policyholders, although more than 142,000 policyholders were still to be found and could not be traced. The scheme, as we know, has now closed. We also know that 37,764 with-profits annuitants, or their estates, were issued payments by the scheme. Those initial and subsequent payments totalled £271.4 million.

In conclusion, I have to give credit to the coalition Government for introducing a compensation scheme from which the majority of Equitable policyholders received 22p in the pound. I am sure we would all agree that that is a lot better than nothing. However, when we examine the compensation that was paid to Icesave investors following the collapse of the Icelandic banks in 2008, from which every investor received up to £50,000 of their losses in full, the Equitable scheme looks rather less than generous. Given that the average policy involved a total sum invested of £45,000, as I have said, it seems rather unfair to Equitable policyholders that they did not receive more. That is why EMAG continues to campaign for full compensation for all Equitable policyholders in a reasonable way—in line with the growth of the economy, not all at once—and why so many Members from all parts of the House continue to support that view.

Equitable policyholders have been very patient. They understand that the recession, at the time, meant austerity and a huge shortage of money for many parts of Government and the state. What they cannot understand is that, as the economy grows, they are denied any further payments against their very real losses. I have

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

heard, as many right hon. and hon. Members will have heard, heartbreaking stories from individuals and constituents, some of whom have lost everything, including their homes, all because of Equitable's failure and the company's "catastrophic" regulation.

I have said in all my previous speeches in the House on Equitable Life that this is fundamentally a moral issue. When the Government are supposed to protect the life savings of individuals who have been encouraged to provide for themselves, as was the case with Equitable, they have a duty to ensure that the losses incurred are adequately compensated. That obligation should I believe, come above pet projects such as, perhaps, HS2 and even Trident renewal; otherwise, the whole fabric of trust in the state is damaged, which I believe is exactly what has happened in this case. Finally, I urge all Members of this House to continue to uphold the cause of Equitable policyholders and to try to restore their faith in the ability of Members of this House, as the elected representatives of the people, properly to compensate the victims of one of the greatest financial scandals of our age. After all, I believe we have a moral duty and we should not be afraid to carry it out.

Sir Peter Bottomley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to correct an oversight. When I intervened on the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), I should have declared that I have a small Equitable Life policy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): We are grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his correction of the record.

1.37 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), both of whom deserve great credit for the work they have done. My hon. Friend also deserves credit for securing the debate. I would call both of them friends outside this Chamber. They have worked tirelessly on this issue.

As the hon. Member for Leeds North East just said, the vast bulk of Equitable Life losers were modest people who had bought in to what successive Governments of all parties had told them was the right thing to do. They were told to save for their retirement, to put something aside, and that they would benefit thereafter. Why did they lose because of catastrophic errors by the company and a catastrophic error of regulation? The Government create the regulator and the regulatory system. The Government, ultimately, must bear the responsibility for that failure. I do not mean that in a partisan sense, but morally they must be prepared to do so.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I have hitherto resisted the case for full compensation on the basis of two arguments. One of them was that if the returns were too good to be true, investors ought to have spotted that. However, I have begun to wonder whether that argument is sustainable, because if the benefits were too good to be true, the regulator should have spotted it. This is a regulated market in which ordinary investors ought to have had confidence.

Robert Neill: My right hon. Friend is spot on about the gravity of the regulatory failure. It was not just the process—the nuts and bolts—that went wrong; there was a fundamental failure to see that something that had been put into the market should have been ringing alarm bells. That is a very important point. That is why the case that the Government should provide proper compensation is all the stronger. The superficially attractive argument that it was too good to be true so people acted at their own risk was put about quite early. It was also claimed that all those affected were lawyers—barristers and solicitors—consultants and the comfortable middle class. I have dozens of victims of Equitable Life in my constituency and most are modest people who had jobs that enabled them to put a little bit aside, which they did in good faith and were let down by the system. A Government-regulated system let them down. That is why the obligation is very strong.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East referred to EMAG's work. I declare an interest as a member of the all-party parliamentary group on the matter. I particularly pay tribute to my constituents, David Truran and Richard Collins among others, who galvanised our local group of Equitable Life victims. They work hard to keep people in their area, many of whom are elderly and quite frail, in the loop about what is happening. That is a valuable local service. As has been said, the information about the compensation scheme and the way it worked was less than user friendly, to put it mildly. There was a lack of transparency and it was sometimes difficult for people in difficult circumstances, in the latter years of their lives, to navigate the information. EMAG's work, nationally and locally, to help them is important.

The moral case is overwhelming and I think that the Minister, given his background and experience, knows that. The coalition Government were right to move when the previous Government had sadly done nothing, and it is a fair point that something is better than nothing. However, that is not really a sound basis for policy, morally or in terms of good governance. Something was given, and circumstances now permit the Government to give more.

Kate Green: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that policyholders do not regard what they are entitled to as compensation? They simply want back the money that they saved—their own money, which they put in to their long-term pension savings, believing it would be given back, with a reasonable return, when they retired and needed it.

Robert Neill: That is an entirely fair and proper point. We use "compensation" only in a technical sense rather than to reflect the morality of what has happened. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East was right to describe the scheme as effectively a Ponzi scheme. In other jurisdictions, it would undoubtedly have been regarded as a fraud on the investors. They put in their money, lost out and the regulator that was supposed to protect them failed abysmally.

When the coalition Government introduced the compensation scheme, finances were difficult. Things have improved and it is not unreasonable to expect those people to be recompensed by more now. The distinction between pre-1992 and post-1992 annuitants was at best arbitrary. Although the case is made in a

legalistic, dry, desiccated-calculating-machine way, it does not hold water for anyone who examines it. I hope for a measure of human decency and a broad view of the impact on public confidence. The Government let themselves down somewhat with that arrangement, although it was better than nothing. Now we can do better and I urge the Government to do that.

As well as the moral case, there is a case to be made for the importance for this country of good governance in our financial services sector. I am a passionate advocate of Britain's financial services; 36% of my constituents work in the financial and professional services sector. It is a massive earner for this country and a jewel in our economic crown. However, it succeeds because of its reputation for integrity, which is based on the strength of its regulatory structures. When there is a failure, which is not followed by proper redress for those who lose out, confidence in our financial sector is dented and damaged.

As we emerge from the European Union—hon. Members know I regret that, but that is where we are—the financial services sector's international reputation will be all the more important. It is in our national self-interest to ensure that we are seen to be 100% behind those who invest prudently and sensibly in our financial institutions. Britain is a world leader in the insurance sector, but this failure has the potential to damage us and it will always be held against us unless we do something to get it right. Given the national benefit that the sector brings, doing justice to the Equitable Life losers would be a drop in the ocean financially. Perhaps even for that reason, as well as for our long-term national economic self-interest, if not out of moral decency, the Government will think again.

1.45 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I pay tribute to those who secured the debate, particularly the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who has worked tirelessly on behalf of the victims of the Equitable Life failure.

Equitable Life policyholders have been failed by three bodies. They were failed, first, by the life insurance scheme in which they invested; secondly, by the regulator; and thirdly, by the Government, who have not done enough, although I acknowledge that this Government and the previous Government moved to do something. The point of the debate is that they have a duty to do more for moral reasons, as other hon. Members have said. They should also do more, again as others, particularly the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), have said, in order to underwrite confidence in the financial sector throughout the United Kingdom.

In Edinburgh South West, the financial sector is extremely important. Many of my constituents work in it, and Edinburgh has the second largest financial sector in the UK outwith London. However, quite a number of my constituents are victims of the collapse of Equitable Life and I want to say a little about the personal experiences of two or three.

Others have already dealt more eloquently than I can with the nub of the issue. Basically, it is the shortfall: the difference between the amount in the scheme that the previous Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), created—£1.5 billion—and the total loss,

which he admitted was £4.1 billion. There was therefore a difference of £2.6 billion. In the great scheme of things, that is not a huge amount of money, especially when we consider it against the principles that should govern such a situation.

The Government initially attempted to exclude all those who took out schemes before 1992. That would have excluded some of the oldest, most vulnerable, and most incapable of making their voice heard. The Government's sticking plaster on compensation for the pre-1992 scheme holders—an extra £50 million—does not cover the full amounts lost and continues the unfairness to those least likely to be able to continue the fight against the injustice. The Government's choice—it is a choice; every Government have to choose their priorities—not to compensate fully those who are unlikely to live long enough to provide the sustained pressure necessary to reverse the decision is most unfortunate.

This is not the first time that the Government have failed on compensation or regulation. Like other hon. Members, I have been present in the Chamber for the debate on the losses of investors in the Connaught Income Fund. I have constituents who suffered as a result of that. Of course, there is also the ongoing issue of the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. Those women invested in their future according to the rules that they understood to apply at the time. During the debate, I have received messages from WASPI women, reminding me to mention them and emphasising that they have suffered a similar injustice to those affected by the collapse of Equitable Life.

I want to say something about the effect on three of my constituents. I will not name them for reasons of personal privacy. I will call them Mr A, Mr B and Mr C. Mr A started to run his own business in his 40s and at that time, he took out three personal pensions with Equitable Life, two for him and one for his wife, who was a partner in the business. When Equitable Life was unable to deliver what it had promised, Mr A and his wife lost their guaranteed annuity rates as the company tried to avoid liquidation. That meant that they were getting only 50% of the rate that the company had guaranteed them. When the coalition Government announced their planned compensation scheme, Mr A expected to be reimbursed to a degree that would at least allow him to lead the sort of life in his old age that he had hoped for when he took the schemes out in the 1980s. However, when he was compensated, he realised he had received only about 4% of the money owed to him. His appeal was successful and was upheld by the independent panel, but the recalculation has never been carried out, despite the strenuous efforts of my predecessor, the previous Member of Parliament for Edinburgh South West.

Mr A still does not have the 50% compensation that he expected to receive, which means that he and his wife have very much had to lower their expectations of old age, and have had to use the equity release scheme to release funds on their home to help them to manage. They would never have expected to have to do that, and indeed had planned against doing so.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The second argument I have used to resist full compensation is that we would be requiring taxpayers, many of whom would never have been able to afford such investments, to compensate the

[*Sir Desmond Swayne*]

annuitants—I accept that the annuitants were also taxpayers. However, the evidence about the modesty of so many annuitants has affected the argument. Equally, I wonder whether it is sustainable to subject justice to a means test.

Joanna Cherry: The right hon. Gentleman has obviously thought this through carefully. The conclusions he has come to with his first concern, and the conclusions he is moving towards with his second concern, are very wise. As another hon. Member pointed out, the purpose of having a regulator is to spot when what is promised is not realistic. In a democracy such as ours, with checks and balances and regulators, ordinary investors are entitled to assume that the regulator would say, “This is nonsense and dangerous”, even when a well respected and reputable company had made those promises—these were not fly-by-night investments as far as my constituents were concerned, but investments in a very old and well respected company.

Mr B is quite elderly—he is in his 80s now—and his memory is fading a bit. He was a shopkeeper, which is just the kind of small businessman and entrepreneur that the Conservative Government purport to support. The Scottish National party, too, very much encourages entrepreneurialism and small business—it is in the interests of all of us to encourage entrepreneurialism.

Mr B took out his Equitable Life policy about 40 years ago and has suffered hugely. He told me that, whenever he thinks about what has happened to him and the losses he has sustained, he finds it very hard to describe the pain it makes him feel. He ran a shop in an area of Edinburgh where a lot of his customers were professional people who had also invested in the scheme and told him it was a good thing. He proceeded with all due caution.

Mr B has told people in my office that he is not looking for very much. He wants his rights and his reasonable expectations to be respected. He wanted me to make it very clear today that the current under-compensation underlines his belief that the ideas of trust and bond, which he says used to be so important to investment, seem to have no place in the modern world of financial transactions. It is unfortunate that an elderly gentleman such as Mr B, who has worked so hard all his life in his own business, should have reached that conclusion. He is anxious that, at this stage, late on in his life, if he is unable to pay the debts that the Equitable scheme should have covered for him, he will lose his house—the home where he lives.

The losses of Mr C, another constituent, are substantial—he told me that he believes his losses to be upwards of £200,000. Mr C was a shopkeeper too. He believes that, as he is getting very old, any year could be his last, and that time is quickly running out to find the justice he deserves.

I am making a heartfelt plea to the Minister on behalf of constituents such as Mr A, Mr B and Mr C to look at this again. I wrote to the Chancellor in advance of the last Budget. The Minister was generous in his reply and dealt with matters in detail. I realise that, to a certain extent, his hands are tied, but I make a plea to him to go to the Chancellor to revisit this issue, so that the compensation payments—I use the word “compensation” loosely, as

we have discussed—can be considerably increased for all our constituents, but particularly for gentlemen and women in the position of Mr A, Mr B and Mr C. To echo what others have said, it is the right thing to do and the moral thing to do, but it is also in all our interests, because it would increase and underline confidence in the financial sector, which is so important to the United Kingdom.

1.56 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I will be brief because we have heard so much wisdom and common sense from all hon. Members who have spoken. I wish to make three points, the first of which is about equity. People have spoken about the proposal being the right and moral thing to do. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said that it is the equitable thing to do—indeed it is. We are about to enter negotiations with the European Union about our future responsibilities towards EU pensioners. As a Government, we will take the right and responsible attitude and fulfil our commitments, as the Prime Minister has said. If that is the case, the principle should also apply to our Equitable Life pensioners.

I have heard from many constituents about the problems that have arisen because promises and commitments made to them were not fulfilled, principally because of a massive failure of the organisation, but also of the regulators. Let us not forget that when we invest in organisations such as Equitable Life, we place our reliance on the regulators. As ordinary investors, we do not have the knowledge or experience to know whether the promises being made and, in small print, underwritten by the regulator can be carried out. We expect them to be carried out.

If my memory serves me correctly, the situation at Equitable Life occurred after the Bank of Credit and Commerce International debacle in the 1980s when, for instance, the highlands and islands lost something like £20 million. Many others lost money. I remember clearly from the time the phrase, “If it looks too good to be true, it is too good to be true.” One would have thought that, if I and others took that message on board, the regulators would have done so. It is absolutely equitable for us to do whatever we can and more than has been done for the Equitable Life investors.

I pay tribute to the coalition Government for the action they took in difficult times to set aside £1.5 billion partially to right this wrong. We should not forget that, but I want the Government to build on that as the economy improves.

The second issue, as other hon. Members have said, is confidence in financial services. The UK is a world centre for financial services, whether they are in London, Edinburgh, Leeds or Birmingham. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) said, many of our constituents—not just in London and the south-east, but right across the United Kingdom—depend on financial services for their living. Behind all financial services lies one simple word: “trust”. If a country or an organisation cannot be trusted, it will fail. Fortunately, the United Kingdom has a long and excellent reputation for the trustworthiness of its financial services sector. It is therefore all the more important for any blemishes to be set right quickly and properly.

My third point is about long-term security. People rightly want to even out their wealth over the course of their life, which is why they invest in pensions. They forgo spending now so that they will have money to spend later on, when they do not have an income from employment. That is a very worthy thing to do. We should support that. We do support that through the tax system and we also support it through regulation, which is why it is vital in cases such as this. As hon. Members have said, it would be one thing if this was a matter of an investment fund or a hedge fund for people with millions to invest, who know what they are getting into and the risks involved, but this is another situation entirely. As we have heard, this concerns people who were expecting pensions of, on average, about £300 a month. That is not at all the kind of money that allows someone to go on lots of cruises around the world, but it is money to top up the basic state pension, as every Government have wanted people to do for almost the past 100 years.

I believe that the country needs to do something similar. I have long advocated our country investing in a sovereign wealth fund, whereby we put aside money every year and do not just rely on a pay-as-you-go attitude—if you like, a Government-operated Ponzi scheme—for the national health service and state pensions. We need to consider operating our public finances in the same way that we expect pension funds to run their operations, whereby future liabilities are met with future assets. That would in turn allow us, when we get hiccups such as this, to compensate for them in full.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I notice that Members are asking questions that they would like the Minister to answer, so the House will want to hear from the Minister at some length at the end of the debate. I want to make sure there is enough time for the Minister to speak, so I hope colleagues will now restrict their remarks to eight or nine minutes.

2.2 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I will aim not to disappoint, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for securing this extremely important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) on their extremely hard work over a number of years to try to secure adequate compensation for everyone who lost out as a result of this scandal. The issue of Equitable Life and the fate of those who lost out after investing has been debated by Members on both sides of the House for more than 15 years. As has been said, there is a great deal of cross-party work on this matter. Throughout that time, the Equitable Life Members Group and the all-party group have campaigned tirelessly to ensure that the issue is not simply kicked into the long grass. I am pleased to have another opportunity to press the case for those who lost out.

After a long battle, I appreciate the action that the Government have taken to date for those affected by this scandal. However, as we have heard from Members and our constituents, many policyholders remain short-changed, receiving a payment of less than one quarter

of the compensation to which the ombudsman found they would have been entitled. The second ombudsman's report was clear that the aim of the compensation scheme should have been to put people back into the position they would have been in if maladministration had not occurred. Despite that—we have heard this from many Members today—1 million people have received only about 22% of the compensation they are due.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The hon. Gentleman, like all speakers in the debate, is making a very powerful point. I, too, have received a great number of letters from constituents who have corresponded with me about the money that they or their relatives lost. He is right to say that they received only 22% of the compensation they expected. Is it not the case that we are dealing with pensioners and that we are losing about 15 a day? If the Government were to look again at whether, with a growing economy, more could be done for the people who have lost out, that would need to happen sooner rather than later.

Justin Madders: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We are dealing with people who are getting on in years. As he points out, sadly about 15 policyholders a day are dying before the situation has been resolved. I am strongly of the belief—we see this for a whole range of issues—that the longer people wait for justice, the harder it is to appreciate that justice has been served.

The core of this issue is that many people feel that, even after all these years, justice has not been done. That message has come across loud and clear from my constituents and those of other hon. Members who have spoken. These people worked all their lives only to find that their pension pot has failed to materialise in the manner they were promised and they genuinely believed would occur.

In practice, this means that people who spent decades working for a comfortable retirement have had it denied them. It means that they are downsizing or even re-mortgaging their homes in their old age just to make ends meet. That is clearly not what we want for people who have contributed throughout their lives.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is speaking extremely powerfully. He is absolutely right to focus on those who will not have the opportunity to recover the money they have lost unless the Government change their mind. Does he agree that a real message can be sent to young people and those of us who, like myself, are less young? We must show that saving and responsible action during a working life is rewarded. There is a danger that if we continue to get this wrong, the lesson we are providing is that people should not bother to save, because it is not worth it.

Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. I am sure that he has many years to go before he reaches retirement age, but that is something that is absolutely central to the debate, so I will expand on it a little more. We are entering an era in which retirement ages will increase and there will be more and more onus on people to take responsibility for their own retirement. If we have a system that people lack confidence in, it simply will not work. That is why compensation in these situations should be delivered in full.

[Justin Madders]

One of my constituents told me:

“what I personally find sickening is that Her Majesty’s Government, no matter which party is in power, has utterly refused to act on the Ombudsman’s findings, which point to its own shortcomings.”

That point, which has been made by many Members, really does sum up where we are. I hope that the Minister will update us on what the Government are doing and focus on what good news those individuals who feel that the system has short-changed them can expect. That is important not just for them, but for the trust we should have in the system to secure our own futures. There is a need to restore confidence and build trust not just for the individuals affected by the scandal, but for everyone. As the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said, there are uncomfortable parallels with the WASPI campaign. People’s confidence has been shattered by what they consider to be broken promises by the Government and the institutions in which we place our trust.

I agree that we all need to encourage people to plan for their retirement and to contribute to their pensions, but what kind of message does it send if the Government fail to properly regulate a provider and then fail to compensate people fully for their losses? It is not just trust in the finance sector that is at stake here; it is trust in politics itself. As has been said in previous debates as well as today, the 2010 Conservative manifesto included this comment, which links these issues in a neat way:

“We must not let the mis-selling of financial products put people off saving. We will implement the Ombudsman’s recommendation to make fair and transparent payments to Equitable Life policy holders, through an independent payment scheme, for their relative loss as a consequence of regulatory failure.”

I think that all Members agree that that is a worthy aim, but the question of whether the pledge has been met in full is a matter of some debate.

I am conscious of the time, because we do want to hear from the Minister. What has already been said today has really summed up the situation, but let me end by making what I think is a key point. A failure to correct the wrongs of the past will lead to a failure to secure confidence in the future. I do not believe it is an exaggeration to say that the erosion of confidence that this episode has engendered could, in fact, be of greater impact in the long run than the cost of full compensation. I hope that, even at this late stage, the Government will do the right thing, not only for the policyholders of Equitable Life, but to restore confidence in the entire system of savings and pensions.

The hon. Member for Harrow East spoke of a debt of honour, and I think that that is an excellent way of referring to our obligations. We need to act honourably, and to correct this injustice in full. Given the age of many of the policyholders involved, it is clear that the adage “Justice delayed is justice denied” was never more true than it is in this case.

2.10 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am pleased to be able to speak today and to keep up the pressure on behalf of constituents who have been hard hit and who deserve better. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for initiating the debate and for his continued hard work on behalf of all those affected.

Like, I am sure, other Members, I remember the reassuring adverts that must have attracted many people at the time. They were warm, homespun and affirming, telling us that “It’s an Equitable Life,” which it clearly was not. If there were any equity or justice in life, we would not be here today on behalf of our constituents whose lives have been changed in such a damaging way. Although I understand the steps that have been taken so far, their confidence in both government and financial regulation has been shattered.

I think of constituents of mine, such as James Moore of Newton Mearns or Howard Lyle, who lives in Eaglesham. Howard is now 81, but he was a self-employed business man. He worked hard for his living and did all the right things to provide financial security. In fact, he ended up working until he was 72 years old. He felt that he had done everything possible to ensure that he had good financial plans in place and would not be dependent on the state in his retirement. But, of course, all his well-laid and well-paid-for plans are in tatters. Howard says:

“All I am looking for is a repayment of what I and hundreds of other pensioners are owed.”

Who could possibly argue with that? I have named only two constituents, but, like other Members, I know of many others who are similarly affected and have been similarly failed by what is clearly a toothless regulatory system, which has utterly let them down.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some great points. Given the hardships that some of our constituents have faced, given the injustice and, indeed, the age that some of them are reaching, will she join me in expressing admiration for their tenacity and their determination to keep the issue on the political agenda and to continue to fight this injustice?

Kirsten Oswald: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We should commend those people for all their continued work in keeping the issue at the forefront of our minds.

A cynical person might wonder whether—as with the collapse of the Connaught Income Fund, which was mentioned by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry)—there is a strategy of dragging action out for an extraordinarily long time to ensure that fewer of those affected are still with us. It is simply not good enough for this sorry saga to continue for even longer. The UK Government must now finally deal fully with the outstanding injustices experienced by these unfortunate policyholders.

We really do need to grasp the nettle, and acknowledge the wrong that has been done and the impact that it has had on people’s lives. It is essential for action to be taken on behalf of the people who have lost out, but we also need to ensure that they can maintain confidence in our pension provision and in financial and regulatory bodies.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some powerful points on behalf of her constituents. Many of my constituents have also been in touch to say that they see this as such an unfairness because they did the right thing. They worked all their lives, and they paid into a scheme that they thought was the right one. That sense of unfairness is compounded by the way in which so many other schemes that have failed have been

dealt with. Banks have been bailed out by the Government, and policyholders have been refunded. Does the hon. Lady agree that the grievance of these policyholders is perhaps all the more because so many other organisations have already been bailed out?

Kirsten Oswald: The point is well made. I think that Equitable Life policyholders, like Connaught Income Fund investors, feel particularly hard done by, and that is perfectly understandable. We need to deal with the compensation, and that can only happen when we have fully quantified the loss by negotiating the sums involved. At present, we are simply not there. After all this time, the Government need to acknowledge and deal with the injustice that people understandably feel. They have worked hard, and they have saved hard. They have done all the things that Governments emphasise are financially responsible and the way to guarantee security in retirement. Imagine how they must have felt when not only did their hard-earned money vanish, but the Government failed to protect them and then, to compound the problems further, failed to offer fair compensation.

Of course I recognise that there has been some compensation, but those affected understandably feel that that is not good enough and that it is not right for them to lose out because the Government claim that there are financial constraints. Why should they pay the price for failures of Treasury regulation in the 1990s? The Government must realise how much damage scandals such as this cause to public confidence in saving and in regulation. Surely, as the hon. Member for Harrow East said, righting wrongs like those suffered by Equitable Life and, indeed, Connaught investors is part of the way to restore that confidence.

There is real confusion, much of it arising from inaccurate communication from the Department for Work and Pensions, about the national insurance contributions that are needed for the new state pension. As we have heard from a number of Members today, WASPI women are marching on Parliament because the UK Government have whipped the pension rug from under their feet. Here, the saga of the Equitable Life policyholders drags on and on, and their pension provision has also vanished into the ether. If the Government are at all serious about pensions and about people saving for their future, they must listen and they must act now, finally, to deal with the Equitable Life scandal once and for all.

2.16 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on setting the scene. I also thank him personally, because for the time that I have been in the House—since 2010—he has always championed the Equitable Life policyholders. Today, some seven years later—for me, if not for him—we find we are still fighting for something for which we were fighting back then. The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) is no longer present, but he should be commended as well, because he has clearly fought equally hard to bring about justice for the policyholders. Like both those Members, we all support the continued attempts to ensure that our constituents are not left financially ruined after doing their best to save for a rainy day.

There is not a big representation in the Chamber today, but that does not detract from the importance of

the debate or lessen the impact of what we are about to say or have said so far. All those who have spoken have made valuable contributions, all of them saying the same thing and all of them looking to the Minister—there is no pressure on the Minister, is there?—to deliver the answers that we want. With respect, and the Minister knows that I mean this in the best possible way, we must convey to him what our constituents are telling us. We need the Government to know exactly where we stand.

Before I came to the House, when I was a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, we debated this matter there, and we also had debates and correspondence about it when we were councillors, and we were probably following these issues in other roles even longer ago, many years before I came here.

People always use that phrase about saving for a rainy day. Well, the rain is falling now, and it is the Government's responsibility to hold out the umbrella. The newspaper over the head is starting to wear out: it is useful at the start, but it does not last. It is time for the Minister to step up to the mark and do the right thing by these savers. I have received dozens of e-mails and letters from my constituents, and I have never come across an Equitable Life policyholder who was in a high income bracket. The hon. Member for Leeds North East spoke of people in a low income bracket, and those are the people we are talking about. The impact on them is greater, and, unfortunately, they do not have time on their side either.

My constituents and those of my Northern Ireland colleagues have spoken to us about this issue, and I believe that this is an opportunity for me to make my constituents' case and, like other Members—including some who have now left the Chamber—to give examples. I am very aware of the fact that the Government have paid out a substantial sum of money—at present, almost £1 billion—which is commendable; we should give credit where it is due. However, that is an indication of the fact that the Government have a further responsibility that needs to be fulfilled. I understand as well as anyone else in this Chamber that we currently have an £89 billion deficit, and I congratulate the Government on their economic policies. Unemployment in my area has fallen—that is a devolved responsibility—but the fall is in part a result of the greater economic policy carried out centrally by the Westminster Government. We must seek to lower the deficit, but we must also honour our obligations, and that is what we are asking the Minister to do today: to honour this obligation.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East mentioned in an intervention that some of the policyholders might never see this issue being brought to a conclusion and get the benefits, and they will therefore live on low incomes until the day they die and pass on from this world. If Governments have a mind to settle and help out the savers, could that be retrospectively passed on to their families? Will the Minister address that in his summing up?

I was brought up in a household where saving was drilled into us from an early age. That was not just because of our Ulster-Scots background, which meant that every pound was a prisoner; we were encouraged at a very early age to have savings, and we have done that throughout our lives. It was good to learn that lesson, because it showed us the value of money, and there was not much of it.

[Jim Shannon]

That points to what we need to do. “Put a bit aside for the future” was a phrase that was repeated often, and I have instilled that principle in my boys—successfully, I believe. But times have changed as well; it is difficult for my boys to buy a house and live their lives, never mind save on their wages. For that reason, the Government have put schemes in place to encourage saving, yet the question must be asked: why bother when we have an example of a generation—the one just before us and alongside us—who scrimped and saved and are still having to do so, through no fault of their own? We must incentivise a generation to know that savings are safe, and we should demonstrate that by doing the right thing by the Equitable Life savers.

A good point was made to me, and I shall repeat it now as it is important for it to go on the *Hansard* record:

“The Government ensured that no savers lost out because of the banking crisis. £133 billion was found to support the banks. According to the NAO, £76 billion is still to be recouped. At recent share prices, the taxpayer is likely to end up losing £15 billion”, and it was suggested that there could be a loss of up to “£22 billion on RBS alone, with annual losses in billions continuing year after year. EMAG does not believe that Equitable Life savers—who did the right thing in saving for their retirement—should have to pay for the recklessness of the banks.”

I am sure that the Minister is aware of that, but if he is not, he needs to be.

The banks got special treatment. I know the importance of giving that to the banks, but it is equally important for Equitable Life policyholders, although we must also be ever-mindful that the Government have made a substantial contribution in that regard. However, as the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who set the scene today, and others have said, we need to do that little bit extra.

The facts are that £2.6 billion of relative losses should be paid to the 895,000 Equitable Life victims who are still 78% short of what they are due—a substantial sum for them—and pre-1992 with-profit annuitants should be treated the same as post-1992 WP annuitants.

Equitable Life policyholders are justified in their grievance and in pursuing full compensation. We in this House, as their representatives at Westminster, have been tasked with putting their case. That is the reason for today’s debate, and it is why I am standing with those Equitable Life victims, alongside my colleagues in this Chamber from across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are all together, asking for justice for the Equitable Life victims. I ask the Government to pledge simply to do the right thing by these pensioners.

2.24 pm

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): At times, the debate has seemed like a meeting of old lags, since some of us have been discussing this issue for many years.

I would like to be able to say, like other Members, that many of my constituents are still coming to see me about Equitable Life. I cannot, however, although many constituents used to do so; unfortunately, time has done its work and there are now few left. They are people like my constituent Gertrud, an elderly lady who thought

she had made the right choice and would have a decent standard of life in retirement, but who is now living off 25% of what she thought she would get, which is very difficult. The situation is the same throughout the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) unfortunately cannot be here today, but she told me of her constituent Ishbel, who is in the same situation. These are elderly people who had made the right decision and found that they had lost out.

The motion before us today notes that the Government have made no further funding available in the spring Budget. Several Members have mentioned that this is similar to the situation of the WASPI women. These are totally different issues—one is about retirement age while the other is about the amount received from private pensions—but, as others have mentioned, they bring us to the same thing: ever more people believe that it is not worth saving for pensions. That will cause huge difficulties in the future. Young people today say, “What’s the point of doing that? Look at what’s happened to others, like my granny. That’s what is likely to happen to me.” Reports such as one today saying that the pension age is likely to go up yet again, and young people may now be working into their 70s before getting a pension, continue to undermine confidence in pension provision. We will face a huge problem in the future if we continue in this way.

I was an MP when we tried to persuade the last Labour Government to do something about this issue, and they turned their face against that and refused to do anything. I acknowledge that the coalition Government and the current Government have grasped the thistle to some extent, and have made some money available. They must be given credit for that, but of course it took a report from the ombudsman to get the ball rolling for compensation, and she concluded that the state of the public finances was “a relevant consideration”, which I suppose is why we are still here today.

Part of the difficulty is that there is a huge difference between the amount sought by the action group and the sum the Government say was actually lost. There is no real agreement as to what the total losses are. In a sense, the Government came down in the middle with a figure of £1.5 billion, and in coming to that figure cited the state of the public finances. It is disappointing that the Minister stated in his letter to the hon. Members for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) of 30 January, which was circulated to us:

“The announcement was clear that the funding available to the Payment Scheme was not a fixed amount of £1.5 billion but rather that up to £1.5 billion would be made available.”

Should we take that as confirmation that the Government have no intention of even putting the remainder of that amount—about £140 million, I understand—towards the plight of those who have lost out? To be frank with the Minister, given the Government’s previous record, that seems rather small minded and mean, and it undermines the Government’s commitment, which they have shown previously, to tackle this matter.

EMAG argues that the policyholders’ pension savings, carefully accumulated over decades, should be safeguarded in exactly the same way as funds deposited in banks and building societies. They have a point, although they should not stretch it too far, as there is a limit on those

funds and it is not an exact analogy. But it is also worth recording that, in her response to the Government scheme, the ombudsman stated:

“I am unable to conclude that the Government’s proposals comply with the recommendation for the establishment of a compensation scheme which I made in my report.”

Such comments will continue until the Government do something to address the continuing sense of injustice.

Others have said that Equitable Life was touted as a long-established, steady company, and that small business people and the self-employed were encouraged to invest their pension savings in it. When I was a practising solicitor—many years ago now—Equitable Life was considered one of the best investments, which is why so many people were encouraged to go into it. Increasingly, however, we are being encouraged to invest in pension provision to augment our state pensions, and people will find it difficult to have confidence in any pension company while this issue remains unresolved. It is also clear that fewer than half of new pensioners will receive the whole of the new single tier pension when it is introduced, so this issue is becoming more and more important.

The fact that pensioners now have much greater freedom to access their pension savings will also greatly alter the pension landscape and the attitude of savers towards pensions, but it could also make it more difficult for companies’ investment strategies. It is doubly imperative in this new environment that there is confidence in the stability and worth of pension investment. Pension investment is not the same as putting money in a bank or building society; as we know, it depends on fluctuations in the market and the type of investment made.

Robert Courts: The hon. Gentleman is making many powerful points. He has mentioned confidence. Does he agree with the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that, having encouraged members of the public to do the right thing and invest in what was seen as a secure and safe scheme, there is a danger that a precedent could now be set and that those people could now decide that investing in a pension would not give them safety or security in retirement? Does he also agree that the unfairness that that creates is unhelpful to the pensions industry as a whole?

Mike Weir: Indeed it is. That is the point that I was making.

Some of us are now getting to the age at which we are beginning to think seriously about what our pensions will bring us—it is going to hit us pretty shortly—but I have children who are in their 20s, and this is a very long-term investment for people in their 20s and 30s. Young people today who look at the WASPI women or at Equitable Life pensioners will not have the same confidence that people of my generation might have had that they are putting aside savings to augment their state pension. The state pension is changing, and we are looking at different ways in which people will invest for the future, such as auto-enrolment. All these things require confidence, but that confidence has been undermined by continuing scandals such as Equitable Life.

The Government have to look at the bigger picture, rather than simply looking at Equitable Life in isolation. They have to look at how we can get over this hump and ensure that all young people make provision for the

future. If we do not do that, a much bigger problem will be coming over the horizon when those young people get older, having made no provision because they lacked confidence in the system. What are we going to do then? The fall-backs that exist today will no longer be there for them. I urge the Minister, even at this late stage, to go back to the Chancellor and say, “Look at the bigger picture. Look at how we are dealing with pensions. How can we get confidence back?” If we do not do this, the picture will get even worse later.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman reminds me of a point I should have made earlier. It is recognised that parents often need to make financial provision for their children, and that we are using some of the money that we have to make that happen, yet some Equitable Life policyholders have told me that they are unable to do that. Has the hon. Gentleman come across similar cases?

Mike Weir: I have a daughter who is now into her third university degree, so I know exactly what the hon. Gentleman is talking about. Yes, parents are having to use their own money to help out their children, and that can cut down the amount that will be available to them in the future. That is a decision that they have to make, however; it is a slightly different issue. The bigger issue is the future. Many young people today are not earning enough money, and many have been landed with large debts following their university degrees. That, and the lack of confidence in the system, will have an impact on their ability to save for a pension. I think I have gone on long enough now, so I will end on that point.

2.35 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): First, I should like to associate myself with all the comments that Members have made about the dreadful events that occurred yesterday. I send my condolences to the families of those who died and I wish a speedy recovery to those who were injured.

This has been an incredibly thoughtful and considered debate on both sides of the House. I should like to thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing this subject before us today. He has devoted a huge amount of time and commitment to this issue over the years. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) have pursued it doggedly, and I would like to thank them for that. The hon. Member for Harrow East set out the situation clearly today. Words such as “scandal” and “confidence” have been thrown in during interventions, and they sum up the issue for many people. I thank the hon. Gentleman for setting out the landscape for us today.

I should also like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East, who said that there was a moral duty to compensate the hundreds of thousands of people who have been affected over the years. He said that this was a moral issue and a question of trust in the state, and I think that that resonates with many of us. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) reminded us that people had been encouraged to save, and that that was the right thing to do. He said that they should not be dis-benefited as a result of that now. He also talked about the catastrophic regulatory and company errors that were made—I shall say more about that later—and about the alarm bells that were

[Peter Dowd]

ringing. He said that the Government's providing the necessary resource would be a gesture of confidence for the public.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) also raised the issue of the failures in the system, and said that the unfairness was continuing. She spoke movingly about her constituents' experiences, and about the trust that people must have in the system. The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) talked about equity, and I think that he probably meant equity not only with only a big E but a small one. He said that the regulations should not only be carried out but be seen to be carried out. He also talked about confidence and trust in the system, and the question of long-term security through confidence in the regulatory process.

Sir Desmond Swayne: It is alleged that when Gordon Brown was put under pressure by members of his own party in the early 2000s to compensate the policyholders, he retorted, "These aren't our people." Whether that is true or not, would the hon. Gentleman accept that they are very much his people, as indeed they are ours as well?

Peter Dowd: I have no doubt whatever that these people are all our people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about cross-party support and about the appropriate action that the Government need to take. He said that policyholders were still being short-changed. He, too, talked about the restoration of trust and confidence in the system, and referred to the WASPI women. He said that the erosion of confidence could cost more in the long run, and that justice delayed was justice denied. The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) talked about her now elderly constituents who are in distress, and about the failed and toothless regulatory system. That saga cannot continue. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about his constituency and looked to the Minister for solutions, saying that people are justified in their pursuance of full compensation.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a characteristically erudite speech. Does he agree with me, and possibly the hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir), that it is important to redouble our efforts at the opposite end of the spectrum? It is imperative that young people receive financial education so that they understand the long-term benefits of securing a long-term and sustainable pension income.

Peter Dowd: That is an excellent suggestion—I would expect nothing less from the hon. Gentleman—but if people do take out a pension, they must have confidence in the system.

The Minister has heard the clear and unambiguous views of many Members from across the Chamber. The Opposition will not make any cheap party political points on this matter. We give credit where credit is due to the coalition Government for setting aside £1.5 billion in a compensation fund for those who invested in the Equitable Life Assurance Society, most of which was invested in pensions. The compensation scheme was set

to close in 2014, but the previous Chancellor extended it to December 2015, with the fund set to close mid-2016. EMAG—the group that represents the policyholders—has called since February 2016 for £2.7 billion of additional compensation, arguing that that is the shortfall, and many Members have made the same point today.

The Conservatives committed in their 2010 manifesto to make fair and transparent payments to Equitable Life policyholders, and the debate continues about what that amount should be, but £4 billion is the generally accepted figure. In the previous debate on this subject, the then Minister, the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), stated:

"The improvements our economy has made since 2010 are greatly to be welcomed and show that the Government's long-term economic plan is working, but the plan is not complete and we have some way to go to fully restore the public finances."—[*Official Report*, 11 February 2016; Vol. 605, c. 1186.]

The current Minister will also note that. The Chadwick report of July 2010 concluded that relative loss should be defined as those who have suffered financial loss, pointing out that the Ombudsman recognised that losses in policy values were only partly due to maladministration and that the backdrop to cuts in policy values was a sharp fall in world stock markets that all life insurance companies were forced to respond to. Similarly, the report also argued that compensation should be assessed on the cost of maladministration as opposed to the size of investor losses. However, we are politicians and we can make different decisions and choices, and the Minister has been asked to consider carefully whether we want to make different decisions or choices.

I want to make an important point that has been pushed time and again about regulatory failure. There is a broad consensus among the parties that compensation should have been paid out by the Government for maladministration, which has happened to a degree, but we are unsure whether regulatory failure continues to exist. We have to ensure that the regulatory frameworks that operate in this country are continually stress-tested and reviewed again and again. The regulatory organisations need the appropriate resources to ensure that proper regulation occurs. We have to consider that 100 or 150 people are looking at 200 insurance companies. I am not suggesting that there should be more staff; I am saying that we should take the resourcing of regulatory authorities into account.

This scandal does not relate to one particular Government. As Members have said, it was ignored by regulators throughout the '80s. With the knowledge that the regulatory system did not work, however, it is all the more important that we continue to check it. The second ombudsman report states:

"The central story of this report is that this robust system of [financial] regulation was not, in respect of the Society, implemented appropriately—that is, consistently, fairly, and with proper regard to the interests of those directly affected—by the prudential regulators and those providing assistance and advice to those regulators."

That is absolutely salutary. We have had scandals in the past, such as with PIPs and the 1980s endowment scandal, and we must always keep a lookout for them. There is the growing concern about the sale of leaseholds and some new properties, which we should not allow to become a scandal. There is even the problem of airlines refusing to pay people compensation for delays, so it is important to keep looking at the regulatory system.

I want to conclude by pushing the question about confidence in the regulatory system. What efforts are the Government making to trace policyholders who have still not been found after the scheme has closed? Can we have an update on the number of people who have received compensation from the £1.5 billion? How many policyholders does the Minister estimate are still affected? I know that this is a moveable feast. What are the broader steps that the Treasury has to take to restore faith in the financial regulatory system? In summary, it may be that the Government are not legally required to pay the compensation, but many Members have pushed the moral imperative, and the Government will have to consider that matter today and in the coming months and years.

2.46 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): I start by associating myself with the earlier comments about yesterday's terrible events. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) on securing this important debate. It is fair to say that their tireless work on this issue and their involvement in the all-party parliamentary group for justice for equitable life policyholders are of great importance to many of our constituents up and down the country. Hon. Members from across the House have done a great deal for their constituents on this matter. It has been a thoughtful debate, and I have listened carefully to the individual cases that have been mentioned. I am also grateful for the opportunity to set out what the Government have done to address this long-standing issue.

This topic has a long and well-documented history, which I do not propose to go over in my limited time. Instead, I will focus on the action we have taken to make payments to the people affected, and these figures are well known. The ombudsman's findings assess the loss from Government maladministration to be £4.1 billion, and it is worth noting that that is significantly more than the evaluation commissioned by the then Labour Government. That report, known as the Chadwick report, rejected some of the ombudsman's findings and concluded that only £340 million should be paid to policyholders.

This Government, in contrast and despite the constraints facing the public purse, have agreed that £1.5 billion will be made available, tax free, for payments to eligible policyholders. We consulted carefully on how that £1.5 billion should be paid out and reached the conclusion that we must pay the with-profits, or trapped, annuitants in full. As a result, that group will receive an annual payment for life, with the total cost of those payments assessed to be around £625 million. The £100 million contingency fund, which is often referred to, is to ensure provision for policyholders who exceed the life expectancy forecast. On the advice of an independent commission, the remaining £775 million of available funding was distributed pro rata to other policyholders, representing a payment of some 22.4% of their relative loss. I recognise that, for many, that was disappointing, but it is about striking the right balance while also taking into account the position of the public finances and fairness to all taxpayers.

The point about affordability was raised explicitly by the ombudsman in her report, in which she stated that it was appropriate to take into account the impact on the

public purse when considering the funding of the payments. Indeed, the ombudsman has written to the all-party parliamentary group on Equitable Life about the level of funding and said that the Government's decisions on affordability cannot be said to be incompatible with her report. I also understand it has been suggested that, as the economy improves, further funding should be made available to the payment scheme.

Robert Neill: I accept that the decision on funding is not incompatible with the ombudsman's report, but that is not to say that the decision follows the spirit of the ombudsman's report or that it is right.

Simon Kirby: I repeat that this is about striking the right balance between the position of the public finances and fairness to all taxpayers, and I will cover that point in more detail as I proceed.

I was talking about further funding being made available to the scheme, but with debt at its highest level since the second world war, tackling the deficit and getting debt falling are challenges that call for long-term discipline, which is why we have no plans to reopen the payment scheme or to review its level of funding.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the Minister for giving way because I realise that time is short. I spoke earlier about Icesave and the £50,000 maximum compensation ceiling. Those who lost money with Icesave and other collapsed banks in 2008 received up to £50,000. Given that most of the investments in Equitable Life totalled around £45,000, will the Minister consider looking at those particular individuals who have suffered most?

Simon Kirby: I was going to cover the issue of Icelandic banks later, as might be expected, but there is a big difference between the two. Those ex gratia payments were different from the Equitable Life scheme in that the Government expected to recover, and indeed did recover, all the money paid to UK depositors as the banks were wound up. It is not fair to compare the two.

I will now address some of the specific issues that have been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East said that the payments were not transparent. Transparency is one of the core principles of the scheme, and the methodology of calculation was published in full along with a simplified explanation for the layperson. I am also aware that Her Majesty's Treasury has met EMAG to discuss the matter and found there to be no errors.

My hon. Friend sensibly asked why the Government cannot commit to paying Equitable Life policyholders in full when the economy has fully recovered and the debt starts shrinking, and it is right that the Government balance the needs of affected policyholders against those of taxpayers, and of public service users more generally. The Government have to tackle a debt of nearly £1.7 trillion, or almost £62,000 for every household in this country, which is a salient point. He also said that the cost of paying the pre-1992 annuitants would be less than £100 million. No assessment has been made of the pre-92 losses, but the Government recognised the hardship faced by the group so paid lump sums of up to £10,000, at a cost of around £50 million. That was new money over and above the original £1.5 billion.

[Simon Kirby]

Several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), mentioned the failure of regulation and the need to stand behind any failure in a financial services group. It is fair to say that this Government, and the coalition Government before us, have fundamentally reformed financial regulation, including, importantly, through the expansion of the financial services compensation scheme.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East, who has moved places and is confusing me only very slightly, said it was unfair that we excluded pre-92 policyholders. I have every sympathy with the position such policyholders find themselves in during retirement, but the policies commenced before any maladministration could have affected investment decisions. Pre-92 policyholders have instead been affected by falling comparative annuity rates in the light of the issues at Equitable Life. I have already referred to the *ex gratia* payments of £5,000, or £10,000 for those in receipt of pension credit, that were made in December 2013.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said that the Government have not done enough—a point also made by others. I sympathise with the plight of her constituents. I am glad she recognises that the coalition Government did more to address the issue than any Government who preceded them. She asked about the Chancellor of the Exchequer; he was clear in his spring Budget that the scheme is closed and no more money is forthcoming.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) made some eloquent points about regulation. I agree that trust is vital, and I am proud of the reforms made to the regulatory system. Many people say we have too many regulations; I always think that financial services are there for everyone so it is important that we provide an appropriate level of protection for everyone, big or small.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) suggested that the Government had ignored the ombudsman's recommendations. The ombudsman's report was the foundation of the payment scheme. As I said, the ombudsman subsequently wrote to the all-party group. Whether or not we agree about the term "incompatible", the ombudsman said that the Government's decisions on affordability and eligibility cannot be said to be incompatible with her report. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the 2010 manifesto. It is worth saying that payments were fair to both the taxpayer and policyholders, with the most vulnerable groups receiving 100% of their losses. The whole scheme is based on the ombudsman's report.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I hate to interrupt the Minister's flow, but I wish to take him back to my intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) about the regulator's failure to identify problems. My hon. Friend said in response that the Treasury itself was aware of Equitable Life's problems long before they emerged; does the Minister know whether that is true?

Simon Kirby: It is fair to say that there were a lot of issues and that a lot of things were done that we would do differently today. All that was taken into account in the vast number of reports and inquiries, and is now represented in a fair and equitable scheme for payments.

Connaught was mentioned by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West. As I understand it, I will be meeting her in the very near future to discuss that issue, and I am very pleased to do so. The matter is currently being investigated by the Financial Conduct Authority.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his understanding. He made a very thoughtful contribution in which he mentioned children. I say to him that we must be careful to strike the right balance and that we do not saddle our children and grandchildren with unfair levels of debt. It is about making sure that those people affected receive a fair amount.

The hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir) set out cases in which constituents have a reduced annuity in their retirement. I have a great deal of sympathy with them, as I know the difficulties that a reduced income in retirement causes. The Government recognised that, which is why annuitants should receive 100% of their losses.

I will, if I may, finish with some figures, because I need to clear up the confusion. To date, the Government have paid out £1.12 billion. They will be paying out another £355 million, totalling £1.47 billion, leaving a balance, for those who can add up, of £25 million. We intend to provide a safety net to ensure that payments to the most vulnerable are maintained as they live longer—let us hope that they all live longer—and so I do not recognise the £140 million figure that was cited.

In conclusion, I appreciate that some policyholders who have carefully invested for their retirement are now not receiving the income they expected, but we have done more than any other Government to resolve the Government's part in the Equitable Life issue. We have committed £1.5 billion. We have paid out the £1.12 billion, with more to come, and we have struck the right balance, which is fair to the British taxpayer and supportive to those most vulnerable policyholders.

3.1 pm

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for his response to the debate. We have had a very good debate, with representations and interventions from Members of no fewer than five political parties represented in this House. Everyone has spoken with the same voice. This is a debt of honour that we owe to vulnerable people across this country. We will not allow this matter to rest until such time as those vulnerable people are properly compensated for their losses, which happened through no fault of theirs.

I thank the hon. Members who have taken part in this debate. It is good to hear some fresh voices in this debate, as well as those that we have been hearing for many years. May I say to my hon. Friend on the Front Bench: I was disappointed that we did not get a mention in the spring Budget, but there are many opportunities to come—I am talking about the autumn Budget and further such Budgets. It is not fair to say that the scheme is closed; the scheme is closed to new applicants. We know that it will continue paying out for as long as those receiving compensation live. It is absolutely open to the Government to top up this compensation scheme so that everyone who suffered losses would receive their proper payment. If those pre-1992 trapped annuitants receive their proper compensation, they would put that

money immediately into the economy. That would help boost our hard-pressed retailers, which means a double benefit to the Treasury.

All I ask of my hon. Friend on the Front Bench is to go back and have a word with the Chancellor and let us see if we can truly provide justice to our Equitable Life policyholders.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's acceptance in full of the Parliamentary Ombudsman's findings in relation to its maladministration with regard to Equitable Life; notes that the Parliamentary Ombudsman recommended that policyholders should be put back in the position they would have been had maladministration not occurred; further notes that the overwhelming majority of victims have only received partial compensation compared to the confirmed losses directly attributed to regulatory failures; regrets that the Government made no further funding available in the Spring Budget 2017; and calls on the Government to make a commitment to provide full compensation to victims of the scandal as the economy continues to recover.

Social Mobility Commission: State of the Nation Report

3.4 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House notes the contents and recommendations of the annual State of the Nation report from the Social Mobility Commission; notes that despite welcome measures by successive governments to improve social mobility the Commission warns that social mobility is getting worse, the reasons for which are deep-seated and multi-faceted; and calls on the Government to lead a renewed approach in the early years, in education, skills and housing, to improve social mobility.

This motion stands in my name and those of the right hon. Members for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg).

May I start by putting it on record that my thoughts are with the victims of the terror attack yesterday? I thank the emergency services for their dedication, bravery and service, and the House staff who looked after us so well yesterday. That we are meeting today shows that we can carry on with our democracy and debates in such times. It also shows that we often come together in this House, as we are doing today in the spirit of this important debate on social mobility.

This debate, with Members on both sides of the House joining together to champion social mobility, is welcome and timely. I have been delighted to work closely with the right hon. Members for Loughborough and for Sheffield, Hallam over recent weeks, and it is our hope and intention that we continue that work beyond today to truly build a cross-party consensus for a strategy to tackle social mobility. I also thank the Government's Social Mobility Commission for all its important work. As it has consistently warned, by all measures social mobility is getting worse, not better. It recently said:

"Low levels of social mobility are impeding the progress" of many in our society, "not only the poorest". That is the context for our debate.

We need a better understanding of what we mean by increasing social mobility in the modern economy. Too often, social mobility is thought of in terms of plucking the one or two lucky ones out of disadvantage and taking them to the top—the so-called "council house to the Cabinet table" journey. That understanding is really unhelpful when we are looking at the challenges and opportunities that our country faces, and the strategy required to deal with them. In today's context, social mobility is about everyone being able to make economic and social progress, unconfined by the disadvantages they begin with. With Brexit, automation, digitisation and huge changes to work, that process is going to get harder and ever more squeezed. No longer can this just be about those who go to university, as everyone needs to gain a rich, stretching education and the skills to succeed.

To put it another way, if we look ahead to the needs of the economy in, say, 2022, forecasts by the Social Mobility Commission show that there will be 9 million low-skilled people chasing just 4 million jobs, yet a shortfall of 3 million workers for the higher-skilled jobs. That is before the effects of Brexit. The biggest barrier to dealing with this issue is known as the long tail of underachievement. At the same time, companies such

[Lucy Powell]

as Google say that we are not producing enough of the right engineering graduates for their growth. Britain has the third highest proportion of graduates in non-graduate jobs in Europe, with only Greece and Estonia behind us. No wonder our productivity is so poor compared with that of other OECD countries. In fact, it takes a British worker five days to produce the same amount of work that a German worker can do in four days—that is the stark challenge we face. Any social mobility strategy must therefore also be inextricably linked to our industrial strategy.

These huge challenges require a new national mission built on consensus and evidence to turn them into real opportunities for the country, and that is what we hope to address with this debate and our work. But, let us be honest, although much progress has been made by successive Governments, the political cycle means that every party is guilty of looking for a quick fix or a new wheeze that might appeal to voters, rather than the more difficult job of putting in place a clear and determined strategy. Let us look at the evidence and stick with it, even if at times that means giving praise to our opponents, as we will be doing today.

We know from the Social Mobility Commission and others that when it comes to education, some areas are absolutely key. I will focus on a few of those now and I know that Members will pick up others in their speeches. First, I want to look at the facts on early years, which will not come as a surprise to those who know me well, because it is a personal passion of mine. By the age of five, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are already far behind their peers, with a developmental gap of as much as 15 months between those from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. One study found that children in low-income households hear up to 30 million fewer words by the age of three than their better-off peers. The levels achieved by the time a child is five are still the biggest predictors of outcomes at GCSE.

What happens in the first few years of life is massively critical, yet that still does not demand nearly enough Government and policy attention. We have made some progress under successive Governments. The Labour Government did so through the extension of maternity leave, Sure Start centres, the integration and expansion of health visitors—that was continued by the Conservative Government—and the introduction of quality early education for three and four-year-olds. The introduction of the two-year-olds offer was much championed by the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam, and the right hon. Member for Loughborough developed the beginnings of a real life chances strategy. However, I worry that the recent focus has been on childcare and the demand of maternal employment rates alone, and less on social mobility reasons for investing in the early years.

A greater focus on what works and on joined-up working does not actually need to cost more money. For example, the quality and outcomes in Ofsted ratings do not match. After looking at this recently, I found that 91% of early years providers are rated good or outstanding, yet a third of children are not leaving those settings school-ready—that does not match up. There are other ways in which we could incentivise quality providers to work with—not in competition with—others in their locality. There could be more support for parents through

regular contact, as well as things such as the ages and stages requirements. We have been doing some interesting work on this in Manchester. Remarkably, some of the most deprived communities in many parts of the country have some of the highest quality early years provision—this is often what we think of as the silver bullet in education—through maintained nursery schools and some of the nursery places attached to schools. Let us cherish those and not put them under threat. A proper focus on narrowing the gap before the age of five would have a real impact on social mobility.

Let us now consider slightly older children. By the age of 16, just one in three disadvantaged children gained five good GCSEs including English and maths, and that figure has remained stubborn over the past few years. We know what works in schools and we have seen it happen. It was epitomised by the London challenge, when leadership, collaboration, resources, the attraction and retention of outstanding teachers, and the development of Teach First all came together.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Would my hon. Friend like to thank Lord Adonis for all the work that he did on the London Challenge? Throughout all my time during the Labour Government, I found him to be the most effective and passionate Minister when it came to improving schools. He has a truly brilliant record.

Lucy Powell: I very much thank Lord Adonis for all his work and, indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who was a Minister at the time of the London initiative.

The London challenge was one of those Government initiatives that achieved real change, including the biggest rise in attainment we have seen in an area. The opportunity areas developed by the right hon. Member for Loughborough during her time in office are good successors, but they need to be matched by resources and the ability to attract and retain the best teachers. The pupil premium has been a remarkable development that has allowed those who are behind to begin to catch up during their time in school. Let us follow these learnings and not get distracted by things that do not work.

By the age of 25, many of these children will be in low-skilled, low-paid jobs. Only one in 10 low-paid workers will ever escape low pay. That is a pretty terrible outcome for them and our country and, as I said, those jobs are disappearing, too. Our skills strategy for post-16 and in-work training needs strengthening. I welcome the Government's moves in this area. Proposals such as T-levels, the apprenticeship levy and the skills plan linked to the industrial plan are all very much to be welcomed. Although I have some criticisms of the way in which initiatives such as university technical colleges are working, they are a good idea, but they do need more focus and work.

Let us not implement some of these good initiatives badly, however, and lose what we know works. For example, on T-levels, we need to make sure that we continue to have the blend of technical and academic that will be so important for the jobs of the future. If we look at all our OECD competitor countries, it is clear that it is critical that children continue to work on maths and English to a high level right to the age of 18. The post-16 reforms also need matching with other reforms,

such as pathways out of university. As I said earlier, the underperformance and under-skilled jobs of many of our graduates fundamentally need addressing. Access to the professions is key, and other Members will talk about that.

Those are just three of the key areas that can drive social mobility—the early years, what happens in schools, and post-16—but we also know what does not work in terms of social mobility, and I want to talk about that for a minute. One thing that does not work is grammar schools. Unfortunately, under the current Prime Minister, grammar schools and selection seem to take centre stage in her vision for dealing with social mobility. They are sucking up all the oxygen in the debate, yet the evidence is clear: they do nothing for social mobility; in fact, they make it worse.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I compliment my hon. Friend and the right hon. Members for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) for securing the debate. In Trafford, as she knows, we already have a selective system, and although our schools perform very well overall in the national rankings—that is despite selection, not because of it—one group that does not benefit are children with special educational needs and disabilities. Only a tiny proportion get into grammar schools in Trafford, and it is believed that that is in part because those schools have no incentive to take them. Does my hon. Friend agree that any selective system is bound to lead to children being brushed aside when it comes to opportunities to get the best education?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely agree, and my hon. Friend has campaigned on this issue for many years. While Trafford has many good and outstanding schools, recent data show that the top 25% and the bottom 25% of pupils do worse than those in neighbouring Manchester, so there are questions about attainment gaps to address.

The list of organisations that are against more selection in schools is ever growing. The OECD says that countries with selective education perform less well on average than those with comprehensive systems. The previous and the current chief inspector of schools do not agree with more grammars. The Government's own Social Mobility Commission, the Education Policy Institute, the Fair Education Alliance, Teach First, the teaching unions, multi-academy trust leaders and all the headteachers in Surrey are among those who have come out against selection. Perhaps that is because grammar schools contain such tiny, tiny numbers of poorer pupils—just 2.6% across the piece.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Some 11% of students at sixth-form colleges are on free school meals, compared with 3% at selective grammar schools, yet sixth-form colleges perform so well. There needs to be more focus on the success of these engines of social mobility than we have perhaps had recently.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to sixth-form colleges. All the data show what great outcomes they deliver for a comprehensive intake of pupils. Indeed, Loreto sixth-form college in my constituency is one of the top 5% in the country in terms of outcomes for its pupils, and it is in the heart of inner-city Manchester.

New analysis by Professor Simon Burgess and a team of academics shows that poor, bright children are much less likely to attend grammar schools than more affluent children who are not as bright. In England, the best performing boroughs are comprehensive. For example, London, which I have mentioned, outperforms selective areas and the national average in its top GCSE results. In contrast, the attainment gap is worse than the national average in eight out of nine fully selective areas, so the evidence is pretty overwhelming.

I am sure that when he rises to speak later, the Minister will repeat the one fact that he is particularly keen on—of course, there is another one that he likes about modern foreign languages—which is that in grammar schools, the tiny number of children on free school meals do better than all the other children in the country on free school meals. What the Government fail to tell us is that the children who get into grammar schools are already highly able, by definition, so the Government are not comparing like with like. In fact, highly able children do just as well in good and outstanding comprehensive schools as their counterparts do in grammar schools.

The grammar school policy is wrong in itself when it comes to social mobility, but it is also a huge distraction. I am setting out an agenda, which is shared by the Social Mobility Commission and other hon. Members, around the early years, schools, post-16 and other areas. That agenda would keep any Minister or Department extremely busy, but the Government have also embarked on other major overhauls, including the new national fair funding formula—that has caused much consternation on both sides of the House—the biggest reform of GCSEs in a generation, new SATs, the creation of hundreds of thousands of new school places to deal with the massive increase in demand, and a reduction in the amount of funding and number of teachers per pupil. The divisive pursuit of more selection in grammars will require huge political capital and a great deal of officials' attention, and it will mean that all the other really important work, some of which the Government have already embarked on, will fail.

I do not think that we would be having this debate about grammars and selection if we had done more in recent years to create a cross-party consensus on what needs to be done to tackle the lack of social mobility. Our intention in this debate is to look at and develop an understanding of what works, and to build a broad consensus.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I apologise for not being around for the beginning of the hon. Lady's speech. When it comes to building consensus, if she were willing to cross the Rubicon in terms of more selective education, would it not be a good idea to focus it on the opportunity areas and coldspots that the Social Mobility Commission has highlighted?

Lucy Powell: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is saying that he thinks that selection would work in such areas. There is no evidence for that at all, especially when I look at the fantastic schools in my constituency. My constituency has some of the highest levels of deprivation in the country—I think it is the second ranking constituency for child poverty in the whole country—but I have some outstanding schools that get amazing results in a comprehensive setting. I do not understand how selection will help them; it will simply make their job all the more difficult.

Mr Burrowes: We may well disagree on some of the principles and practice, but if there is to be increased opportunity for selective education, would not the best place to focus it be in the areas of most need—those opportunity areas coldspots highlighted by the Social Mobility Commission?

Lucy Powell: No, I disagree fundamentally. As we have seen historically and evidentially, opportunity areas such as the London challenge work when we bring schools together and encourage them to collaborate, rather than creating an environment of competition. Such areas work when we ensure that they have the best teachers, the right resources and strong, collective leadership. Bringing a selective agenda into that ecosystem will work against all those core principles.

I think that there is a broad consensus about what needs to be done, and I hope that we can devote political time, and the time of Ministers and officials, to that. The important things are: quality in the early years; targeting resources; creating and developing opportunity areas; getting the best teachers where they are needed; developing a skills strategy focused on jobs; creating job opportunities and access to the best jobs; and securing progress through those jobs for the many, not the few.

3.24 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I echo the words of the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and of many other speakers in the House today in paying tribute to those who lost their lives or were injured yesterday, and to the House staff for keeping us safe. It is very important that the House's business has resumed today. As the Prime Minister said earlier, yesterday was an attack on democracy. It is therefore important that our democracy should continue unabated today, and where better to start than on so important an issue as social mobility?

I was just looking at Twitter, as you do, and I see that somebody has tweeted, "How can there be a debate this afternoon if everyone agrees?" I suspect many of us spend our time trying to explain why everybody disagrees in this place, and why we are busy arguing and falling out with each other, so on the whole I think it is rather nice to have a debate in which people can broadly agree that there is an issue with social mobility in this country that we all want to tackle.

I thank the hon. Lady and the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) for co-sponsoring this debate, and I thank all those outside the House who have sent briefings to Members sharing their thoughts on today's debate. The November 2016 Social Mobility Commission report said:

"Britain has a deep social mobility problem which is getting worse for an entire generation of young people".

The Teach First briefing for this debate says:

"Failing to improve low levels of social mobility will cost the UK economy up to £14billion a year by 2050, or an additional four per cent of GDP."

Frankly, we cannot afford not to tackle it.

I want to talk about three things: Britain's social contract; schools, to pick up some of the issues that the hon. Member for Manchester Central has mentioned; and social capital. Every generation expects there to be greater opportunities for their children and grandchildren. In Britain at the moment, that social contract and the expectation of social mobility has broken down in parts

of our country and among some groups of people. Education is a key driver of social mobility—I know that the Minister is committed to this, because I have had the privilege of working alongside him—but in the parts of the country that most need social mobility, there is often little educational aspiration, and underperformance is entrenched. I agree that tackling that should be the focus of this Government's education policy, rather than having yet another discussion about expanding selection.

Last year's vote and the rise of populism not just in this country but elsewhere, including in the United States, was a cry showing that our social contract has broken down. As I have said, each generation expects better opportunities for the next, but I think we should be honest in saying—I know this from my casework, but also from talking to friends and family—that that is not how many people see life today. There is pressure on housing services, and housing is unaffordable for the next generation in many parts of this country. The labour market feels incredibly insecure, but also very demanding, which has a knock-on effect.

The hon. Lady mentioned the numbers of words that children from different backgrounds know by the age of three. There is some very interesting research in the Social Mobility Commission report about the number of minutes each day that parents from different backgrounds spend interacting with their younger children. People working long hours in an insecure job will inevitably have less time to interact with their children than those not in that position. What can we do to help with that?

Mr Burrowes: I thank my right hon. Friend for highlighting the issue of parental contact, but may I focus on contact with fathers? The Government have made great strides in trying to ensure greater opportunities in work, but we must also look at how to create greater opportunities to ensure that fathers are not only in contact but are involved in their children's upbringing. I saw from clients in the criminal justice system that one of the prevailing factors for them was either an absent father or a father who was not involved in their lives.

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The importance of families and of having two parents or two important role models in life—and of both boys and girls having a strong male role model—should not be underestimated. It is no secret that I disagree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) on some policy issues, but the work that he did at the Centre for Social Justice and the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) is doing now on the importance of family relationships and public policy should not be underestimated.

Siobhain McDonagh: On the issue of working hours, I find in my south-west London constituency that the bigger determinant is ethnicity. If people have travelled a long way to get here, an education is the most important thing for them. In my experience, their children do exceptionally well whatever hours they work, because they imbue them with the importance of education. The young people who go to the grammar schools in south London, other than the privileged ones, are overwhelmingly from particular ethnic minorities. In my experience, that particularly includes children from the Tamil community.

Nicky Morgan: The hon. Lady makes a really interesting point. There is a broader point, which is that we are sometimes reluctant to explore too far the differences in social mobility between different communities and people from different ethnic backgrounds. She is right, in that anyone walking around Chinatown on a Saturday morning will see children sitting there, often in their parents' restaurants, actually doing their homework. I do not need to tell the Minister about the successes, particularly in maths, of students from the far east.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right to talk about drive and aspiration, and I will come on to aspiration in a moment. It always struck me when I was Secretary of State for Education that around the world young people and their families are fighting for education, and sometimes in this country we have parents fighting to take their children to Disneyland. That tells me that education is not given the importance in everybody's lives that it should be given. I suspect that part of the success of the London challenge—it is difficult to unpick exactly what was behind it, because there were lots of factors in the London challenge that made a difference—was due to the diverse ethnic backgrounds and the importance that people from different ethnic backgrounds attach to education, and everything that goes with that.

As I was saying, there are parts of the country that feel they are very much left behind other parts. That is picked up in the commission's report, which also says that

“today only one in eight children from low-income backgrounds is likely to become a high income earner as an adult.”

Politicians and the Government have to find a way of renewing that social contract; otherwise, we are playing into the hands of those who would feed on the dissent and take advantage of it at forthcoming elections. That means that we need to focus on communities and areas where social divisions are at their widest and where social mobility has stalled or is going backwards.

Recently, I have been studying the Louise Casey review of opportunity and integration. We are awaiting the Government response to it. It is a fascinating report, in which she says that integration is a key part of a successful immigration policy. I do not think we have used the word “integration” in our immigration discussions enough. I do not expect the Minister to respond to that point, because he is not a Home Office Minister, but Louise Casey goes on to say that social mobility is a key part of integration:

“As well as providing economic advantages, social mobility also provides knock-on benefits such as reducing grievances, heightening a sense of belonging to a country or community and increasing geographic mobility and social mixing too.”

As I said, schools and education are the great driver of social mobility. It is worth drawing attention again to what the Social Mobility Commission report says:

“Despite a welcome focus on improving attainment in schools, the link between social demography and educational destiny has not been broken”.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central was right to say that that is not the fault of one Government, but has happened over successive years. However, it cannot be right that that link between social demography and educational destiny has not been broken. The report states that

“over the last five years 1.2 million 16-year-olds—disproportionately from low-income homes—have left school without five good GCSEs.”

It goes on to say:

“A child living in one of England's most disadvantaged areas is 27 times more likely to go to an inadequate school than a child living in one of the least disadvantaged. Ten local authorities account for one in five of England's children in failing schools.”

We know where the problem is; we must work out how to fix it. What does that mean in practice? Those of us who have talked about choice in education must realise that for families who are surrounded by inadequate schools, “choice” is a hollow word. There are no good or outstanding schools in those areas, and the families cannot afford to buy their way out of poor services or even the transport to a different area.

The focus on areas is right. In the White Paper that the Department published last March, “Educational Excellence Everywhere”, areas of entrenched educational underperformance were announced, where access to high quality teachers, leaders and sponsors was insufficient. They are now opportunity areas and I hope that the Minister will say more about them in his concluding remarks. It will be helpful to know the plan for investing in them, the services that will receive attention and how we will tackle getting high quality teachers, leaders and sponsors into them. We can be more directional. That is where Government can give a lead.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) said that it is about not just academic attainment but aspiration. One of my most formative experiences—I have probably shared it with hon. Members previously—was visiting a primary school in Lancashire. It was a good primary school. It would be fair to say that the staffroom was not inclined towards my politics, but we had a robust discussion. I was struck by the fact that the headteacher had moved to this rather nicer area and this good school from an inner-city primary school. She said of the latter, “Oh well, those children were never going to be more than ‘requires improvement’”. How can someone write off children before they reach the age of 11 as never amounting to more than “requires improvement”? What a waste of human potential. What a waste for our country. That attitude must be overcome.

Attitudes in families of, “My child can access a profession, go to university, get a great apprenticeship”, even though perhaps the parent did not, should be encouraged. We must also foster the attitude in schools that children will fulfil their potential.

Siobhain McDonagh: I believe that all parents aspire for their children, but some do not know how to make things happen. We know that doing more homework on more evenings is more likely to get children to where they aspire to be. The inability to connect reality and the required work with the aspiration is a problem.

Nicky Morgan: I agree. It is not that parents do not want the best for their child. If you ask most parents on the birth of a child, they want their child to be happy, healthy and successful in life. I will talk about extra-curricular activities shortly because again, there is a social injustice in access to those activities. The hon. Lady is right about support. All the nagging that middle-class parents do about homework, or chivvying children to read more books, often does not happen elsewhere, not for lack of wanting to do it but perhaps because it was not done to those parents. Going into a child's school and challenging teachers is anathema to someone

[Nicky Morgan]

who has had a very unhappy school experience. Attendance at parents' evenings is indicative of the support that children get at home.

Aspiration is about aiming high for young people. I did not have a chance to look up the name of the school, so I apologise for not remembering it, but I went to a fantastic primary school in Northamptonshire, where a high proportion of children had free school meals, but it was working with the Royal Shakespeare Company and every child had access to Shakespeare and his language. I heard the tiniest children talk about Shakespeare's characters and watched the older children perform complicated scenes—I would have had difficulty remembering all those lines, but they were doing brilliantly. The headteacher there had high aspirations. He said, "All my children will be able to do this and benefit and learn." They were doing incredibly well.

I pay tribute to the National Association of Head Teachers for setting up its "Primary Futures" campaign, which is about getting adults into schools to talk about their careers and broaden horizons. When I was in the DFE, we set up the Careers & Enterprise Company. Broadening horizons, and aspirational and inspirational careers advice, are important. There will be a difference of opinion in the House about work experience, which we have debated. One week's dry work experience in an office will not necessarily set the flame alight, but I remember talking to some apprentices, who told me that a week at Rolls-Royce, where they could see how the maths they were learning would be applied in the workplace, does set the flame alight. People then go back to school more determined to do better in their maths classes.

There is a changing labour market. In the article at the weekend that the hon. Member for Manchester Central and I wrote, we talked about the number of high-skilled jobs that will be around. The Teach First briefing says that, by 2022, the British economy is expected to experience a shortage of 3 million workers to fill 15 million high-skilled jobs. At the same time, there will be 5 million more low-skilled workers than there are low-skilled jobs. I did not want to mention the "B" word this afternoon—it is very nice not to be talking about the European Union—but, if we are to change our immigration policy in this country and have fewer people coming in from overseas, we must ensure that all our young people are training for the labour market of the 21st century.

That is my problem with the Government's focus on introducing more selection. We do not live in a world where we need only the top 20% or 30% to be highly skilled. We need everybody to have access to a knowledge-rich, excellent academic curriculum. A renewed battle over selection distracts from what is needed in our education to deal with the demands of a 21st-century labour market, to give everyone a chance to close social divisions, and to build a consistently strong school system.

Research from the Education Policy Institute talks about the negative effects on those who live in the most selective areas but who do not attend grammar schools. The negative effects emerge around the point when selective places are available for around 70% of high-attaining pupils. The research says that there are five times as many high-quality non-selective schools in England as there are grammar schools.

Every child is entitled to an academic curriculum. Like the Minister, I have seen some great schools in some very unexpected places. I remember my visit to King Solomon Academy in London—the Minister will have been there too—and to the Rushey Mead in Leicester. They have a higher proportion of children on free school meals but are doing incredibly well in terms of the exam results they are achieving. I also pay tribute to the Harris academies and Ark in Portsmouth.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central mentioned the secondary heads in Surrey who had written about selection. The Leicestershire secondary heads, too, wrote to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education. Impressively, every single headteacher in Leicestershire signed the letter. If the Minister has not seen it, I hope he can get hold of a copy. One paragraph states:

"As professionals who have dedicated our lives to educating children across Leicestershire, our concern is for all the children in our region. Removing the most able pupils in our schools will have a negative impact on those who remain. Removing the option of ambitious, all ability comprehensives, with a scarcity of academic role models, will impact most particularly on the least affluent and least able. Therein lies the most significant injustice of this policy."

Academic attainment is important and we should set high aspirations and ambitions for all pupils, but pupils in the best schools gain something else, and I want all pupils to gain it. This was one of the things I tried to champion when I was in the Department for Education. I am thinking of the character traits—persistence, resilience, self-confidence, self-esteem—and the values and virtues of integrity, honesty and whatever it might be, that help to build a whole pupil. I was at Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School in north London recently. The school focuses on building social capital among its pupils. It is conscious of the fact that its pupils will have to compete with the independent school down the road. I visited the King's Leadership Academy in Warrington, which is a new free school, now over-subscribed, where behaviour is excellent, and where aspirations are incredibly high. All the young people are trained for leadership. Kings Langley School in Hertfordshire and Gordano School near Bristol are fantastic schools—I could go on.

Educating young people is about not just what happens in the classroom, but access to other schemes. I pay tribute to the former Prime Minister and the current Government for their focus on the National Citizen Service and other schemes: social action, volunteering, uniformed activities such as the cadets, the guides and the scouts, and the Duke of Edinburgh award. They all help to build up experience and confidence in young people. Those of us who have been employers and have interviewed see the ability of some young people to walk through our door, look us in the eye and shake us by the hand. Some children are taught that and encouraged in school, but some are not. These things matter in helping young people to get on.

I mentioned extracurricular activities. The commission's report specifically talks about the effect different social backgrounds have on how people participate:

"One study found that 43 per cent of children whose mother had a postgraduate degree had music lessons, compared with just 6 per cent of children whose mother had no qualifications. At the age of 11, 85 per cent of children whose mother had an undergraduate degree participated in organised sport outside of school, compared with 56 per cent of children whose mother had no formal qualifications."

I was very pleased that in last year's Budget the then Chancellor announced funding for a longer school day. It would be helpful to know what emphasis the Department will place on that to help schools provide such activities. It is not necessarily about the schools themselves providing the activities; it could be enabling all young people in their schools to take up a place and participate.

Mr Burrowes: I very much support what my right hon. Friend says, particularly about social capital and building character through education. The Government have committed to a statutory requirement for relationships education. Many children, sadly, come from a background of conflict, trauma and survival. There is now the opportunity to provide them with the building blocks that others receive outside school to build resilience, self-esteem and respect for others, and help to build that character which is so vital for their long term future.

Nicky Morgan: I agree with my hon. Friend. I was very pleased to support his amendment on sex and relationships education, and I am very pleased that the Government have taken that on board and accepted an amendment to the Children and Social Work Bill. He is right to say that. One of the most important characteristics is resilience, or to use the awful phrase, stickability and bouncebackability: the ability to deal with what life throws at them and not be blown off course. Anything that schools, adult role models and other organisations can do, in addition to families, to help young people to develop that characteristic will go at least part of the way to building the more resilient and confident young people we need for the 21st century.

I do not think we will all agree with everything in the commission's report, but it shows that we have a problem with social mobility. For those of us who are one nation politicians, that should make us very uncomfortable. There is talk of a meritocracy, but the difficulty is this: who decides who has merit? I would prefer to say that everyone has potential, but that in some cases the keys to unlocking that potential are more readily available to some than others. Today's debate is about working out what those keys are and how they are handed out, and about building a consensus, or perhaps cross-party momentum, on how to do just that. But it has to be about more than words. Much has been done by this Government and by previous Governments, but there is much more to do if we are to show how we are going to renew our broken social contract and build real social mobility in this country.

3.48 pm

Mr Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) for the cross-party collaboration and work that has secured this debate on this all-important subject. In time-honoured Westminster fashion, there is an inverse relationship between the importance of a subject and the level of attendance, but that does not mean we should not persist. I join them, and everyone who has spoken today, in expressing my condolences to the family and friends of those injured and killed in yesterday's horrific attack. I would like to pay my own heartfelt tribute to, and admiration for, the emergency services and the police who work so tirelessly, as they did yesterday, to keep us safe.

There is a choice that hangs like a backcloth to this debate: do we want to live in a closed society in which people are, in effect, told to know their place, or do we want to live in an open society in which people are able to choose their place? There is, I hope, an unarguable cross-party consensus that we should aspire to the latter.

I am delighted that the Social Mobility Commission, under the chairmanship of Alan Milburn, produces these excellent annual reports. I would say that, because I set up the commission: I announced its establishment on 5 April 2011, and we subsequently legislated for it. On the same day—it is interesting to look back on this—I announced the introduction of a new set of indicators that would help Whitehall to judge whether social mobility was being progressed or not. I also established a ministerial committee on the subject, which I chaired for many years.

At the time, all those things were new. Whitehall did not have a set of indicators, and we did not have a Social Mobility Commission. Extraordinarily, when I entered the Government I discovered that there were interns working in Whitehall and paid by the taxpayer who were judged purely on the basis of who they knew. Even in the heart of Government. prior to 2011, people were being given a leg-up because of who they knew rather than what they knew. It is fantastic that, in the intervening five or six years, social mobility has become a regular feature of the annual cycle of announcements.

I remember the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, observing to me rather ruefully that he thought I might have made a mistake by insisting that a member of the Opposition should chair the precursor of the Social Mobility Commission, because the first report produced by Alan Milburn and his colleagues had been critical of something that the coalition Government had done. I said to him, "That is the whole point: we need an institution that is independent of Government and contains people who will be fearless in their criticisms of any Government of whatever political persuasion, and which"—this is guaranteed by law—"reports to Parliament, not to the Government."

The commission has—I will put it politely—had its wings clipped a little by the present Government. Shortly after the last election, the Government announced that they would remove the child poverty remit from what was formerly called the Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission. I very much hope, and I am sure the Minister will reassure us, that that is not the first step in an attempt to make the commission in any way more docile, or less ferocious, in its all-important work.

I want to dwell on three issues, all of which are touched on in the annual report that the commission produced last November, and many of which have already been touched on by my co-sponsors. The first, the role of early years support, was highlighted by the hon. Member for Manchester Central, to whom I pay tribute, because she has made it a personal mission and has done so in an admirable way.

I think we all know this intuitively as parents, but, crucially, over the last decade or so, the academic evidence—from neuroscience to research done by educationists—has confirmed the axiomatic importance of what happens to a child's brain, a child's ability to learn, a child's willingness to learn, a child's willingness and ability to adhere to authority, a child's ability to mix with other

[Mr Nick Clegg]

children, and so on. So much of that, of course, is formed, or not fostered, in the home, but a huge amount can be fostered, or neglected, in the early years and pre-school support that is given to our children.

There are two matters that concern me slightly. What I am probably most proud of from my time in government was the initiative that we took to provide 15 hours a week of pre-school support for two-year-olds. No Government had done that before: all early years and pre-school support had previously been confined to three and four-year-olds. I was keen for us to act on the evidence that the earlier we start—and, crucially, the earlier we start with those from the most deprived families—the greater the multiplier effect on children's subsequent educational performance. So we introduced that measure. It initially applied to two-year-olds whose families were in the lowest 20% income bracket, but we later doubled that to 40%. That is where it stays to this day: there is a 15-hour entitlement for two-year-old toddlers from families that fall into the 40% lowest income families category.

The Government have now embarked upon a dramatic expansion of the entitlement for three and four-year-olds. I say, as someone who did not get into the bunfight between the two larger parties in the last general election, that that was—let us not beat about the bush—frankly because of a great Dutch auction in which the Labour and Conservative parties at the last election tried to outdo each other on how much they could improve the 15-hour entitlement for three and four-year-olds: at first it was 20 hours, then it was 25, then 30, and so it went on.

The Government will encounter terrific difficulties in delivering this expanded entitlement in a sustainable, high-quality way. That is worrying enough, but, this being a cross-party debate, I simply make a plea to us all to pause and consider whether, in a time of constrained resources when we have to make choices, this is really the most sensible use of scarce resources, given the importance of early years. The expansion of a universal entitlement from 15 hours to 30 hours for three and four-year-olds does absolutely nothing to build on this ground-breaking initiative of providing early-years support for two-year-olds. It also does nothing to bridge a gap that we will, as a society, have to bridge one day: the gap in a child's development, which can be perilous, between the point at which mum and dad, or mum or dad, go back to work and the point at which the child can enjoy the state-funded allocation of early-years pre-school support devoted to him and her—which, if they do not come from those lower income families, comes not at two, but at three and four.

We have this gap at that age. I know nothing about neuroscience, but I am told that this is when the brain does the most extraordinary things and forms at a pace that is barely repeated at any other point in life—although I am also told that some neuroscientists say that they think rewiring might happen later, in the early teens. Certainly, judging by my teenagers, there is a lot of rewiring going on, most of it devoted to staring at an iPad.

We all know that early-years is one of the most important engines of social mobility, and we all know that money does not grow on trees. A decision has been

taken—I think because of a non-evidence-based rush to double up again and again on a universal entitlement for three and four-year-olds—not to build on the ground-breaking initiative provided to two-year-olds. However, the early evidence—I would love to hear whether the Minister can share any of the evidence that I assume the Department for Education is accumulating—shows promising results for the knock-on effect on the two-year-old entitlement, and we have this persistent gap between the point at which many parents have to go back to work and the point at which their children can be put into a setting where they receive some of those entitlements.

I therefore make a plea to the Government. I am not for a moment imagining that they are going to say, "Absolutely, the right hon. Member for Sheffield Hallam is right and we will stop entirely the direction of travel and orient policy in a different direction," but the challenge remains. We need to continue to target resources earlier and at children from the most deprived families, and we are not doing that right now.

Mr Burrows: In a spirit of consensus, I would point out that one of the successes of the coalition Government was the focus on early years and the early years foundation stage, which came not least out of the work of the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). There is growing evidence, not least through the Department for Work and Pensions programme on parenting, of the quality of the relationship between parents having a huge impact on children's long-term wellbeing, mental health and life chances. There should be a focus on that. There is a lot of well-evaluated evidence from the parents as partners programmes showing that we need to focus on these quality relationships all the way through as providing the foundation for long-term prospects.

Mr Clegg: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. I have gone on a bit of a journey on this: I have always had a somewhat kneejerk liberal reaction of slight squeamishness and reticence about the idea of politicians, the Government, Whitehall and public policy experts seeking to tweak or improve how parents choose to raise their children, which I intuitively think is no business of politicians, but I agree with the evidence. Much like the right hon. Member for Loughborough, I agree on almost nothing with the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) on many issues, but on this I think that he led the pack in saying that this is something that politicians need to grapple with, although we need to do so with care.

The first page of the summary of the report recommends that the Government should introduce

"a new parental support package, including a guarantee of help if a child's 2 to 2½-year check shows that they are falling behind."

I entirely agree with that. Public policy is inching towards greater involvement in an area that many folk have previously felt should be kept immune from such interventions.

I want to make one more point about early years that I am sure everyone here is aware of. It is unglamorous, rather fiddly and difficult to fix, but it is acutely important: it is the quality of early years provision. The pay and status of early years teachers are real problems. We do not have enough men going into early years teaching.

Pay is very low, and there is no qualified teacher status. As the Government seek to expand the entitlements for three and four-year-olds, it is terrifically important that quantity does not come at the further cost of diminished quality. If the Minister can tell us how the quality, status and—in the long run—pay of early years teachers can be improved, so much the better.

I also want to talk about money. In those glory days back in 2010, I intervened aggressively in internal discussions when we had to announce what was in many ways the fateful comprehensive spending review setting out all sorts of unappetising cuts. I insisted that the per-pupil and indexed core budgets for schools should be protected. Those budgets needed to be protected in terms of prices and of pupil numbers, not least so that we could then add on the pupil premium in a meaningful way and ensure that it added genuine value.

I look now at the trouble the Government are getting into, and yes, a lot of this is complex. A lot is to do with the higgledy-piggledy, unjust, idiosyncratic way in which schools have had their budgets allocated to them over many decades, but some of it is pretty obvious. The Government simply cannot cancel the £600 million education services grant, as they did shortly after the 2015 general election, while protecting the per-pupil allocation only in cash terms and not in real terms and while diverting hundreds of millions of pounds to free schools—many of which are doing a great job, but frankly, far too many of which have been opened in places where there is no desperate need for extra places—and possibly compounding that error by spending hundreds of millions of extra pounds on new selective schools, and then ask schools to shoulder their own newly increased national insurance and pension contributions and, in some cases, apprenticeship levy costs, and, on top of that, introduce a national funding formula with no additional money to make that work. If they do all that, they are bound to get into terrible trouble.

I do not say this in a spirit of recrimination, but the Government should not be surprised that they are encountering huge resistance to these plans across the House and huge disquiet from parents, headteachers and governors up and down the country. There is a limit to how much they can keep expecting improved performance from a schools system that is being put under those multiple and entirely self-inflicted financial stresses and strains.

I know a little bit about this because, in the coalition Government, we looked exhaustively at the case for introducing a national funding formula. In principle, the case for doing so is impeccable; of course it is. The current situation is woefully unfair. There are many non-metropolitan schools, smaller rural schools, suburban schools, schools in the shires and so on that have received far less funding over a long period. However, the problem is that if we introduce a national funding formula in a way that does not raise the overall financial tide for all schools, what happens is exactly what is happening now. The schools that think they are going to gain pots and pots of money are disappointed at how little they gain, and those that are going to lose will lose an unacceptably large amount of money. No one is pleased.

The one issue in this debate on which I disagree with the right hon. Member for Loughborough is that, if I understand it correctly, her solution is to adjust the deprivation calculation buried within all the numbers in

the national funding formula, which—all credit to the Minister and his Department—is a bona fide attempt to protect the funding to the poorest. The right hon. Lady will no doubt correct me if I am wrong, but one way to try to square the circle is to take a little money from the deprivation allocation and raise the floor or the minimum amount—

Nicky Morgan *rose*—

Mr Clegg: Have I got it wrong?

Nicky Morgan: The intricacies of the national funding formula are probably not quite right for this debate, but the right hon. Gentleman wants to consider the different grades of deprivation and how they are funded. Of course, there is the pupil premium outside the national funding formula, but there is also the income deprivation affecting children index, or IDACI, which looks not only at the overall deprivation weighting, but the weighting within the different deprivation gradients. That needs to be reconsidered and the Department needs to rerun the numbers.

Mr Clegg: I am grateful for that explanation. I will not try to improve upon the technical proficiency and expertise that the right hon. Lady has just displayed, because I cannot match her for that. I hope in many ways that she has just made my point, which is that we are condemned to fiddling around in the undergrowth to shift a little bit of money here or there to try to square a circle.

We came to the conclusion in the coalition—the Minister may remember—that it is not possible to introduce a national funding formula in a way that is just and fair if it is not pump-primed with a lot of money. I cannot remember whether it was in 2013 or 2014, but we did the next best thing, which was to use about £400 million as a stopgap measure—the Minister may have announced it at the time—to target the underfunding of the most underfunded schools. I plead with the Minister to learn from the past and, because I doubt whether any new money will be forthcoming from the Treasury, do that again. It is not ideal. It is a stopgap. It is temporary, but it is much better to allocate targeted resources to the schools that rightly complain about having been most hard done by under the current funding formula than to annoy and upset everyone in the way that the Government appear destined to do if they carry on with their current trajectory. That is my helpful suggestion for a way out for the Government from this politically invidious position in which they find themselves.

My final point has been made already, but it is worth repeating and relates to the importance of evidence-based policy. It really should not have to be restated that when we consider something as precious and as important as how we design the education system for our children, we should always be led not by dogma, ideology or personal hobbyhorses, but by the evidence. I do not want to go over many of the points made earlier, but this old idea of improved selection perplexes me—that is the politest way of putting it. No international, national or local evidence whatsoever is being wheeled out. If the evidence is not there, let me at least make a political plea: the proposal is not actually popular with parents. Opinion polls show that older voters like it, particularly those who remember grammar schools in the old way,

[Mr Clegg]

but parents, who actually have to make invidious choices about where to send their children, hate it.

The Government appear to have forgotten why previous Governments, including previous Conservative Governments, stopped the expansion of selection. It was precisely because they were encountering such resistance from their own voters, who do not like it. I ask people in the Westminster and Whitehall village why on earth we are proceeding with something that parents do not like, for which there is no evidence and for which there is no manifesto commitment at all. I do not remember the Conservatives populating our television screens in the run-up to the 2015 general election saying, “And we will introduce grammar schools.” There is no mandate for it. I am told—the Minister will not be able to confirm this—that one unelected political apparatchik in No. 10 went to a grammar school and has apparently persuaded the Prime Minister that they are therefore a good idea.

I am sure that it is not as simple as that, but surely it cannot be the case that the whole of Whitehall is being led by the nose because of the personal prejudices of one unelected political appointee in No. 10. I have to put on record this magnificent quote from Russell Hobby, the leader of the National Association of Head Teachers, writing in *The Times Educational Supplement*:

“In no other sector would this be acceptable. If the minister for health proposed to increase state funding for homeopathy on the basis that it did wonders for his uncle’s irritable bowel back in the 1970s—and must, therefore, be right for everyone today—there would be an uproar. This is a precise metaphor for the expansion of grammar schools. It is educational homeopathy.”

I hope that the Minister, who of course will not be able to disagree with the new orthodoxy, will none the less privately go to the Secretary of State for Education, and to the other powers that be in Whitehall, to stop the fetish for selection before it gets this Government into terrible trouble.

Where does the evidence suggest that we should do more? I am not exactly declaring an interest, but I chair a cross-party commission for the Social Market Foundation—there are Labour and Conservative Members on the commission—and we are looking at some of the key evidence-based drivers of increases in, and the existence of, inequality in the education system. One of our most striking early conclusions from the data we have seen and our original research—we will be producing a concluding report in the next month or two—is, I should think, intuitively obvious to us all, much like the importance of early years.

There is an intimate relationship between educational underperformance in some of the more deprived parts of the country, and the high teacher turnover and lack of experienced teachers in those schools. It really is very striking. The proportion of unqualified teachers working in primary schools with the highest concentrations of pupils on free school meals is 4%, but it is half that in the most affluent quintile. There is a similar pattern in secondary schools, where 5% of teachers in the richest schools, if I can put it like that, are unqualified, compared with 9% in the poorest schools. Schools that serve the most disadvantaged communities also experience far higher levels of teacher turnover than neighbouring, more advantaged schools.

This policy challenge, which does not detonate with the same attention and fury from the media as selection

and so on, is a mundane but, none the less, crucial one. What can we do to attract highly qualified teachers to those parts of the country to which they are not presently attracted and/or to make sure that teachers in those schools stay and are supported to improve their own experience and qualifications? The Department for Education is looking at that, and I very much hope that—as we all continue to grapple with the elusive problem of how to build an open society in which people can go as far as their talents, application and dreams take them, rather than having their life fortunes determined by the circumstances of their birth—it is one of the many areas in which the Government will seek to make a positive intervention in the years ahead.

4.13 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments of all Members in relation to yesterday’s incident. It still seems completely unreal, and my thoughts are with the brave police officer outside defending us who lost his life just doing his job—it is hard to come to terms with that. Without prejudging the person who did this, I suspect that issues of social mobility might apply here. I particularly reference Louise Casey’s report on the need for social integration among all peoples.

I thank the right hon. Members for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) and my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for securing this important debate. As a girl who went to a secondary modern, I wholeheartedly support their article in *The Observer* last week making it clear that grammar schools are not the answer to social mobility.

I was proud to be part of the previous Labour Government, for whom social mobility and education were absolutely priorities. Earlier, I was able to give thanks to Lord Adonis who, in my assessment, was one of the best Ministers we ever had. I note today’s figures on teenage pregnancy rates. The Labour Government’s efforts to reduce teenage pregnancy were so successful that those figures suggest that that is at its lowest ever level.

As the Social Mobility Commission’s “State of the Nation 2016” report sets out, under the current Government we are slipping back decades on the progress that has been made. Those born in Britain in the 1980s are the first generation since 1945 to start their careers on a lower income than their parents. A child living in one of England’s most disadvantaged areas is 27 times more likely to go to an inadequate school than a child in an affluent area. Just 5% of children who receive free school meals will secure five A grades at GCSE. Children from low-income homes are 30% more likely to drop out of education than their wealthier classmates with similar GCSE grades. Overall, by secondary school age, pupils on free school meals lag behind their wealthier counterparts by around 20 months.

For working people in my community, the link between social class and professional success is more entrenched than ever. Only one in eight children from low-income backgrounds is likely to earn a high salary as an adult. Working-class people make up only 4% of doctors, 6% of barristers and 11% of journalists—a whole generation of talent is being frozen out. But I wish to make it clear that grammar schools are not the answer. A House of

Commons Library research briefing from earlier this month states:

“Pupils at grammar schools are much less likely than average to...be eligible for free school meals”.

Indeed, only 2.6% of pupils at grammar schools are eligible for free school meals—a well-understood signifier of poverty—whereas nationwide 14% of all students are eligible.

Part of the reason why poor students are so under-represented at grammar schools is that the attainment gap between richer and poorer students is clear even when they are only a few years old. The Library briefing states that

“of the 6.9% of pupils eligible for FSM with high prior attainment who are near selective schools, only 2.4% actually attended a grammar school.”

Let us be clear: grammar schools do not work for even the very brightest poor students, never mind the average or below-average student. Grammar schools educate a minority—just 5%—of state school students, so while the Government waste time banging on about grammar schools, the needs of 95% of our state school students are being ignored.

When I talk about social mobility, I am not just talking about the brightest poor students; I am talking about the poor students who are average but who deserve no less to succeed in life through hard work. We really need to prioritise comprehensive school education; if we do not, we will never address the national scandal of white working-class underachievement in this country.

Let us be clear: underachievement is a class issue and an ethnic issue. White British boys and girls who receive free school meals are consistently the lowest performing group at GCSE level, and the genders show no difference. It is not about boys; it is about boys and girls. Last year, only 32% of working-class white British students who receive free school meals achieved the GCSE benchmark, compared with 44% of mixed-race students, 59% of Bangladeshi students, 42% of black-Caribbean students, and 47% of Pakistani students receiving free school meals. Over the past 10 years, the educational attainment of white working-class students has improved much more slowly than that of almost any other ethnic group.

A good school can be life changing. I had the honour of being on the Education Committee and to play a part in a report that looked at white working-class underachievement. What we learned was how much we do not know. The one thing that stood out is the truism that a poor child does so much better at a good school. The benefit of being at a good school is a much more important driver for them.

This is where I get to pay tribute, as always, to the Harris academy chain in south London. I am forever grateful to it for having two secondary schools in my constituency. Last year, Harris Academy Merton achieved some amazing GCSE results, with a staggering 77% of students achieving five A to C GCSEs including maths and English, compared with the national average of just 54%. These schools, not grammar schools, should be our ideal. The pupil premium needs to be used to ensure that disadvantaged pupils receive the focused support that they need. We need to give academically average students from poor backgrounds better alternatives to university. Social mobility is about not just the children

at the very top doing well, but all children being able to aspire and surpass expectations, including the average and below-average student.

If I have a couple of minutes—I do not want to take any time from other Members—I would like to address housing in not only south London, but all of London, as it is a major dampener on social mobility. If someone is in temporary accommodation and they live miles away from their home area, they do not get to school. Every Friday at my advice surgery, I meet families who are being fined for non-attendance at school, simply because they now live two or three hours away from their schools. I have letters that would make Members cry about clever pupils missing their exams because they physically cannot get to school to take them because of their housing situation.

Social housing is not fashionable. It is not something that everybody will come together about, but unless people have a secure and consistent roof over their head, the possibility of their not achieving is huge.

4.22 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I too wish to associate myself with the comments that have been made by hon. Members today regarding the tragic events yesterday. I also send my condolences to the families of those who lost loved ones in yesterday's incident.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and the right hon. Members for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) and for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) on securing this incredibly important debate. As the chair of the all-party group on social mobility, I am pleased to have the opportunity to debate this very important issue. I am sure that all Members who attended this debate will have read the Social Mobility Commission's latest report. For those who have not or who are watching at home, they really should read it, because it represents an urgent call for action on opportunity and the state of our nation.

For too long, we have allowed privilege and connections to override ability and potential. We have failed to recognise that there is a criminal waste of talent—generation after generation—and we have mistakenly and unquestionably accepted the myth that greater economic prosperity means greater opportunity for all. All those beliefs have been questioned by this report.

There is a crisis of opportunity. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central said, this is a crisis for everyone; it affects everyone. The motion before the House calls for the focus to be on improving educational outcomes for all children. The commission's report makes it very clear that if we are genuinely to improve outcomes for all children, we need to intervene and give them more support well before they start school.

My hon. Friend set out the issues in this area very well. We know that by the time students receive their GCSE results, 32% of the variation in performance can be explained by indicators observed before the age of five. A number of studies show that cognitive outcomes vary hugely among toddlers according to their parents' socio-economic group, and that by the age of five that gap has widened further. Yet much of the debate on social mobility is centred on attainment at later stages of development—it feels a little like closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.

[Justin Madders]

In the past decade, 500,000 children from poorer backgrounds were not school-ready by the age of five. We know that, for many, the gap at the age of five will still be there when they leave school, if it has not widened even further. If we do not get the building blocks right from the start, it just makes everything so much harder. The Social Mobility Commission's proposal for a guarantee of help for children shown to be falling behind at the age of two to two-and-a-half is something that we must take very seriously.

I found the commission's comments on early years childcare interesting, particularly in the context of the Government's planned expansion of free childcare to 30 hours a week. From what I have heard from local childcare providers, it is pretty clear to me that it is going to be an enormous challenge for them to maintain standards on the funding that they expect to have available. The commission has said that a situation is already developing where poorer children are twice as likely to have access to low quality childcare than those from wealthier backgrounds are.

The right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam raised a pertinent issue when he asked whether the emphasis is right in where the investment goes in early years. I am concerned that we are heading for a situation where the focus on fulfilling that pledge on hours of access will override the important points that are being made about the need for early years childcare to play a vital role in ensuring that every child starts school life in the best possible position. We cannot think it acceptable for there to be an almost *laissez-faire* attitude to those most important early years of a child's life, when all the evidence tells us that it could have a profound influence on their life chances.

Getting those early years right is hugely important, but once our children leave school they face a world where even the most talented have huge barriers in front of them. The all-party parliamentary group on social mobility report on access to the professions looked at opportunities in law, finance, the arts, media, medicine, the civil service and, indeed, politics, and found many similarities between the evidence we heard and the commission's findings. Indeed, it was startling that, whatever the profession, the lack of opportunity and the reasons for that were often very similar. Across the board, privilege and opportunity go hand in hand. The Sutton Trust's research shows that three quarters of senior judges attended private schools, as did more than half the top 100 news journalists and more than two thirds of British Oscar winners.

One of the areas where we found that the evidence very much chimed with the commission's recommendations was in relation to internships. Research has shown that 50% of vacancies in law, banking and finance are filled by graduates who have already worked for that employer in some capacity. Too often, internships are not just a way to get a foot in the door, but the only way to get through the door at all. They have become almost a further compulsory step into many professions, but by their very nature they exclude many.

The APPG has recommended a legal ban on unpaid internships lasting more than one month. We found that not only was their unpaid nature a barrier, but that many of the placements are in London, which means

that unless someone is from that area and has parents who can afford to support them for extended periods, there is no prospect of their even being able to consider an internship. There needs to be a fair, transparent and open recruitment process for such placements as well: we often found that placements were determined by existing connections—be it family or business contacts. These placements need to have the same rigour applied to them as if they were a permanent job; otherwise, any proposals made on payments may just be easing the path for those who are already on it.

Another area where we found the evidence remarkably consistent concerned the aspirations that our young people have. As the right hon. Member for Loughborough said, it is often not that families do not want the best for their children; it is a much more complicated story than that. I am sure that if I were to speak to a group of children from poorer backgrounds in most constituencies and asked them what they wanted to do when they were older, the vast majority would not say that they wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer, and certainly not an actor. For too many, the very notion that they should even consider careers such as those is almost universally absent. They need role models, mentors, inspirers—people from their communities who have been there and done that. We need to inspire kids from an early age to aim for wherever their abilities and interests take them. We should not accept that coming from the wrong part of town means low horizons. Getting a job should mean following a dream and forging a career, not just simply working to survive.

We need to develop a mindset within business whereby we treat social mobility on a par with protected characteristics in terms of a diverse workforce. We rightly challenge it when we see minority sections of society not getting an equal opportunity, and we should do the same here. We cannot allow the situation to continue where someone's background is likely to be the biggest factor in determining their chances of success in life. The social mobility index should be rolled out to all employers over a certain size, so that there is a clear and public record of what our biggest companies are doing to ensure that opportunity is there for all.

A study by the Boston Consulting Group for the Sutton Trust in 2010 found that failing to improve low levels of social mobility will cost the UK economy up to £140 billion by 2050. In the inquiry, we certainly heard from some employers who recognised that their business benefited from having people who were like, and therefore understood, their customers. Sadly, they were the exception rather than the rule. Businesses need to be persuaded that it is not only the right thing to do morally, but that it makes sense for them as businesses.

The media was one area where we felt that companies needed to do more to appreciate the benefits of having a diverse workforce. Indeed, only last week the London *Evening Standard* provided the perfect example of what is going wrong with social mobility. Although I am sure the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) has many talents and a broad range of skills in a number of areas, does anyone seriously believe that he has the experience that qualifies him to be the editor of a daily newspaper? My 15-year-old son has more recent experience with the daily news, and he is a paperboy. But there is a serious point here. What kind of message does this send to those kids who are spending months and months on

unpaid placements in the media? And this is an issue not just in the media; it is widespread in the arts and politics as well.

As the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam said, this country is too closed. It is a country where, far too often, where we are born and who we are born to define our life chances. Parents believe that their children will have less opportunity than they did, and that is a shameful state of affairs for this country. Automation and artificial intelligence will only exacerbate the problem, and we are miles away from even beginning to understand the social impact that that will have. The only way we will be able to meet this challenge is by intensive, long-term Government intervention, over not just the long term of a Government but the long term of our lives—not just at five or 15, but at 35 and 50 and so on. The world of work will change more rapidly than ever before and we need to recognise that opportunity is something that will need to be addressed not just in our younger years but throughout our lives. We have to invest in ourselves throughout all of our working lives and we will need Government support to do that. Too often, there is talk about the number of jobs created, but too little talk about the quality and permanence of those jobs. Social mobility cannot take place against the backdrop of an explosion in part-time and insecure employment.

In conclusion, there have been many fine words today about the need to improve social mobility, but it is time for us to listen to the evidence about what works and put those words into action.

4.32 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I associate myself with all the remarks made about the senseless, horrific events of yesterday, and with the tributes paid to the people who lost their lives, including the brave police officer who was defending us all.

It is important that we continue undeterred to debate this important “State of the Nation” report by the Social Mobility Commission. I was an academic sociologist before I came to this place. Having turned into a politician, I sometimes feel that there is something of a mismatch between theory and practice. Academics kind of think that something works if it works in theory, but, as politicians, we might have the media in our face and have to think of a quick soundbite, or there might be someone in our surgery who needs a problem resolved quickly. I am still grappling with the same questions of social class and life chances that I grappled with as an academic.

It is important that we all reject the notion that we have had enough of experts, and part of the reason that I wanted to speak in this debate is that the people on the commission are eminent academics and practitioners. I want particularly to focus on chapter 2, which is on schools. I am incredibly privileged to represent the constituency I grew up in. I recall the same schools that I visit now in the ’80s, when they had buckets strategically positioned to catch the drips under leaky roofs. Those schools were transformed under Labour’s Building Schools for the Future programme: some of them look like spaceships now. My alma mater, Montpelier Primary School, where I achieved my lifetime ambition in June 2015 by cutting the ribbon at the fête, should particularly go on the record.

This morning, the Prime Minister praised London as the greatest city on earth, and I am proud to be a London MP. People have mentioned the so-called fair funding formula, but 70% of London schools will be worse off under these new arrangements.

In my constituency, school budgets will be down by a whopping £5,524,197 by 2019—that is 137 teachers. An average child will receive £485.52 less funding. The problem is most acute in Acton, where we have wards in some of the poorest deciles. I will be doing my surgery in Acton High School tomorrow, and my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) mentioned how people come along to our surgeries with horrific stories about their housing conditions—they bring their mobile phones with pictorial evidence of the conditions they are living in—and about how they have been shipped far away because of the bedroom tax. However, Acton High School will be down £961 per pupil and 26 teachers, and its budget will be down by £1 million.

The recommendations in chapter 2, on page 53, talk about how children from poorer backgrounds are experiencing a worrying drop-off in progress at secondary. The gap in progress between low-income families and their more affluent counterparts has been widening year on year since 2012, and we should be very concerned about that. One of the report’s recommendations is to ensure that funding cuts do not exacerbate the problem of less well-off pupils failing to make good progress at secondary, so the idea that this funding formula is fair is simply laughable.

As has been said, school education does not exist in a vacuum; the whole context of children’s learning is important. I was very fortunate to address a conference by a group called What About the Children?, which deals with nought to three-year-olds. As a parent, I was lucky enough to use Sure Start centres. Sure Start was an amazing, joined-up programme, with education and health services to give kids a good grounding. But the children’s centres I used to use now face devastating cuts and closures. We have also seen cuts in health promotion, with fewer health visitors. All that is contributing to a picture that is getting bleaker. It is little wonder that it was revealed this week that baby teeth removals—extractions of baby teeth from children!—have gone up 24% in the last decade.

The right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) mentioned parents’ evenings. I have to say that because of the five-hour lockdown yesterday, I managed to miss my parents’ evening—some people might say, “The lengths people will go to to get out of parents’ evenings!” However, the right hon. Lady is absolutely right that all these things—and having books in the house—make for a positive learning environment.

There is a lot that could be said about this report. Chapter 3 goes on to post-16 education and training. I worry about rising tuition fees. In my seat, I have the University of West London, and I have had representations from staff and students that applications are down because of tuition fees and also because of the vote on 23 June—Brexit has created a climate in which international students no longer feel welcome. The removal of the nurse bursary—the university teaches nurses—is also detrimental to post-16 training and education and to jobs, and chapter 4 talks about jobs, careers and earnings for future generations.

[Dr Rupa Huq]

In their Budget just the other week—it feels like it was ages ago, but it was only the week before last—the Government announced not only that they are ploughing on with their dangerous selective school experiment, but that they will provide free transport to grammars, which seems such a misplaced priority at a time of straitened circumstances.

There is much more that could be said. The eye-catching new 30 hours of free childcare sound good in theory, but try finding a provider in practice who can live up to that manifesto pledge by delivering those 30 hours and who thinks that the funding will be adequate to cover the increased costs it will incur in my seat. It is like looking for hen's teeth. Things are harder than they should be anyway. In London, families spend £15,700 a year on average on nursery fees. We all want the holy grail of affordable, good quality, flexible childcare, but it is a challenge to find it, to put it mildly. The childcare proposal is one of those things—like the decision to have an in/out referendum on Europe—that seem good in a manifesto but do not measure up to their promise.

Many sociologists these days consider the concept of life course, and my casework involves people right across the age range. We heard in the previous debate about the Equitable Life pensioners. The WASPI women, who were born in the 1950s, had high hopes for their futures and their life course, and they feel as though the trajectory of their lives has been thwarted twice by Tory Government changes to their pensions.

As everyone has pointed out, there has largely been consensus in this debate, with its cross-party ethos, and that is very welcome. Rather than pursuing an academic idea of making things work in theory, we need to work together to fix them in practice. It is assumed that every generation will do better than the previous one, but the evidence in the Social Mobility Commission's report suggests that we are going in the wrong direction. Yesterday we were faced with lockdown, and we really were all in it together. At times like that, cross-party friendships and alliances flourish. Let us continue in this spirit, and let us heed the warnings and correct our erroneous direction of travel.

4.41 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I join hon. and right hon. Members from all parties in the House in paying tribute to PC Keith Palmer, who gave his life to protect us, this place and all that it represents.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and the right hon. Members for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) on securing the debate. My hon. Friend talked about Government policy, and about the idea of picking the few who would go from the council house to the Cabinet. Today might not be a day for humour, but the tale I tell is that I grew up in a damp two-bedroom council flat in Manchester, and since I became an MP I have lived in a one-bedroom ex-council flat in Westminster, so for some people the trajectory is downhill. I am one of the few in this place who can say that.

Yesterday, while democracy was being attacked, the Labour party members in Manchester, Gorton were selecting as their candidate another council house kid.

He was orphaned out of Pakistan, grew up in abject poverty and worked as a labourer. After attending night school, he became a police officer and a solicitor, and he ran his own practice. I wish Afzal Khan all the very best over the next few weeks as we approach the election.

The “State of the Nation” report by the Government's Social Mobility Commission explained the scale of the challenge we face in improving social mobility in Britain today. It told us in no uncertain terms:

“Britain has a deep social mobility problem.”

It identified

“four fundamental barriers that are holding back a whole tranche of low- and middle-income families and communities in England: an unfair education system, a two-tier labour market, an imbalanced economy and an unaffordable housing market.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) spoke eloquently about that. To say the least, the Government—and the Minister, who has been sent to defend the policies that have led us to this point—have their work cut out for them.

The “State of the Nation” report presented the Government with a number of proposals on parenting and early years, schools, post-16 education, jobs and housing, but there is no evidence so far that the Government have listened to the proposals. That is why our debate today is so important.

For instance, the report calls on Government to

“set a clear objective for early years services that by 2025 every child is school-ready at five and the child development gap has been closed”.

As a former teacher, I know that nursery teachers can predict with 95% accuracy what exam results the children in their care will attain at key stage 1, key stage 2 and key stage 3. The report also recommended that the Government provide

“high-quality childcare to low-income families.”

The Department for Education has given no indication that it will adopt these plans. In fact, its policies could do exactly the opposite. The Minister probably needs to tell us why the Government are not directing resources towards those who need them the most. The Department will spend about £1 billion a year on a policy of so-called tax-free childcare, which will be of the greatest benefit to those who have £10,000 to spend on childcare. I will give way right now to any Member in the House if they know a low-income family who have £10,000 to spend on childcare.

I hope that the Minister will also tell us what the 30 hours of free childcare will actually mean for the tens of thousands of low-income families who, under the eligibility criteria, are not actually eligible for the extra childcare. As the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam eloquently put it, this policy is in considerable trouble at the moment. After all, while I am sure the Minister is growing tired of being reminded of promises in his manifesto that are being broken, the pledge was clear: the Conservative manifesto promised that his party would “give working parents of 3 and 4-year-olds 30 hours of free childcare”.

This is not just about quantity, but about quality, as the right hon. Gentleman mentioned.

Our maintained nurseries are under attack, with the future of many of them in doubt in the next weeks and months. Labour Members know the immense importance

of early years intervention to improve the life chances of children in Britain. That is why the Labour Government opened over 3,000 Sure Start centres, and increased education spending in every year that we were in Government. This Government just need to follow that example.

There are a number of recommendations on schools in the report, and I will briefly address them. The right hon. Member for Loughborough said that education is the key driver of social mobility. She is a one nation Conservative. Disraeli said the same on the steps of Manchester town hall in 1872, so, a century and a half later, I am looking for a one nation in terms of social mobility.

First and foremost, the commission made it clear that the Department's flagship vanity project to expand academic selection is wrong. It said:

"We recommend that the Government rethinks its plans for more grammar schools".

I know the Minister has been told time and again to rethink these plans. He will come back to the Dispatch Box in a few minutes and say that children on free school meals in grammar schools have a better chance of getting to a Russell Group university, but it is a false statistic. The sample of children on free school meals in grammar schools is so small that it makes nonsense of the statistics. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden pointed out, 2.6% of children in grammar schools are on free school meals, compared with 14% of children nationally.

We have heard a great deal about the White Paper that we expect to see in the coming weeks. We want the Minister to commit to basing it not on dogma, but on evidence, and we want him to abandon the discredited policy of selection. The Chancellor has made an announcement about a lot of money for grammar schools, but it seems that there is none for school budgets. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) talked about the buckets used when it rains. I trained as a teacher in the late 1990s, and I remember going round with buckets. However, by the time Labour left office, schools had been rebuilt and roofs had been repaired, while the only thing going through the roofs were standards.

Cuts to school budgets will make it almost impossible to deliver on the many recommendations, so we need to think about the £3 billion that is currently going to be cut from school budgets across this country during the next few years. Let us not pursue the divisive policy of selection; let us fund education properly and come together on improving mobility. Government is about choice, so let us make the right choices.

4.48 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): If I may, I will take a moment to express my personal gratitude to all the brave men and women who work here every day to protect us, showing immense bravery—they run towards danger to keep us safe. Our thoughts are with those who were injured yesterday, and with the families of those who tragically lost their lives.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) and the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing this

debate. I agree with all the speakers in this debate about the importance of improving social mobility in this country, which is why the Secretary of State has demanded that social mobility should sit at the very heart of everything the Department for Education does.

The Government have already done a huge amount in our determination to achieve that. The pupil premium ensures that schools are given additional funds to support disadvantaged pupils. We are delivering 30 hours of free childcare for three and four-year-old children of working parents. We have begun our pioneering work in 12 opportunity areas, where we will partner with local communities to drive social mobility. Teach First is now sending even more high-quality graduates to work in areas of high deprivation. We have introduced a £75 million teaching and leadership innovation fund to improve professional development for teachers in disadvantaged areas. Our school reforms have led to 1.8 million more children having a good or outstanding school place than in 2010, helping to ensure that they get the education they need and deserve. The number of children studying the combination of academic subjects that make up the English baccalaureate has risen from just over one fifth to nearly two fifths, ensuring that more pupils have access to the broad academic education that they need. The Government are transforming technical education, with new T-levels adding prestige and raising quality for students.

I listened carefully to what the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam said about early years. The Department's ambition is to ensure that the circumstances of a child's birth do not determine what they can achieve in life. We are delivering 30 hours of free childcare for three and four-year-old children of working parents. We have laid out our strategy to improve the quality of the early years workforce by improving access to high-quality professional development. We have introduced the two-year-old offer to allow disadvantaged two-year-olds to attend early years. I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman with regard to that policy.

Crucially, the introduction of systematic synthetic phonics and the accompanying phonics screening check have seen a dramatic rise in early literacy. This year, 147,000 more six-year-olds are on track to becoming fluent readers than in 2012. Phonics is our most potent weapon in our fight to close the intolerable gap in literacy between the most disadvantaged children and the more affluent.

The Government have been unapologetic in their unrelenting push to raise educational standards. Nearly nine in 10 schools are rated by Ofsted as good or outstanding, but there is still more to do. More than 1 million children still attend a school that is not yet rated good. The Government want every parent in the country to have the choice of a good school place for their child. That is why we will create more good school places, harnessing the resources and expertise of universities, faith schools and independent schools, and lifting the ban on selective school places.

We do not think it is fair that children have the opportunity to go to an academically selective school only if they live in a particular county in England, when 98% of grammar schools are good or outstanding. We know that selective schools are vehicles of social mobility—I accept that that is for those pupils who attend them—and almost eliminate the attainment gap between pupils

[Mr Nick Gibb]

from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. That is one argument, but there are many others. Pupils in grammar schools make significantly more progress than their similarly able peers, with Progress 8 showing an aggregate score of plus 0.33 for grammar schools, compared with a national average of 0. The House will also be aware that 78% of high-ability children who leave primary school with a level 5 in their SATs go on to achieve the full EBacc suite of GCSEs if they go to a grammar school, but only 53% achieve that if they go to a comprehensive. That is why we want to ensure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds and ordinary working families have the opportunity to benefit from selective schools. We also want to ensure, as we set out in the consultation document, that selective schools work with neighbouring primary and secondary schools to the benefit of all pupils.

As the Social Mobility Commission report sets out, there are “social mobility coldspots” across the country that are falling behind. Twelve of those areas have been designated as opportunity areas by the Secretary of State, building on the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough. We will target interventions in those areas that are designed to improve opportunity and choice for pupils. Those opportunity areas will enable us to identify new approaches to tackling the root causes of educational disadvantage. We will build an evidence base of what works so that we can transfer those approaches to other areas to remove the barriers to social mobility.

As the Social Mobility Commission recognises, the single biggest educational factor that improves social mobility is the quality of teachers, so we intend to invest in the profession. We will invest a substantial proportion of the £70 million for the northern powerhouse schools strategy in piloting new approaches to attracting and retaining teachers in the north of England, and we will target the £75 million teaching and leadership innovation fund at improving professional development for teachers where that can make the most difference.

Thanks to the academy and free schools programme, teachers and headteachers have enjoyed greater freedoms to tackle poor behaviour and raise expectations in the curriculum. Teachers have been instrumental in setting up some of the highest performing and most innovative free schools in areas of disadvantage.

Last month, I visited Reach Academy Feltham, run by Teach First ambassador Ed Vainker. I was struck by his passion as he explained the lengths to which he and his school go to ensure that they attract as many pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds as possible. Reach Feltham’s determination to do everything it can to admit pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds is an example of a school with a mission to drive social mobility. That free school and other innovative schools show what it is possible to achieve.

Whether it is Reach Feltham, Michaela Community School, City Academy Hackney, King Solomon Academy, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough mentioned, or Harris Academy Merton, which the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) mentioned, where 39% of pupils are entered for the EBacc suite of GCSEs, they all understand the importance of knowledge and teach a stretching, knowledge-rich

curriculum. Each of those schools has clear routines that are consistent in all classrooms. They understand the importance of a strong approach to behaviour management. They all serve disadvantaged communities, demonstrating that high academic and behaviour standards are not and must not be the preserve of wealthy pupils in independent schools or socially selective comprehensive schools.

Nicky Morgan: Is not my right hon. Friend demonstrating in the second half of his speech why the first part about reintroducing selection is a red herring? He has just given examples of several hugely impressive schools, with pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who are achieving excellent results. Does he not agree that we want more such schools rather than accepting that schools cannot always achieve that and therefore taking pupils out to put them into selective education?

Mr Gibb: We want to leave no stone unturned. The purpose of the Green Paper that we published in September is to ensure that we harness all the expertise and talent in this country, whether in universities, independent schools, faith schools, outstanding comprehensive schools or selective schools to ensure that we have more good school places. There are still problems that we have to address.

According to the Sutton Trust, just 53% of high-ability children who are eligible for the pupil premium take triple science GCSEs, compared with 69% of non-free-school-meal children. Some 20% of high-ability free school meal children are at schools where triple science is not even offered. We are trying to tackle those issues, and we are leaving no stone unturned.

We are also addressing technical education. We are spending £500 million a year on improving technical education and we will deliver the recommendations of Lord Sainsbury’s review in full. Those new T-levels will replace 13,000 or so different qualifications.

As right hon. and hon. Members argued in their article, our country and economy are changing fast. We must ensure that all pupils, irrespective of background, receive an education that gives them opportunity and choice in their adult life. We should all be able to agree that social mobility should be about not where a person starts, but where they end up.

A few weeks ago, I visited Michaela Community School in Wembley, a new free school committed to improving the education of those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Every day at lunch all the pupils recite in unison one or two of the poems that they have learnt by heart. When I was there, they recited William Henley’s “Invictus”, which reflects the determination and stoicism that is fostered at Michaela Community School:

“Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the contents and recommendations of the annual State of the Nation report from the Social Mobility Commission; notes that despite welcome measures by successive governments to improve social mobility the Commission warns that social mobility is getting worse, the reasons for which are deep-seated and multi-faceted; and calls on the Government to lead a renewed approach in the early years, in education, skills and housing, to improve social mobility.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Tuesday 28 March, the backbench business set down for consideration may be entered upon at any hour, may be proceeded with, though opposed, for ninety minutes, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of.—(*Michael Ellis.*)

Ratty's Lane Incinerator

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Andrew Griffiths.*)

5 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's statement this morning on yesterday's distressing events? She spoke for the nation and for my constituents.

May I say how disappointed I am to have to bring this matter to the attention of the House and the Minister this afternoon? In the main, Members of Parliament should keep out of the way of planning applications. However, the conduct of Veolia in making an application for an incinerator in my constituency, at Rye House and Fieldes Lock, a site running off Ratty's Lane, is so egregious that it is worthy of being aired in the Chamber.

I thank County Councillor Tim Hutchings for all his support in helping me to prepare for this afternoon's Adjournment debate. He is a diligent representative and has worked tirelessly to inform me of his community's concerns, as have the Hoddesdon Society and, Madam Deputy Speaker, many of your constituents—this application has an impact on your constituency as well.

The concerns centre on an application by Veolia to build a 350,000 tonne incinerator at Rye House, Fieldes Lock in the north of my constituency. Veolia had argued as recently as July 2015 that the site was wholly unsuitable for such a facility, a view shared by Hertfordshire County Council, which is the relevant planning authority and the owner of the waste contract, and, more importantly, by the planning inspector and ultimately the Secretary of State.

By way of background, in July 2015, after a long and protracted period of review, the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government threw out a planning application by Veolia for a waste incinerator at New Barnfield, a site in the Borough of Welwyn Hatfield in the neighbouring constituency. As part of that application, Veolia researched and then ruled out a number of alternative sites. One of those was Rye House, Fieldes Lock, the site of its current application.

In July 2013, Veolia, on page 35 of its alternative sites assessment report, said that the Rye House, Fieldes Lock site

“is identified as a safeguarded strategic rail aggregate depot, is located adjacent to the River Lea within an area subject to flood risk and is proximate to a RAMSAR designation. The site is also very compact and has local highway capacity access constraints that required the need for the rail linked solution. Such constraints do not facilitate the development of an RERF at this site, where the local rail network presents operational and logistical difficulties to serve Hertfordshire and where the strategy of the Hertfordshire Waste Collection Authorities and Hertfordshire Residual Waste Treatment contract are essentially based on road borne delivery.”

The findings of Veolia's 2013 ASA were repeated virtually word for word by the company's agent, Steven Kosky, on page 96 of his proof of evidence report, which was presented to the planning inspector as part of the New Barnfield inquiry. In responding to that evidence, Mr David Richards, the planning inspector, said on page 27 of his report to the Secretary of State:

“The fact is that no suitable alternative site has been put forward in the evidence by any of the parties to the inquiry.

[Mr Charles Walker]

Veolia and HCC have given evidence in writing some 6 weeks before the inquiry began (and in rebuttal evidence a week before the inquiry) and in oral evidence that there is no alternative suitable site."

The inspector went on to say:

"Fieldes Lock is dealt with in the ASA and by Mr Leech. It is not in an Area of Search in the WCS and is in the south-east of the county not well located to waste arising and collections. It was promoted by Veolia for a SRF power station with additional natural gas fired generation to serve North London and with the SRF to arrive by rail. It needed the rail feed because it is a compact site which could not accommodate the road based collections needs of this county and so could not accommodate the kind of EfW plant proposed, let alone the front-end recycling facility too."

The findings of the planning inspector were endorsed by the Secretary of State who, in his letter of 16 July 2015, said:

"the Secretary of State agrees that there is no obvious alternative site that would perform significantly better in environmental terms and that is suitable for the use proposed and available for a development of the scale proposed at New Barnfield... For the reasons given, the Secretary of State also agrees with the Inspector that there is no available sites within the Employment Land Areas of Search which would be of sufficient size to accommodate the proposed development."

Well there you have it, Madam Deputy Speaker: a seeming slam dunk against New Barnfield and, in connection, the Rye House, Fieldes Lock site. The Secretary of State, his planning inspector, Hertfordshire County Council and Veolia are all in agreement that the Rye House, Fieldes Lock site is not a suitable alternative for the incinerator.

Like the undead, however, this zombie application is now rising from the grave, badly decayed but somehow still living. Having invested significant sums of its corporate treasure to trash the Rye House, Fieldes Lock site, Veolia is now promoting it as the ideal alternative location for its incinerator. Veolia's previous statements, such as that the site

"is located adjacent to the River Lea within an area subject to flood risk and is proximate to a RAMSAR designation",

or

"the site is also very compact and has local highway capacity and access constraints"

or

"Such constraints do not facilitate the development of an RERF at this site"

have, on page 22 of Veolia's 2016 ASA, incredulously been replaced with the following statement:

"Generally, the site has few operational, planning and environmental constraints, although it is noted that the presence of power lines across part of the site constrain the developable area."

That is a simply stunning volte face on behalf of Veolia: no mention of the site being poorly located for waste arisings, and no mention that the site was previously deemed too compact by the planning inspector or was ill-suited to road-borne deliveries. In essence, it is a complete reimagining by Veolia of its previous position: a new and alternative reality completely at odds with both Veolia's previous position and the stated position of the planning inspector and the Secretary of State.

Quite frankly, on this evidence Veolia could argue with a straight face that the moon is actually the sun and the sun is in reality Mars. Just last week, when interviewed by Broxbourne's local newspaper, the *Hertfordshire Mercury*, Richard Kirkman, a director of Veolia, said:

"I think people always worry about transport. We have looked at the impact on the local highways and what has been demonstrated is that even now traffic can be supported".

But in making this statement, Mr Kirkman must have known that it entirely contradicted Veolia's position, as stated in its 2013 ASA that

"The site is also very compact and has local highway and access constraints."

So I say to Mr Kirkman, on behalf of my constituents, "Why are you taking us for fools? Your statement is false. It is false not just because it falls foul of your own ASA statement, but because in 2012, when Veolia was trying to promote the Rye House, Fieldes Lock site for a rail-fed incinerator to burn London's waste, Hertfordshire County Council Highways objected to just 46 of Veolia's proposed HGV movements, as opposed to the 212 the company is now asking for." So, Mr Kirkman, if five years ago our roads could not cope with 46 HGV movements a day, how can they cope with 212 a day now?

Veolia's creation of alternative facts is matched by its wholly cynical public information campaign. In a letter, dated 9 March, that it sent to thousands of homes in the Rye Park and Hoddesdon area, the company stated:

"This application is for a smaller facility than previously proposed at New Barnfield".

Well, if not directly dishonest, that is a wholly distorted statement designed to mislead my constituents. The New Barnfield application was for a 380,000-tonne incinerator. The application for Rye House, Fieldes Lock is for an incinerator with a capacity of 350,000 tonnes. That is a fractional difference of about 9%. However, Veolia's conduct in this claim is, once again, most effectively damned by its own Steven Kosky, who, when concerned residents were arguing in favour of smaller sites than the one being proposed, wrote on page 10 of the company's 2013 supplementary proof of evidence to the planning inspector:

"In addition two facilities, of say 200,000 tonnes throughput capacity, each would not be materially smaller in terms of height and land take than the single facility proposed... In summary, to make a materially smaller ERF facility, the annual throughput would need to fall considerably below 100,000 tonnes".

That is a breathtaking rebuttal of Veolia's claims, by Veolia. You really could not make it up, unless you could find it in writing.

Just as concerning as Veolia's cynicism on the issue of size is this claim in its 9 March letter:

"Already £6.5 million has been allocated through the Local Enterprise Partnership to improve the local road network."

That statement is concerning. For more than 20 years Broxbourne borough council has been seeking funds to pay for that upgrade without success; then, miraculously, after more than two fruitless decades, a £6.5 million investment arrives at a time that is most advantageous to both Veolia and Hertfordshire County Council—which, I remind the Minister, in relation to this application is both the relevant planning authority and the owner of the contract. In making that investment, the LEP announced that it would create

"up to 400 new jobs".

That figure is not dissimilar to the one being trumpeted by Veolia in its press release, but let us be clear: of those jobs, 300 will end when the construction phase is completed, with the proposed incinerator employing no more than 40 whole-time equivalents.

Why are my constituents concerned about Veolia's laying claim to having motivated that £6.5 million investment? They are concerned because Hertfordshire County Council has senior representatives sitting on the LEP board and a direct interest in securing those funds: not primarily, I suspect, for the benefit of my constituents, but to ease the progress of Veolia's—its business partner's—planning application.

My constituents are concerned that our county council is even entertaining the application for the Rye House, Fieldes Lock site, given that on 24 June 2014, in a special report addressed directly to Hertfordshire County Council, Andrew Freeman, the planning inspector, stated unequivocally:

“In addition to flooding and groundwater issues, there is a safeguarded rail aggregate depot within the Rye House site. Waste developments not served by rail could have a significant impact on the local highway network. The viability of a smaller (road served) facility could be questionable given the cost of likely necessary mitigation measures. Allocation of the sites would not be appropriate”.

Despite that statement by the planning inspector, and despite its being ruled out by the Secretary of State, the council still seems to want to promote the site along with Veolia.

Why is the £6.5 million important to Veolia? It is important because, as I said a few moments ago, in 2012, when Veolia was promoting the Rye House, Fieldes Lock site for a mostly rail-fed incinerator, Hertfordshire County Council lodged a highways objection against just 46 HGV movements a day. In making its objection, the council stated, in October 2012:

“Should the facility be unable to import 90% of the SRF material by rail, then it is considered that the resultant impacts on the highway network would be unacceptable in highway terms because...additional road movements would have a significant impact on the highway network”.

The 46 HGV movements to which Hertfordshire County Council objected in 2012 pale into insignificance compared with the 212 for which Veolia is now asking. So, bluntly, without the LEP stumping up the cash, this current planning application to burn Hertfordshire's waste would be even more dead in the water than it is now. Let us be honest—if this application was a fish, it would be floating around, belly up and bloated. Even with the LEP money, the application is on its last gasp before the point of expiration. I believe that it is possible that coincidence can be the bedfellow of happy circumstance and that therefore not everything is a conspiracy, but given the highly contested nature of this incinerator, it is now incumbent on Hertfordshire County Council, the Hertfordshire local enterprise partnership and Veolia to demonstrate beyond contention that public money has not been used to promote and ease Veolia's planning application.

In pursuit of establishing the facts, you will not be surprised to learn, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I wrote to all three parties on Monday 13 March asking that they place in the public domain any communications they had in relation to this £6.5 million of funding and its possible connection, either in whole or in part, to the

incinerator. While I still await a substantive response from Veolia, I can say that the chief executive of Hertfordshire County Council has responded and categorically denied any suggestion that the local authority placed any pressure on the Hertfordshire LEP in relation to the £6.5 million of LEP funding in connection to Veolia's application. I accept this assurance at face value, and I can say that the LEP has also written to me along similar lines.

However, I also asked the county council in my letter to release information in connection to any discussions it had had with Veolia regarding the road and bridge improvements. That question remains outstanding, but it needs to be answered. It needs to be answered because, in bringing forward its application, it is inconceivable to imagine that Veolia did not raise the Hertfordshire highways department's 2012 objections to its previous Rye House, Fieldes Lock application for just 46 HGV movements a day. Following that objection, Veolia would surely have asked the council how that could be overcome, given that the company is now proposing 212 HGV movements for the same site in 2017. Until there is full disclosure, the nagging concern will remain that the allocation of public money for the road improvements was primarily motivated by an interest to improve the circumstances of Veolia, a private company that is in danger of being rewarded for its shoddy enterprise and shoddy conduct.

My constituents' concerns about the relationship between the principal parties—Veolia, Hertfordshire County Council and the Hertfordshire local enterprise partnership—are legitimate. They are legitimate because this is meant to be an undetermined planning application. They are legitimate because, despite its having a foot in all camps, it is reasonable for my constituents to expect that Hertfordshire County Council's planning regime is robust and independent. They are also legitimate because as recently as 2015, the interested parties now promoting the Rye House, Fieldes Lock site deemed it to be unusable, a position endorsed by the planning inspector and the Secretary of State.

The Minister will be aware that, for the reasons I have set out, I am of the view that this application cannot be safely determined by Hertfordshire County Council. That is the case because Hertfordshire County Council, as both the relevant planning authority and the owner of the waste contract, has a glaring conflict of interest in relation to this long-running application that has been going on in some form for more than six years. The county council has put itself in an impossible position from which it now needs to extricate itself. Let me be absolutely clear that although I am making this criticism of the county council, I believe that in all other areas it is an outstanding example of good, sound and principled local government. It is an authority for which I have immense respect, and I do not damn it for its sole error of judgment: entering into a contract with Veolia, a company whose conduct in this matter plumbs new depths of entitlement and corporate dishonesty. That dishonesty is exemplified in its dealings with the planning process, the inspectorate, Hoddesdon's local newspaper and, most importantly, my constituents and yours, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I wholly accept that the Minister will not be able to respond to my concerns this evening. However, I want to conclude with these facts. The applicant, Veolia, the contract

[*Mr Charles Walker*]

holder, Hertfordshire County Council, the planning inspector, Mr Robinson, and the Secretary of State have all previously agreed that Rye House, Fieldes Lock is unusable as a site for an incinerator. None of the facts that underpinned the decision has changed. The site is still compact, it is still at the far edge of the county, it is still on a flood plain, it still has highway and capacity constraints, and it is still next to a Ramsar site. These are the facts as they are, not as Veolia would reimagine them to be.

5.20 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell):

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) on securing this debate on the proposal to develop an energy recovery facility at Ratty's Lane in Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire. I know that the issue is of great importance to him, as he demonstrated by the eloquence of his speech. It is also an issue of great concern for many of his constituents, and he does them a good service by raising it in the House tonight. I know that this is also a matter of concern for many of your constituents, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As my hon. Friend said, a planning application was submitted by the developer, Veolia, on 22 December last year for an energy recovery facility located in the Lea valley in Hertfordshire that would deal with 320,000 tonnes of municipal, general, commercial and industrial waste produced each year in Hertfordshire. It would be expected to generate 23.5 MW of electricity per year.

Mr Walker: The capacity would be 350,000 tonnes. That figure is taken from Veolia's own press release.

Gavin Barwell: I have experience of dealing with these issues, because a similar facility is being developed in Sutton, near my constituency. I believe that 320,000 tonnes is the projected annual usage, but that there is a maximum capacity of 350,000 tonnes, as my hon. Friend says.

I should say at the outset that, as my hon. Friend kindly pointed out at the end of his speech, proprietary considerations prevent me from commenting on the detail of the specific planning issues that he has raised, for two reasons. First, this is a live planning application that is currently being processed by Hertfordshire County Council. I understand that the application is subject to a public consultation that closes at the end of this month. There is obviously a possibility, were the application to be refused, that an appeal could be made to the Secretary of State, so it is important that I should not say anything that might prejudice the Secretary of State's position in determining any such appeal. Secondly, my hon. Friend has asked the Secretary of State to call in the application, and it is equally important that I should not say anything that could prejudice that call-in request.

I will therefore focus on how the planning system operates in contributing to the robust regulatory framework that we have in place to plan for the sustainable management of the waste that we produce. The national planning policy for waste was published in October 2014 and provides part of the wider regulatory framework in which the application to develop an energy recovery facility in my hon. Friend's constituency will have to be considered by the council.

The Government are committed to a zero-waste economy. By that, we do not mean somewhere in which no waste exists. We mean a society in which resources are fully valued, financially and environmentally, in which one person's waste is another's resource, and in which nothing is actually wasted, so that, over time, we get as close as we can to zero landfill. The planning system plays a vital role in delivering that ambition, and it is pivotal to the adequate and timely provision of the new waste facilities that are needed to move the management of waste up the waste hierarchy so that we do not continue to bury large amounts of our waste in the ground as previous generations have done.

Waste facilities are an essential part of the infrastructure necessary to make our towns and cities function properly in the 21st century, and they often provide an important service beyond their immediate neighbourhood. The key to getting this right is the preparation of waste plans. There are sound financial and environmental benefits in having up-to-date plans. They provide certainty to attract investment in new facilities, and they guide and deliver waste infrastructure that will help us to divert waste from landfill and to reduce greenhouse gases. To that extent, and without commenting on the merits of the plan for the reasons to which my hon. Friend alluded, I am pleased that Hertfordshire County Council has in place an up-to-date waste core strategy, which was adopted back in 2012 and covers the period to 2026.

I appreciate that many people may have concerns about the type of technology under discussion: an energy recovery facility that would generate electricity by incinerating waste. The planning system is technology-neutral. It is not for planners to describe a specific type of energy-from-waste technology required for a particular site; it is for the planning system to decide whether it is appropriate to site such a facility in a particular location. That is my hon. Friend's argument. Energy-from-waste facilities—they include incinerators, but also embrace other technologies such as anaerobic digestion or gasification—make a valuable contribution to achieving waste objectives, but we recognise that recycling waste is better than energy recovery. The evidence for that is the national target to increase the recycling of municipal waste to 50% by 2020. In the majority of cases, however, maximising the energy recovered from non-recyclable residual waste is better than sending it straight to landfill.

The choice of technology must reflect local circumstances, which clearly will vary from place to place. However, it is important that plans for the technology emerge out of local waste strategies, which seek to drive waste up the waste hierarchy. Whichever type of technology is chosen, national planning policy requires that waste planning authorities—Hertfordshire County Council in this case—assess the suitability of locations against a range of criteria when they are preparing a plan or deciding an individual application. It might help my hon. Friend if I set out those criteria, which should include: the physical and environmental constraints on development; existing and proposed neighbouring land uses; the capacity of existing and potential transport infrastructure to support the sustainable movement of waste, which my hon. Friend touched on in his speech; the cumulative impact of existing and proposed waste disposal facilities on the wellbeing of the local community; and any significant adverse impacts on environmental quality, social cohesion or economic potential.

Waste processing facilities are unpopular neighbours, and it is understandable that local residents will be concerned about the possible adverse impact of such a facility on their local environment. As my hon. Friend is no doubt aware, those matters must be considered by the county council when reaching a decision on the application. Should planning permission be granted, we must not forget that such facilities will not be able to operate until the operator has also obtained an environmental permit from the Environment Agency. Once such facilities become operational, I assure the House that the Environment Agency governs their operation strictly, ensuring that ambient air and water quality meet standards that safeguard against negative impacts to the local environment and human health. In addition, planning authorities such as Hertfordshire County Council can ensure that waste is handled in a manner that protects the environment and human health through the application of appropriate planning conditions, adequate enforcement, and monitoring of the operation of facilities once they are up and running.

I am very much alive to the concerns that my hon. Friend and other Members have raised about this planning application. In this particular case, the council should process the application and, when reaching a decision, should thoroughly examine the concerns raised by my hon. Friend and his constituents, and by you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and your constituents. I encourage anyone with an interest in this application to let

Hertfordshire County Council know their views by 31 March. I assure the House that the Government are not complacent.

We welcome the contribution that my hon. Friend has made during the debate. We will continue to maintain both the right national planning policy and a robust regulatory framework to secure the sustainable management of waste across the country.

Finally, it falls to me to end our proceedings today. As other hon. Members have done during the course of the day, I want to put it on record that it does this House, our society and our country great credit that, in the light of yesterday's tragic events, business in this House has gone exactly as planned. We have got on with the job that we were elected to do, and we will not be deterred from doing it by those who have committed such heinous crimes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I am sure that the whole House would agree with what the Minister has just said in concluding today's proceedings, which have gone, as he said, exactly to plan. Our democratic system is working perfectly.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 23 March 2017

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

Syrian Refugee Crisis

1.30 pm

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

That this House has considered the First Report of the International Development Committee of Session 2015-16, Syrian refugee crisis, HC 463, and the Government response, HC 902.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. In January last year, the International Development Committee released our first report of this Parliament, which focused on the refugee crisis that has arisen from the conflict in Syria. On 15 March, the Syrian conflict marked its sixth anniversary. The scale of the conflict has been well documented: it is enormous, in terms of both the humanitarian challenge and the number of lives lost. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates that since the start of the conflict, 450,000 people have lost their lives. Last year, the United Nations identified 13.5 million Syrians requiring humanitarian assistance, almost half of whom—6 million—are internally displaced in Syria. In January 2017, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that there are 4.8 million registered refugees.

I refer to my relevant entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: in 2015, I visited Jordan with Oxfam. A third of Jordan's population are refugees. When I visited the Zaatari refugee camp alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), we heard the same message repeatedly from the refugees: all they want is the opportunity to return home to a peaceful Syria.

We have seen six years of repeated atrocities. Let me highlight two examples. Last September, the Syrian Government bombed a UN aid convoy, killing 14 aid workers. The convoy had been organised by the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, and was carrying food, medicine and other humanitarian supplies destined for families in areas of the country controlled by the opposition. A UN report released earlier this month said that the attack was deliberate, meticulously planned and ruthlessly carried out. Then, of course, there was the long siege of Aleppo, which the same United Nations report called a war crime. It was reported that the Syrian Government and their allies were carrying out attacks on areas packed with civilians while the city faced chronic shortages of food, medicine and fuel. We have seen all those events unfold in real time on our television screens. We saw the shocking image of Omran Daqneesh, the five-year-old Syrian boy sitting in the back of an ambulance. We need to work together to bring an end to this conflict as soon as possible.

As with all conflicts, there are many parties acting for good in both Syria and the surrounding region. I want to draw particular attention to and praise the work of the White Helmets—the 3,000 members of the Syria Civil Defence—who work tirelessly to protect civilians

caught up in the conflict and are often the first on the scene after bombings. We should also praise the work of the various non-governmental organisations and United Nations missions that deliver aid on the ground in some of the most challenging conditions ever seen.

Our Committee's report made a number of recommendations to the Government, and principally to the Department for International Development, including on increasing the opportunities for cash-based assistance to the region, identifying and developing opportunities for investment and job creation in Jordan, ensuring that vulnerable refugees outside camps receive appropriate levels of support, and pressing the Lebanese Government to resume the registration process for new refugees. We urged the Government to come to a quick decision on Save the Children's proposal that 3,000 unaccompanied children from Europe be resettled in this country.

DFID has led the way with its efforts to alleviate the suffering and the ongoing humanitarian crisis that still grips Syria and the surrounding region. The UK plays an active role in encouraging other countries to pledge money and resources to the region. A year ago, in February 2016, the Government hosted the "Supporting Syria and the Region" conference, in which nearly \$6 billion was pledged to help the UN co-ordinated appeals. An additional \$5.4 billion was pledged up until 2020, bringing the total to more than \$11 billion. That was followed up with an event this January, co-hosted by Finland and the United Nations, which launched a further appeal for \$8 billion to relieve the humanitarian crisis. I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us what progress was being made towards achieving that, and what the United Kingdom's contribution is.

In our report, we made it clear that we welcome DFID's cash-based assistance efforts in the region and want them developed further. Many refugees exhaust their savings just to get out of the country, and many are heavily in debt. That is exacerbated by the fact that they are often not allowed to work in the country in which they have refuge. Cash-based assistance has proven to be a value-for-money approach to humanitarian assistance. I welcome the fact that DFID has already distributed nearly 1 million vouchers in the region.

Job creation, investment and economic growth are vital factors in ensuring that refugees in the countries around Syria are able to regain a sense of normality when the conflict eventually ends. During the Syria conference in London last year, Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon—the main recipient countries of refugees—promised to open up their economies to help generate job growth, for both refugees and, very importantly, their host communities. I want to put on the record that the Jordanian Government and people have responded particularly positively to that. Syrian refugees are now able to apply for work permits in Jordan in sectors of the economy in which Jordanian participation is low—for example, construction, agriculture and other service industries. Those changes have allowed roughly 37,000 Syrian refugees to gain employment in Jordan—up from 4,000 at the time of the London conference. Jordan has also gained preferential access to European Union markets, which will give designated development zones the potential to provide more than 100,000 jobs to both Jordanians and Syrians in the future.

The United Kingdom is the second largest bilateral donor to Syria and the surrounding countries. As a result of the funding that humanitarian organisations

[Stephen Twigg]

have received, we are able to keep refugees close to home, so that when the conflict comes to an end they can return to Syria. Providing basic humanitarian assistance is vital, but it is not enough. There needs to be a sense of hope for a better future.

The UK Government, and DFID in particular, have taken some very positive steps to ensure that the humanitarian situation in Syria and the surrounding countries is well managed and well funded, but there are some areas where our Committee feels DFID could and should do more. In our report, we recommended that the Department make use of the Commonwealth Development Corporation's expertise in that regard. We believe that the Government already have a good story to tell on job creation and investment, particularly in Jordan, but more could be done to provide sustainable job opportunities for both refugees and host communities if CDC's expertise were engaged. Legislation has now gone through Parliament to increase significantly the amount of capital available to CDC. I urge the Government to look again at the question of whether CDC can invest in at least some economies in that region, particularly in the run-up to the forthcoming publication of the corporation's five-year strategy.

Other outstanding issues were addressed in our report. The Syrian conflict has disproportionately affected certain minority groups, especially ethnic and religious minorities and disabled people. The best solution for them is often resettlement in other parts of the world, but for reasons of stigma or fear of persecution, many do not register, so they fall through the net. Only 23% of Syrian refugees live in formal camps, and there are no such camps for them in Lebanon or Egypt. There is the tragic situation in the berm, the area between Jordan and Syria, where a large number of refugees live, in often very desperate circumstances, in a state of limbo, unable to get out.

As the conflict has worn on, more people have sought out support from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. I am keen to hear from the Minister what the Government are doing with UNHCR and civil society to ensure that support reaches everyone who needs it, whether they are registered or not. Registration is an important step, but more needs to be done to ensure that all those eligible for resettlement, either here in the UK or elsewhere, are granted it.

On 9 February, *The Independent* reported that the Home Office wanted a "temporary limit" on requests from people with mobility problems and learning disabilities because of a lack of "suitable reception capacity" for them in the UK. Will the Minister include in his response the Government's position on the temporary limit, and will he say whether they are planning to lift it? I simply make the point that the most vulnerable are those who need our support the most.

There is also long-standing concern about a policy in Lebanon that has inhibited UNHCR's ability to register new refugees in that country. DFID has allocated £46 million to UNHCR's efforts in Lebanon, but I am concerned that the policy may prevent people from accessing basic services. The Lebanese Government say that there are more than 500,000 unregistered Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and that more than two thirds of the Syrian children born in Lebanon have not even had their births registered. Will the Minister update us on

that Lebanese policy? Is it still in place, and if so, what is the United Kingdom doing to work with the Lebanese Government to make progress, so that, ideally, all refugees in Lebanon are registered?

Last December, the UK Government co-sponsored a UN General Assembly motion that sought to establish an independent mechanism to assist in bringing to justice those responsible for the most serious crimes in Syria. The UK has also worked closely with the French and American Governments on a motion to hold Daesh and the Assad regime to account for their use of chemical weapons. Unfortunately, the motion was vetoed by Russia and China. Will the Minister update the House on that, and in particular on the potential for an independent UN mechanism that would enable us to make progress in bringing to justice all those who have used illegal weapons in Syria?

The UK clearly has an important role to play in diplomatic efforts to bring an end to the Syrian conflict. It is promising to see that the UN-mediated political talks between the Syrian parties resumed in Geneva last month, and the next round is due to take place later this month. There have been calls for the 30 December ceasefire to be strengthened, so will the Minister tell us what role the UK will play in ensuring that the ceasefire holds and that we can make progress through diplomatic means?

The final issue from the report has probably attracted the most attention and public debate, and that is the Save the Children recommendation on 3,000 unaccompanied children. Last year, before the Government had an opportunity to respond to our report, Lord Dubs put forward an amendment to the Immigration Bill that would have legally bound us to resettle 3,000 unaccompanied children from Europe. Ahead of the vote, the Government announced that they would resettle 3,000 vulnerable people from the middle east and north Africa over the course of the Parliament. Those people would not solely be unaccompanied children, but that was nevertheless very welcome.

When the Bill became an Act, it stated that the number of children to be resettled

"shall be determined by the Government".

By September last year, no child had been brought to the UK as a result of the provision, which is still known as the Dubs amendment. By November, according to what the Home Office's Minister for Immigration told the International Development Committee, about 140 children had been resettled, including 80 from France. We welcomed the progress. Last month, however, the Government announced that a total of 350 children would be resettled over the course of the Parliament, with 200 already in the UK. The Immigration Minister told the House in a written statement that the 350 number met

"the intention and spirit behind the provision".

That figure is of course a fraction of the 3,000 proposed by Save the Children, a figure that was based on an estimate of the UK's fair share of the 30,000 unaccompanied children who had made their way to Europe by 2015—and estimates suggest that the figure has since trebled. The Government can do more to ensure that children who have made the journey to Europe alone are protected. In 2014, an estimated 13,000 unaccompanied children arrived just in Italy, about 4,000 of whom have gone missing. There is real concern that some of those children

might have become the victims of people traffickers and been forced into prostitution, child labour or the drugs trade. We cannot stand by while that happens on our doorstep.

Meanwhile, in the past two months, President Trump has signed two executive orders that prevent Syrian refugees from claiming refuge in the United States. The US has a positive and progressive track record of resettling refugees from many conflicts around the world; President Trump has broken with that. He said that European countries had made “a tremendous mistake” by admitting millions of refugees from Syria and other middle eastern “trouble spots”. How can giving people refuge from conflicts that are destroying their country be described by the President of the United States as a mistake? President Trump’s executive order does nothing but further complicate the humanitarian situation in the region. It is vital that the United Kingdom does not follow the Trump Administration’s lead.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Would the hon. Gentleman, like me, welcome clarification of whether the Dubs amendment scheme is in fact closed? There seems to be uncertainty about that. Will the Government welcome any additional contributions offered by local authorities that feel that they may have more capacity in future?

Stephen Twigg: The hon. Gentleman is a relatively new member of the International Development Committee but already an active and committed one. I thank him for his work on it. I absolutely agree with him. If the Minister could respond to that point, I would be delighted. I agree that it is not entirely clear whether the scheme has been completely closed. I hope that it has not, and that there will be further opportunities for unaccompanied children to be resettled, beyond the 350 to which the Government have already committed.

I am grateful to the Liaison Committee for the opportunity to debate our report and the Government response. I thank fellow members of the International Development Committee for their work—a number of members from all parties are present for the debate—and I put on record my appreciation of the fantastic team of staff who support the work of the Committee. I look forward to listening to all contributions to the debate, which—this is my final point—we are holding in the context of great public and media concern about, and scrutiny of, international aid and development. I and other members of the Committee from different parties have argued consistently that those of us who believe in UK aid, and who defend the 0.7% target and DFID as a stand-alone Department, have a particular responsibility to demonstrate that that aid is being delivered and makes a real difference to the most vulnerable—that we truly have value for money.

In her statement to the House last week on the counter-Daesh strategy, the Secretary of State for International Development said that our work in Syria and the region

“shows Britain at its best and exactly why we have UK aid. It shows not only how the British Government lead across the world, but how we influence security and stabilisation”—[*Official Report*, 15 March 2017; Vol. 623, c. 448.]

in many of these areas. I echo her remarks; she is absolutely right. The investment that this country has made in aid to Syria and its neighbouring countries in

recent years is one of the finest examples of how humanitarian aid can make a real difference in a crisis. Our aid is crucial, but it is equally important that we redouble our efforts to find a diplomatic solution, so that the people of Syria can at last have the peace and justice that they deserve.

1.50 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and a pleasure, as always, to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who chairs our International Development Committee and gave an excellent and thorough speech. I thank Syria Relief, Islamic Relief and Save the Children, which gave evidence to the Committee and provided vital information about the impact of our aid to ensure that we were up to speed with what was happening on the ground.

I will not reiterate all the issues that the Chair of the Committee so eloquently raised, but I shall highlight several issues that came to the fore of my mind during our visit to Lebanon and Jordan. What are the Government doing about child labour in Lebanon? That issue was raised with us. I understand that the registration process means that families cannot gain employment, so children as young as six are sent out to work for as long as 12 hours for only a few dollars a day. That is basically child labour, abuse and exploitation. What is happening there? What are we doing to address that very concerning issue? Those children are traumatised and are being exploited. We should take that situation seriously and highlight it to the Government to ensure that they are aware of it and that measures are taken to try to ensure that children are not exploited in that manner.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the berm. What is happening there? When the Committee visited Jordan and Lebanon, we were not able to visit the berm, due to security issues. However, we heard about the absolutely desperate situations of people trapped there. They are trapped alongside extremists and encouraged to join extremist groups. They have little opportunity to do anything else with their lives and are absolutely desperate for money, so they are forced into situations in which they are exploited.

What is happening with the berm? When I raised the issue with Ministers we spoke to there, they downplayed and minimised it, which ran counter to the information that aid agencies on the ground gave us. We need to highlight and to press the issue in our liaison with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and to do all we can to ensure that people in the berm have not only aid but the opportunity to leave that area and access refugee camps, where they and their children will be secure and their children can receive education, which we help to provide.

Will the Minister also comment on mental health support for children? When the Committee visited the region, we saw children who had been traumatised by their journeys, the atrocities they had witnessed and having lost family members. I am sure that some of them could not even speak. Fortunately, they had some mental health support. How do we contribute to mental health support to ensure that those children recover as much as possible, start to lead their childhoods again and are enabled, so far as possible, to go on and achieve their full potential?

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

I was also troubled by the lack of electricity at the al-Azraq camp, which we visited. I was told when I raised the issue, “Well, that’s just about to happen,” but when I spoke to aid agencies, they said, “Yes, but for months lots of visitors have come and that’s what everyone has been told.” What is happening in that regard? Is any electricity available in that camp? How are we supporting the basic needs of refugees?

I am also concerned about the plight of Christians in the area. We heard evidence that Christians were frightened to go to camps where they would be in the minority, so they tended to live outside camps, in quite desperate situations with little access to aid. What is the Government’s strategy or policy? What do they hope to do to secure aid and protection for minority groups such as the Christians we heard about?

When we were in Lebanon, we heard about Palestinian camps. We must remember that these communities have hosted refugees for years, and we should commend the work that they have done. However, some quite distressing issues were raised about the services in the Palestinian camps. I know that we provide support in that regard. One crucial issue—I was tremendously upset when I heard about this—is that Palestinian people are electrocuted almost every other week because there is no appropriate electricity system. When it rains, people are electrocuted by live wires. We have been putting money into those camps for many years, so why are such basic things not in place? Surely, in this day and age, that should not be happening.

On the issue of vulnerable children and the Dubs scheme, will the UK consider taking more children than the 350 they announced? The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby stated that some councils have come forward to say that there may be additional capacity. Surely, if that is the case, we can work with councils to do all we can to ensure that as many children as possible are safe in the UK. *The Independent* reported that the Government have stopped taking disabled children through the MENA vulnerable children resettlement scheme. What is happening? How many disabled children have been relocated to the United Kingdom? I asked the Home Secretary that question on the Floor of the House more than a month ago and was told that, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on disability, I would receive a written response, but I still have not received any response and I remain very concerned. Disabled children are some of the most vulnerable children in this situation, and we should do all we can to identify their whereabouts and ensure that, wherever possible, we offer them refuge.

What liaison is taking place among United Kingdom Government Departments about Syria’s disappeared? Evidence of human rights abuses continues to mount against the regime of President Assad. What do we know about the underground network of detention centres where reportedly men, women and children have remained missing over a number of years, with families hearing little or no news as to what has become of them? In terms of diplomatic efforts, what are we doing to ensure that, where human rights abuses are taking place, we are directly addressing those with the appropriate authorities and Ministers?

Our aid has had a tremendous impact on the people it reaches; I have seen that first hand. It is true that our compassion sets us apart in terms of our leadership in

this field, but much more can be done, particularly for vulnerable children: those who may be on their own in Europe without parents, who have suffered trauma and long journeys, who are going missing and who are being exploited and abused. I would like the Government to try to address those issues compassionately and show the leadership those people very much deserve.

2 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and the International Development Committee on securing time from the Liaison Committee for this debate and the one that is about to follow. The Scottish National party has issues about the estimates procedure, but while it exists in its current format I hope he will be able to persuade the Liaison Committee to find some time for debates on his Committee’s reports on the Floor of the House. DFID might be one of the most scrutinised Departments in terms of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact and the excellent work of his Committee, but a lot of scrutiny in debate by other Members of Parliament goes on here in Westminster Hall, so DFID Ministers do not get their fair share of time at the Dispatch Box. Whenever they do, Members across the House show willingness to participate in such debates. I hope that we have more of them.

It is telling that the report is more than a year old, as is the Government’s response to it. That is the length of time we have had to wait for this opportunity, despite the fact that business in the main Chamber keeps collapsing. Without getting bogged down in procedural matters, I wanted to put that on the record.

Both of the reports are highly relevant, and sadly there has been little improvement in many of the areas covered in them. I offer my backing to the Committee’s findings and recommendations. It is worth reflecting on media reports suggesting that, just yesterday, while this place was under attack, 33 people were reported dead after an airstrike on a school acting as a shelter for internally displaced people in northern Syria. Yesterday, we had a terrible and tragic taste of a reality that people in Syria and elsewhere in the world—not least Nigeria, as we will hear later—live with on a daily basis.

I echo the general points made about the importance of the Government’s commitment to the 0.7% aid target. The global leadership that demonstrates is particularly important in the context of Brexit. It is important that we all defend and make the case for the continuation of that commitment.

I will look at two key areas of the report: support provided in Syria and the surrounding region, and the impact of the refugee crisis on the UK and western Europe in particular. We all recognise, as the Chair of the Committee did in his opening speech, the significant logistical challenges of delivering humanitarian aid on the ground, especially when land access is difficult. The tragic case mentioned of the aid convoy is a real example of that. That is why the SNP has repeatedly asked about the possibility of aid drops to areas under siege. If manned missions are not possible or risk airborne conflict, what serious consideration is being given to the use of drone technology? In the main Chamber, various Members have raised the US joint precision airdrop system, and we know that DFID—admittedly on a smaller scale—was

trialling drone delivery of medicine and aid in Nepal and Tanzania, so what discussions is the Minister having with the Ministry of Defence, the FCO and international partners on that? If we can drop bombs, surely we can find a way to drop aid.

I will also ask the Minister about support for NGOs on the ground and faith-based organisations in particular, who are often best placed to deliver aid. If it is difficult for the multilateral agencies to get through, what support can we provide for organisations on the ground? A big element of the counter-Daesh activity is cutting off finance and supply and using disruptive technological interventions. Can the reverse be true: is there a way of making finance and resources available under the radar? It would be interesting to hear about that.

In the wider region, NGOs, civil society organisations and faith-based organisations in particular have a role in the border countries, where much of the immediate displacement has occurred. Again, it would be useful to hear about support. My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) made important points about Christian and more general religious persecution in the area.

The Government are rightly a significant contributor to support in the formal refugee camps, but support outwith those camps, particularly in Lebanon, is also important. The report touches on the concept of cash transfers, which are a very—and increasingly—important method across development interventions. That shows respect for the individual's dignity and empowers people in an often otherwise oppressed situation. The Government should be commended for trying to press ahead with that. It would be interesting to hear any reflections the Minister can provide on that. Provision of education is also crucial in these scenarios. Otherwise, there is a risk of future generations being radicalised or simply missing their life chances and opportunities. As the crisis becomes increasingly protracted, there is the risk of not just one but more than one generation growing up like that.

I draw the Minister's and the House's attention to my early-day motion 1054 on the work of a former constituent of mine and his organisation Journeys of Hope, or Mishwar Amal, which supports refugees in Lebanon. It provides diverse opportunities, including travel, expeditions and entertainment for young people in particular in the camps who have been displaced from Syria and indeed Palestine. That is also indicative of the incredible response and generosity of people in the UK to the crisis. He was a constituent of mine, as I said, but he uprooted and has now made a home there, running that fantastic initiative.

There is also a role for the CDC, as the report says and as the Chair mentioned in his speech. The opportunity is there for the Government to live up to the potential they spoke of the CDC having when increased funding was asked for during the passage of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 2017.

On the impact of the refugee crisis here, Scotland and my city of Glasgow have been proud to welcome refugees from Syria and indeed around the world. However, I echo the comments of the earlier speakers: 20,000 over five years from the camps is not a fair share, and 350 under Dubs is certainly not. The issue of unaccompanied children in particular is of huge concern to the general public, to constituents of mine and I suspect to all of us. There have been clear indications from local authorities

that they are willing to take more children. The time is still there to put that right, do the right thing, reopen the scheme and ensure that more children can be safely relocated. I was interested to hear—I had not heard—that the number of unaccompanied children has potentially trebled since 2015. That is incredibly worrying, and that calls on us to do more.

Questions are raised by the Department, the Committee and me about the spend of official development assistance by Departments other than the Department for International Development. The resettlement of refugees is a legitimate way to use ODA, and I think none of us would disapprove if some of the money was going to that and that allowed the Home Office to increase the number of people it was willing to take.

There must be support for those refugees when they come here. I notice that the report speaks about English for speakers of other languages, which is important. I have encountered difficulties on that issue in my constituency. The voluntary organisations that provide that service are under pressure because there is so much demand, and that has an impact on the ability of refugees to access services. That is something that some of us encounter when we are trying to deal with refugees in our constituency surgeries.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow spoke about the need for mental healthcare particularly in the refugee camps, but it is also true for people arriving here. I have met severely traumatised refugees who have come here to make their home but who still live with the scars of the dreadful things that they have witnessed. We have to ensure that support is there, both for them and the people who can provide the right kind of support.

The situation is a tragedy and is increasingly protracted and long term; as the Committee Chair said, we are past the sixth anniversary. My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow gave the example of electricity in the camps. There are lessons to be learned even from the initial response to the crisis and from how we continue to respond. There should be no excuse for not learning the kind of lessons outlined in the report and modifying and adapting our responses as appropriate. I welcome the Committee's work on this and hope it will continue to monitor and scrutinise the situation. I look forward to the Minister's response.

2.10 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. May I say—this is the first time I have had the opportunity to do so in an official capacity—that I am sure all hon. Members will join me in offering our sincere condolences to the family and friends of victims of the attack yesterday afternoon? We offer our greatest thanks to PC Keith Palmer, who fell in the line of duty yesterday, and to the emergency services both in London and across the UK, who go to work every day to keep all of us safe. They are people we must remember in our thoughts and prayers. The business of the House continues as normal today. We are sitting and debating the issues that matter to us and to our constituents, which shows that we will not be beaten.

I applaud the Chair of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who has brought this

[*Imran Hussain*]

important debate before us. He made some important and pertinent points in what I thought was a very passionate speech. In particular, he referred to the six years of atrocities in the region, the long siege of Aleppo, the attacking of civilians and the real shortage of food, medicine and immediate emergency medical supplies. I align myself with his praise for all the NGOs, voluntary organisations and many others that do fantastic work on the ground in some of the most difficult conditions. He also rightly made the point about the Commonwealth Development Corporation, which has received increased money to spend. The region is clearly in need of investment, and my hon. Friend is right that we should do more to support the economies there.

I am also grateful for the contribution of the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who raised one or two very important points, particularly on the children's mental health services that we provide. That is a massively important point that can be so easily overlooked in the totality of the situation. I am sure the Minister will inform us of how that particular issue is being looked at. The hon. Lady also made an important point about the protection of minority groups in the region, which is a worry. We have all seen reports showing that more needs to be done on that.

The Opposition broadly welcome DFID's commitment to supporting refugees caught in the Syrian emergency. It is extremely commendable that it is taking more than its fair share of the responsibility for the situation, with significant levels of funding. After all, the UK has so far committed more than £2.3 billion to the emergency, the majority of which has gone to supporting countries in the region. I also express my support for the assistance that DFID is providing to in-region countries. As has been pointed out many times, it is far more economical to support refugees residing in the region, allowing us to spread more funding to those who desperately need it. That is not to say that more could not be done to refugees in Europe; I will come on to that shortly.

While we are broadly supportive of DFID's work in the region to help Syrian refugees fleeing the brutal conflict, there are questions about that work that need answering. First, despite DFID's exemplary funding, there is still a significant funding shortfall in the Syrian emergency, with just 3% of the needed funds raised as of February. About £4.5 billion is required for the UNHCR to properly meet its regional objectives and assist almost 5 million registered and the many unregistered refugees, so that low figure is particularly concerning. The Government must therefore redouble their commitment in negotiations, discussions and diplomacy to bring weight to bear on other nations to step up to the plate and fulfil their obligation to spend 0.7% of their GDP on development. That would ensure that the UNHCR and other emergency programmes in and around Syria are properly and adequately funded to do their job.

I also find interesting the way in which funding is distributed to refugees across the region. While not always popular, cash programming has proven to have considerable benefits for both refugees and their host countries, as has been stated. For every £1 given to refugees in Lebanon, for example, £2.13 is generated in the local economy, so there is a clear advantage in using cash programming as part of a wider development strategy

while also aiding refugees. I will be grateful if the Minister can inform me whether it remains a measure used by his Department, and what the Department is doing to ensure that it is joined up with the broader development strategy in the region.

As I have said, helping refugees in the region is the most economical way of supporting them. It also creates the least upheaval for the refugees involved, because a common language is often spoken, many have either friends or family nearby and it is often in their best interests. However, as the conflict in Syria continues—it is now in its sixth year—there is a danger that countries in the region that are supporting refugees, such as Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt, will become saturated, threatening refugees' wellbeing.

A lack of legal access to work often means that refugees are forced into informal sector jobs that do little to help them out of poverty, with low pay, insecure working arrangements and poor employment conditions. It is important to help to get them legal access to work, and to foster economic growth, which will provide jobs. That is particularly pressing as the conflict has no end in sight. We must ensure that refugees are suitably relocated for the medium to long term. I will therefore be grateful if the Minister updates us on DFID's work on economic investment in Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. As I stated earlier, I believe the CDC is an appropriate vehicle to provide economic investment in the region.

As all hon. Members who have spoken have stated, we must consider the situation of unaccompanied children, who have seen far too much of the world and its tragedies at far too young an age. The UK has a duty to accept our fair share of those vulnerable children. The Government originally committed to resettle 3,000 vulnerable children and family members from the region, which I believe was widely supported by all, by accepting the Dubs amendment. However, I share the deep concerns raised today about their recent backtrack on that commitment and the capping of the number to be resettled at 350. For the many reasons that have been stated, I believe that we must overturn that and accept vulnerable children who are fleeing conflict.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that while there is suffering elsewhere, the middle east is the true epicentre of suffering? Does he welcome, as I do, the effort of the British Government to take 3,000 unaccompanied children from the region—an effort that is not necessarily matched by our international counterparts?

Imran Hussain: Of course I welcome that, and it is a point well made. However, I hope the hon. Gentleman will agree that there are at least that many unaccompanied children in Europe who are at serious risk. Some have already been exploited and many are at serious risk of exploitation through criminally organised gangs. I believe we have an absolute duty to those children. To say we will accept a very small number is not the right way.

Paul Scully: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important to address capacity? If people and children can be abused and exploited in a developed, peaceful country such as France, things could happen over here if we do not organise ourselves in the UK. We need to ensure they have the best care, and we can only do that

by addressing capacity, which is what the Dubs amendment that was actually agreed and voted on in this House was there to do.

Imran Hussain: I absolutely agree that capacity is important. Whether or not we have the capacity is something we could talk about further. I certainly believe we have more capacity than the cap that has been put in place. The hon. Gentleman raised the point earlier that some local authorities are coming forward to say they believe they have more capacity, but he makes a generally valid point. My strong view is that if we do not reverse the cap and address this issue, history will not forgive us.

In conclusion, we broadly support the work that DFID is doing in Syria and the region to resettle and support refugees. The Government are providing a substantial level of funding and ensuring that refugees are properly supported as a result. However, they can put more pressure on our friends and allies to do more, and they need to ensure that countries such as Lebanon are not overwhelmed. We also need to meet our obligation to provide a safe refuge for vulnerable Syrian children fleeing conflict. I hope and am sure that the Minister will address all those points and elaborate further.

2.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (James Wharton): First, I join the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), in offering my condolences and those of all of us here today to those who have been so terribly affected by events yesterday, including Keith Palmer, who gave his life in protecting this place and the democracy that we are continuing the work of in this debate and in the House and across the estate and Government today.

It is a stark reminder of the challenges faced by many people across the world every day and of the stories we hear emanating particularly from the middle east and Syria—of the terrible events that so many people face as part of their ordinary lives and have done for many years now. We are looking at six years of the most terrible conflict, with tragic human consequences. It is welcome that when we debate these issues, the tone is—without exception—the one we have seen adopted by Members today. Despite what are so often our differences of party policy, ideology and outlook to the world, we unite in agreement that we want to see the UK play a lead role in addressing these issues. We share a common view that we want to see the most good done that can be done with the resources we allocate and the work we do.

To that end, we should recognise the significant role that the UK has played and is playing in addressing the humanitarian crisis in the middle east and the fallout from the conflict that sadly continues in Syria. More than £2.3 billion has been committed, and this year's expenditure, which was agreed to be £510 million at the "Supporting Syria" conference, has now been exceeded to around £550 million. The UK, I am proud to say, is the second largest bilateral humanitarian donor after the United States.

We continue to work through international agencies to support some of the world's most vulnerable and in-need people. I can reaffirm the Government's commitment to that. On behalf of my Department and the Government, I recognise the level of interest taken

by hon. Members, reflected in the breadth and depth of questions and understanding today, and thank members of the International Development Committee and its Chair, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), for their work in the report. I have some sympathy with the comment from the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) that it would have been nice had the report been debated in a shorter order of time, but the fact that so many questions and issues have been raised today reflects the ongoing interest.

The Chair of the International Development Committee raised a broad range of issues, including the CDC and what its involvement might be. The next five-year strategy, as he said, will consider what role the CDC can play in Syria and regarding Syrian refugees in the region more broadly. There may well be opportunities there, and we are keen to ensure that where such possibilities exist, they are properly explored and considered. I do not want to go further than that or potentially tie the hands of an arm's length organisation, but the point that he and other Members have made is a good and important one.

Questions were asked about Lebanon, a particularly small nation that has been heavily impacted by the conflict on its borders. In October 2014, the Government of Lebanon introduced tougher measures to reduce the flow of refugees, including the closure of borders to refugees, stopping registration by UNHCR and introducing a prohibitive and, to be quite frank, expensive process for acquiring residency permits. The UK Government, other UK agencies and international actors have been working with and making representations to Lebanon, and significant improvements have since been made. A statement of intent was signed in London at the "Supporting Syria" conference, and the Lebanese Government have removed the pledge not to work from residency permits and recently waived the residency permit fee for most Syrian refugees. That is a significant step forward. We continue to make appropriate representations and support where we can, but we should recognise where progress is being made.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) asked about children in Lebanon and the most vulnerable groups affected by not only the more obvious health concerns but the mental impact, toil and toll that conflict can take. With the support of the Government of Lebanon and other international actors, but primarily through the UK's support, I am pleased to say that we have been able to assist the Government of Lebanon in getting 203,000 Syrian children into its public school system, supporting the necessary infrastructure to go with that and the provision of the health services that are needed, and looking particularly at the humanitarian, educational and economic needs of women and girls.

We have worked with international agencies to design programmes targeting those groups specifically, because we recognise that it is sometimes the most vulnerable who find it most difficult to have their voices heard in such situations. It is the duty of the international community to recognise and reach out to all groups, not only those who shout the loudest or whose need is the most obvious, as important as those groups also are.

The Chair of the International Development Committee raised the issues of the ceasefire, illegal weapons and the diplomacy aspect of our involvement in the region.

[James Wharton]

We continue to work with our partners, through international agencies and bilaterally, to keep pressure on where we can and to support initiatives where appropriate, to try to stabilise the continuing situation there as much as is possible in the circumstances. That is something we will continue and are, I am proud to say, a leading nation on.

The hon. Gentleman also asked specifically about the Helsinki appeal. It is, I understand, currently about 18% funded. He will be aware that the UK is co-hosting a conference in Brussels very soon, from 4 to 5 April. That will be an opportunity to take this and other issues further. We hope and expect to see further progress made, but we should recognise that, as dire as the need is, the international community has contributed a significant amount to address some of the needs in and around Syria, which is welcome.

There is more to do. We will continue to work with our partners to go further, and of course continual work is needed on the scrutiny of how money is spent and the effect it is having. However, we should recognise that so far the international community has done a good job of recognising the severity and importance of what is happening. We intend to continue to press that message home with our friends across the globe and meet our obligations in supporting those who most need it.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow brought up the berm—the border between Syria and Jordan—and the dire situation that affects so many people there. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced in December a further £10 million of funding, £6 million of which was specifically for the Syria-Jordan border. There are challenges in getting support to those who need it there, but we recognise them and are aware of the depth and breadth of the need. Again, we are working with international partners to see what more the UK may be able to do and what more is needed to address the terrible situation in which so many find themselves.

I welcome the reaffirmed commitment of the hon. Member for Glasgow North. He never misses an opportunity to impress on those who will listen, whoever they may be, the importance of our commitment to 0.7%. I was proud to support that legislation in the previous Parliament; it is one of the great achievements of global Britain. He is right to recognise that particularly post-Brexit, as we are given the opportunity to shape the UK's place in the world going forward, the work that we do on international development is an important aspect of that, including our 0.7% commitment, which is world leading both in its scale and in our implementation of it. It is welcome that there is cross-party support for it, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising it, as he invariably remembers to do.

The hon. Gentleman asked about aid drops and the possibility of getting to harder-to-reach areas. We must of course be careful. We always review whatever possibilities there might be to get support to those who need it, and in the right way, but we must ensure at the same time that no harm is done. Many conflict-affected areas, by their very nature, have groups in them that we would not want to supply with aid and that might misuse what we supply were we not able properly to monitor it. We must retain public confidence in the money that we

spend, the aid that we deploy and how it is used, and we must recognise that in conflict areas there is danger to operators who will try to deliver by conventional means and challenges with the deployment of drones for large-scale, heavy drops of the type that we might be discussing. We remain committed to reviewing innovative methods of delivering support and aid where appropriate, but the challenges at present make air drops to areas under siege difficult. I recognise that the hon. Gentleman has raised the issue before, including on the Floor of the House, I believe. I suspect that he will continue to pursue it, and, as always when he raises and pursues issues, the Department for International Development listens and ensures that we respond appropriately and ambitiously. We will continue to review all options, where they might arise, to do more good with the resource that we have.

The hon. Gentleman asked about under-the-radar support for NGOs operating in areas where we might be able to provide support, but perhaps in a way that is less obvious to those who would want to frustrate it. It would be easy for me to say that, by the very nature of under-the-radar support, it would be inappropriate for me to talk about it in a forum such as this, but I also want to recognise that challenges come with it—challenges of accountability, deliverability and ensuring that the work we do does no harm. I do not want to pretend to have secret information up my sleeve that I am not sharing; rather, I ask hon. Members to recognise that, even if I were able to comment on such activities, this is not a forum in which I would be able to do so. However, the hon. Member for Glasgow North made an important point, and it is on the record.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned early-day motion 1054 and the work that his former constituent is engaged in with Journeys of Hope. I have never been a signer of early-day motions; I am a long-standing sceptic. However, I will undertake to review that early-day motion and its signatories following the debate. He has done the job of an ever diligent and good constituency MP in ensuring that his former constituent and his good work is raised and recognised and put on the record in the House, not just in the form of the early-day motion and the signatories to it, but in the *Hansard* report that will follow this debate. That ought to be recognised. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will continue to promote the good work of his former constituent through appropriate means.

The shadow Minister raised a range of issues, including cash programming and cash transfers, which can be controversial. They require careful thought and planning, but are appropriate in some circumstances. I have seen a number of cash transfer programmes in my time in the Department and have been impressed by what I have seen. They have, potentially, a role to play. I welcome the shadow Minister's statement of support for what can be a controversial area of activity, as I do the agreement that the Chair of the Select Committee expressed from a sedentary position as he nodded and smiled and "Hear, hear"-ed. It is recognised that this is an area that we should not close the door to in ensuring that we deliver the maximum good and the maximum utility for the taxpayers' money that we spend. We have not just a duty to British taxpayers to do that, but a duty to those who receive the support, because every pound through which we can drive more efficiency is an additional opportunity to help more, to do more and to do more good with the resource that we allocate.

There was a debate, which I hesitate to reopen, about the Dubs amendment, which has been quite widely discussed on the Floor of the House and debated at some length. I do not mean to reopen the debate in its entirety, but I will of course speak to some of the comments that hon. Members have made. First, we should recognise the significant work that the UK is doing regarding support to refugees, both in region and at home. Under a separate scheme, as I think my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said, 3,000 refugee children are being supported by the UK. UK local authorities were asked in a consultation what more they felt they could do, which is where the number of 350 has arisen. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow asked, “What if we can find more?” Local authorities are of course free to offer more and talk about the resources that they have available, but there is also a need, which we should recognise, to ensure an equitable and appropriate distribution among host authorities throughout the UK. That factor may also be considered in how we approach the ultimate delivery of this policy.

We must recognise, as the shadow Minister said, that it can be more economical to support refugees in country. For the likely cost of supporting 3,000 unaccompanied children in the UK, the UK can provide support to 800,000 refugees in region. We have to be very careful with the money that is available to us, to ensure that it does the maximum good that it can. A local authority receiving an unaccompanied child refugee aged under 16 currently receives support of more than £41,000 a year. It is right that when we place people in communities in this country, we provide appropriate support, ensure that facilities are there and recognise that we have to do it carefully and sensibly to avoid the risk of exploitation. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) made that point very ably, and it was welcome that he did so.

We should also recognise that for every good action we take, there is the opportunity cost of another action that we could have used that resource for. That leads to difficult decisions and quite a challenging reading of morally difficult circumstances, but we should recognise that we need to deliver the maximum benefit that we can to those who most need it with the budget available to us—the very significant 0.7% commitment that we have made. We must constantly reinforce support for that in the broader community, with our constituents and the taxpayers who ultimately pay for it.

There was a range of other questions, which as always I will be happy to discuss with hon. Members. I am of course happy to ensure that if Members want to write specifically, with detailed follow-up from the debate, the Department will answer as fully as it can. I place on the record my thanks to all hon. Members who have attended the debate. I particularly thank the Select Committee for its continued work and diligence in this area and the shadow Minister for the collegiate and non-partisan way in which the shadow team approach this very important issue.

We should be proud of the UK’s contribution. We should be proud of what we do diplomatically, of what we do in terms of aid and of the guidance and leadership that we are sometimes able to provide to the international community in ensuring that we do aid and support in the right way and that it gets to the right people.

That has cross-party support, and perhaps today, following the events of yesterday, it is even more poignant than normal.

I thank hon. Members for taking the time to come and contribute and ask questions. I thank all those who, in the field and at home, work so hard to deliver the interventions, policies and work that allow the money that we allocate to make the difference that it does. It is not the politicians sitting here—although importantly, they set the debate—who are on the frontline delivering the work; it is the many hard-working people in the Department for International Development, in the agencies with which we work and in the international agencies with which we partner. They do incredibly challenging jobs in an incredibly difficult environment, and I take this opportunity to thank them on behalf of the House and to pledge our support to assist them in whatever way we can to continue the important work that makes a difference to so many.

2.39 pm

Stephen Twigg: I echo the Minister’s thanks to everyone who has participated in the debate. Not least, I thank him for his response and, on the Committee’s behalf, I thank all those who have enabled us to undertake the inquiry by providing evidence. As a Committee, we are trying to follow up our reports. Although this report was published just over a year ago and was our first report of the Parliament, we are keen to ensure that we review our recommendations and progress on them. In the light of that, we followed up the report a few weeks ago with a further evidence session, which included our taking evidence from Lord Dubs.

I absolutely agree—I think this is the Committee’s view—that we can be immensely proud of the UK’s work in region, both with internally displaced persons in Syria and with refugees in the surrounding countries. My argument is not that we should not be proud of that, but that we could do more here. I was encouraged by the Minister’s response, which I take to mean that the door is still open on Dubs if certain conditions are met. That is the challenge for local authorities, civil society organisations and others, and I am sure they will rise to it.

Let me welcome three things that the Minister said. First, the update on Lebanon and the progress there was very welcome. Secondly, I was encouraged by his response on the CDC; our Committee will pursue that with the CDC and the Department. Thirdly, I absolutely echo what he and the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), said about the role that properly managed, carefully targeted cash transfer schemes can play in supporting some of the most vulnerable people. The evidence base is very powerful.

Thank you for chairing the debate this afternoon, Mr Stringer; it has been a good opportunity for us to update the House on an important issue. Let us hope that by the next time we meet to discuss it we will have seen real progress towards peace and reconstruction in Syria.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the First Report of the International Development Committee of Session 2015-16, Syrian refugee crisis, HC 463, and the Government response, HC 902.

DFID's Programme in Nigeria

2.41 pm

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Second Report of the International Development Committee, DFID's programme in Nigeria, HC 110, and the Government response, HC 735.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate, Mr Stringer. Following yesterday's tragic events, we have been urged to continue with business as usual in Parliament. Many of the things that we could debate feel rather trivial compared with the many injuries and deaths that happened yesterday, but this debate is far from trivial.

Despite being a lower-middle-income country, Nigeria plays host to 120 million people who live below or only just above the poverty line, as well as 10% of the world's mothers who die in childbirth and 16% of the world's out-of-school children. There is great inequality, with very few people benefiting from its economic success, which is—or was—largely based on oil wealth. The Department for International Development's programme in Nigeria is its second largest bilateral programme in Africa, and its third largest in the world, with £303 million allocated for 2016-17.

The second report of the 2016-17 session by the Select Committee on International Development, on DFID's programme in Nigeria, was published on 27 July 2016. It looked across DFID's work in the country, making the following key conclusions and recommendations. The Committee commended DFID for its work on governance, which had had a direct impact

“in contributing to a credible, fair and peaceful presidential election in 2015.”

The Committee urged DFID to maintain its support for systems strengthening, institutional management and civic education. It also recommended that DFID should, as a priority, develop a deeper understanding of Nigeria's political economy and strengthen its judiciary.

The Committee expressed concern that DFID's power sector reform programme—the Nigeria Infrastructure Advisory Facility—was based on an insufficient research base and was

“hurting poor Nigerians in the short term, even if there is a net overall benefit to privatisation of the power sector in the long term.”

It therefore suggested that DFID encourage the Nigerian Government to take measures to mitigate the impacts.

The Committee recognised the key role of the private sector in successful economic development, but noted that there was not a coherent, joined-up strategy between various parts of the UK Government on achieving that. It recommended that as well as producing such a strategy, DFID should do further research on quality job creation in Nigeria.

The Committee was particularly concerned about Nigeria's prospects for achieving sustainable development goal 4 on education, and called on DFID to do more to support Nigeria in mapping a route to achieving the goal, including emphasising the value of basic public services and spending on education. It expressed further concern about the affordability of private schooling, including that provided by Bridge International Academies, for the poorest families, and called on DFID to ensure

that it aligns with the principle of “leaving no one behind”. We visited a school that had a morning and afternoon session; it had to do that, because so many children need an education and there are insufficient schools. The Committee also found that the UNICEF-managed girls education project was failing to perform, and asked that DFID lay out the steps being taken to improve its effectiveness.

The Committee commended DFID's commitment to humanitarian support in north-east Nigeria, but noted that there is a funding gap. It recommended that DFID do all that it can to ensure that the 2016 UN appeal was fully funded, both through its own resources and its influence. It also commended DFID's commitment to development in a fragile area, and recommended continuing support to address the drivers of conflict, and including community-based approaches in its peace-building work.

The Government responded to the Committee's report in September 2016. They welcomed the constructive review, and stated that it agreed

“with the principles sitting behind all the recommendations provided by the committee, and in the majority of cases we fully agree with the practical next steps these imply.”

They made the following specific points. DFID agreed to continue its work on governance, and it has extended its “Deepening Democracy in Nigeria” programme until 2021

“to ensure full election cycle support.”

It noted that it is investing in research into the political economy of Nigeria and agreed to reach out to more UK-trained lawyers in order to strengthen the judiciary there.

On power sector reform, DFID agreed to do more to mitigate the short-term effects of its programme, and accepted that

“only a small proportion of consumers currently benefit.”

It agreed to

“encourage the Nigerian Government to increase the number of poor customers benefiting from the lifeline tariff”,

and to build more evidence on the poverty impacts of the work.

On economic development, DFID partially agreed with the Committee's recommendation on a joined-up strategy from Her Majesty's Government, claiming that the

“bilateral aid review...considered all elements of UK government efforts toward inclusive economic development in Nigeria.”

It stated that it had already taken steps

“to strengthen cross-departmental join-up”,

and agreed to

“ongoing operational research by programme teams during implementation”

on quality job creation.

On education, DFID stated that it is

“supporting the Federal Ministry of Education to develop the Government's Ministerial Strategic Plan which sets out how it will move towards achieving SDG 4.”

It went on to restate its commitment to leaving no one behind, and said that its support for

“partners such as Bridge International Academies is intended to accompany DEEPEN's sector wide work, with a focus on testing innovative school improvement models that will support stronger learning outcomes.”

It further noted that it has been

“working intensively with UNICEF to improve the effectiveness of GEP3”,

with an annual review due later in the year.

On humanitarian support and conflict, DFID only partially agreed to do all that it could to ensure that the UN appeal for Nigeria in 2016 was fully funded, but it agreed to continue support for addressing the drivers of conflict, and to scale up its community-based work. I have a series of questions for the Minister, which I will come to at the end of my speech. If he can answer them today, that is fine, but if not, perhaps he could write to the Committee to follow up.

Following the publication of our report, the Committee sought and obtained a Westminster Hall debate through the Backbench Business Committee on the Chibok schoolgirls in Nigeria. In that debate, which I do not believe this Minister attended, Committee members expressed their full support for the “Bring Back Our Girls” campaign, and spoke passionately about their experiences during the Committee’s visit, when we all met the campaigners outside our hotel. They had been there every single day since the Chibok girls were kidnapped, and they continue to be there. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who acted so heroically yesterday, responded to that debate on behalf of the Government. He laid out the support that the UK has provided, including specifically on the issue of the Chibok girls, such as support for hostage negotiation, military support, and support on governance issues more broadly, and he reiterated the Government’s support for defeating extremism in Nigeria and bringing back the Chibok girls.

In October, 21 more Chibok schoolgirls were freed. We know that they are not the only people who have been kidnapped in Nigeria, but a lot of international attention has focused on them. The problem is that many of the girls, whether freed or not, have been raped, forced to marry, or forced to change their religion, and many of them now have children. Sadly, some of the girls who have been freed have been rejected by their own community. They were in a terrible situation, and thought that they would be welcomed back by their families, but that has not happened universally.

Since the publication of the Committee report, the humanitarian situation in Nigeria has worsened. Nigeria is one of a number of countries in Africa and the middle east suffering from a severe crisis of food insecurity. More than 5 million people in the country’s north-east are estimated to be food-insecure, including nearly 500,000 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition. Despite the Committee’s calls for DFID to ensure that the 2016 humanitarian appeal was fully funded, it reached only 52% funding. The 2017 appeal is for more than double the 2016 appeal, and is currently 5.2% funded, with a funding gap of around \$1 billion. Some progress is being made, though, as the Nigerian Government continue to make gains against Boko Haram, allowing development actors better access to those in need.

DFID began a major programme of humanitarian support in Nigeria in late 2015. In July last year, DFID committed an additional £50 million to the response for the remainder of the year. DFID has identified that the major challenge to humanitarian support in Nigeria

is the lack of donor experience in providing it in that country, leading to weak co-ordination and leadership and, at times, lacklustre delivery. DFID is looking to scale up the capacity of its humanitarian team in the country, especially for work on nutrition, which is incredibly important.

After the Committee’s recommendations and the programme redesign, DFID now assesses the Girls’ Education Project 3 to be making good progress. In its latest annual review, carried out around the time when the Committee’s report was published, DFID gave the programme an A rating, and noted both that it is now delivering results, including increased enrolment, and the introduction of an early-grade learning initiative and an education management information system. That is good news. Perhaps the Minister can give us an updated progress report.

Early this year, President Buhari disappeared from the Nigerian political scene. Rumours about his health spread through Nigeria before it was officially announced that he was in London for medical treatment. After two months in the UK, he returned to Nigeria earlier this month and resumed his official duties, but rumours continue due to the length of his absence, creating a feeling of instability in the country.

Since the new Government were established, there has been some progress on security and corruption, which are perhaps at the heart of Nigeria’s problems. Boko Haram has been pushed out of most of the territory that it controlled in north-east Nigeria since President Buhari, whom some see as being on the back foot, took office. In the last six months, Boko Haram has lost most, if not all, of the territory that it held in the Sambisa forest in Borno state, which had been an important rear base for it.

In May 2016, not long after former Prime Minister David Cameron described the country as “fantastically corrupt”, the British Government said that they would give Nigeria £40 million over the next four years to help the fight against Boko Haram, and that they planned to train almost 1,000 Nigerian military personnel for deployment in counter-insurgency operations, which is clearly welcome.

On anti-corruption, there has been a wave of arrests of those who held office under President Buhari’s predecessor, Goodluck Jonathan. The trial of former national security adviser Sambo Dasuki has begun; former Petroleum Minister Diezani Alison-Madueke has yet to stand trial; and several major investigations have been launched. However, critics claim that the Government’s copybook is blotted on security and anti-corruption, saying that some of the steps taken against corruption have been politically motivated, rather than taken without fear or favour. As is often the case in Nigeria, investigations are proceeding at a snail’s pace.

Meanwhile, the Nigerian security forces remain prone to committing human rights abuses, but continue to enjoy impunity. A more fundamental criticism is that Buhari has not yet got to grips with the interlocking root causes of violence: poverty, inequality, marginalisation and, not least, corruption, whether in the north or elsewhere. With the possible exception of in the oil-rich Niger delta, he appears uninterested in seeking negotiated settlements. The authorities have also been criticised for their performance in response to the humanitarian crisis in north-eastern Nigeria.

[Pauline Latham]

The biggest challenge to emerge during the second half of 2016, apart from Buhari's possible ill health, were the cracks in the fractious coalition of interests that makes up the ruling party, the All Progressives Congress. The main divisions emerging, which have never been far from the surface, are between Buhari's faction and those loyal to former Lagos State governor and APC kingmaker Bola Tinubu, who is reportedly in cahoots with former Vice-President Atiku Abubakar. According to *Africa Confidential*, that faction is actively contemplating setting up a separate party, coined "the mega party". The party would bring together APCers disillusioned with Buhari and sections of the former ruling party, the People's Democratic Party, which is also faction-ridden.

As a large producer and exporter of oil, Nigeria has taken a bad economic hit from the sharp fall in the price of oil in 2014. Government revenues have fallen, resulting in cuts to Government expenditure, while the value of total exports has fallen significantly, given that oil and gas make up around 90% of Nigeria's exports. Nigeria has had huge problems with corruption in the oil industry, and its value has decreased so much that it continues to cause major poverty problems for the country.

The Government were also forced to abandon their currency peg, which fixed the naira to the dollar, despite having spent billions of dollars from their foreign exchange reserves to try to prop it up. The naira fell from about 197 to the dollar to 280 to the dollar in June 2016, and the official exchange rate is currently around 300 to the dollar. That is compounding the country's problems. However, it appears that the currency was not allowed to float fully; Government intervention is still occurring. During 2016, there was a serious foreign exchange shortage and consumer price inflation rose rapidly, which had an impact on the poorest and on the people with the most severe problems.

These factors mean that full-year growth in 2016 is likely to have been negative for the first time since 1991. The International Monetary Fund estimates that GDP contracted by 1.5% in 2016, compared with growth of 2.7% in 2015. It does, however, forecast growth of 0.8% in 2017 and 2.3% in 2018. The outlook is supported by the oil price, which is higher than it was a year ago, in part because it has been boosted by a deal by OPEC members restricting oil supply.

Nevertheless, the longer-term challenges facing Nigeria's economy remain. Corruption remains a huge problem, despite efforts by the Buhari Administration to clamp down on it, and broader conditions for conducting business remain poor. Poor-quality infrastructure, very low education levels, security worries and high poverty levels are additional barriers to faster long-term growth. One of my major concerns when we were in Nigeria was how the Government were going to tackle corruption. They came in with great ideas, wanting a clean sweep of the country, but they have delayed and delayed, and they are not delivering. They will have problems, because the people of Nigeria will not wait forever for things to change.

[SIR DAVID CRAUSBY *in the Chair*]

I have key questions that I hope the Minister will be able to answer—if not now, perhaps later. First, how has recent uncertainty surrounding President Buhari

affected DFID's work with the Nigerian Government and its work on governance in Nigeria? Secondly, what is DFID's assessment of humanitarian need in north-eastern Nigeria? What support is it providing to deal with the humanitarian crisis and food shortage in that area? What are the UK Government doing with other donors to ensure that the 2017 humanitarian response plan is fully funded?

Thirdly, what is the UK Government's assessment of the prospect of release of more of the Chibok schoolgirls? Does the Minister know how many have been released and how many are still being held? What continuing support are the UK Government providing to Nigeria to secure the release of more of them, and other schoolgirls who we know have been captured? Fourthly, on DFID's power sector reform programme, how much progress has been made on extending the lifeline tariff and assessing the programme's impact on poverty? Fifthly, how have the UK Government strengthened joined-up working on economic development in Nigeria? How is DFID working with the prosperity fund and the Department for International Trade on economic development in Nigeria?

Finally, what is DFID's assessment of the likelihood of Nigeria achieving sustainable development goal 4 on education? That seems to me one of the key questions if, in the long term, the country is to lift itself out of poverty and its terrible situation. If Nigeria does not meet SDG 4 and provide a decent education for every single person in the country, it will never fully become a middle-income country or better.

I thank the Committee specialists who worked with us on the report, and those who went with us to Nigeria. It was an incredibly interesting visit to a country that I had never been to before. It held out so much hope, but I believe that its Government are failing. As I said earlier, the country will not forgive them if they do, because people there believed that their Government would transform the situation. All the money that we have put in should be helping them to get there. I believe that it is meant to do that, but I am not sure that the Nigerian Government are taking as much advantage of it as they could.

3.5 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) and the rest of the Committee for their work. She gave an extremely extensive and thorough speech that covered the Committee's findings on Nigeria. I do not intend to repeat what she said, but I will raise a number of issues that were apparent to me on the Committee's visit.

As the hon. Lady said, although it is a lower-middle-income country, Nigeria plays host to 120 million people living below or only just above the poverty line, to 10% of the world's mothers who die in childbirth and to 16% of the world's out-of-school children. I have to say that what struck me when I arrived there was the inequality, which is absolutely stark: many people have great wealth, but the majority of the population have very little at all.

I ask the Minister what the long-term plan is for DFID's work with Nigeria and its Government. Nigeria is a lower-middle-income country and it has a number of resources, although they have not provided the same

economic benefit in recent years as they did before. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the issue is what systems can be put in place to address inequality and ensure that the economy's benefits actually reach people who are vulnerable and in need of support. What will the Department do to ensure that such systems will be put in place? What work is taking place with the Government to try to address that? Without those systems, the problem will be self-perpetuating: we will continue to give vast amounts to Nigeria, a lower-middle-income country—I think it is DFID's second largest bilateral programme in Africa and its third largest in the world—when what it really needs is assistance to self-sustain and make long-term progress in the right direction, so that some of that money can go to other countries that are not in the same financial position.

The other issue that stood out to me was corruption. It was even apparent at the airport: I tried to buy something at the duty-free and was told, "No, you can't pay with a card—you will have to pay with cash." Even in places where you would not expect it, there is money flowing through the systems, with very little accountability for how much of it there is and where it ends up, and I imagine that very little tax is being collected. One of the key issues that the Department should look at in Nigeria is electronic cash transfer programmes—we have recently seen some excellent work on those in Kenya—to ensure that the Nigerian Government have a record of where money is being transferred, in shops and throughout the economy, and are therefore much better able to collect taxes. That was not at all evident to me in Nigeria, not even at the airport, which I would have expected to have some system in place.

We were taken to see an anti-corruption tower—that is the only way I can describe it. It was a massive building that the Nigerians hoped we were going to help to fund. It was exorbitant in size. It was to house the anti-corruption teams of the Minister. I was not sure that, by funding a tower, the money was going to go in the right direction—towards anti-corruption policies. What is happening in terms of the work we are doing with the Government and the anti-corruption Minister who was in place at the time to take forward strategic anti-corruption policies? Again, I feel that the crux of the matter is about knowing where money is coming from and where it is going to, and making sure that it is electronically registered.

The Committee recognised the key role of the private sector in successful economic development, but noted that there was not a coherent joined-up strategy between various parts of the UK Government on achieving that. What progress has been made? The other issue of grave concern to me was the prospect of achieving sustainable development goal 4 on education. When I visited the school in Kano in northern Nigeria, there appeared to be great ambivalence about ministerial-led support for girls' education. Education was taking place in the school, but I would say the quality was extremely poor. On what was being taught, I cannot say from my visit that I had much awareness of any learning other than the continual reciting of religious books. I am all for religious education and I believe parents should have a choice in that regard. However, if we are providing money for education programmes, we should address the quality of those and ensure progress is made. I understand that some progress has been made of late, but I would like that to be repeatedly reviewed because

I did not end the education visits with a great sense that the money was being spent in a way that would make a great difference to the girls.

I also had a sense—an undercurrent—of women's place in Nigeria. That was even apparent when we visited Ministries, where there were no women aside from our own delegation around the table. I asked why there were so few women parliamentarians and I was told they cannot afford to stand. That is a huge gender equality issue. If there are few women in political life in Nigeria, there will be few policies that create gender equality, so we should focus on that. On the idea that someone has to have a set amount of money to stand, obviously, we cannot enforce our absolute democratic principles on every other country, but if we are working with Governments to try to improve governance and democracy, these are conversations that must be had. Unless the system and its failings are addressed, I fear that little will change for girls in Nigeria, particularly in the north, and we will continually have to try to monitor strongly what is happening and doubts regarding the effectiveness of what we do there.

One thing that emotionally struck me was meeting the "Bring Back Our Girls" campaigners, who are out every day speaking about the importance of bringing back the girls safe and alive. I really want the UK Government to work with the Nigerian Government to ensure that we do as much as we can to support them in that regard. We know only too well that defeating extremism should be our priority. It tarnishes society and reduces the hopes of people around the world. We know that only too well today after the impact even in this House.

We must provide support to defeat extremism. At the time, I thought that the Nigerian Government were taking that extremely seriously. I understand that they have made good gains. The President has a military background and defeating extremism is one of the key objectives that he is committed to. We need to support that positive objective to ensure that people in the north, the children, women and families have opportunity and hope outwith being kept in conditions of extremism. We must always fight to try to help to bring back those girls. Where else in the world would hundreds of girls go missing for such a length of time with nothing happening? That is very stark. Some have been released. But they were not found. We need to ensure that we do all we can to bring those girls back safe and alive for their families. I am a mother of girls. I feel very strongly and passionately that we should assist the Government.

Food insecurity is a humanitarian issue now in Nigeria. We must do all that we can to help the vulnerable people there who are suffering from acute malnutrition. We know that the humanitarian appeal has reached only 52% of the funding requirement, so we need to look at that and decide whether there is more that the United Kingdom can do. Again, I come back to saying that there also has to be a long-term plan. Nigeria has grave inequality and pockets of extreme wealth. There has to be a Government plan for situations that arise over the long term. Perhaps the UK might assist Nigeria to put in place a plan to help its own population in future, but in the meantime we have to do everything that we possibly can.

I have concerns regarding the governance of the work that we do in Nigeria. I am hopeful that DFID will be extra scrupulous in looking at programmes, their quality

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

and outcome. Fundamentally, in order to help support Nigeria, there needs to be radical change in the politics in Nigeria and the will to make changes to deal with corruption and inequality. I hope that, wherever possible, the Minister will help to push on those particular issues. Also, I hope he will update us today on what we can do to bring back the Chibok girls.

3.18 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I apologise for not being here at the beginning, Sir David. I was participating in the debate in the main Chamber. I am glad to follow the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). She has highlighted a lot of the very important issues. I would differ slightly with her on education, but I will come to that.

One thing that struck me more than anything in our visit to Nigeria, which was my first visit to that country, was when we were in Abuja and we visited a refugee camp where the refugees were cared for not by an outside agency or the United Nations, but by Nigerians themselves and by Christian organisations and mosques. The teachers gave up their time, often voluntarily, in a school that was almost in the open. I felt that Nigeria was a hugely self-reliant country, but, as the hon. Lady has said, perhaps the people are sometimes not supported sufficiently by their own Government. Nigerians are hugely entrepreneurial and dynamic people, but I believe they are sometimes a little held back. However, I felt that their caring for their own in the refugee camp in the middle of Abuja, where there were refugees from the north and particularly from Borno state, was a microcosm of what so many Nigerians do for each other across the country.

Education is clearly something for which the Chair of the Committee has a huge passion—as do we all—and he has made it a hallmark of its work. I welcome that. I agree that perhaps aspects of the schools that we visited in Kano surprised us, but other aspects encouraged me. For instance, in the Koranic schools we saw that, almost for the first time, many of the children were learning subjects to which they had not had access before. The curriculums that they were using—which have been largely supported through DFID—were encouraging; they were not, perhaps, the finished article, but they were probably a step forward from what there was before. Clearly, we want much more of an advance. We want girls' education to be absolutely right; we want them to get the same education as boys. However, it was a step forward.

The other school had something like 13,000 children. It is one of the biggest primary schools in sub-Saharan Africa, if not the biggest, and, again, I felt that progress was being made. We visited a class with disabled children, where an effort was being made on their behalf. Clearly, in comparison with our education system or those of other middle-income countries—Nigeria is, of course, such a country—there are great shortfalls. Nevertheless, improvements are being made, particularly by one of the two education programmes that DFID is running in the north. Progress is being made, and much more could be done, but clearly that is fundamentally an issue for the Nigerian Government. In a country as large as Nigeria, DFID can only really supply technical advice and a little support here and there.

That brings me on to corruption, tax collection and so on. I share the views of the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow about the anti-corruption building. I was more interested in finding out about the anti-corruption work than I was in seeing a half-finished building in which that work might take place in future. There is little more to be said other than that I hope the building will be finished and that the work that is done in it will have a huge impact. I am not sure that the UK Government should finance the building. We should support the work that goes on there but not the infrastructure.

I was encouraged by the work on health that we heard about through some of our meetings in Abuja. I am the chair of the all-party group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases and I have a particular interest in the area, as does pretty much every Member attending the debate. We heard of the great progress that has been made in reducing the incidence of malaria across Nigeria, which, along with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, still has the largest burden of malaria in the world. We heard particularly of progress in the northern regions—the Sahel region of Nigeria, where there can be intermittent malaria, particularly in the rainy season.

We visited a midwife training school based at the hospital, and the pharmacy there. I was extremely impressed with the pharmacist, who was clearly dedicated to her work to prevent malaria. She contacted me and the all-party group after the visit and said, “I want to do something on World Malaria Day”—which was a month after our visit; “can you help us?” The all-party group agreed to send an amount of money—I think it was about \$1,000; and with it the pharmacist co-ordinated a magnificent World Malaria Day event. She invited local people, local government leaders and health leaders, and also managed a mass distribution of bed nets. It was all done voluntarily and it showed the spirit of individual Nigerians—how they really want to work on behalf of their country and people. I very much hope that the same thing will happen again this year, and that our group will support it if it does. For \$1,000 I think the impact was substantial, based on the report we received.

It is not only on malaria but on neglected tropical diseases that the work supported by DFID in the north has had a great impact. I believe that that programme is just coming to an end, and I urge DFID to look at supporting a continuation of the work. We know that, if work in areas such as neglected tropical diseases and, indeed, malaria is halted for a while, those diseases can come back. Clearly, we want the Nigerian Government to take up the work on NTDs. In the meantime I should like the Minister's reassurance that DFID is considering supporting a continuation—perhaps in a different way—of the programme on NTDs in the north of Nigeria. I should declare an interest, in that I am a member of the board of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine. I want to make that clear as I know that the school has great engagement in Nigeria and with DFID programmes, although I am not sure in what respects.

The economy in Nigeria has been far too dependent, clearly, on oil in the past decades, but a real effort is being made to expand and diversify it. That has been made necessary by the fall in the price of oil. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow rightly mentioned the lack of women in senior positions, and particularly the lack of women Members of Parliament. However, the Finance Minister of Nigeria is a woman,

whom we had the pleasure of meeting in Abuja, and who was committed to reform of the Nigerian economy. I should hope that she—and, indeed, her reform-minded, progressive colleagues—would get the fullest possible support from the British Government, whether through DFID or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in their efforts to ensure that the economy of Nigeria works for everyone.

I want to touch on the issue of food, food security and famine. We have heard from the Government and from colleagues across the House of the issues in Nigeria and east and central Africa. I welcome the generosity of the British public in supporting the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal for east and central Africa. Perhaps the Minister will outline for us the current situation in Nigeria, as it is a year since we were there. Nigeria has a proud reputation of wanting to help itself to deal with such issues, but I want to find out what the current food security situation is. Our efforts are concentrated on east and central Africa, but we would not want countries in the Sahel—not just Nigeria but Chad, Mali, Niger and others—to miss out on the efforts that are being made. Whether we like it or not, the UK is a leader in the area; particularly given concern about the potential withdrawal of United States funding it would be a problem if areas where the UK is not so prominent fell behind because they are not on our radar. I should appreciate an update from the Minister about that.

3.28 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and to follow my three colleagues from the International Development Committee, who have set out very fully some of the findings of our inquiry, and some continuing concerns. I shall speak briefly. I take this opportunity to apologise for the fact that I shall have to leave at about a quarter past 4, so I may miss the closing part of the debate.

I support the remarks of my friend the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) about the current food crisis in Africa and the Yemen. I would welcome a response to his points from the Minister, as well as an early opportunity for the matter to be considered in more detail in the House, whether by way of a statement or a tabled debate. There are massive challenges, and as the hon. Gentleman said, the public response to the DEC appeal has been extraordinary. The Government are already doing a lot of good work in the countries concerned, but it is vital that we should do all we can to relieve a massive humanitarian crisis.

I will briefly talk about two issues—governance and education. I do so really to reaffirm what others—in particular the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), who is an assiduous and hard-working member of the Committee—have said. She opened the debate by talking about the challenges regarding governance and made the important point that, partly because of the support of the UK, we saw in 2015 a credible, fair and peaceful presidential election in Nigeria, which resulted in the sitting President being defeated, standing down and handing over to a successor. That was a very significant development and was hugely welcome.

Alongside the many humanitarian and other development challenges that this debate has rightly emphasised, I urge the Minister and the Government

not to lose focus on some of the governance issues and the importance of the UK—in the form of both DFID and the Foreign Office—continuing to engage on governance, both at the federal level in Nigeria and at state and local level. Part of that involves meeting the challenge that the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) rightly reminded us of, which is about not only women's representation in public life in Nigeria, including in politics, but frankly representation for anyone who is not wealthy, which is difficult because of some of the barriers she told us about.

The other issue I will speak about is education. Nigeria is an enormous country. I think the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire said in her opening remarks that 16% of the world's out-of-school children are in Nigeria—one in six of all the children in the entire world who are not in school are in that one country. So if that country makes the sort of progress on education that we would like it to make, it will be hugely important not only for Nigeria itself but globally.

When we were on our visit to Nigeria last year, some Members went to Kano; we heard some reflections on that trip from the hon. Members for Stafford and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow. Some of us saw schools in Lagos and saw some of the challenges there. Again, we saw some of the difficult issues that exist, which the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow rightly highlighted, but also some more encouraging aspects. I remember that we went to a state school in Lagos. On the one hand, the sheer number of children in each class and how challenging that was for the teachers was very striking; on the other hand, children with disabilities and special educational needs were in the same class as the other children, and the teachers were able to deliver for them all.

Clearly, Nigeria faces a massive challenge if it is to achieve sustainable development goal 4; it will be very hard for the country to do so. At the moment, the Select Committee is conducting an inquiry into DFID's work on education, and Nigeria is probably one of the most striking test cases given the level of resource, support and ambition that is required, both within Nigeria, as the hon. Member for Stafford rightly said, and in the international system, to ensure that goal can be reached. Let us hope that it can be.

3.32 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and I again congratulate the International Development Committee on securing time for this debate. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) on her comprehensive introduction of it.

In the context of all the speeches we have heard, it is clear why this debate is particularly relevant at the moment, especially given the growing food crisis in north-east Nigeria, which is starting to reach critical—famine—conditions. I echo the calls for the opportunity to question the Government in more detail about their response to that on the Floor of the House, outwith the Department for International Development questions session that is coming up next week.

As we have heard from a number of Members, Nigeria captures many of the challenges of delivering aid and international development in the world today. It is

[Patrick Grady]

classed as a lower-middle-income country and it is in a period of economic and developmental transition, and therefore there are significant inequalities across the country, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) spoke about, including those caused by the famine situation and the terror attacks led by Boko Haram. Indeed, yesterday I saw reports of there being seven dead people and 18 injured people in refugee camps in the north-east of Nigeria, which again gives us cause to express our solidarity, following our own tragic experiences yesterday.

The structure of the Select Committee's report emphasises the holistic challenge that exists in Nigeria and the need for a holistic approach to development to get everything right in governance, economic development and the delivery of basic services, as well as in the areas of conflict and security.

Getting governance right is an often unseen and occasionally questioned part of the development equation, but it is hugely important. The debate that we have just had on the situation in Syria demonstrated the need for strong internal governance and strong civil society, because if people cannot demonstrate peacefully or seek democratic change peacefully, situations can rapidly spiral out of control and into violence.

I welcome the recommendations in the report, especially those on corruption, support for the regional governments across Nigeria and the opportunities for the sharing of best practice, drawing particularly on the strength of the Nigerian diaspora in this country and elsewhere.

Openness of government and transparency of information are both absolutely critical, so I also welcome the developments on IT and open-access budgeting that are covered in the report. We recently had a more general debate in Westminster Hall on west Africa, including Gambia, where there has been a peaceful transition of power. In large part, that was due to the role of new technology, including mobile communications. Perhaps there are some lessons to be learned there.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow also reflected powerfully on the corruption situation in Nigeria, and said that gender equality is a very important way in which that corruption can be overcome. Economic development and economic inequality are also major challenges in such transitioning economies. If the cycle cannot be broken, there is a risk that it will be a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty and growing inequality.

There are important recommendations in the report, including a focus on jobs. There is also a role for the Commonwealth Development Corporation, as we discussed in the previous debate. There is an opportunity for the Government to show how the CDC really can make a difference by delivering poverty reduction in places that are very hard to reach.

In the report, there is also an emphasis on the role of the diaspora, particularly in trade and the sharing of skills across borders. There is also emphasis on the issue of basic service provision. That is because despite the transitioning economy, despite the growth and despite the existence of pockets of wealth in Nigeria, there are places where such basic service delivery and service provision are needed.

Once again, there is a role for local NGOs, civil society organisations and faith-based organisations. The ability to gather data and monitor the impact of different measures has been highlighted, both in the report and by Members today. Two of the most basic aspects of service provision in education have already been widely covered in the debate, and there is also the issue of healthcare. I echo the points made by the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) about providing support to combat malaria and neglected and tropical diseases more widely.

Finally, we must consider conflict and security, and the dreadful impact of Boko Haram. We have heard very powerfully about the campaign to find the captured Chibok and other schoolgirls—the “Bring Back Our Girls” campaign. I pay tribute to all who are involved in that campaign. Access to education, especially for girls, is particularly important to help to protect and support future generations.

Unlike the Members who have already spoken, I have not yet had first-hand experience of visiting Nigeria. I hope to join the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), who leads for the Labour party on international development issues, on a visit with the all-party group on Nigeria at some point in the next few months. I think the timing of Abuja airport's reopening will largely determine the timing of that visit, but I look forward to having the opportunity to visit Nigeria, having made many friends from the Nigerian diaspora over the years, not least in recent weeks the two new priests in the parish that serves my constituency office, Father Ambrose Ohene and Father Dominic Alih, whom we welcome to St Columba of Iona in Woodside.

I will also reflect briefly on the fact that tomorrow is Red Nose Day for the Comic Relief appeal. Over the years, many millions of pounds from Comic Relief have made a huge difference not only in Nigeria but around the world. The very first Red Nose Day was on 5 February 1988, which was my eighth birthday, so I have always had a fondness for that particular charity, and I wish everyone involved with it the very best.

As I think the Select Committee's report has demonstrated, DFID has a complex and detailed programme in Nigeria, which is making a real difference, but there are always lessons to learn, and the report draws some of them out. I always think it is interesting when the Government partially agree with recommendations; that is a polite and political way to respond to aspects of a report. Hopefully, the case has been made for the Government to come even closer to agreement on some of the Committee's recommendations, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

3.39 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on securing another important debate. In particular, I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) on making a very informative contribution. She expressed particular concerns about education and electricity. I share those concerns and will speak about them. I also thank the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for making very important contributions in their usual styles.

The International Development Committee's report on DFID's programme in Nigeria was stark. It offered a scrutinising insight into DFID's work in what is one of the world's fastest growing economies and one of its most deprived nations. The report highlighted several pieces of positive work that DFID is doing in Nigeria; the hon. Members for Stafford, and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, both mentioned that.

DFID is spending money effectively on fighting malaria in the country, and the positive lessons that health professionals have learned and applied from anti-malaria programmes has had a knock-on benefit for the health sector more widely. DFID used a range of expertise to help deliver the fairest elections in Nigeria's history. That allowed President Buhari to stand strong on his mandate of delivering economic growth, reducing inequality and tackling corruption. DFID is rolling back the neglected tropical diseases that have taken hold in the country, enabling more children to go to school and more adults to go to work. We commend that work and believe that the Government should hold up those successes as examples of DFID's money being put to use to benefit the people of not only Nigeria, but the UK.

Nevertheless, as has been said, the report and hon. Members have expressed concerns about areas that need improvement. First, there is the economy. I welcome the work done on that. It is absolutely clear that there has been economic growth, but has it been inclusive of the whole country? I do not believe it has. The disproportion between growth in the south and the north is massive. That needs addressing, and I look forward to the Minister's comments on that. In the earlier debate, a point was made about the CDC; with its increase in funding, there is an opportunity to look seriously at investment in industry in the north of Nigeria.

The second issue that could do with improvement is healthcare. While DFID spends quite a large amount of the total funding that goes to Nigeria on healthcare, the report highlights a number of basic hygiene problems in hospitals, which is counterproductive to the efforts. I urge the Minister to liaise with the Nigerian Government on addressing those issues. On the face of it, they are not major, but they are important.

Quite a lot was said about corruption and governance by the hon. Members for Stafford, and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, and by the Chair of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby. The first point they made was that we have seen disproportionate growth—Nigeria has in a very short time become one of the countries with the fastest growing number of millionaires—but, unfortunately, that wealth has not been spread across the breadth of the country, and that needs addressing. If strange-shaped buildings could resolve corruption issues, we would all be in a much better place, but tragically, it is not that simple. I align myself with the comments made earlier on that front.

On governance, we have to accept that DFID has done some magnificent work around the 2015 election—the freest and fairest election in Nigeria. Power changed hands with very little trouble, but we cannot be complacent, and that work must continue. I know that there is a plan to continue that work until 2019, and that is clearly important. To address the corruption and governance elements—I hope that the Minister will accept and agree with this point—we must further strengthen institutions across the board. We need to strengthen the

judiciary and the rule of law to allow investors and Nigerians to have confidence in the system. We are on the road to that, and I have every confidence that DFID will follow that through to 2019, when the next election will take place.

The two problematic areas where we have concerns are education and electricity, which the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire mentioned. Education is a universal right. We would all agree that everyone has the right to at least a good primary and secondary education. Unfortunately, that is not the case in Nigeria. The International Development Committee rightly pointed out that 25% of all those between 17 and 22 years old in the north of the country have fewer than two years of education. Just three out of five children will have completed grade 4. Those statistics have led to a dire literacy situation in the country; 85% of girls in the north-east cannot read, and 44% of those who have completed grade 6 are unable to read a complete sentence in English or their preferred language.

Bridge International Academies, which works with DFID, provided evidence to the Committee that stated that 90% of the communities in which it works are able to afford to send their children to school. That is good, but what happens to the other 10%? Do they send none of their children to school, or do they make a choice and send either their boys or girls to school? The stark reality is that when given that choice, the evidence shows that they are more likely to send boys to school. That further highlights the issue that Members raised about the lack of education offered to girls. Not only does that mean that DFID is supporting work that does not reach the poorest in Nigeria—the very people we should be reaching out to—but it raises further issues about the children who reside in the poorer states, which are often not reached by private education. One figure struck me: the Committee calculates that, on a conservative estimate, sending three children to school would cost \$234 in annual fees, in a country where more than half the population lives on less than \$2 a day. That is an easy calculation for everyone to make.

If DFID is to support an expansion of private sector education across Nigeria, what will happen to the children in poorer regions of the country, where less than 90% of people can afford schooling? We recognise that private schools are key providers of education in Nigeria, but we are steadfastly opposed to any DFID programme that sees an expansion of private, fee-paying schools in the country, particularly if it is done at the expense of public schools. There is a prevalence of private schools in Nigeria, but that does not mean that DFID has to accept that. I hope that the Minister will tell me what the Department is doing to promote an expansion of public education in Nigeria that can reach the whole population, not just the wealthiest.

Electricity production and distribution is of concern. Access to a stable, secure and reliable electricity network is of great importance, if not an absolute necessity, for promoting growth and freeing households from the burden of self-generation. Despite the immense importance of the electricity sector and Nigeria's growth rate, the country has the highest number of Africans without access to electricity. DFID clearly recognises that that is a problem. If electricity is not supplied to millions of Nigerians, DFID will struggle to fulfil its aims and objectives in the country, so it put in place the Nigeria Infrastructure Advisory Facility.

[Imran Hussain]

On the face of it, allocating more than £100 million to help bring light into the homes of 96 million Nigerians seems a positive step, until we look at the details of what the money bought. It brought in Adam Smith International—an international organisation that ultimately advised the Nigerian Government to put Nigeria's electricity production and distribution networks up for sale, with the goal of creating a commercially viable and privately owned power network. While the intentions may have been good, at best the programme proved to be ill designed; at worst, it focused not on the needs of Nigerian consumers, but on private interests. It is putting electricity even further out of reach of many Nigerians, and it is loading purchasers in the energy sector with huge amounts of debt, preventing them from making any meaningful investments in the network. Tariffs had to be raised, rather than lowered, and the situation was so bad that a prominent university, Ahmadu Bello, was forced to cut power for 12 hours a day. Privatisation of the energy sector has not helped poor Nigerians or businesses to get secure access to the electricity network. It is hard to describe the endeavour as anything other than a failure for the poorest in the country.

It has been a year since the report, so I hope that the Minister can shed some light on how the matters it raised have been addressed. DFID has made very strong progress in certain areas of Nigeria. There have been commendable efforts to tackle malaria and neglected tropical diseases, and to strengthen confidence in democratic institutions, but we must address the other issues on which further progress can be made. I look forward to the Minister's response.

3.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (James Wharton): I thank hon. Members for their contributions and the very broad range of issues that they raised. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), whose tour de force opening comments covered a broad range of subjects—I hope I have been able to note them down sufficiently to answer her questions. In line with her gentle suggestion, if I fail to address any of her questions, I would of course be delighted to enter into further correspondence or discussion with her, as indeed I always am.

I am going to do my very best to go through the broad range of issues that hon. Members have raised, but I am going to base my comments, in the first instance, on my hon. Friend's excellent contribution. She asked some specific questions at the end, but also talked in informative and in-depth terms about the Committee's report and the Government's response. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) spoke in his typically witty and engaging way, and said, in a politically carefully worded phrase, that the Government were partially in agreement. I think that is probably fair. To be partially in agreement is often that for which we should strive in this place. Were he and I to find ourselves completely in agreement, I suspect that either I would be wrong or he would be right—I am not sure which it would be.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire talked about power. I will start there, as the shadow Minister chose to end there. Power sector reform is crucial for

Nigeria. I do not need to remind hon. Members that power supply can be a key prerequisite for sustainable growth. I am sure they are aware that in early 2016 Nigeria's power sector supplied an all-time record amount of power, but that since then disruption, and even terrorist activity in some cases, has impacted on its capacity. However, I am pleased to inform the House that supply levels are approaching those of early 2016.

We are clear that reform is needed. It is clear that significant investment is needed in Nigeria's power system. Over 60% of Nigerians do not have grid connection, which holds back economic growth. Intermittent supply presents real challenges for those who wish for certainty and investment. Reform was necessary. The shadow Minister alluded to the involvement of the occasionally controversial Adam Smith International, which has had its fair share of coverage. We are reviewing some of our relationships with it.

It is important to recognise that there are pluses and minuses to all change. Along with the price increases that have come from privatisation and the removal of some of the artificial subsidy within the power system, fixed charges for those who do not use power have been removed, and the lowest volume users have been protected through reforms that have taken place. Much more needs to be done for the power sector in Nigeria. We need to build on the reforms we have seen and continue to review and improve on changes that have been made. The interest that hon. Members take is welcome.

We have had a wide-ranging discussion about the importance of education. The Girls' Education Project, which is in phase 3 in Nigeria, is one of the programmes that DFID in the UK supports. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire recognised, it has seen reform and improvement and is now an A-graded programme, having had some issues in the past. We are helping more than 23,000 girls to stay in education through small cash transfers, which we discussed in the previous debate and which was raised in particular by the shadow Minister. There is no doubt that a significant amount needs to be done and that education is important in driving change and ensuring that a country such as Nigeria can develop its way out of some of the challenges it faces.

The sixth question asked by my hon. Friend was about sustainable development goal 4, which was also raised by the hon. Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). There is no doubt that there has been insufficient progress to date in Nigeria on education. Access increased by only 4% between 2003 and 2013, and the poorest are even less likely to complete schooling. That is why education is a real focus for DFID in Nigeria and why we have the programmes we have. However, it would be unrealistic not to recognise the scale of the challenge and the fact that more needs to be done and constant scrutiny is required. I welcome the work of the International Development Committee in that space.

Jeremy Lefroy: The Minister will know that African countries committed quite a long time ago—I think it was in the early 2000s—in the so-called Abuja declaration to spend 15% of their budgets on health. Indeed, some of them, including Rwanda, have reached that target or are not far short of it. That commitment was made in Nigeria. Does he agree that it would be very welcome if

a similar commitment were made by sub-Saharan African countries and other developing countries around the world to spend a specific amount of their budgets on education, which we have seen far less commitment on than health?

James Wharton: My hon. Friend makes a relevant and important observation. The long-term sustainability of education in countries such as Nigeria must be founded on Government support and investment. We want to see and encourage more of that. We can offer direct support, as we do now, for those who need to benefit from it. We can offer technical assistance and support in training teachers and establishing curricula. However, for long-term sustainability, domestic Government support is required. My hon. Friend's suggestion deserves a good airing and consideration, and I suspect we have not heard the last of it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire mentioned the Chibok girls. That issue caught the attention and imagination, in the most dire of circumstances, of much of the broader global community. It has drawn attention to the terrible conflict in north-east Nigeria and the effect of Boko Haram not only there but in neighbouring countries. I will go on to talk about some of the challenges with the humanitarian response that is required, but specific questions have been asked about the girls by hon. Members, including the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow. One hundred and ninety-five of them remain to be released, which is a significant number. There are significant challenges in addressing that. Much of north-east Nigeria remains a challenging area in which to operate. Boko Haram is not yet defeated, although there are some signs of progress. The UK provides significant support in that work, including a recent commitment of a further £5 million in funding. We offer and indeed give training to the Nigerian armed forces; more than 20,000 personnel of the armed forces have now received training supported by the UK Government. We must continue to fight radical terrorism in all its guises. Today of all days, I do not need to remind right hon. and hon. Members of that or of the scale of the threat faced by so many people throughout the world. The Chibok girls are a stark and poignant reminder of the scale of the challenge that many countries face.

Many others are of course affected by the conflict in the north-east, Boko Haram and the other challenges there, but I am pleased that we are playing the role we are playing, even though I am not pleased that it has not been possible to make more progress. However, we will continue to focus our efforts in that area and to provide appropriate support that can make a difference in the medium and longer terms.

The humanitarian crisis is a significant one. About 5.1 million people face a severely difficult environment; they face food insecurity. If we take no action, we estimate that somewhere in the region of 90,000 children could die. That is a stark and worrying figure, and one with which the world and the global community must engage. Indeed, I am pleased to recognise that the global community did engage at the recent conference in Oslo and has committed a significant contribution to the amount of funding that is needed: more than \$400 million has been committed. More is needed, and we expect more to be committed in due course, but the \$1 billion target has none the less not yet been reached.

The Government of Nigeria, however, have made their own commitment to spend \$1 billion in the north-east. We recognise that that is a welcome announcement and that it gives the Government of Nigeria an opportunity to present themselves as a true world leader in this space, and Nigeria as a country that is serious about humanitarian issues and about tackling the problems it finds within its own borders. We must encourage them to do so, so their announcement is welcome. We look forward to working with them to ensure that the money materialises and is spent in the right way, so as to have the maximum beneficial impact that it can. I expect we will see further announcements on this over the weeks and months to come.

I thank those right hon. and hon. Members who have taken the time to meet me, whether one to one in recent weeks or at the drop-in session that I held with officials to brief interested Members of this House and the other place on the work of this Government, on the broader situation in north-east Nigeria and on the other famines throughout the globe, in particular in Africa, in what is set to be a very challenging year indeed.

The fifth question of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire was on strengthening joined-up working across UK Government Departments. In my eight or nine months at the Department for International Development, I have been pleasantly surprised by the extent to which that already takes place. I am keen to drive it further and I have regular discussions with my counterparts in the Department for International Trade and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and have had meetings with Ministers and officials at the Ministry of Defence, to discuss a broad range of issues across the portfolio that I oversee. That has included discussions about the situation in Nigeria. We need to continue to drive cross-Government collaboration, to break down silos and to make a reality of one HMG.

The truth is that, when people look at UK Government engagement, they do not see the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development, the Ministry of Defence or whatever it might be; they see the UK Government, the role they play in the world and the contribution that they can make. Together we can make a greater contribution than in our individual departmental parts. I recognise that. It is a message that I reinforce continually to the teams for which I am responsible in DFID. It is an area in which we are making significant progress but, following this debate, I will take the opportunity to continue to push it, because it is one in which we can always do more. The more we can do, the greater the net achievement will be.

Many hon. Members have spoken about health and health systems. I particularly recognise the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford on the importance of tackling malaria. I commend him for the work he does; he supports this area of debate and activity and the work of Government in this area in particular. He is aware of the Support to National Malaria Programme—SuNMaP—in which the UK Government are engaged in Nigeria. That £50 million contribution—the figures underline the importance of our work to tackle malaria on a global scale—aims to reduce the number of children who will die before their fifth birthday from 128 in every 1,000 to 80 in every 1,000 by 2022. Eighty is still far too high, but it underlines the significant threat that malaria in particular poses to

[James Wharton]

so many of the world's poorest children and to developing nations. It is a disease that we can beat and are committed to beating. I am pleased that this is an area in which, along with the UK's part in the Global Fund, programmes such as SuNMaP are making such a significant contribution.

My hon. Friend also mentioned neglected tropical diseases—another very important point and one that is not lost on the Secretary of State, who is very keen to pursue further work in the area.

Our programme in Nigeria being our second largest bilateral programme in Africa, it is one in which I take a very keen interest as the responsible Minister. In recent weeks, I have had significant and in-depth discussions with our teams, including in Nigeria, going line by line and component by component through the programmes that DFID supports there and talking about our strategy for the future and where we need to go to have the maximum impact with the money that we spend.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, in particular, talked about the need for a strategy—the need to see where we can make a long-term difference. I can assure her that that message is not lost on me as the responsible Minister or on our team in country, with whom I have been having those discussions. We expect to see changes as a result of those discussions, but it would perhaps be premature for me to pre-empt now what they might be. However, she is absolutely right to say that we need a ruthless focus on value for money, on where we can make a difference and on the impact that we can have. We need to ensure that we identify those programmes that are working and those that could work better, either change or close programmes and then reinvest to ensure that we get the maximum impact we can.

We need to recognise that there are big challenges in countries such as Nigeria. Corruption, which was mentioned by several hon. Members, is a key cause of poverty and a key factor that can hold back development. It is not like me to disagree with the former Prime Minister about much—actually, in effect, I do not disagree with him about this—but corruption cannot, in any context, be fantastic. To be fantastically corrupt is to be terribly so. That, of course, is what he really meant, and the attention that he drew to the issue was welcome. We have significant programmes, including Anti-corruption in Nigeria—ACORN—and PERL, the Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn, both of which engage with government structures and civil society groups, through which we are working both to empower people to tackle corruption when they see it, and to ensure that institutions have the tools to address it.

Several references were made to particular individuals and individual cases. With hon. Members' permission, I will not talk about those cases, because many are live, but they make clear the point that we need to pursue corruption wherever it might hide, from the lowest to the highest levels, without fear or favour. We must always be alert to the risk that anti-corruption work will be focused on the political enemies of the people who control the direction of that work, and we are. We should be proud of what we do in this area. The work that we do to tackle corruption is an absolutely necessary and vital prerequisite for securing the long-term sustainable

growth that we all want to see delivered and we all recognise Nigeria has the potential to secure.

Nigeria is a relatively affluent country in its region. It is blessed—or perhaps cursed—with significant natural resources. It accounts for about a quarter of the population of sub-Saharan Africa. It presents one of the greatest opportunities for growth and one of the greatest dangers of instability on that continent. We are right to be engaged there, we are right to play a key role given our historical ties and the country's importance for the future, but we are also right to scrutinise what we do and to hold to account those who are responsible for it.

I therefore welcome the Committee's work and thank hon. Members for their contributions and questions. I hope that I have addressed most of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire raised, but I know that she will take me up on any that I omitted to comment on. I look forward to continuing our work and the positive and constructive dialogue that we have had today as we all strive to improve life and realise the opportunities that exist for the people of Nigeria. Nigeria is a friendly and important nation that I hope we will continue to trade with, and I am confident that its economy will become further entwined with that of the UK as both nations develop and march forward into the world in a way that will deliver benefits for both our peoples.

4.10 pm

Pauline Latham: I thank the members of the Committee who contributed to this important debate and in particular our Chairman, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who secured both of this afternoon's debates. He is always a good speaker who covers many salient points, and his contribution in both debates, but this one in particular was well made.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) covered many personal parts of the visit we had to Nigeria, which was an important visit for the Committee. I and many people had not been there before, so it was certainly an eye-opener into a very large country with many, many associated problems. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) is always comprehensive. As the Minister said, he covered all aspects of malaria and neglected tropical diseases. Coming from his position as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, he ensures at every possible opportunity that no one forgets that those issues are incredibly important to the people of Africa.

I also thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for his contribution—he is unfailing in turning up to all of these debates—and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), who showed through his contribution that he had done much research into what we have been talking about and knew many of the issues surrounding the people in Nigeria.

I particularly thank the Minister, who covered pretty much everything asked of him. I am sure he will forensically look with his officials for anything he might have missed. I do not think he did, but he may have missed little bits and, if he did, I am sure he will come back to us. I thank him for his openness in allowing us to talk to him about any issue at any time and for always finding time for

those of us who wish to get up to speed with what is happening in the Department. It has been a worthwhile debate, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Second Report of the International Development Committee, DFID's programme in Nigeria, HC 110, and the Government response, HC 735.

4.13 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Petitions

Thursday 23 March 2017

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

Changes to funding for 3 and 4 year olds

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the Government's consultation paper (Early Years Funding: changes to funding for 3 and 4 year olds 11 August 2016) outlined proposals that will leave nursery schools financially nonviable, forcing them to close; notes that this funding will not cover basic costs, let alone staffing with qualified teachers; and further notes that state nursery schools have very good outcomes with regard to closing the achievement gap and supporting children with special needs, and that state nursery schools are legally required to employ highly-qualified teaching staff, who are proven to give young children the best opportunities for academic achievement and enabling social mobility.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to recognise the school status of state nursery schools and fund them accordingly.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 2 March 2017; Vol. 622, c. 536.]

[P002022]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenage):

Maintained nursery schools make an important contribution to social mobility, particularly in disadvantaged areas. They are also high quality providers, and are more likely to care for children with special educational needs than other types of early years and childcare provider.

We want maintained nursery schools to be sustainable for the long-term, not only to ensure that the quality support they give to disadvantaged areas continues, but also to make the most of the pedagogical expertise and experience that they have for the benefit of the early years system as a whole.

As a result of being constituted as schools, they experience costs that other providers do not. That is why we will provide £55 million a year to local authorities, at least until the end of this Parliament, to enable them to maintain current levels of funding for nursery schools. This will give them stability during wider changes to funding.

Illustrative allocations of this supplementary funding were published in December 2016 alongside the Government's response to the consultation on an Early Years National Funding Formula. To ensure that local authorities receive the correct amount of supplementary funding to enable them to maintain current levels of funding for nursery schools, in March we will carry out a data assurance exercise with local authorities to ensure that they receive the correct funding. The Government have also written to local authorities to advise them that

they should not make decisions about their nursery schools until they have their final supplementary funding allocations.

The provision of this supplementary funding will give the Government time to consult on the future of maintained nursery schools. We are developing this consultation informed by conversations with maintained nursery schools themselves and others with an interest in their role and future. We will publish the consultation in due course.

Changes to funding for 3 and 4 year olds in Walsall South

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the Government's consultation paper (Early Years Funding: changes to funding for 3 and 4 year olds 11/08/16) outlined proposals that will leave nursery schools financially nonviable, forcing them to close; notes that this funding will not cover basic costs, let alone staffing with qualified teachers; and further notes that state nursery schools have very good outcomes with regard to closing the achievement gap and supporting children with special needs, and that state nursery schools are legally required to employ highly-qualified staff, who are proven to give young children the best opportunities for academic achievement and enabling social mobility.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to recognise the school status of State nursery schools and fund them accordingly.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Valerie Vaz, Official Report*, 9 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 748.]

[P002011]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenage):

Maintained nursery schools make an important contribution to social mobility, particularly in disadvantaged areas. They are also high quality providers, and are more likely to care for children with special educational needs than other types of early years and childcare provider.

We want maintained nursery schools to be sustainable for the long-term, not only to ensure that the quality support they give to disadvantaged areas continues, but also to make the most of the pedagogical expertise and experience that they have for the benefit of the early years system as a whole.

As a result of being constituted as schools, they experience costs that other providers do not. That is why we will provide £55 million a year to local authorities, at least until the end of this Parliament, to enable them to maintain current levels of funding for nursery schools. This will give them stability during wider changes to funding.

Illustrative allocations of this supplementary funding were published in December 2016 alongside the Government's response to the consultation on an Early Years National Funding Formula. To ensure that local authorities receive the correct amount of supplementary funding to enable them to maintain current levels of funding for nursery schools, in March we will carry out a data assurance exercise with local authorities to ensure that they receive the correct funding. The Government have also written to local authorities to advise them that

they should not make decisions about their nursery schools until they have their final supplementary funding allocations.

The provision of this supplementary funding will give the Government time to consult on the future of maintained nursery schools. We are developing this consultation informed by conversations with maintained nursery schools themselves and others with an interest in their role and future. We will publish the consultation in due course.

The future of nursery schools

The petition of residents of Cambridge.

Declares that nursery schools have very good outcomes with regard to closing the achievement gap as well as supporting children with complex educational or medical needs; further that the petitioners are concerned by the Government's proposals for early years funding that would mean that local authorities would pass on 95% of early years funding from central government directly to early year providers; further that should the proposals be accepted all nursery schools in Cambridgeshire will find themselves in dire financial difficulties; and further that the proposals would lead to a loss of early years provision as well as job losses for nursery staff.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to drop their proposal that would require local authorities to pass on 95% of early years funding from central government directly to early year providers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Daniel Zeichner, *Official Report*, 21 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 991.]

[P002014]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenege):

The 95% pass-through is good news for all providers including maintained nursery schools. It means that local authorities will have to pass on 95% of their early years funding to providers from 2018-19 (with a transitional arrangement of 93% in 2017-18). This will put an end to the excessive top-slicing of budgets that occurs in some local authorities and will ensure that the record level of Government investment in free childcare will reach providers.

Maintained nursery schools make an important contribution to social mobility, particularly in disadvantaged areas. They are also high quality providers, and are more likely to care for children with special educational needs than other types of early years and childcare provider.

We want maintained nursery schools to be sustainable for the long-term, not only to ensure that the quality support they give to disadvantaged areas continues, but also to make the most of their pedagogical expertise and experience for the benefit of the early years system as a whole.

We know that maintained nursery schools typically have higher costs than other providers. That is why we are giving local authorities supplementary funding of £55 million a year for their maintained nursery schools, until at least the end of this Parliament. This is in addition to their early years national funding formula allocations and will enable local authorities to maintain their current funding rates for nursery schools.

In March we will carry out a data assurance exercise with local authorities to ensure that they receive the correct level of supplementary funding to enable them to maintain current levels of funding for nursery schools. The Government have also written to local authorities to advise them that they should not make decisions about their nursery schools until they have their final supplementary funding allocations.

Local authorities will be able to use their funding (both their early years national formula and supplementary funding) to continue to fund nursery schools at their current funding rates.

The Government have also committed to consulting on the future of maintained nursery schools. We are developing this consultation informed by conversations with maintained nursery schools themselves and others with an interest in their role and future. We will publish the consultation in due course.

TRANSPORT

Traffic enforcement measures along the A52

The petition of residents of Broxtowe.

Declares that as a result of the lack of traffic enforcement measures along the A52 road between the roundabouts known locally as Bardill's Island, which crosses with the B6003, and Priory Island, which is at a junction with the A6464, there is excessive speeding and as such the road is unsafe.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to install traffic enforcement measures along the A52 between the two roundabouts known locally as Bardill's Island, which crosses with the B6003, and Priory Island, which is at a junction with the A6464.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Anna Soubry, *Official Report*, 28 February 2017; Vol. 622, c. 268.]

[P002020]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard):

The Department for Transport (DfT) is responsible for setting legislation and for guidance to traffic authorities on how to provide various traffic management measures. Local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide appropriate traffic management schemes for their roads (under section 122 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984). They are free to make their own decisions about the streets under their care, provided they take account of the relevant legislation. They are also accountable to local people for their decisions and their performance.

Local highway authorities can introduce a number of measures such as lower speed limits, traffic calming measures or reconfiguring the road. The local police are responsible for day-to-day enforcement of speed limits.

The decisions on the type of measures that might be most suitable are matters for the local highway authority in consultation with local communities. The DfT provides guidance for local authorities in Speed Limit Circular 01/2013 'Setting Local Speed Limits' which is at:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/setting-local-speed-limits

With regard to traffic calming, this is also a matter for local authorities. The DfT have published guidance on the design of traffic calming measures in Local Transport Note (LTN) 1/07 Traffic Calming' which is available on the DfT website at:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-transport-notes

Ministers and officials have no remit to intervene in the day-to-day affairs of local authorities except where

specific provision has been made in legislation. Any concerns should therefore be raised with the appropriate local authority.

However, the Department for Transport (DfT) would like to thank the petitioners for taking this positive action to bring this matter to its attention and the Minister will write to Nottinghamshire County Council to make them aware of the concerns of Parliament.

Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 23 March 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Maternity Discrimination

The following is an extract from the reply by the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James) to the Westminster Hall debate on Maternity Discrimination on 15 March 2017.

Margot James: However, more than 100 employers, representing 1.2 million employees across the UK, have signed up to the initiative, which is an important milestone. Many of the employers pledging action **such as Barclays, Nationwide, Royal Mail and Ford** are putting in place returners programmes and means of staying in touch with pregnant women and new mothers on maternity leave, which is another point that was made.

[Official Report, 15 March 2017, Vol. 623, c. 127-28WH.]

Letter of correction from Margot James:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the Westminster Hall debate on Maternity Discrimination on 15 March 2017.

The correct response should have been:

Margot James: However, more than 100 employers, representing 1.2 million employees across the UK, have signed up to the initiative, which is an important milestone. Many of the employers pledging action **such as Barclays,**

Nationwide and Ford are putting in place returners programmes and means of staying in touch with pregnant women and new mothers on maternity leave, which is another point that was made.

Nuclear Decommissioning Industry: Pensions

The following is an extract from the reply by the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), to the Westminster Hall debate Nuclear Decommissioning Industry: Pensions on 21 March 2017.

Margot James: As a first step, the NDA held discussions with the trade unions about the potential for non-legislative options as an alternative to CARE to realise the required savings. As a result of those discussions, the NDA launched a consultation document on 9 February setting out details of two options—the CARE option and a non-legislative pensionable pay cap option. The consultation was due to end on 10 March.

[Official Report, 21 March 2017, Vol. 623, c. 313WH.]

Letter of correction from Margot James:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the Westminster Hall debate on Nuclear Decommissioning Industry: Pensions on 21 March 2017.

The correct response should have been:

Margot James: As a first step, the NDA held discussions with the trade unions about the potential for non-legislative options as an alternative to CARE to realise the required savings. As a result of those discussions, the NDA launched a consultation document on **9 January** setting out details of two options—the CARE option and a non-legislative pensionable pay cap option. The consultation was due to end on 10 March.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 23 March 2017

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Thursday 23 March 2017

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not later than
Thursday 30 March 2017

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